

Salem Convention & Visitors Association (SCVA)

Hosted by Angie Morris

October 16, 2008

12 p.m. - 1 p.m.



Angie Morris, the Chief Executive Officer of SCVA, was hired in February 2007 after a nationwide search. Before joining SCVA, Morris was the Executive Director for Pentacle Theatre. Morris also served as Director of Marketing & PR for Portland Opera/Broadway Across America. In 2008, she received the Governor's Tourism Industry Awareness award. She serves on various boards including the Oregon Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus, Marion County Economic Development Advisory Board, Chemeketa's Hospitality & Tourism Management, and Salem's Vision 2020.

Angie is a Salem native, and alum of McKay High School. She lives in Monmouth with her husband Malik and their two daughters Mina and Maeve. She received her bachelor's in Journalism and Public Relations from the University of Oregon.

Click below to submit a question.

Angie Morris:

Hi - this is Angie Morris. This is my first time doing an online chat - and I'm really excited about this opportunity to discuss tourism-related issues with you. I look forward to your questions and insights!

Salem, OR:

Explain your hopes of the new downtown location and SCVA's name change to Travel Salem.

Angie Morris:

These are huge steps for SCVA, now Travel Salem. I'll try and tackle these one at a time.

First - the name change. For quite some time, the organization has been considering a name change for some key reasons. Salem Convention & Visitors Association is long, and a challenge to say. It isn't easy for folks to remember. And, we're often confused with the Salem Conference Center. So for all of these reasons, it was important to reevaluate our name. We immediately leaned toward "Travel Salem" as that is the name of our website and Visitors Guide publication. But we wanted to do some research to determine if this was the right choice for us. Throughout the state of Oregon, groups like SCVA have moved to destination names such as "Travel XX" or "Visit XX." Other places in the country call themselves "Experience XX" or "Discover XX." We wanted a name that had an inherent call to action - and Travel Salem met that need. In addition, the Oregon Tourism Commission and Portland Oregon Visitors Association both changed their names to Travel Oregon and Travel Portland respectively. So, after coming at new name opportunities from a variety of angles - we settled on Travel Salem. It aligns well with the major tourism organizations in the state - and it is an easy transition given we already use Travel Salem for other marketing programs.

Second - hopes for the new downtown location. This is an innovative approach to a visitor center, and is the first one of it's kind in the state. We wanted to create a destination visitors center with a huge variety of qualities to attract visitors, and increase awareness of the local community about what there is to see and do. We came up with the Travel Cafe concept to showcase interactivity, technology and new ways to access information. We will feature exhibits, wine tastings and other events, podcasting and wifi, art and culture, tickets, and GPS units available for rent. It will become a centerpiece for downtown and help us get folks excited and out experiencing all that we have to offer.

Dallas, OR:

Are you concerned about raising the addition \$150,000 needed to fund this project - especially in a time when individuals and companies may be less likely to donate?

Angie Morris:

Great question - it is a bit daunting given our current economic climate. However, we wouldn't have engaged with this project and made the commitment unless we knew we would be successful. And successful we will be! The business community is very excited about this project - and is stepping up to support tourism promotion. We secured an additional \$15,000 yesterday toward the build. So, things are moving forward and I'm really pleased with the quick response so far as businesses step up and get behind the Travel Cafe. I do want to say that it will take a "village" to help fund the Travel Cafe - so we will need partners big and small to make it happen. No donation is too small - it all counts and helps us drive toward opening the doors later this year.

Dallas, OR:

The article mentioned an anticipated quadrupling of visitors. How do you currently count that and how will you count that in your new location? Will you be counting everyone that walks in the door, whether for the cafe and wi-fi access, or just those inquiring about visiting sites within Salem?

Angie Morris:

In our current Visitors Center at Mission Mill, we count all visitors that come through the door. Some of them want extensive itinerary planning, others just want a map and directions, and still others want to know where to get the best burger. So we interact as much as possible with every visitor that comes to the Visitors Center. And this is how we create economic impact and ultimately create jobs. As a side note - tourism in the Marion and Polk counties region was roughly \$512 million in 2007, and was responsible for 6,010 jobs.

In our new Visitor Information Network - which includes the Travel Cafe and two satellite locations on I-5 - we will be counting visitors the same way. We work with visitors and help direct them throughout the two-county region, so we promote Dallas, Monmouth, Independence, Aurora, Silverton, Woodburn, Willamina, etc. As we serve each consumer in the visitors centers, they will be counted in our total visitors center attendance figures. This includes whether they make a direct inquiry or use wi-fi. We're providing the products and services that drive economic impact - and these consumers are accessing these resources in our visitors centers.

Sublimity, OR:

Parking is mentioned as a potential issue - do you have any plan to mitigate the problems faced by visitors? It is difficult enough to find parking when driving a car, but I don't know where visitors will park if they are driving an RV, towing a trailer, or driving a tour bus?

Angie Morris:

Parking is an important issue for us, and we considered opportunities and challenges with this when seeking visitors center locations. For the Travel Cafe, there are a number of parking options. We have several parking garages within a few blocks...there is a city-owned surface lot on State/High Streets that is designated for visitors...and free two-hour parking most other places. We felt there were sufficient options for visitors and locals alike to find a convenient parking spot. In addition, we will be talking with the City of Salem about designating the spots directly in front of the Travel Cafe as 30 minute spots if possible.

The two satellite locations on I-5 also were selected primarily on ease of access and parking availability for larger rigs. We drove both locations and evaluated based on how easy it would be to find a parking spot and navigate an RV through the parking lot. I'm personally very familiar with the needs of parking an RV as my husband and our two daughters travel a lot in our RV. So we paid close attention to this when selecting the Best Western Mill Creek and the Red Lion Hotel. Both have sufficient RV parking behind the hotels and can easily handle a tour bus or other large vehicle.

As another piece of context to this question - our downtown location was selected because it is also centralized in the downtown core, and will be able to serve the thousands of folks on the ground who are shopping, walking to meetings, going to lunch, etc. We are also only 2.5 blocks from the Salem Conference Center - so it will be easy for them to direct conference delegates to the Travel Cafe. The Capital Mall is only a few blocks from this location as well. So we hope to get folks on the ground and out of their cars to experience downtown. Then we hope to get them back in their cars and out about in the region experiencing the bounty it has to offer.

We also looked at other metropolitan areas and where their visitors centers are - and Portland is a good example. Their Visitors Center is in Pioneer Courthouse Square - a very challenging location to find parking of any kind. So I think we've really scored the best of all possible worlds to serve visitors in whatever means they travel to Salem.

Sublimity, OR:

With the recession and less people traveling, do you anticipate catering more to locals who may be looking for something to do within Salem?

Angie Morris:

Absolutely - this is a very important component to what we do. In fact, Travel Oregon realized \$8.3 billion in economic impact from visitors in 2007...of which approximately 44% came from Oregonians exploring Oregon. So, we already serve a large local and regional contingent of visitors. You've heard about "Staycations." Who hasn't these days :-). Anyway, Travel Salem is really pushing local awareness about what there is to see and do - hoping to get our community engaged and excited about what our area has to offer, and out exploring their own backyard. We live in one of the most beautiful and bountiful places in the country (some say world!), and Travel Salem is committed to partnering with the Statesman on how to promote our local treasures.

Salem:

The new kiosk in the Grand looks - well, grand! Salem was just recognized as a bicycle friendly city. Have you thought about adding a couple of rental bikes and suggesting that visitors go for a spin in Riverfront park or out to Minto? Those who visit from more urban places will also be

comfortable biking in the downtown core, and might be interested in getting around that way.

Angie Morris:

Great comment and good point - we are totally on your wavelength! Yes, we will be exploring partnerships that allow us to rent bicycles by the hour or for the day. We'll be putting together a variety of walking/bicycling tours. There are so many awesome trail opportunities in Salem - we have so many green spaces in downtown that are easily accessible by foot or bike. Getting around by bicycle will be a great way to explore. We're also excited about the bridge connectivity trails in development at Riverfront Park. There are also some beautiful historic neighborhoods in downtown as well. Seeing these assets via bike is a great way to showcase our city. We'll be working hard to create the opportunity for rentals at the Travel Cafe.

StatesmanJournal.com:

Thank you for all of your questions. Angie is taking a break, but will return and answer all of the questions that were submitted by 1 p.m. Check back later to read her responses.

Salem, Oregon:

Hi Angie, I am curious about your intern program I had read about in yesterday's paper. What types of positions will you be giving the interns and what skills will they develop from their practices working at the travel cafe? Great idea by the way. Goodluck!

Angie Morris:

Thanks for your interest and support! I encourage you to visit our website for detailed information. Here's a link for your convenience:

<http://www.travelsalem.com/aboutSCVA/jobOpenings.html>

The skills interns will develop are varied and professional in scope - from marketing to public relations, customer service, sales, administrative and research.

We have an extremely creative and professional team with years of experience. They are excellent mentors and foster a very supportive environment. It's a great opportunity!

Keizer, OR:

What does Salem need to do to become better known as a tourism destination?

Angie Morris:

The short answer is: increase tourism promotion funding resources and capacity. The long answer is that it's a game of numbers...specifically, dollars.

The City of Salem invests roughly \$500,000 in tourism promotion through the transient occupancy tax fund (lodging tax paid by visitors). Travel Salem receives this core funding via a contract with the City of Salem. Salem has made the core investment in tourism promotion and that investment makes Travel Salem efforts possible - but it takes a regional approach to make tourism promotion successful.

Travel Salem generates revenues from our membership program, partnership opportunities and regional contracts to help leverage the Salem investment. And while the City of Salem's investment in tourism promotion is very significant, the fact is that Travel Salem is competing with other organizations just like ourselves for the discretionary dollar of the visitor. And our competitors to the north, south, east and west have multi-million dollar regional budgets to promote their destination. So we can't compete on a funding level, so we must come up with other creative ideas to help the Salem area obtain its market share.

Travel Salem is a marketing agency promoting the region as a tourist destination. We use a variety of marketing tools and resources to do this - some of which are very expensive. The fundamentals of marketing are all about frequency and consistency. We don't have the bandwidth to purchase enough ads that are big enough and in all the right places often enough. So we look for partnerships and cooperative opportunities to spread our dollars and be as targeted as possible.

The Salem area is a wonderful destination (see previous answers with details on what sets us apart) - we just need to increase our capacity to tell the story.

Salem, OR:

What are SCVA's plans to increase marketing of wineries in the region?

Angie Morris:

The wine industry is a very important component of the tourism industry in the Salem area. We currently partner in a variety of ways. In regards to the new Travel Cafe - this will be another opportunity to showcase wineries of the region. We plan to host wine tasting events in the Travel Cafe, retail wine products, and utilize Garmin GPS systems to drive visitors into wine country. We're always looking for new ideas and partners!

Salem, OR:

What's it like to be interviewed by Ron Cowan of the Statesman Journal?

Angie Morris:

I've actually worked with Ron for about 12 years. I knew Ron back when I was with Portland Opera/Broadway Across America, and used to set up interviews with him for Tony Curtis, Luciano Pavarotti, Eartha Kitt, etc. So I was typically not the person being interviewed by him. But since coming to Salem, I have been interviewed by Ron many times, and he's always been great! He's very easy to talk to, very curious and asks lots of questions, and truly cares about the stories he writes. He has an incredible journalistic integrity, and he has a real knack for taking complex issues and breaking them down in ways that really connect with readers. He's done so much for culture and the arts in Salem - he's a true champion of carrying these important stories forward. I really enjoy spending time with Ron - I don't ever feel like I'm being "interviewed."

Salem, Oregon:

Some say the tax rate is driving business out of Oregon at an astronomical pace. Do you agree with that view? If not, what do you feel is the main cause for the businesses to leave Oregon. Do you see a relationship between a strong business economy and the ability to attract visitors?

Angie Morris:

I think this is a very important question, but I'd recommend talking with the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce who will have resources to assist you.

Regarding whether there is a correlation between a strong business economy and the ability to attract visitors - absolutely! You will discover by reading my responses to previous questions, there is a direct and very important correlation.

birmingham:

i am visiting salem from england in february. what can i see and do when there?

Angie Morris:

We're so glad you're coming to visit the Salem area - you're in for a real treat! We'd be delighted to help you with personal assistance - please contact Barb Cowan, Guest Services Coordinator, at bcowan@travelsalem.com who can customize your trip according to your interests. We look forward to seeing you!

Salem, OR:

What do you see being Salem's biggest draw for tourists in the coming years?

Angie Morris:

Please refer to my comments to "Hubbard" as well, but I see the following being major draws for visitors to the region in coming years.

As Salem's Capital city, Salem will always be culturally significant and a major draw for visitors.

The natural attractions of the region - everything from having six State parks, wine country, and beautiful gardens, to outdoor recreation such as Silver Falls and Ankeny and Baskett Slough national wildlife refuges.

Agri-Tourism - visitors want to see how crops are grown and processed, and how it gets from the farm to their kitchen table. Organic crops and sustainable practices are also a growing trend. And Salem's location as an urban setting within a stone's throw from rural communities will position us perfectly.

Salem's vibrant downtown will continue to play a vital role as an energetic center with events, promotions, historic architecture, specialty boutiques, unique retail and dining opportunities. This combined with other historic downtowns in the region such as Silverton and Aurora make this a very rich and abundant resource for visitors.

Unique industry - GPS units produced by Garmin, food processing by Truitt Bros, Kettle Foods, green energy with solar and wind production, etc.

We also have top destinations in the state of Oregon - Woodburn Company Stores, Spirit Mountain Casino and Silver Falls. These amenities provide significant draw to the region, and when paired with the other things mentioned above, help position Marion & Polk Counties as a premier destination in the Pacific Northwest.

Salem:

Who are most of our tourists, visiting families our actual tourists coming through town?

Angie Morris:

Our research shows visitors coming from the following areas in order of volume: Oregon, Washington, California, British Columbia, Texas, and a variety of national and international locales. And yes - many come to visit friends and family. And that's why the Travel Cafe is such a key project because it is instrumental in educating the local community about what there is to see and do. However, the majority are coming as tourists and many are repeat visitors because of the hospitality and how much the area has to offer.

Dallas, OR:

The new ideas sound great. Have any other cities tried some of the concepts you are implementing? What successes have they had?

Angie Morris:

The Travel Cafe will be the first of its kind in Oregon. We hope it will become a model for other communities seeking to enhance their tourism promotion efforts.

The satellite visitors center at Best Western Mill Creek will be the first "Travel Plaza" of its kind in the state as well (through a partnership with Travel Information Council) - and will become a pilot project to help set the stage for how other communities can set up similar public/private partnerships.

As Travel Salem continues to reinvent itself, we hope to continue to set the bar for how tourism can deliver return on investment for the businesses and communities we serve.

Hubbard, OR:

Angie, with the recent economic collapse, tourism is more important than ever when it comes to enhancing our local economy. Can you explain the role of tourism as it supports the more traditional industries of manufacturing within Marion County. What is the future of tourism in this region...what's new and on the horizon?

-Dan

Angie Morris:

Dan - I agree, tourism is more important than ever as it is typically more resilient during other economic challenges. The reason is that most tourism funding comes from Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) revenues that are generated by the lodging properties. These taxes are not paid by locals - but are paid by visitors when they rent a room or stay in a campground for instance. These room tax revenues are a fairly consistent source of funding. Why are they fairly predictable and resilient? Well, our society is very career driven and we work very long hours typically. So, we need and deserve time off and vacations. So, even when the economy is struggling, folks still travel (even if it's local) and spend discretionary dollars. Americans will always value their freedom to travel.

Your question about tourism and how it supports industry and manufacturing is a great one - not many folks realize how tourism impacts every facet of the economy. I'll just add that we also support education, health and other industries as well. So I appreciate the opportunity to answer this question.

Tourism is considered an economic development generator - in the same vein as SEDCOR and local chambers of commerce. Each of us has a specific mission and piece of the economic development continuum that we support. But we all work synergistically together to recruit new business opportunities to the area (Travel Salem focusing mostly on visitors). There are many really interesting ways that tourism connects with industry and manufacturing that are not as obvious.

We focus on public relations initiatives that raise the profile of the region as a premier destination, as well as promote the quality of life factors that make this such a special place to live/work/play. These are the exact same factors that large corporations and industry rely on when determining where they want to do business. They want to relocate to a community that is vibrant and rich with activities for their employees and their families, has an excellent education system, a solid workforce, etc. These quality of life factors are often the tipping point - and where the tire meets the road in making the final decision of where to do business. So Travel Salem is focusing resources on promoting regional assets as the "hook" to help foster other economic development initiatives. We are working to create a positive image for our community, and position our region as a premier destination with many one-of-a-kind amenities not found anywhere else in the world.

In addition, we work with industry and manufacturing to help support recruitment and retention efforts. When businesses are recruiting employees, we can help them sell the Salem area as a great place to live/work/play. They utilize the Official Salem Area Visitors Guide and TravelSalem.com as resources and lure pieces to showcase what our communities have to offer. They also use Travel Salem as a resource when entertaining out-of-town guests or dignitaries, and setting the stage for what our community has to offer.

The future of tourism in the Salem area is to continue to reinvent how we connect with the

consumer, businesses and other industry partners that drive economic impact and job creation. This region is booming with opportunity - and experiences not found anywhere else in the world. We need to continue to seek ways to drive value and return on investment for our communities. We do this by promoting the incredible assets right here in the mid-Willamette Valley and by building innovative partnerships that create economies of scale and new opportunities.

There's so much to showcase already - for instance, we have Elsinore Theatre - the last Tudor Gothic theater in the country; Hallie Ford Museum, the only one of its kind on the West Coast; the A.C. Gilbert Discovery Village which is in the top 10 children's museums in the world; Black Rock Mountain Bike in Falls City, one of only three in the country attracting international attention; and our spectacular wine country which is producing the best pinot noirs in the world (better than France and Italy) according to international wine experts. This is just to name a few...trust me, I could go on and on! So I see tourism continuing to grow - getting more culinary experiences, unique lodging facilities, more immersed in outdoor recreation opportunities, etc.
