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Wednesday, June 10, 2009
Story last updated at 6/10/2009 - 3:16 pm

Tourism Best Management Practices: Giving Juneau residents a voice in the tourism industry

By Libby Sterling | Capital City Weekly

JUNEAU - If you've ever been cut off in traffic by a tour bus, buzzed by a flight-seeing helicopter or had a serene hike interrupted by a busload of people, there is no need to despair. Tourism Best Management Practices (TBMP) is a city-funded program that exists to address the concerns of any citizen who feels irked by any aspect of the tourism industry in Juneau.

TBMP was formed in 1996 by a handful of local tour operators with the intent of minimizing the impacts of tourism on the community. At that time, the industry was growing quickly and Juneau was finding itself with many more visitors than it was able to properly handle.

At the time, Kirby Day, director of shore operations for Princess Cruises, was on various different tourism committees that were charged with the task of examining the negative and positive impacts of the industry.

"Rather than force the city's hand to come up with new zoning that might be prohibitive to business, we came up with some voluntary guidelines to see if we could begin to create a better environment for residents and business owners," Day said.

HONOR CODE

TBMP is based around a series of guidelines that participating tour operators agree to follow as members of the program. In its first year, there were only about 15 guidelines. Now there are nearly 60. They cover topics such as road traffic management, trail etiquette, flight operating times, marine vessel operation and other areas of tour operation.

For example, drivers are to turn off their engines at every reasonable opportunity when loading, unloading and staging in order to cut down on emissions and noise pollution. Certain streets have specific traffic pattern guidelines including avoiding left turns if they cause a traffic buildup. Tours on trails are not to exceed a certain size. Flightseeing tours are limited to certain flight patterns and operating times. Marine tours are to be sensitive toward marine life and local residents who may be within earshot of onboard PA systems and engine noise.



Photo by Libby Sterling

Neiko C. See works as a crossing guard in downtown Juneau. Tasked with maintaining the safe and orderly flow of traffic and discouraging pedestrians from jaywalking, the crossing guards are a good example of the visitor industry's commitment to minimizing the negative effects of tourism and making the summer experience more enjoyable for visitors and residents alike.

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Many TBMP guidelines are based on laws that may be enforced by local or state authorities. However, a guideline is just that. An employee of a TBMP-participating business who fails to follow a guideline won't necessarily receive a ticket, but they may be reported by another TBMP member or by a member of the community.

The TBMP hotline exists for residents to voice their concerns, complaints or constructive criticism toward any aspect of tourism in Juneau. During the summer season, the hotline is staffed by an administrator who takes calls, creates reports and makes sure cases are appropriately addressed.

During the 1996 season, the hotline received 280 calls from concerned citizens. By 2008, that number had dropped to 100, evidence that TBMP is fulfilling its mission.

"What's gratifying is I think we have handled many if not all of the real critical things that were coming up in the 90's," Day said.

The program runs on about \$12,000 per year. Those funds are taken out of the local head tax that is collected by the city from cruise lines. Most of the budget is spent on advertising and community awareness.

A large part of the program's success comes from every individual employee of every tour-operating business. Operators agree to provide ongoing training for all of their employees throughout the season in an effort to reinforce compliance with all guidelines. An internal observation program encourages operators to notify each other if they observe TBMP guidelines not being followed.

"The beauty of TBMP is it's voluntary," said Jeremy Gieser, operations manager of Gastineau Guiding Company, a member of TBMP.

The business is locally owned and operated, as are most others in Juneau.

"We're all locals," Gieser said. "We have all the same values as the people who point fingers at us."

TBMP's website lists more than 70 businesses who have signed on to the program. This includes mostly local businesses as well as cruise lines, who agree to limit their vessels' emissions while within distances of three miles from Alaska's coastline.

A hot topic in Juneau this summer has been the debate on 12th St. traffic. Many residents of the neighborhood have actively voiced their opposition toward tour vehicles traveling past their homes, while other residents say they welcome tours.

TBMP has been working to make the necessary changes to reduce traffic on the residential street. Under current guidelines, buses are only to transit 12th St. if the tour description includes the Governor's House. In addition, vehicles are only to travel northbound along the route to avoid the excess noise and exhaust created from climbing uphill. Operators are also to avoid the use of vehicles in excess of 35 feet and avoid the area during busy times of day.

According to TBMP's tracking, only about five operators offer tours on 12th St., and the tours run between 12 and 15 trips per day.

Juneau can also thank TBMP for the addition of crossing guards in the downtown area.

"It might slow things down, but it adds a lot of structure," Day said.

TRENDSETTER

TBMP has no predecessor. It's the first of its kind and news of its success is spreading around the world. Skagway started its own TBMP program this summer and Ketchikan started a similar program a few years ago. Victoria, B.C. also took the TBMP template and has created a program of their own. There are even cruise ship ports on the East Coast and in South America who have inquired about Juneau's program in hopes of creating their own.

Though most of Juneau's tour businesses have signed on to the program, there are still a few who operate outside of TBMP's guidelines. In addition to calling the TBMP hotline with concerns, residents are encouraged to contact incident-related businesses directly.

A public meeting is held each spring as an opportunity for Juneau's residents to talk face-to-face with tour operators about any concerns they may have.

"It doesn't solve every single issue that every single resident has, but it certainly goes a long way toward minimizing the impacts on the community," Day said.

For more information about TBMP, visit tbmp.info.

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