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From the Tampa Bay Business Journal:

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2017 Hospitality Roundtable

# Bay area tourism executives spell out how their industry is an economic driver

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*The Tampa Bay Business Journal recently invited executives from the tourism, hospitality and leisure industry to a roundtable discussion.*

*Here is an edited transcript of that discussion.*

*Reporter Frances McMorris moderated the discussion.*



## PANELISTS:

**Lou Plasencia**, Head of Plasencia Group

**Paul Romero**, director of sales and marketing at Kimpton Hotel Zamora

**David Downing**, President & CEO of Visit St. Pete Clearwater

**Todd Gehrke**, Director of Sales and Marketing for The Don CeSar

**Santiago Corrada**, President & CEO of Visit Tampa Bay

**Keith Overton**, President of TradeWinds

**Bob Morrison**, Executive Director of Hillsborough County Hotel & Motel Association of Tampa Bay

**Robin Sollie**, president of Tampa Bay Beaches Chamber of Commerce

**Richard Glover**, VP of marketing and events Florida Aquarium

**Mary Ann Ferenc**, owner of Mise En Place and board member of US Travel Association

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**McMORRIS:** How significant is tourism to economic development in this region?

**CORRADA:** We believe that tourism is the leading economic development tool for the state of Florida. You know, we've heard Visit Florida talk about over 100 million visitors. We help with that number. We have over 22 million visitors. We just had our Economic Impact Study done in the last year. We're evolving into a destination marketing organization. The county had this great idea. Why not let the marketing experts who are out there bringing over 22 million visitors to our destination become the marketing professionals for economic development? Because at the end of the day we all know that you move to a location because you visited there or know something about it. We bring so many visitors, conventions, corporate business here already. Why not take that message, get the content from the economic development corporation and run with a new campaign and new initiative called "Make It Tampa Bay"?

It's using our young entrepreneurs, our business leaders, to tell the story of why Tampa, why it's a great place to live and work and bring your families here. It makes all the sense in the world.

**McMORRIS:** David, you've had a lot of success in marketing as well. You've seen the hotels, museums, everything going up in Pinellas County. Do you see what you do as driving economic development?

**DOWNING:** We're always after a greater yield, a greater economic impact not so much in terms of numbers, but of visitors. If you speak to anyone in this industry, you talk about one Brazilian visitor and one Canadian visitor or French visitor, and if you do it in a granular way like that, they aren't weighted equally. To count them all equally as one-equals-one really doesn't stack up in how we market.

What we're after is the biggest footprint. That's something that the market is going to dictate. I can't say it's going to be 22 million people. I couldn't say statewide what that number is. You have to find that median between having a very robust economic engine in

the tourism space and maintaining the quality of the experience that a place doesn't get loved to death.

I vacationed in Italy in the summertime. Some of those piazzas are just overrun with visitors and the experience becomes very diluted. That's something we have to guard against.

**McMORRIS:** Keith, in terms of your hotel, are you trying to get more people in or just a different kind of tourist?

**OVERTON:** It's a good question. We have the blessing, if you will, of being a very mature property in the marketplace. Since the 1960s really. So our focus really is on rate growth and how you get the out-of-room spend from the consumer up.

You want 5 or 6 percent growth in average rate. Right now we're about a dollar-to-dollar. We'd love to get that to about \$1.25; meaning every dollar spent on room revenue, for everything else you produce about the same amount of revenue.

We're pretty pleased with where we are.

**McMORRIS:** Are you seeing more business travelers come in?

**OVERTON:** If we could get the leisure traveler to visit us in the fall, we would be tremendously better off. But group businesses by default is looking up for us. It usually happens from September to February. It's pretty low. It's only about 30 percent of our group mix right now.

We are getting more and more travelers in the fall, but it's not nearly enough to fill the hotel up.

**McMORRIS:** Todd, are you seeing the same kind of phenomenon?

**GEHRKE:** Very similar. Certainly from an overall perspective, the fall is definitely a busy time for group and conference business and we are looking to layer that.

For us it's also about digging a little bit deeper into the actual traveler and understanding what the perfect demographic is and from a marketing perspective getting out in front of more of that demographic. You certainly want more travelers, but you also want more of the right traveler. I think that comes from leisure and group.

**CORRADA:** It's a balancing act, because when the economy is good, then you may get

that type of high-yield visitor. But you can't forget other types of business that are very steady and stable that are going to get you through the hard times.

We certainly saw that in Tampa, because of the convention center and the types of groups that we were out there working on it for years, that help us get through some of the tough times. So it's a balancing act. You really have to make sure you're aware of the right economic moment.

**GEHRKE:** We love to talk revenue and we love to talk what we do as far as bringing money in, but when you work in the hotel business you're surrounded by a lot of staff members who work extremely hard. When it comes to tough times for the destination, it's all about providing them with an opportunity to be successful and to bring home a paycheck and do all those things. We've got areas in Florida which unfortunately are closed, people aren't working. That's a major impact not only from a revenue perspective, but also just on economic development and impact for the folks who are out there spending money in the destination.

A big thing for us is just our people and our culture and focusing on making sure that they're out there spending their money. Happy employees go a long way when it comes to economic development and impact.

**McMORRIS:** Bob, you've got a new tourism marketing district, so tell us a little bit about how that's working and what the goal is.

**MORRISON:** In many ways, it's the first of its kind in Florida, so it is breaking ground in a number of areas.

**PLASENCIA:** It won't be the last.

**MORRISON:** No, no. I suspect we're going to have some friends joining us quickly. This concept basically is one that has its origin in California. There are about 90-plus tourism marketing districts in the state of California, so every large destination you can think of has one.

The vision is simple. We know that in order to grow our market share our hoteliers appreciate the fact that, sure, we're driving rate and we're growing as a destination. We have had some record years year after year after year over the last four to five years of tourist tax collection.

But the reality is when we look at David and the team over at Visit St. Pete Clearwater, look

at our counterparts in Orlando or Fort Lauderdale or Miami, we languish far below and behind their firepower in terms of marketing.

If there's a new airline opportunity, we ought to be able to assist Visit St. Pete Clearwater and Visit Tampa Bay and be a partner with Tampa International in bringing that new airline service to our market. That's been a stretch for our market in the past. So the tourism marketing district is designed to supplement existing marketing dollars in the market, No. 1.

No. 2, it's designed to look specifically at the hotels in that district with the idea that each of those hotels should see an impact, what we call "supplemental room nights," from the marketing initiative.

Our sense is that in year one, if it does what we're projecting, we're hoping to see around 90,000 additional room nights with the 13 hotels that are in the downtown historic Ybor marketing district.

Long story short: Our hope is that as we grow our base, that obviously grows our bed tax, which grows our marketing resources, so at the end of the day we're able to develop and deliver additional fuel to the tank.