



EBTC INFORMATION BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: *Passport Issue affects Tourism*

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Debate over a passport mandate scheduled to take effect next year has confused visitors to the Buffalo Niagara region, and local leaders say this year's tourist season has already been hurt by the new identification requirements.

While some believe the mandate to carry a passport to cross into the United States from Canada could keep more American tourists on the U.S. side in the short term, they worry it could ultimately hurt the region as a whole.

"There's confusion on a daily basis, and it has been that way and it drives you crazy," said John Percy, president and CEO of Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp. "I think it's going to affect the destination overall, just because I don't think people sometimes realize there's a Niagara Falls, N.Y., and a Niagara Falls, Canada. They'll choose another vacation destination that doesn't have a passport issue."

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff is in Buffalo today, with the border-crossing issue and the impact on tourism here a big topic of discussion. Last week, he announced that the Bush administration's January 2008 passport mandate for all adults entering the United States has been pushed back by about six months.

Today, with the bustling Peace Bridge as a backdrop, Chertoff ended a roundtable discussion with local leaders at the Peace Bridge Authority offices by telling reporters he is amenable to studying the idea and possibly delaying further implementation if New York and other states commit themselves to promptly developing a secure license.

But Percy said the continual debate over the passport mandate has left tourists confused.

Adam Janis of Ohio said he found conflicting information on Web sites he visited before deciding to bring his family to Niagara Falls last week. If the passport restriction goes into effect next summer as planned, it's not likely Janis, his wife, Jasmine, and their two young girls will be back.

“I knew the passport restrictions would go into effect, so we decided to come this summer,” Janis explained while waiting to board the Maid of the Mist on the Canadian side. “I wasn’t going to spend \$80 to \$100 [for each passport], especially since we’re not going anywhere else that would require it.”

Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, chairwoman of the House Rules Committee, who invited Chertoff to Buffalo, has called for a full economic impact study of border areas to be done before the new requirements take effect. “Homeland Security’s ambitious rush ahead with its passport requirement is not grounded in reality,” Slaughter said last week.

Local lawmakers and business owners concur, but say a lot of damage already has been done.

Niagara Falls, Ont., Mayor Ted Salci said his city last year saw 42 percent fewer day-trippers — mostly Americans who drive over the border — than the previous year.

“It doesn’t seem to be any better at this stage,” he said of the current season. “Those are the lowest figures we’ve had since we started recording the data back in the ’60s.”

He blames misinformation about what’s required to drive over the border right now, as well as a strong American dollar.

The Ontario Ministry of Tourism has also measured a drop in people crossing the border from the United States. Since January, the number of people who have crossed from the United States into Ontario has decreased by 18.1 percent compared with the same period last year.

The impact of the passport mandate on the American side of Niagara Falls is less clear.

Christopher Glynn, president of the Maid of the Mist attraction, which has boat docks on both sides of the border, said his numbers are already out of whack after less than a month of operation.

Glynn said business on the Canadian side has been down 25 percent. On the American side, it’s increased about 35 percent compared with this time last year. However, he cautioned that overall visitors are down by about 700 each day.

“In Niagara Falls, N.Y., we could see some incremental increases by default,” he said. “I don’t think it’s good for the industry as a whole in the long run.”

The New York side, Glynn said, needs Canada because it has more hotels, attractions and restaurants.

“If the total market has less people in it, how is that a good thing?” Glynn asked.

Galeb Rizek, co-owner of the Econo Lodge at the Falls on Niagara Falls Boulevard, agreed. He said the American side of the Falls struggles to educate visitors that the destination includes two countries.

“Even 85 percent to 90 percent of the people, when you say ‘Falls,’ they think Canada,” Rizek said. “I just don’t see us benefiting off stopping people from going into Canada. I just think people are going to just stop coming, period.”

Rizek, like other business owners, said his staff has been inundated with questions about the passport requirement.

Despite the confusion — or perhaps because of it — Percy, Rizek and others say business on the American side has started off strong this season.

Mike Bartz, site supervisor at Flight of Angels helium balloon ride in Niagara Falls, N.Y., said he’s noticed an increase in customers this year. He said it could be due to the fact fewer Americans want to venture over the border.

Americans and Canadians are also taking different strategies to market the region.

Advertisements for Ontario have emphasized that passports are not needed to visit Canada. Meanwhile, the Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp., which advertises Niagara County destinations, has avoided the issue.

“We don’t put anything in there about the passport issue,” Percy said. “We discussed it back and forth, and we decided not to put anything in there so as not to confuse the situation.”

Salci and Niagara Falls, N.Y., Mayor Vince Anello are doing all they can to tell visitors they don’t need a passport yet.

Last week, they joined Arlene White, executive director of the Binational Tourism Alliance, on a cable access show to try to get the message across. The same mantra is being repeated in television ads in Boston, New York and some Great Lakes cities, Salci said.

“It’s on people’s mind,” Anello said. “If you’re making a lastminute vacation with the thought to drive over the border, but you’re not sure what’s required, you might not make that trip.”