Hawai’i’s tourism sector hit a new high last year, reaching the 10 million visitor mark. Any time our industry hits a milestone like this, questions are raised about the sustainability of tourism and whether we’ve reached a saturation point. Thanks to studies by Hawai’i Tourism Authority, we can look deeply and objectively at these trends to both understand and act prudently to address concerns among residents about this issue and the buzzword, “overtourism.”

Looking at HTA’s 2019 Visitor Plant Inventory, we see the number of hotel rooms available to visitors has steadily decreased from 44,802 to 43,217 units over the past three years. Meanwhile, in HTA’s December report, traditional lodging properties reported a year-to-date occupancy rate of 81.2 percent. One can conclude our hotel room inventory has not grown at a rate sufficient to sustain the increased visitor numbers we’re seeing.

These facts considered, Hawai’i Lodging & Tourism Association remains a strong proponent of the responsible development of lodging properties in resort zones, as well as careful renovations within a property’s existing footprint. We will always strive to be environmentally sensitive, and to cherish and respect our Native Hawaiian culture. Our view is that construction on existing hotel properties and renovation of aging resorts

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ISLAND MATTERS  Mufi Hannemann

Tourism Supports Responsible Development

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will only help our industry attract the high-quality visitors that we seek.

In fortifying our traditional lodging options, our counties are afforded time to curb the proliferation of illegal, tax-avoiding transient vacation rentals (TVRs). With the advent of online booking services, growing numbers of visitors have turned to TVRs for their accommodations, many of which are located outside resort-designated areas.

Our industry’s goal, in keeping with state and county land use and zoning regulations, should be to draw visitors back to tourism-designated areas, which are well-equipped to handle these travelers.

Under new county regulations, TVRs in resort districts will be allowed to operate but will now be taxed at rates comparable to what hotels pay in general excise, hotel room and property taxes. We believe this will decrease the number of visitors but generate more in spending and tax revenue.

Meanwhile, traditional brick-and-mortar resorts are investing millions of dollars on projects and renovations to their existing properties. On Hawai‘i island, the Mau‘na Lani renovation has been completed and is now part of the Auberge Resorts Collection. Slated for the next couple years, Sheraton Princess Ka‘u‘u Lani will undergo a complete rebuild. This year on Kaua‘i, Princeville Resort will undergo a $100 million remodeling, while Grand Wailea has planned a $91.5 million renovation to its current 776-room property on Maui.

The benefits that come with hotel construction and renovations are myriad. First and foremost, it means more local jobs as residents will be the ones building and staffing them. This means employment opportunities for skilled laborers, housekeepers, front office staff, suppliers and so on. Secondly, having the hotel room inventory and the upgraded visitor experience provided by these renovations will allow us to attract high-quality travel, while also ensuring that residents can continue to live, work and raise their families in Hawai‘i.

These exhibitors covered all corners of our industry from hotels to transportation, retail, attractions, sustainability, restaurants and festivals, just to name a few.

Kudos to Tourism Committee chairmen state Rep. Richard Onishi and Sen. Glenn Wakai for their input and support.

Feedback from those who attended and participated was excellent. It was gratifying to see our legislators interacting with people from the many facets of tourism. We anticipate more from our industry will want to participate in next year’s Tourism Day.

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A Successful “Tourism Day” At The Capitol

On Feb. 21, in partnership with HTA and Hawai‘i Visitors and Convention Bureau, HLTA put on its fifth annual Tourism Day at the state Capitol. This is an event we hold to demonstrate to our elected officials just how important our sector is to the state.

Thanks in part to our close working relationships with HTA president and CEO Chris Tatum and HVCB president and CEO John Monahan, we were able to bring together nearly 70 organizations that manned 80 booths during the trade show portion of Tourism Day.

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