

EagleTribune.com, North Andover, MA - July 20, 2011

NH moves welcome centers to tourism department

By John Toole

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SALEM — The hospitality industry is welcoming the state's decision to shift responsibility for highway welcome centers from transportation to tourism officials.

"We're pretty happy with this move," said Mike Somers, president and CEO of the New Hampshire Lodging and Restaurant Association. "The focus of these centers is truly about visitors."

The new budget passed by the Legislature transfers the welcome centers from the New Hampshire Department of Transportation to the Department of Resources and Economic Development.

The budget creates the Bureau of Visitor Services under DRED's Division of Travel and Tourism Development to manage the remaining 13 centers.

A welcome center is located just across the Massachusetts state line on Interstate 93 northbound in Salem, south of Exit 1.

About 50,000 visitors a month pass through the Salem center, Travel and Tourism spokesman Tai Freligh said.

There's potential through the move for the centers to become more visitor friendly so their experience is nothing but positive, Somers said.

"We're very optimistic and positive about the whole thing," he said.

The state is adding computers for staff members to aid travelers, plus planning hospitality training for center staffers.

"All of this is designed to give more customer service to tourism," Freligh said.

The budget closes three of the 16 welcome centers — in Epsom, Antrim and Rumney — to save money, fewer than the eight initially proposed by Gov. John Lynch.

The state estimates tourism brings \$4 billion in visitor spending to New Hampshire and supports more than 60,000 jobs.

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