

James Bolen: Tourism grows - but we can do even better

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Last week, the Department of Tourism announced another record year in Wisconsin! Over \$20.6 billion in direct visitor spending. I am not surprised because Wisconsin has it all: natural beauty, attractions, the arts, fishing, hunting and most important of all—fantastic hospitality.

Tourism and the forest products industry are the mainstays of our northern economy. I believe we should be seeking opportunities in other ways to grow the northern economy. However, it is also important to not lose sight of our strengths.

Because we must never lose sight of our strengths, I am calling for an increase in tourism funding in the next state budget. As your state senator, I will make it a priority to find a small sliver of the state's \$76 billion budget to increase the tourism budget. As part of the increased tourism funding, I will include the Creative Economy proposal championed by former Senator Harsdorf last legislative session. After all, the creative economy, including the arts, generates \$535 million in economic activity and employs over 42,000 full-time jobs. Even a tiny sliver will be a big increase for tourism. Plus, it will narrow the gap between us and Michigan and Illinois, whose tourism budgets are more than three times Wisconsin's.

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As a lifelong resident of northern Wisconsin, I know the impact of tourism on our economy. My wife, Heather, and our family, have lived the ups and downs of life as resort owners and I have had the privilege of serving as executive director of the Cable Chamber of Commerce. There are few things more satisfying than seeing

families unwind from their hectic lives for a week and enjoy what the Northwoods has to offer.

Because of my experience, including serving on the Governor's Council on Tourism, I can bring the expertise to make the case a modest increase in the tourism budget is an investment that would yield big returns. Every dollar we spend on tourism brings over seven dollars in revenue back to the state.

Wisconsin has a true leader in Tourism Secretary Stephanie Klett. Under her leadership, Travel Wisconsin has won over 104 major marketing awards and has seen an increase in revenue every single year. Tourism's economic impact is up nearly 40 percent since Klett took the reigns at Tourism. Let's invest in that leadership to make Wisconsin the destination for more of our friends across the country.

- Bolen, of Cable, is a Republican candidate for the 25th Senate District.