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## Convention business boosts city hotels, tourism official

Tourism Saskatoon aims to revitalize city's brand thanks to increased funding

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The StarPhoenix

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Last year's constant stream of conventions and events was a boon for local hotels, and 2008 should bring more of the same, Tourism Saskatoon officials told city councillors Monday.

In fact, no other Canadian city matched Saskatoon's room-revenue growth in 2007, according to Tourism Saskatoon CEO Todd Brandt.

The busier-than-expected year means a windfall for the tourism organization's destination marketing fund (DMF), which collects revenue from member hotels through a voluntary two per cent levy on their room sales.

The levy, paid by 16 local hotels under the terms of a three-year contract with Tourism Saskatoon, pays for marketing efforts aimed at attracting more out-of-town visitors. The contract is up for renewal at the end of this year, and Brandt said he expects even more hotels will sign on for another three years.

Hotels currently paying the levy represent more than 75 per cent of all the hotel rooms in the city.

Convention travellers tend to spend significantly more money than other tourists during an average visit, and Saskatoon is attracting more major conventions -- events with at least 500 delegates -- than it ever has before, Brandt told council.

Recent expansions of facilities such as Prairieland Park and TCU Place are partly responsible, he said.

"When you look at the area of conventions and events, our performance is strong. There's certainly a lot of competition and we'll be working with a number of your facilities in developing a new trade show marketing strategy for Saskatoon to complement the convention marketing strategy which is now in full play."

Tourism Saskatoon presented its largest-ever annual budget to members of city council's executive committee, laying out plans for the coming year which include a move to new headquarters in the former Canada Post building downtown, the launch of a new website and relocation of the visitors' centre in the city's north end.

The \$2.7-million operating budget is almost \$750,000 richer than last year, primarily because of the higher DMF contributions from the hotels and investment from other partners, Brandt said. The City of Saskatoon contributes about \$350,000 a year to the tourism organization's operations under a funding formula.

"Certainly I think you'll see Tourism Saskatoon's presence, and the presence of our

industry, to a much greater extent than you've seen before. We are going to look at a number of initiatives to revitalize and expand the Saskatoon Shines brand that belongs to the community, and kind of bring that to a new height and level," Brandt said.

The visitors' centre at the northern edge of the city -- which is open during the summer months -- needs a new location to attract motorists on their way into Saskatoon, councillors heard. Tourism Saskatoon operates the facility under the terms of an agreement with the city.

"We think we can significantly increase its effectiveness by getting it out farther north on the highway on the inbound lanes, and we're working with the Department of Highways (to find a new site)," Brandt said. "It's just difficult to get to, especially when you're pulling RVs and that."

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