

Tourism Industry Questions for the Gubernatorial Candidates

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To assist the membership of TTR and the state's tourism industry in understanding the position of each of the 2010 gubernatorial candidates on tourism-related issues, the TTR Board of Directors and its Executive Committee developed a series of questions to be posed to all of the candidates. The candidates' responses to those questions are listed below.

To provide a neutral forum for these questions and answers, the candidates' responses have been included verbatim and with no editing on the part of TTR. Political parties and candidates are listed in alphabetical order with no ranking or preference intended or implied.

The Tennessee Tourism Roundtable is providing this information to the state's tourism industry and other interested parties for the purpose of assisting each individual in making his/her own informed choice of candidate. TTR has not and is not endorsing any party or candidate for the office of Governor.

QUESTION AREA NO. 1: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TOURISM

TOURISM HAS A MAJOR IMPACT ON TENNESSEE'S ECONOMY, GENERATING \$14.4 BILLION IN TRAVEL-RELATED EXPENDITURES ANNUALLY AND GENERATING OVER \$3 BILLION ANNUALLY IN FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL TAXES.

A. WHAT IS YOUR POSITION ON TOURISM AS A MAJOR ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN THE STATE?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *Tourism is a vital and indispensable part of Tennessee's economy. Our state possesses a unique and powerful combination of cultural and natural attractions, and it is important that our next governor makes every effort to promote Tennessee as a tourist destination. Each region of Tennessee has its own distinct offerings, from the blues of Beale Street in Memphis, to the honky tonks of lower Broadway in Nashville, to the Great Smoky Mountains of east Tennessee. We need to make sure urban and rural areas alike share in the benefits of tourism and as Governor I will work closely with the tourism industry to promote and expand our tourism industry.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER):

BILL HASLAM: *There's no question tourism, which employs approximately 182,000 people in Tennessee, is a vital industry for our state. As governor, I will leverage the industry for economic development, and it will play a key role in my overall plan to make Tennessee the No. 1 state in the Southeast for high quality jobs.*

RON RAMSEY: *Tourism is a huge boon to the state of Tennessee because our varying geography and rich history provide something special for every member of a vacationing family or conventioner. The positive impact of the billions of dollars in economic activity tourism creates can hardly be overstated as it relates to job creation. Most importantly, tourism creates jobs for Tennesseans of every age and educational attainment.*

As a Tennessean who is a history buff, I view tourism with a sense of wonder at the many historic events which have occurred here that are ours to study and enjoy. As a small business owner and future Governor, I view tourism as an opportunity to create jobs and make an investment in our state that will pay off many times over.

To make the most of this opportunity, I will maintain the pro-business environment I have fostered as Lt. Governor. My goal will be to make Tennessee the most profitable place to start or grow a business in the country. By keeping Tennessee a strong Right to Work state and defeating any new business tax, I will make life easier for employers in the tourism industry.

Under a Ramsey administration, every department of government would have the same goal: help business owners create jobs. In order to accomplish this, I would appoint a small business liaison to every department of government to help cut through the red tape. Just this year, I passed legislation which created a Small Business Advocate within state government to work with employers when bureaucrats try to slow down job creation.

While no single industry will drive recovery, tourism can speed our state's recovery from the national economic downturn. My administration will utilize every weapon at our disposal to bring new jobs and new businesses to Tennessee. Our goal must be to make Tennessee the most profitable place to start or grow a business in the country, including those related to tourism. I will ensure that Tennessee will be a job-friendly state and we will grow our way out of recession.

ZACH WAMP: *We must always remember the unique value that tourism and particularly the music industry plays in driving Tennessee's economy. As Governor, we will leverage everything we have that makes Tennessee so unique – our people, places and culture, our mountains, lakes and rivers, our music and more to celebrate and sell Tennessee. Tourism is our identity; it's how people see us, know us. It really demonstrates our culture, our traditions, and our talents.*

B. WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR SUPPORTING AND GROWING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN THE STATE?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *Governor Bredesen laid a great foundation for tourism in Tennessee with the recently-launched Discover Tennessee Trails and Byways Initiative. By leveraging Tennessee's award-winning road systems with its rich cultural and historical heritage, the program will encourage tourists to explore lesser-known tourist spots off the beaten trail. The program is important because it represents the collective effort of the Tennessee Department of Tourism, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Economic and Community Development. As Governor, I will work to pool the talents and experience of all state agencies in order to continue developing our state in such a way as to attract businesses and tourists.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *As a businessman, I believe the first thing we must do is establish a clear and compelling brand for Tennessee that will entice visitors from all over the country and the world to come here. The brand should be comprehensive and the marketing plans of tourism agencies should be integrated throughout the state.*

However, we must also continue to support and improve the state's efforts to drive tourists to locations throughout the state in order to support tourism jobs in big cities and small towns alike. Tourism is one of the largest employers in many small towns and rural areas in Tennessee, and I believe the next governor must leverage this key asset for regional job creation.

To me, it's clear what we need to do: First, we must attract more visitors to Tennessee. Rather than simply coming to Tennessee to visit a single attraction, we want the state as a whole to have a compelling brand. Then, we must entice tourists to visit destinations throughout the state.

RON RAMSEY: *First of all, keep the current tourism marketing budget at its present level. Second, while we are in a national economic downturn, focus our efforts on encouraging Tennesseans to take a "staycation" and visit attractions in Tennessee which they have never experienced.*

The upcoming Civil War Sesquicentennial in 2011 will provide an ideal opportunity to attract not only out of state visitors, but encourage Tennesseans to explore our own Civil War heritage, crucial to every stage of the War Between the States.

I am also interested in developing new areas of interest for tourism. We are known nationwide as the Home of Country Music, the Birthplace of Rockabilly and Bluegrass and for Gatlinburg. But how many people know about our prehistoric treasures, the Gray Fossil site or the Pinson Mounds? Or that Tennessee is home to the largest natural-habitat elephant sanctuary in the United States? We have so much to offer every member of a vacationing family.

ZACH WAMP: *The State of Tennessee must play a major leadership role in leveraging and marketing our strategic tourism assets to our fullest advantage. Given the tight budget times we face, all marketing efforts will need to be done cooperatively, efficiently and in partnership with our tourism community, but the Governor's personal leadership, passion and commitment to tourism is paramount, and I will work like no other to help market and showcase our many assets to the nation and the world.*

I am honored to have folks across our state who represent the best of the tourism and music industry in Tennessee as part of my statewide leadership team, including former Commissioner of Tourism John Wade and such top stars as Ricky Skaggs, John Rich, Gretchen Wilson, Michael W. Smith, Ray Stephens, Larry Gatlin, the Oak Ridge Boys, T.G. Sheppard and many, many others. My plan is to call on friends like these to help sell and promote all we have to be so proud of in Tennessee.

The State can also help by creating strong new workforce development partnerships to help ensure our workforce has the right training and skills to create the climate of warmth, hospitality and service that Tennessee is so famous for.

QUESTION AREA NO. 2: THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

SINCE TOURISM IS THE SECOND LARGEST INDUSTRY IN THE STATE AND HAS A MAJOR IMPACT ON THE STATE'S ECONOMY, THERE IS STRONG SUPPORT IN THE STATE'S TOURISM INDUSTRY FOR MAINTAINING THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT AS A SEPARATE, CABINET-LEVEL DEPARTMENT WITHIN STATE GOVERNMENT.

- A. IN YOUR ADMINISTRATION, WILL THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT REMAIN AS A SEPARATE DEPARTMENT WITH A COMMISSIONER WHO SERVES IN YOUR CABINET?**

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *I have no intention of merging, cutting, or doing away with the Department of Tourism. As Governor, I will always include the Commissioner of Department of Tourist Development in all discussions, planning, and implementation of any state policies that could have an impact on the tourism industry. It is imperative that we keep in mind all possible repercussions of state-wide initiatives and seek to create a more tourist-friendly state at every opportunity. The same attractions that draw tourists also appeal to businesses looking to expand or relocate in Tennessee, and in these troubled times it is important to do all we can to facilitate the infusion of money from outside the state.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Yes.*

RON RAMSEY: *The next Governor will face a \$1.9 billion shortfall when he assumes office. There will be serious budget cuts and efficiencies will have to be found in every nook and cranny of state government.*

However, investment in the Department of Tourism is a net gain for our state so I will ensure that the tourism budget stays whole. I believe we can achieve savings by combining the Departments of Tourism and Economic Development. They share many of the same goals and I think a closer working relationship would prove to be a positive for the state.

ZACH WAMP: *Yes.*

B. DO YOU HAVE ANY SPECIFIC PLANS TO RE-ORGANIZE THE DEPARTMENT? IF SO, WHAT ARE THOSE PLANS?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *At this point in time, I see no reason to waste taxpayer time and resources restructuring a system that has been so successful in attracting tourists over the past few years.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Immediately upon taking office, I will launch a top-to-bottom review of state government in order to identify and eliminate waste, set priorities and establish measurable goals for those priorities, and ensure every aspect of state government is operating as efficiently and effectively as possible.*

After performing this top-to-bottom review, if it's determined that a given department could be better organized in order to accomplish the goals that are set out for it, that's obviously something I will want to consider. However, I have no specific plans to reorganize the Department of Tourist Development at this time and instead will wait to see the results of our comprehensive review.

RON RAMSEY: *As I mentioned above, I will have one commissioner for Tourism and Economic Development. This person will know and understand that tourism creates jobs for Tennesseans and revenue for Tennessee. Unlike most government programs, money spent on advertising Tennessee to the nation and the rest of the world actually creates a huge return on investment for our state.*

ZACH WAMP: *No, not at the present time. However, our state faces an enormous budget shortfall, and I am committed to reforming state government, right-sizing state government when needed, and creating efficiencies in state government, without raising taxes. But tourism is a revenue creator for our state so we will continue to advance and support Tennessee tourism to the fullest extent.*

C. HOW DO YOU SEE THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT WORKING WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS IN STATE GOVERNMENT SUCH AS ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, TRANSPORTATION, ENVIRONMENT & CONSERVATION, AND AGRICULTURE?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *Every sector in our state is connected to one another. Policies enacted by the Department of Transportation have an impact on the economy. Decisions made by the Department of Environment & Conservation are felt in the agricultural sector. We cannot let the agenda of one department take priority or harm the well-being of another department. So it is important that all departments keep an open line of communication to ensure all Tennesseans benefit as a result of agendas pursued at the state level.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Cooperation among the departments will be essential. One of the pillars of my economic development strategy is establishing regional "jobs base camps" that will help coordinate existing regional economic and workforce development efforts. These base camps will help each region create a unique strategy for economic development.*

Formulating a unified strategy will require all relevant departments working together in an integrated fashion. I've made it clear that my top priority as governor will be making Tennessee the No. 1 state in the Southeast for high quality jobs, and that will be the vision that will guide Tourist Development, Economic and Community Development, Labor and Workforce Development, Transportation, Environment and Conservation, Agriculture, and other relevant departments and agencies in integrating their efforts to accomplish my administration's goals.

RON RAMSEY: *Nashville's Trace Trail embodies how I think the various departments should work together to increase tourism and provide a positive economic impact on Tennessee. That project featured the Departments of Tourism, Economic and Community Development and Transportation working together to highlight a self-guided driving trail which wound through multiple counties and included everything from agritourism to unmatched scenic vistas and historic landmarks.*

My plan to combine departments as we face an unprecedented \$1.9 billion shortfall is tailor-made to encourage other departments to work with tourism officials to spotlight Tennessee treasures in a way that will attract in state and out of state visitors.

ZACH WAMP: *To maximize limited resources, all state services must be coordinated and delivered in an integrated fashion. So I will call on all of my state agencies to work together in a cooperative way to maximize and advance our tourism assets.*

In addition, I am the only candidate for governor who has called for and promoted a new agri-tourism focus, capitalizing on two of our state's most important assets – agriculture and tourism. This industry has tremendous potential, particularly in West TN.

D. WOULD YOU ALLOW INDUSTRY CONSULTATION REGARDING POTENTIAL CANDIDATES FOR THE POSITION OF COMMISSIONER FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *Yes. I would seek input from the tourism industry when appointing the Commissioner for the Department of Tourist Development. This is an extremely important cabinet decision and I would actively solicit feedback from industry leaders across the state, from both rural and urban areas.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Ultimately, I will appoint the best person for the job – based on the criteria I set out related to qualifications, competence, character, and likelihood of success in the position. However, I will certainly seek the input of relevant industry officials when identifying candidates for consideration.*

RON RAMSEY: *Certainly. As Governor, I will consult with the job creators on all my cabinet picks. If we're to grow jobs in this state, the next Governor must listen to employers to make sure we are creating the best job creation climate in the nation and not inhibiting job growth. One need only look to Washington D.C. to see what happens when job creators are ignored in the cabinet selection process.*

ZACH WAMP: *Absolutely. I would definitely want the input of the tourism industry in all aspects of the Department of Tourist Development.*

QUESTION AREA NO. 3: FUNDING

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT FOR EVERY DOLLAR INVESTED IN MARKETING BY THE TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT, TWENTY DOLLARS ARE RETURNED TO THE STATE.

A. AS A PROVEN REVENUE GENERATING ACTIVITY, WILL YOU COMMIT TO AT LEAST MAINTAINING THE DEPARTMENT'S TOURISM MARKETING BUDGET AT ITS CURRENT LEVEL?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *With a 20 to 1 rate of return on investment, it would be foolish to curb funding or cut funds dedicated to improving Tennessee's tourism industry. As a businessman, I'm fully aware of how difficult it can be to turn a profit, so it only makes sense that we continue to invest in an industry that has such a dramatic impact on our state's economy. As governor, I'll work to continue funding the Department of Tourism at current levels and expand as funding becomes available.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Yes.*

RON RAMSEY: *Yes. I have released a plan to cut the number of state departments by 1/3 – from 22 to 16. If the federal government can get by with 16 cabinet-level departments, then so can we. That will generate the kind of savings which will allow us to maintain the tourism marketing budget, which is a revenue enhancer, at its current level.*

ZACH WAMP: *Due to the state's current budget shortfall, any absolute budget commitments outside of K-12 education would be premature. We must do more with less until our state's economy rebounds.*

But tourism is a revenue creator for our state so I will continue to advance and support Tennessee tourism to the fullest extent.

B. WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO CONSIDER, AS FUTURE BUDGETS MAY ALLOW, INCREASING THE DEPARTMENT'S TOURISM MARKETING BUDGET?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

MIKE McWHERTER: *As a business sector of Tennessee that puts \$20 into our state's economy for every \$1 spent, there's no question the tourism industry should receive the state's full support. However, as governor, my first two orders of business will be providing targeted tax credits to small businesses and restoring our state's rainy day fund. After those two priorities have been achieved, I will devote a significant portion of my time and energy towards ensuring the Department of Tourist Development receives the funding it needs to develop our state's tourist industry and make Tennessee a place everyone wants to call home. I'll also make sure that the tourist factor is taken into consideration whenever any projects are proposed to make the most out of taxpayer dollars.*

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

BILL HASLAM: *Within our obvious budget constraints, I will certainly consider future investments in areas where there is a clear, measurable return on investment.*

RON RAMSEY: *Yes. If it can be proven to maintain the current level of return on investment. Gone are the days of across-the-board increases for departments. Mine will be an administration that takes zero-based budgeting very seriously. To reiterate, the next Governor will face a \$1.9 billion shortfall. I am the only candidate prepared to make the necessary reductions while maintaining funding for programs, such as tourism, which provide a return on investment.*

ZACH WAMP: *Yes, but again, until the economy and state revenues improve, our primary objective will be to work more cooperatively, aggressively and efficiently with the resources we do have.*

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