Nevada tourism director aims to have people discover entire state

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

When Claudia Vecchio accepted the job as director of the state Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs a year ago, she knew she was entering uncharted territory.

The state had just combined its tourism, arts, museums and Native American culture departments into one office because of a budget crunch. It was anybody's guess how well the parts would fit.

Vecchio came from the tourism industry, having headed Destination Integration, a Dallas company that promotes tourism and economic development for midsize communities. She previously directed the Ohio Division of Travel and Tourism.

Vecchio, who is based in Carson City, spent a year familiarizing herself with the state and the entities that comprise her department. During a recent visit to Las Vegas, she reflected on what she has learned:

What has been the biggest eye-opener for you in terms of marketing tourism in the state?

I think the big surprise was the fact that there is so much in this state that people don't know is here. There are some incredible natural resources, like the Valley of Fire, Great Basin National Park and the Ruby Mountains. And there are some great special events in this state.

Because there are – and rightly so – great marketing machines in Las Vegas and Reno, some of these really extraordinary things get overlooked. I didn't know they were here, and I

consider myself to be someone who knows the world and the good things that there are to see.

It also has been a surprise the level of education we have to do to help people understand what there is besides Las Vegas and Reno. When you're driving along, all these great wonderful things are just five minutes off the freeway, but nobody knows they're there because there's no signage, no rest stops, no visitor services infrastructure, no nothing to help the regular person know what's in the area. That's something I feel pretty passionately about trying to change – working with the Department of Transportation and others that manage those kinds of services.

Where are some of the places you have been since you arrived in Nevada?

I'm getting out there. I've been across Interstate 80 from Wendover to Reno. I've been to Elko on a couple of occasions and was there for the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, which I love. I went out for the opening of the California Trail Interpretive Center, which is an extraordinary facility about 10 miles west of Elko. They've positioned it so that not only is it on the California Trail, but you can see where the trail splits as it goes west. It's really smart. The facility is just gorgeous and definitely worth the trip out there.

I was out in Ely not too long ago and came across Highway 50, which is aptly called "the Loneliest Road." There are some wonderful little towns along there that are fun to see. I was up with some State Parks folks on Highway 93 to some of the parks up in Lincoln County. We didn't get as far as Great Basin, but we did get to Kershaw-Ryan and Cathedral Gorge state parks. It was really cool to see all that.

I can see why people who live in Las Vegas are a little hesitant to go out there because you're into nothing pretty quickly, and there are very few gas stations and services out

there. It’s a little intimidating to make the trip.

When I’ve been down in Southern Nevada, I’ve been to Hoover Dam, Lake Mead and Boulder City. I still need to do the U.S. 95 corridor, because I keep flying between Carson City and Las Vegas.

Because of agency consolidation, the Tourism Commission also markets the arts, museums and Indian culture. What challenges have you faced as a result of that consolidation?

Each of those agencies still does some of their own marketing, because they have their own marketing needs. The Nevada Arts Council does a lot of grants giving, so their marketing needs are significantly different from the museums, which have to work to get people in the door.

The Nevada Indian Commission is very different because they spend a lot of time on the social services of Native Americans – education, health care and daily living kinds of things, with the tourism piece being a part of it.

In total, I think the challenge is that every entity has to retain its own identity while trying to find the overarching brand of the organization and how that all ties into the yet-to-be-determined brand of the state. We’re kind of finding ourselves, while retaining the individuality of these different organizations.

Arts and museums are under your purview, but state parks – something your office promotes – are not. Should the Tourism Commission be tied more closely to parks?

I think having them be a part of the natural resources department is a good place for them to be. We are tied very closely to parks, and I think the interagency cooperation and collaboration is really important.

We do some state park brochures and some collateral materials

with them, and we promote the state parks in what we do. We're also trying to work more closely with the Department of Wildlife because hunting is a big part of tourism in Nevada, and we're trying to integrate that message into what we're doing and help promote the wildlife piece of this, too.

I don't know that it matters so much where these components are housed. The State Historic Preservation Office, which is very closely tied to museums and history, oversees natural resources as well. We're housed in different places, but we have to work really closely together to make it work.

What's the biggest challenge about marketing Nevada?

There are a couple of technical challenges. I mentioned that infrastructure is a big challenge. It's no surprise that there's world-class, best-in-the-business marketing coming out of Las Vegas. That's part of the reason I'm here, to learn from those people.

The marketing challenge of the state is to try to craft the message of Nevada and the unique offerings outside of the Las Vegas market, while still being very synergistic with what they're doing.

We're taking this whole program from advertising to public relations, because we can't advertise. We don't have the dollars to advertise the differences between the rest of Nevada and these two big urban centers. But we do have the PR ability to drive social-media conversations and to get media coverage. The media out there in the travel and leisure world loves these kinds of stories that aren't the ones that are always being told. I think they'll embrace these other-side-of-Nevada kinds of stories.

That's the age-old issue with Nevada, trying to find a message that's different yet synergistic with the big players.

Is it intimidating to be in the same room with Las Vegas?

It’s exciting because we have so much to gain from that. Learning from what they do is really fun. Thank goodness they’re there.

I think we need to do a better job of integrating what they’re doing into what we’re doing. There has been some separation in the past between us. It’s certainly OK for them; they don’t need us. But we definitely need them. I would welcome the chance to do that even more.

What’s the status of developing a brand identity for the state? That’s been ongoing for several months.

It’s actually been ongoing for more than a year. We had an agency, GreenRubino, doing the brand development and they did some really good research. The language that they used to identify and differentiate this state down to its core DNA is wonderful.

Now, we have a new agency on board, Burson-Marsteller, that is going to drive the creative beyond this point. They’ve also been given the tagline project to come up with a tagline that is going to bring all this together.

Some political leaders were upset that a Nevada company wasn’t selected for the two-year $3 million contract that Burson-Marsteller won. What’s your response?

We had a group of seven travel industry professionals from throughout the state that were part of the evaluation committee, and we all worked to follow the rules to a T in this process.

When we started, I had asked how many points extra you give to a Nevada company. When I had done this in Ohio, there was a 10 percent advantage to Ohio companies. They said there was no preference.

As we started moving through this process and we got our

responses back, the evaluation committee scored the responses based on their merit. It was clear when we went through the responses that there was a difference between the ones we got from Nevada companies and the ones that we got from the national-level companies. The goal from the Nevada Tourism Commission all along was to get the best and the brightest. And the best ended up coming from outside Nevada.

I knew going through this that it has always been an issue for people in my role in other states, and there probably would be some conversation about this. After we did the initial selection of finalists, I brought the whole staff together and I said, “Folks, the committee has selected all out-of-state vendors. It’s going to get attention.” And it did.

I think the conversation was always good. We followed the process, we did what we needed to do, and we’re incredibly pleased with who we got. They have really stepped up to the plate, and they have a lot to do. The expectations now are about six times higher than they would have been if this had just been normal, and we know that. But I think Burson-Marsteller is up to the challenge.

The commission also voted to spend $600,000 to sponsor the Reno air races. How did the state benefit from that deal?

They were very careful to take this $600,000 and craft it into a sponsorship, just like a sponsorship we would have for any event. There was a very long list of marketing considerations.

This title sponsorship will be in place for at least three years. We’ll be able to extend our brand through the kind of marketing this event does. It makes business sense, and it’s also a good community gesture.

Both ways, it worked in our favor. The response was very positive. People were very glad that this event was able to remain in Reno.

With this precedent set, how will the commission be able to reject sponsorship requests for other events in the future that are equally important to other communities?

This was an extraordinary set of circumstances. If somebody has an event that they feel needs some sponsorship, I would welcome anybody to talk to me about it.

It has never been that much money. But if there is an event that's significant – and we really look for events that bring international exposure that are tied well with the brand of the state – we will consider it. The Reno air races is intended to be a one-time shot for these folks. But if other people have other events, we're open to looking at urban events and how to sponsor them because I think they're in everybody's best interest.

Why was it the state's responsibility to save the Reno air races?

It's the last of its kind in the world: these kinds of races in these kinds of aircraft in this type of setting. It's important to retain that kind of legacy here in the state.

The thing I like about it is that it brings people here who are risk-takers and adventurers, so they're like Nevadans, even though some are coming from the U.K. They're embracing the Nevada spirit.

There are very few events that are statewide events that everybody's going to recognize. I'd like to do more events in the southern part of the state, but nobody has really come to me and said they want funding.

Do you think it's possible to have an event to tie everyone together for the 2014 sesquicentennial?

We're definitely looking at those kinds of legacy events that can help tie the state together for that year. Hopefully,

there will be ongoing events that would continue to remind people of the unique heritage of this state.

The sesquicentennial steering committee has started to look at types of events and touring exhibits that are fun and interactive and really would engage people in different communities throughout the state. It has to be a statewide, collaborative effort. There will be lots of events that will happen during that time, but maybe one or two real signature events.

The Governor's Conference on Tourism has had a difficult history, having been canceled twice. Are you planning to keep it going?

We're definitely planning to keep it going. It's going to be Dec. 4 to Dec. 5.

What we're trying to do is to make it a significantly different event from Rural Roundup, which is a wonderful educational event for tourism industry members.

To make it retain some viability, we're going to bring back some elements of the past, including a sales and marketing event with a trade show to give members of the Nevada industry a chance to go one-on-one with tour operators, travel agents and the media. We're also going to do a pre-conference technology summit that helps people start to understand the emerging technology world. We're going to try to find some pockets and make this more of a business-building conference than an educational conference.

I don't know if we'll get there this year, but that's the idea because they're different markets. As far as I know, we're the only state in the nation that has two conferences – the Governor's Conference and the Rural Roundup. But to retain the difference between them, I think, is an important thing. We're going to keep looking at how we can make sure there are reasons for people to go to both conferences.

I understand the Tourism Commission is developing a statewide tourism app. Tell me about that.

I haven't seen the finished product, but I've seen the idea. It really starts to answer some of our infrastructure issues in a 21st-century way.

The app will be designed to be downloaded in a place that has cellphone service. Obviously, we don't have statewide cellphone coverage, and that's always an issue. But once you have the app on your device, you can use it even if you don't have cell service.

So if you're driving along I-80 and you're at Exit 46, it would tell you what's in the area. The idea is that at some point, if you've landed at McCarran Airport, it will offer you coupons: "I see you're in Las Vegas, here's $20 off at X Hotel and $10 off at the restaurant."

It becomes a much more retail deal. It is meant to be both a wayfaring kind of piece, as well as something for business.

Will a traditional place like Nevada be able to adapt to 21st-century efforts?

Just having people willing to take a little bit of a risk with us is the key to success. We'll be going in some new directions, and I'll be trying some things out to see if they work.

This isn't your father's Oldsmobile. To be successful, we're going to have to do some things differently. We'll always have a strategic business reason for doing things, but we'll be asking people to go with us to see if they work.

The thing I like about Nevada is that we're a blank slate. Yes, Las Vegas has done it better than anybody, and Reno-Tahoe has some great things. We can do things that are really innovative and different than any other state because of the

fact that we are a new brand because so many people don’t know what is here.

We’re going to be doing a whole new cooperative marketing program for the state in the digital space, as well as in more traditional advertising. But we’re not doing new just to be new. We’re thinking it through. The idea is to build business.

Blood drive in South Lake Tahoe

Barton Memorial Hospital Auxiliary will host its bi-monthly blood drive on Dec. 3 at Embassy Suites, in the first floor ballroom (4130 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe).

Donations will begin at noon and conclude at 6pm.

Parking will be validated.

For more info, Dan Kerr at (775) 781.5343.

Eldorado National Forest roads to close for winter

Seasonal closure of dirt roads in the Eldorado National Forest will occur Nov. 29 due to anticipated heavy rainfall.

They will remain closed until at least April 1.

Rainfall, soil moisture, road and trail conditions, and weather forecasts are factors that trigger a seasonal closure earlier than Jan. 1. Officials say many of the roads are on the edge of being too wet to drive on and the high probability of severe weather makes the pending seasonal closure a sensible decision.

Roads subject to seasonal closure are identified on a map that is free and available at all Eldorado National Forest offices and online.

The seasonal closure does not affect routes in the Rock Creek Area of the Eldorado National Forest near Georgetown, which has its own route closure process.

Tahoe businesses light up the night

A multitude of businesses participated in the inaugural Light up South Lake Tahoe event on Thanksgiving weekend.

While this was the launch date for businesses to turn on holiday lights, more keep coming on.



Tahoe Standup Paddle is in the holiday spirit. Photo/Provided

While an official contest was not planned, South Tahoe Standup Paddle (3115 Harrison Ave.) received the Best Participation and Most Enthusiastic award from city staff.

Festivities concluded at the Y with the annual tree lighting and a visit from Santa.

Supreme Court inaction allows people to videotape, record cops

By Radley Balko, Huffington Post

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a decision by the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocking the enforcement of an Illinois eavesdropping law. The broadly written law — the most stringent in the country — makes it a felony to make an audio recording of someone without their permission, punishable by four to 15 years in prison.

Many states have similar "all-party consent" law, which mean one must get the permission of all parties to a conversation before recording it. But in all of those states — except for Massachusetts and Illinois — the laws include a provision that the parties being recorded must have a reasonable expectation of privacy for it to be a crime to record them.

The Illinois law once included such a provision, but it was removed by the state legislature in response to an Illinois Supreme Court ruling that threw out the conviction of a man accused of recording police from the back of a squad car. That ruling found that police on the job have no reasonable expectation of privacy.

The Illinois and Massachusetts laws have been used to arrest people who attempt to record on-duty police officers and other public officials. In one of the more notorious cases, Chicago

resident Tiawanda Moore was arrested in 2010 when she attempted to use her cell phone to record officers in a Chicago police station.

Moore had come to the station to report an alleged sexual assault by a Chicago cop, and says she became frustrated when internal affairs officers allegedly bullied her and attempted to talk her out of filing the report. Moore was eventually acquitted.

The lawsuit was filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, which is planning a police accountability project in Chicago that will involve recording police while they're on duty. The organization wanted to be sure its employees and volunteers wouldn't be charged with felonies.

The 7th Circuit Court found a specific First Amendment right to record police officers. It's the second federal appeals court to strike down a conviction for recording police. In August 2011, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit ruled that a man wrongly arrested for recording cops could sue the arresting officers for violating his First Amendment rights.

That decision also found a broad First Amendment right to record on-duty government officials in public: "Gathering information about government officials in a form that can readily be disseminated to others serves a cardinal First Amendment interest in protecting and promoting 'the free discussion of governmental affairs.'" And in fact, in that it strips police who make such arrests of their immunity from lawsuits, it's an even stronger opinion. Of course, the police themselves rarely pay damages in such suits – taxpayers do.

The Supreme Court's refusal to grant certiorari in the case doesn't necessarily mean the justices endorse the lower court's ruling. But it does mean that at least six of the current justices weren't so opposed to the ruling that they

felt the case needed to be heard.

The First and 7th circuit decisions mean that it is now technically legal to record on-duty police officers in every state in the country. Unfortunately, people are still being arrested for it. Police officers who want to make an arrest to intimidate would-be videographers can always use broadly-written laws that prohibit public disorder, interfering with a police officer, or similar ordinances that give law enforcement wide discretion.

The charges are almost always either subsequently dropped or dismissed in court, but by then the innocent person has been illegally detained, arrested, sometimes jailed, and possibly paid expensive legal fees.

Journalist Carlos Miller, who has been arrested multiple times for recording police, documents such cases on a daily basis. He has also documented countless cases in which police officers have deleted incriminating video from cell phones – a crime in and of itself.

Ski report: Wet weather on its way

Get out early today because wet weather is moving in. A more significant storm system is coming through Thursday evening.

Here is the Nov. 28 ski report.

— Curtis Fong

South Lake Tahoe finance director gives notice

By Kathryn Reed

Four months into the job and Michael Nakama knew the public sector was not for him.

Nakama at the end of the year will leave his post as finance director for South Lake Tahoe. He gave notice in October, but no one at the city chose to let anyone know until now.

Nakama had been laid off from Southern California Edison when former City Manager Tony O'Rourke tapped him for the $130,000 year position. The hire was made one week before O'Rourke left his job with the city.



Michael Nakama

Nakama had no experience working in the public sector. What O'Rourke touted was Nakama's MBA from Stanford. But apparently that degree didn't translate into real world government know-how.

Nakama was not available for comment. He is returning to Southern California, where his family has remained since he

started the city job in June.

City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News* she is taking her time to assess how to structure the finance department. In the interim she plans to hire a consultant to work on special projects. This person would be paid on an hourly basis. She has conducted phone interviews and plans to do in-person interviews in the next month so the person could start in January.

Kerry said the main issues she wants the interim person to address are the budget (to do a cost-benefit analysis), health care (it accounts for one-sixth of the budget), Harrison Avenue (becoming a business district), and the parking garage (bonds may be refinanced).

What would you suggest a person visiting Tahoe do if they don’t ski or snowboard?

Letter: Wars have already sent us over the fiscal cliff

To the community,

There is loud chatter on the national stage about going over the fiscal cliff if there's no action soon. It's a bit late because we've already marched over the cliff to the tune of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in Afghanistan.

In 2006, congressional researchers estimated it cost $390,000 per soldier per year in Afghanistan. By 2009, the cost had increased to $1 million per year.



Bill Crawford

In Baltimore in June 2011, at the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the mayors called for an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and use the $126 billion annual savings to rebuild U.S. cities. The mayor of Los Angeles said, "That we could build bridges in Baghdad and Kandahar and not Baltimore and Kansas City absolutely boggles the mind."

The fiscal cost is immense. And the random wholesale killing of civilians by U.S. soldiers and drones is morally outrageous. Spiritually, we have come close to bankruptcy.

I believe our city should by resolution call for a quick end to our wars in the Middle East. And our city should call upon the League of California Cities to call for an end to the wars.

For most our history it was the policy of our government not to fight land wars in Asia. Let's return to that policy and save ourselves.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

PS: Our global network of bases and 255,000 overseas troops costs about $250 billion annually.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• The U.S. Postal Service expects to deliver 365 million packages this holiday season.

• The Tahoe Pipe Club has put out a calendar showing all of the gunk flowing directly into Lake Tahoe. Click on 2013 calendar for a PDF copy.

• Three state agencies along with local entities are gathering info about how Californians travel. More info about the survey is online.

• Small World is having house concert fundraiser in South Lake Tahoe on Dec. 7 featuring musician Zo Tobi from Berkeley. Click on the flyer for more info.

• Northstar will host a joint North Lake Tahoe/CVB/Resort Association and Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce Business Mixer on Nov. 29 from 5-7pm at the Tavern 6330’ in the Village at Northstar.