

Lake Tahoe needs work to lure foreign travelers

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Tahoe doesn't have it. It could. But it's going to take a concerted effort for that to happen.

That was the message delivered Thursday by two women who know tourism.

The *it* is what it takes to be on the list of places foreign visitors want to travel to.

Caroline Beteta, CEO of Visit California and chairwoman of Brand USA, along with Denise Pirrotti Hummell, CEO and founder of Universal Consensus, delivered their views about the future of tourism and what Lake Tahoe must do to capture a greater share of the market.



Lake Tahoe continues to struggle to be a tourist destination that has it all.

Photo/LTN file

In particular, the two spoke of the growing international market. Much of the focus was on China, where Beteta just returned. She was there with Gov. Jerry Brown on a mission to lure Chinese to the Golden State.

In 2012, Chinese travelers made more trips than people from any other country – 83 million. They spent \$102 billion abroad last year.

Beteta said with the United States finally focusing on tourism, this should bode well for everyone. It used to take about 45 days for someone in China to secure a U.S. visa. Now it's about five days.

But more needs to be done. Nikki Ekstein of *Travel + Leisure* magazine recently wrote, "According to a new survey conducted by the U.S. Travel Association, 43 percent of foreign travelers will tell their friends to avoid coming to the States. But it's not cultural, culinary, or political differences that are turning off the international crowds—it's our customs entry process, which 84 percent of visitors complain about and believe could be vastly improved. The survey polled 1,200 non-U.S. resident overseas travelers – of whom 1 in 7 missed a connection because of long customs lines."

Even Beteta commented on how her travel plans were disrupted this week when American Airlines had to ground all of its planes because of a computer glitch.

For Tahoe, though, the advice is much simpler.

Hummell said how the sign Chocolate Nugget Factory would be confusing for the average international traveler. What's a nugget? And how would they know shopping of some sort is available through those doors?

She showed pictures of the casino corridor and Park City.

"The center of town is not what I'm used to in mountain towns," Hummell said of the South Shore.

The consultant suggested harmony with colors, installing quaint signs – even ones that are in English, Spanish and

Mandarin, and putting in more lighting.

Guest relations need a drastic improvement, too, based on Hummell's experience.

The speakers on April 18 also commented on how tourists want a locale where shopping is abundant – and that doesn't mean multiple T-shirt shops. All one has to do is look at Las Vegas to see how shopping on The Strip is an activity unto itself.

The creation this summer of 20,000-square-feet of retail along Highway 50 as part of the stalled Chateau project is reportedly being marketed to businesses that would bring a different mix to the area compared to what exists today.

The state tourism agency is focusing on what it calls pillars. The five are: family fun, culinary, culture-entertainment, outdoor-adventure-recreation, and luxury-indulgence.

A series of commercials were shown, including the one filmed in 2011 featuring Olympians Julia Mancuso of Squaw Valley and Shannon Bahkre who grew up in Tahoe City.

"We should ride the coattails of outdoor adventure," South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News* after the forum. "When spending money on tourists you get a direct investment return."

At the City Council's first meeting in May the strategic plan will be discussed, which will include the topic of whether the city is doing its part to draw tourists to the area and working enough with the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

"We know more tourists means more jobs," Kerry said.

Hotel taxes in the city are up 26 percent from October through February compared to the previous year and sales tax for the last quarter of 2012 is up 13 percent from 2011.

The former number is definitely because of tourists, and the

latter is partially tourists.

"Our job is to create a desire for the California experience," Beteta told the group at Harveys.

After that, well, it's up to the respective destinations to make it an experience people want to have again and one they want tell their friends about – in a good way. After all, word of mouth is still the best (or worst, depending on the message,) form of marketing.