

THE DAY

Tourist mecca, so few dollars

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Maine spends five times more money than Connecticut on tourism promotion.

Let that sink in for a minute, because tourism added \$20 billion to the Connecticut economy last year. And much of that money was generated in this area of the state, a place with much less political clout than places like New Haven, Hartford and Bridgeport.

Members of the Connecticut Tourism Coalition who gathered Friday at the Mystic Aquarium were jealous of Maine's \$24 million tourism budget, noting that they couldn't convince politicians statewide to up the \$4.5 million marketing outlay in the next fiscal year.

"That is a disappointment to me," said state Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, chairwoman of the Senate Appropriation Committee. "I really think we made the case over and over again."

State Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, co-chair of the legislature's Art, Culture & Tourism Caucus, said she and other eastern Connecticut lawmakers have tried repeatedly over the past decade to get the state to spend more money on marketing Mystic and other tourist draws only to be turned away.

"This is the governor's office that we need to convince that tourism is the right investment," Somers said to the 50 assembled guests. "This is a good time to put the pressure on the people that are running for the highest offices to make sure that ... they are going to make the investment that is necessary in tourism."

Comments on the disparity between the two budgets followed a presentation by Carolann Ouellette, director of tourism, film and outdoor recreation in Maine. She said Maine's tourism hadn't been controversial over the past several years, though there was a little rumbling in the last legislative session that fortunately led to no cuts.

Jim Paolino, a lobbyist who keeps track of legislative matters, said part of the issue with getting more funding for tourism marketing has been the overall success of the Mystic market in the past few years.

"We're very innovative. We do a lot of stuff on our own," Paolino said. "Being successful with very little has caused them to think that we could continue to be successful with very little."

The trick, he said, will be to stress how much more successful the tourism business would be with even more funding. Statistics cited by members of the tourism coalition indicate that for every dollar spent on tourism marketing, the state rakes in about \$9 in tax revenue.

"Let's not give up," Sen. Osten said. "We still need to fight."

"This is something that makes money," added Sen. Somers. "We're right at the goalpost. We just need to get it across the finish line."

State Rep. Greg Howard, R-Stonington, pointed out that 80% of the state's population comes from western Connecticut, and that's where all the votes are. But he said when it comes to tourism, the state gets all the money, about \$7.7 million just from Stonington alone, and sends very little of it back to local towns.

"While our legislative colleagues are not against tourism, it doesn't become as much of a priority to them," he said. "All this generated money is going to Hartford and does not come back to towns like Stonington."

Matt Beaudoin, who owns the Mystic Knotwork stores on Cottrell Street in Mystic and at Olde Mistick Village, said he moved out of a retail location in downtown because "It's a war zone down there. ... It's not tourism friendly.... The tone was a shift in the last two or three years."

He said he worries that if people don't start seeing money reinvested in the area that townspeople may start turning against tourism.

"Tourism, we cannot take for granted," said Susette Tibus, CEO of Mystic Aquarium, in opening remarks. "We've been at sort of this high with tourism here in the Mystic area. ... But everybody has a peaking point. We're hoping we don't."

Frank Burns, executive director of the tourism coalition, said both Republican gubernatorial candidate Ryan Fazio and Josh Elliott, Democratic challenger to Gov. Ned Lamont, have agreed to bring up the lack of tourism funding if they get to debate the incumbent governor who is running for a third term.

According to the latest 2025 statistics supplied Friday by Rachel Lenda, director of tourism in Connecticut, the state's tourism business saw a 5% rise last year, supporting 125,000 jobs. And statewide visitation last year was put at 72 million, up 3 million in just one year.

"So looking at Maine's economic output (\$16 billion for tourism) versus Connecticut (\$20 billion), you can see there is exponentially a bigger difference, and they get \$24 million to do that," she said.

"I am so totally jealous of Maine," smiled Aquarium CEO Tibus.

But we still have the best pizza.

This is the opinion of Lee Howard, The Day's business editor. To reach him, email l.howard@theday.com.