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# Personal View: Tourism support spurs Ohio's economic growth

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Tourism and Leisure

By MELINDA HUNTLEY

As a perennial battleground state for the presidential election, we in Ohio relish being a political destination for candidates aspiring to the White House. This election cycle, we welcomed the traveling caravans, whistle-stop tours, and even Air Force One as it carried current, former and hopeful occupants of the White House.

Ohio's mark on the electoral map was even greater this year as we opened our restaurants, hotels, streets and hearts to the Republican National Convention. We proudly put on a world-class event, and sent a loud and clear message to travelers around the globe: If Cleveland isn't on your itinerary, you're missing out.

In the same way candidates knocked on our doors, lit up our phone lines and blanketed the airwaves

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asking for our support, the state of Ohio and its private-sector partners do much the same to entice travelers — domestic and international — to come stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants and enjoy our distinct and beautiful destinations.

Now, we ask President-elect Donald Trump to stand by his commitment to improve our nation's infrastructure to bring even more visitors and economic growth to our region.

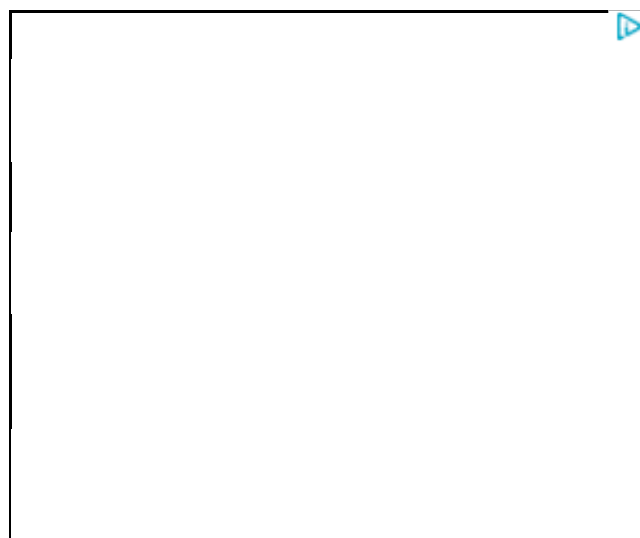
The travel industry in Ohio is big business. Collectively, travel and tourism generate over \$42 billion in spending for the state. Recent estimates by TourismOhio, our state's chief travel authority, reveal that travel supports more than 420,000 jobs, up from 412,000 just two years ago.

Last year, we welcomed 207 million visitors, representing a steady increase from 200 million in 2014 and dramatic growth from just 181 million in 2011.

With this in mind, our industry came together during the election season to remind lawmakers and candidates for public office to take notice of the growing momentum of the travel industry, and to embrace policies that can drive further growth for our state's economy. At every level of government, programs and policies that support the travel economy are bipartisan and proven winners for Ohio's economic growth.

As one example, we applaud the Ohio Legislature's commitment to promote Ohio with its investment in TourismOhio, which led to the agency's recently unveiled "Ohio. Find it Here." branding to attract visitors to the state. We hope that the legislature continues to support this initiative so that we can broaden the reach of this campaign and increase travel to Ohio.

Our federal lawmakers can take the lead with



several critical policy opportunities before Congress right now.

They can champion international travel by continuing to strengthen our diplomatic relationships with our allies, allowing us to ensure effective security and maintain smooth travel between countries.

Congress can also address efficiency at the airport by supporting the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) efforts to appropriately staff security checkpoints, eliminating long lines.

Moreover, Congress should authorize more flexibility in funding streams so TSA can more rapidly grow TSA PreCheck membership throughout the country.

Finally, Congress has the ability to boost airline competition by placing more financial authority in the hands of our airports. Such control gives them the capacity to raise capital funds for improvement projects that can attract new carriers to serve the ever-increasing amount of consumers seeking to travel here.

It is no secret that Ohio has been hurt over the years as a result of airline mergers and consolidation. Congress should increase the cap on the Passenger Facility Charge, a user fee that airports can harness when seeking investments to build and modernize their facilities to attract new air service.

Ohio ranks seventh in the nation in the number of jobs supported by travel. Across the state and federal policy landscape, there are plenty of options for lawmakers to embrace championing travel to Ohio so that we remain a top destination and employer.

*Melinda Huntley is executive director of the Ohio Travel Association.*



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