



City attracts record number of visitors

BY MEREDITH MacLEOD

Hamilton has attracted a record number of visitors but is still far from fully capitalizing on the booming number of travellers cruising the web.

The city hosted more than 3.4 million visitors in 2002, who pumped more than \$233 million into the local economy, Tourism Hamilton revealed yesterday.

That eclipses the number of visitors in 1999 and raises hopes the local tourism industry, which accounts for more than 3,000 jobs and about \$8.6 million in municipal taxes, has turned a corner since the

devastating impacts of 9/11, SARS and West Nile virus.

The 2002 numbers, the most recent available, were presented at Tourism Hamilton's Fall Summit at Flamboro Downs. Tourism Hamilton is an arm's-length tourism organization set up by the city in 2002,

"You are putting yourself on the map with some of the innovative things you are doing," said Arlene White, a tourism business development consultant with the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation.

The city has embarked on an ambitious and aggressive tourism strategy which includes

developing Hamilton into a premier Ontario tourism destination by 2007.

That coincides with a provincial initiative focused on luring travellers from the United States, Europe, South and Central America and especially China. China is negotiating open travel policies with a number of countries including Canada.

"We will see a huge influx into this country within the next two years," said White.

Next year, Tourism Hamilton will complete its inventory of local tourism products. It will in part examine how to blend

festivals, sports events, cultural activities and outdoor experiences into tourism packages for website surfers.

It's a blueprint for where tourism can go in the future, said Tourism Hamilton executive director David Adames.

The group will also begin to implement its sport tourism plan to attract provincial, national and international sporting events and conferences.

Adames said one of the major keys is expanding Hamilton's web presence as a place to visit and stay. Opportunities for creating consumer profiles and

then launching targeted marketing campaigns are endless, he said.

"There is no doubt we are missing all kinds of opportunities. E-marketing is growing exponentially."

The web might reach the world, but tourism officials say the biggest challenge is convincing city residents they can be tourists in their own city.

"I hear often from Hamiltonians that they had visitors and that they didn't know what to recommend to them. The first thing people think of is Niagara Falls and Toronto," said Adames.

Hamiltonians will soon be able to learn what's going on through myhamilton.ca, a portal website that will act as a gateway into all things Hamilton, said Shannon McKay, coordinator of eGovernment for the city. "This will be like Google for Hamilton. It will lead you everywhere."

The site, scheduled for launch in May, 2005, will offer one-stop surfing for city hall transactions, events, forums and mapping using geographic information system software.

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