

Salem rolls out the tech carpet for tourists

RON COWAN Statesman Journal
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There will be something new in downtown Salem and something new on the travel scene as Salem Convention & Visitors Association makes the biggest move in its 25-year history.

SCVA, which has had offices and a visitor information center at Mission Mill Museum, is opening what it calls an all-purpose Travel Cafe in the Grand building at 181 High St. NE.

The site will include event ticket sales, Wi-Fi access, iPod downloads, readerboards with scrolling events, an art gallery, a spirits room for wine tasting, exhibits, plasma screens for travel videos, and travel brochures and maps.

"It's going to have more bells and whistles there to engage the consumer," SCVA chief executive officer Angie Morris said.

She said the center will immediately immerse visitors in art, wine, scenic attractions and tour possibilities and give them the tools to explore the area.

"I call it a destination visitors center," said Irene Bernards, tourism and marketing director of SCVA.

Garmin will provide GPS units available for rent for walking and driving tours. Garmin is one of many local organizations partnering with SCVA.

Two new satellite locations also will be established near Interstate 5, at the Red Lion Hotel and the Best Western Mill Creek Inn.

"We really needed to rethink ourselves as a whole and how we interact with visitors," Morris said.

"I don't know if anyone outside this city is doing a travel cafe concept; this is the first thing of its kind."

The site will triple the floor space available to SCVA and could be instrumental in building on travel spending, which had an economic effect of \$512 million in Marion and Polk counties in 2007.

SCVA also plans to rename itself Travel Salem — the same name as its printed travel guide.

Todd Davidson, executive director of the Oregon Tourism Commission, called the holistic



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Angie Morris, CEO of the Salem Convention & Visitors Association, and architect Garth Brandaw stand in front of the new office in the Grand Building at 181 High Street NE.

Travel Cafe

What: An all-purpose visitors center featuring wine tasting, GPS units for rent, exhibits, art for sale, iPod downloads, Wi-Fi access, travel brochures, maps and plasma screens

Operator: Salem Convention & Visitors Association, to be renamed Travel Salem

Where: 181 High St. NE, Salem

Cost: \$236,000 construction cost; cash, in-kind donations and marketing partners being sought

Opening: Soft opening by mid-December

Information: (503) 581-4325

approach of the Travel Cafe "a brilliant move."

"What they're doing is an opportunity to immerse people right away in the experience of Salem, as well as Polk and Marion County."

Carole Smith, who will be landlord of the Travel Cafe, along with husband Eric Kittleson, said SCVA is taking a 10-year lease, with an option of two five-year extensions.

SCVA also has an option of someday expanding into upstairs office space, she said.

"We're thrilled with SCVA coming downtown," Smith said.

Garth Brandaw of CB2 Architects/Construction, who is designing and handling construction of the Travel Cafe, said he will use the setting to tell the story of this area, with a central information pavilion as "an exciting signature piece."

"It's really a blend of coming up with some excitement; Angie was really interested in coming up with that vision."

Remodeling the space, formerly the home of two stores, will cost \$236,000, of which \$80,000 has been raised from partners such as Salem Conference Center, PGE, Salem Sign Co., Garmin and CB2.

"We're seeking cash and in-kind partners to make the project possible, and we're also looking for marketing partners," Morris said.

The new location, including both offices at the rear of the space and the Travel Cafe at the front, is 4,000 square feet, up from 1,200 square feet at Mission Mill.

Morris is optimistic there could be a soft opening by the Dec. 13 Festival of Lights Holiday Parade. Interior demolition on the site begins this week.

"I think she's really within striking distance," said SCVA board member Chuck Bennett of the fundraising. "I think the amount of money involved is manageable."

Bennett is a member of Salem City Council.

"There just couldn't be a better space," he said. "If there's any drawback I could find, it's the parking."

"You really put them in the middle of what are the attractions."

Morris has been working on the project for the past two years.

The goal of the new Travel Cafe is to build tourism in Marion and Polk counties, with the idea that the new and more interactive visitor approach could quadruple the current visitor center traffic of 35,000 to 40,000 annually.

Existing staff and budget are not expected to increase much, with the use of interns from Chemeketa Community College's hospitality program to flesh out staffing.

Irene Bernards, tourism and marketing director for SCVA, said the two satellite locations will be stocked with brochures and maps and be open 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

SCVA will train motel staff to provide service to travelers.

The Best Western site will be an official Travel Plaza and someday could have an outdoor travel kiosk.

"Hopefully this will create more demand, and the supply will follow," Morris said.

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