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Survey: Montana Tourism Anxious as COVID-19 Impacts Continue, Travelers Feel Safer

UM News Service

MISSOULA – When Gov. Steve Bullock announced the June 1 lifting of the 14-day quarantine for people driving into Montana, perhaps you heard an overwhelming sigh of relief from Montana tourism businesses.

Forty-four percent of tourism business owners said they have six months or less to survive if the current conditions continued, and another 22% said they could last up to a year. This is according to a business survey conducted May 6-8 by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana.

Additionally, potential travelers to Montana and Montana residents are slightly more likely to travel than they were one month ago. That was before the end date of the 14-day quarantine was announced.

This uptick in travel interest showed that 81% of Montanan's are likely to travel away from home, yet within the state, over the summer.

As for travelers to Montana, large majorities of trips to the state were canceled or not booked through May. Moving further into the summer, travelers are holding off on canceling and watching conditions as they consider their travel plans.

“Our survey results suggest that following a lifting of the 14-day quarantine period, we will see a bump up in the number of travelers venturing to Montana,” said ITRR Associate Director Jeremy Sage.

It has been a rough couple of months for tourism-related business owners and times remain tough for those seeking jobs in the travel industry this summer. The ITRR survey found that on average eight positions per travel business will not be filled for the near future. Out of the 440 respondents, these businesses alone will not hire 1,575 full-time jobs, 779 part-time jobs and 1,904 seasonal jobs that they typically fill in the summer.

Preparing for survival was a common theme from various types of businesses. One respondent wrote, "Compared to previous years, I've lowered the quantity of supplies ordered for the season and am not hiring usual staff. This fall I will have to lay off most staff, which has never been done before, in order to make it through the winter."

Less inventory, reducing workforce, applying for government aid or closing the doors completely were responses to how they are can survive.

"This was the third business survey we conducted in two months to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on Montana's travel-related business," ITRR Director Norma Nickerson said. "If I were to summarize in a word or two the sentiment from each survey, it would be 'slightly worried' in mid-March, 'frightened' at the end of March and 'angry' in early May."

By May, business owners felt helpless with little hope, she said. Many blamed that on the 14-day quarantine.

On the other hand, some business owners said, "Not too fast." One wrote: "I have no interest in reopening too quickly. I've read enough to believe that we'll bounce back faster, economically, if we keep to tighter restrictions now (analysis of the 1918 pandemic) and believe that's a smarter way to proceed. I don't want to see communities in Montana filling up with tourists (out or in-state) until we know that the pandemic is truly under control, meaning (to my current thinking) next year sometime. I think this summer tourist season is a bust, and we should all make plans to ensure that we both help that be a reality and plan for our own businesses accordingly. We're playing the long game here."

Travelers, too, have evolving perceptions of the risks of the pandemic. Through March, health concerns for themselves and their communities steadily increased. However, by May those concerns began to taper.

Economic concerns though, have not. More than 70% expressed they are extremely concerned about the economy, which is up from 41% in March.

“If there is any economic silver lining, it is that Montana is largely a drive market for visitors, and they are indicating an increased interest in driving to destinations this summer versus flying,” Sage said. “This will all, of course, have to be played out in balance with continued health threats for travelers and the Montanans they come in contact with.”

For a review of the business survey, visit <https://bit.ly/MTBizR3> and https://scholarworks.umt.edu/itrr_pubs/408. For a review of the traveler survey visit <https://bit.ly/MTtravelersRD3>.

All information and reports published by ITRR are available online at <http://www.itrr.umt.edu>.

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