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## Tourism industry faces challenges But officials remain fairly optimistic about coming year

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Another challenging year faces Victoria and B.C.'s tourism industry, again expecting to see fewer American visitors.

Last year, a strong domestic market offset the 6.5 per cent drop in U.S. visitors to B.C. "I'm pretty optimistic about the upcoming year," said Chemistry Consulting Group's Frank Bourree.

"The focus now is what we can do to attract those U.S. visitors with the passport issue and everything else." Passports are required for those travelling between Canada and the U.S.

Close to 200 people attended a Tourism Monitor meeting staged by Chemistry yesterday to get a snapshot on the industry. In 2006, Victoria saw average hotel occupancy rise by two per cent to 67.1 per cent. The average hotel rate moved up \$2 to \$124.32.

The number of passengers at Victoria International Airport increased 5.4 per cent to 1.39 million, Bourree said.

Last year's record of 182 cruise ship visits brought 334,570 passengers, up eight per cent from 2005. Passengers and crew spent an estimated \$30 million here, he said.

This year will likely bring continued declines in the U.S. market, thanks to issues such as passport rules. Another strong year is anticipated for cruise ships, Bourree said. This year's 2007 cruise ship schedule is not yet public.

Hotel developments are slowing and the tourism industry faces severe and growing labour shortages, he said.

Tourism Victoria research found that, for Seattle residents, Victoria still holds its traditional image, and that trips with the strongest appeal are Island vacations, and getaways for long weekends, romance, and food and wine.

Rod Harris, Tourism BC CEO, said initiatives to prepare B.C.'s tourist industry for the 2010 Olympic Games in Whistler and Vancouver include building relationships with the American NBC network, preparing film footage, and programs helping individual communities get ready.

Individual sectors, such as spas and diving businesses, will be helped to develop long-term strategic plans in time for Games visitors.

Work has been going on for more than two years to plan and prepare for the Games. Marketing programs are ramping up to build business in the Asia Pacific region, he said.

Travel media will be invited here so they get to know the region. Another program is aimed at ensuring Games visitors "have smooth and easy access to accommodation," Harris said.

Don Welsh, CEO of Seattle's Convention and Visitors Bureau, is eager to forge stronger relationships with Vancouver and Victoria to promote the Pacific Northwest as a whole. In October, the board of directors for the Seattle Visitors Bureau visited Vancouver to meet with tourism officials. "We went up to begin looking at opportunities."

Possibilities include working together to entice large conventions to this region more often. For example, the big conventions, with thousands of participants, may only come to a city once every 10 to 15 years. But if Seattle or Vancouver work together, it might mean a convention would go to Seattle one year and in five years it may come to Vancouver. If that happened, the region as a whole could benefit by participants coming to the area beforehand as tourists or staying extra days after the event, Welsh said.

"It is really co-operative marketing."

Welsh is also anticipating spinoffs from the 2010 Games as the world's attention and media are focused on this region. "It is going to showcase the Northwest like it has never done before."

He's hoping that visitors will stop in Seattle on their way to the Games. Initiatives could include packages offering Seattle accommodation and transportation to the Games.

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