

Tourism chief: Long Island needs a large ‘destination’ resort

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Kristen Jarnagin, new president of the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau and Sports Commission, at her office in Hauppauge Photo Credit: Heather Walsh

Like many people who relocate to Long Island, Kristen Jarnagin is finding real estate expensive and taxes high but the quality of the schools praised by residents. She’s also finding many “no turn on red” signs in seemingly needless locations.

A recent arrival from Arizona, Jarnagin also has noticed something particularly relevant to her new job as president of the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau: a lack, in her view, of large, luxury resorts that can be destinations in themselves rather than simply places to eat and sleep after a day of recreation.

A 41-year-old with a background in tourism promotion, she most recently was senior vice president and acting head of a statewide Arizona hotel trade group.

On Long Island about 118,000 people are employed at hotels, restaurants, bars and other leisure and tourism businesses, according to state labor department figures. Leisure and tourism generates more than \$5 billion a year in revenues, the visitors bureau says.

What are the major differences between how the travel and leisure industries are marketed on Long Island and in Arizona?

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It's very fragmented on Long Island. When you're not promoting Long Island as a regional brand — when you're promoting different counties or areas — you're trying to brand too many things, and it becomes confusing to the customer. It's much better to have one cohesive message. And that's one of the things we're going to address right off the bat in 2016.

Where will you be focusing your promotional efforts in the coming year?

First, I want to do research to find out who is the Long Island customer, who is our visitor, who has the highest propensity to travel to Long Island and what they're seeking and expecting when they visit our destinations. Then we can develop the brand that resonates with that customer and target our marketing to become more efficient. The last study that I can find was done in 2008.

Long Island MacArthur Airport is once again struggling with reduced service and passenger traffic. Is there anything your organization can do to help?

We definitely want to create a better sense of arrival so that when people land on Long Island, we have some great imagery and information for them about all the things they can see and do here. Secondly, when the airport is seeking new [flights] or secures new [flights] from other markets, we should definitely be a support system for those markets in attracting visitors and letting them know why they should get on that flight to Long Island.

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Are there any visitor attractions that you see missing on Long Island?

Yes. One of the biggest things I see lacking is the mega resort — that iconic destination resort that has 300-plus guest rooms, meeting space. They bring in conventions and visitors, group meetings, destination weddings. They usually have spas, golf courses — full amenities.

We have a few, but they're small compared with what you're talking about.

Right, and the boutique resorts that we have are wonderful and they are well known. But a 300- to 500-room resort — that's going to have probably 100,000 square feet of meeting space, and that's going to bring in your groups and conventions, and people will stay more than one or two nights — they'll stay a week. They come and spend more money and stay longer.

Do we need casino gambling on Long Island?

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I don't know if we need gambling. I wouldn't say it's something that's missing, but I would say if it was developed, it would be an additional driver, an additional amenity.

What would you like residents to know about tourism?

I think it's important for people to understand the [role] that tourism plays in attracting corporations and businesses to your destination. When you try to attract a business you generally contact the CEO. Go to the Hamptons in the summertime, and everywhere there are titans of industry and business. If we on Long Island want to think about future generations and how we're going to keep our children here and create jobs, we should all be utilizing tourism as the red carpet to welcome all of these CEOs here, to educate them about what is so great about our destination so that they can fall in love with it, too.

Anything else?

The other thing I'd like to add is the reason why the regional tourism industry is so important is that it generates jobs and tax revenues, and I can't say that enough. I understand that sometimes people think, "I don't want visitors here taking up my secret hideaway spot, clogging up the freeways," but . . . when tourists come to town, it's one of the highest taxed industries in the nation. People pay their bed taxes, retail, restaurant [taxes], and they leave their money behind, and you don't have to service them with all the public services. We're not educating them, we're not paying for them to use city services. It's new dollars that come in, and it's critical for all the services we enjoy as residents.