

Tourism pros look to region's future

By Edith Decker
of the Daily Courier

Nestled between national parks and monuments — Crater Lake, the Oregon Caves and Redwood National and State Parks — and on or near the main north-south artery of Interstate 5, Jackson and Josephine counties rely on tourism to help drive the economy.

Expanding on the “big three” sites in recent decades have been agritourism offerings like wineries and farm tours, organized sporting events and destinations. These are added to longtime major local festivals such as Boatnik, one of the state’s largest festivals, the Pear Blossom Festival, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and many more. And, of course, tourists continue to come to the Rogue, Illinois and Applegate rivers to fish, raft and jet boat.

Tourists to Medford alone brought in spending of \$725.8 million in 2023 and supported 5,580 travel-related jobs, said T.J. Holmes, senior vice president of Travel Medford.

We contacted the major local tourism organizations and asked the same four questions. For Medford, Holmes of Travel Medford answered the questions.

Travel Medford maintains a downtown visitor center at 101 E. Eighth St., as well as a visitor kiosk at the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport and an alcove at the new Rogue X recreation center.

In Grants Pass, Griffyn Storm, marketing manager for Visit Grants Pass, a city-supported organization, answered. The organization runs the downtown Visitor Center at Sixth and G streets. A second visitor center, run by the Grants Pass & Josephine County Chamber of Commerce, is at 1995 N.W. Vine St., near Exit 58 of I-5.

Megan Curtis, the executive director of the Illinois Valley Chamber of Commerce, answered for the Illinois Valley. The chamber operates a visitor center at 201 Caves Highway in Cave Junction.

Travel Ashland, which has an office at 110 E. Main St., was not able to participate.

Where is our region in terms of tourism recovery, post-pandemic, in your opinion?

Storm: In the wake of the global health crisis, our region initially experienced a notable increase in domestic day trips, which inflated visitor statistics. However, as international travel resumed, we observed a subsequent deceleration in local tourism. Nonetheless, there has been a consistent annual uptick in visitor numbers since 2020, indicating a gradual but steady recovery in our tourism sector.

Holmes: In terms of lodging and overnight visitation, Medford has exceeded pre-pandemic levels in hotel and short-term rental demand. Transient lodging tax within the Medford city limits has hit all-time highs post-pandemic.

Curtis: In my opinion, both Jackson and Josephine County’s tourism sector has not only rebounded but also experienced growth beyond pre-pandemic numbers.

In 2021, Jackson County’s direct travel spending was only down \$1.3 million from the 2019 pre-pandemic total, essentially recovering most of the steep decline in 2020. In 2022, Josephine County welcomed approximately 1.9 million individual trips by visitors and preliminary estimates indicate that there were nearly 2 million overnight visitor stays in the county that year, surpassing



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier, 2024

Rogue X had a first-year economic impact of \$6 million, according to the Medford Parks & Recreation report.

pre-pandemic levels.

Unfortunately, most of these overnight stays are outside of the Illinois Valley as we are currently without a traditional hotel.

What needs to happen in the coming few years to boost tourism to the next level in Southern Oregon?

Storm: To elevate tourism in Southern Oregon to new heights, it is imperative for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to forge collaborative strategies aimed at enhancing visitor numbers. A critical focus should be on capturing a larger segment of the fly-in market, leveraging key airports such as those in Medford, Portland, Seattle and San Francisco, to funnel tourists into our region.

Holmes: Our region is known for successful collaboration, especially stemming from public-private partnerships and projects that span multiple organizations or businesses. Our tourism ecosystem is still peaking. Our community will continue to thrive as long as we have a clear vision and active participants to help implement tourism-related programs that will lead to strengthening the local economy from our industry.

One of our key focus areas over the coming years is sports tourism. The City of Medford has done a phenomenal job investing in and maintaining world-class sports facilities such as Lithia & Driveway Fields and Rogue Credit Union Community Complex (Rogue X). That has led to Medford earning an identity as a sports and recreation hub on the West Coast. Travel Medford will continue to invest in sports tourism by partnering with Medford Parks & Recreation and the Southern Oregon Sports Commission to bring more tourists to the area through sporting events and offerings.

Curtis: There are many things I would like to see in order to boost tourism to the next level, but I’ll just name a few.

1. Infrastructure development, such as a hotel in Cave Junction.
2. Strategic branding across the counties as a strong regional marketing campaign highlighting Southern Oregon’s unique attractions — museums, art galleries, Crater Lake National Park, Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve, the Rogue River, wine country, and the many other recreation opportunities — could help attract a broader audience.
3. Community involvement, engaging local businesses and residents in tourism planning is essential to grow benefits for the broader community while maintaining Southern Oregon’s character and charm.

What projects are your cities

developing that may bring more tourists to the area?

Storm: Our city is currently advancing the Main Street program, which is dedicated to the revitalization and enhancement of our downtown area. This initiative not only aims to foster the growth of local businesses by connecting them with essential resources like grants but also seeks to cultivate a vibrant event schedule that will engage both residents and attract visitors, thereby enriching the cultural and economic landscape of our community.

Holmes: The success of Lithia & Driveway Fields laid the groundwork for the City of Medford and partnering organizations to advocate for the building of Rogue X. The state-of-the-art multi-event and aquatic center had a successful first year with more than \$6 million in economic impact, according to the Medford Parks & Recreation annual report.

It’s a successful case study to show how public-private partnerships and collaboration can come together to provide amenities for residents and tourists alike.

Travel Medford partnered with the City of Medford to complete a Conference Center Feasibility Study in late 2024 and there is ongoing work to see this project come to fruition. Also, the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport is beginning a \$184 million expansion project that will lead to more opportunity for air traffic to the region and just received a Small Community Air Service Grant with the goal of adding a direct flight to the Dallas/Fort Worth market.

Jackson County broke ground on the Multi-Use Pandemic Response Center at the Expo that they will share with the City of Central Point. Travel Medford looks forward to multi-agency partnerships that can assist in bringing larger, including national events to that facility when combined with Rogue X.

Also, there are four hotels that are being built and planned to open over the next couple of years to increase room supply in the city, which will take Medford to more than 3,000 hotel rooms.

Curtis: The City of Cave Junction has been hard at work with public art installations and parks improvements.

Currently the chamber is participating in Travel Oregon’s Recreation Ready program.

Our project, IVCoC Gateway to the Stars, is working to identify the feasibility of Cave Junction applying for an International Dark Sky Community certification through Dark Sky International. With growing interest in space and eco-friendly tourism, investing in astrotourism could position the city as a premier stargazing destination, with the potential to increase overnight stays and boost local businesses.

What are the major hindrances to tourism in your city or area, in your opinion?

Storm: A key challenge to tourism growth is the seasonal fluctuation in travel. During the off-season, visitor numbers decline in Grants Pass, placing increased financial strain on local businesses. To foster a more sustainable and resilient tourism economy, it is essential to implement strategies that support businesses year-round, ensuring consistent revenue opportunities and long-term viability.

Holmes: Unpredicted weather and wildfires are a concern. However, MFR completed an expansion of the east apron in June 2024 that can now hold three very large air tankers at once. The successful completion of that project will hopefully lead to improved wildfire response, mitigation and better air quality during the latter part of peak tourist season.

Curtis: Tourism in Cave Junction and the Illinois Valley faces several significant challenges that hinder our full



EDITH DECKER / Daily Courier, 2024

Grants Pass has experienced a consistent annual uptick in visitor numbers since 2020.

potential for growth.

I would say the absence of a standard hotel in Cave Junction is our biggest hindrance at this

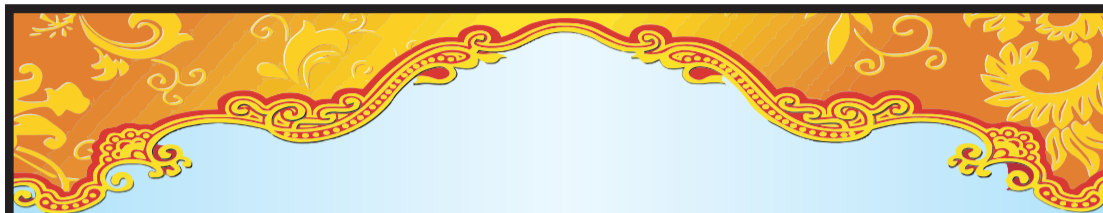
time, limiting overnight stays, forcing visitors to either shorten their trips or find accommodations in Grants Pass or Med-

ford. Unfortunately, this reduces local spending on dining, shopping, and our attractions.

We also have a lack of coordinated regional branding so Cave Junction and the Illinois Valley are often overlooked in favor of more well-known Southern Oregon destinations and as such, many travelers are unaware of the hidden gems in our area.

In addition, some local residents view increased tourism as a potential disruption to the quiet, rural lifestyle we enjoy and cherish in the Illinois Valley. There are concerns about traffic, noise, and changes to the community’s unique character that often create resistance to tourism-focused developments.

Reach reporter Edith Decker at 541-474-3724 or edecker@thedailycourier.com.



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The Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve attracts visitors to the Illinois Valley, but the lack of a hotel in Cave Junction limits overnight stays and forces visitors to either shorten their trips or find lodging in other cities.



SCOTT STODDARD
Daily Courier, 2021