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Travel & Tourism

Executive Insight: Mufi Hannemann talks tourism



Image: Elizabeth 'Ufi

Mufi Hannemann, Hawaii Lodging & Tourism Association president and CEO; and Hawaii Tourism Authority chair

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As president and CEO of Hawaii Lodging and Tourism Association and chair of Hawaii Tourism Authority, Mufi Hannemann said Maui’s visitor industry remains top of mind as it continues to recover from the Aug. 8, 2023, wildfires.

In an interview with Pacific Business News, Hannemann shared that efforts to promote Maui include emphasizing that the island is open for business.

“[HTA] did a major, what we call, saturation mission of Southern California in September,” Hannemann said. “Basically, we flooded the market with word about

Hawaii [and] Maui being open for visitors. ... One hundred businesses participated, 60 of which helped in the marketing side and 40 of them supported a pop-up makeke that we did in Venice, California.”

According to Hannemann, as the Maui visitor industry recovers, more funding is needed “from the Legislature and the governor, not only for marketing, but to do destination stewardship.”

“[HTA] feels that we need at least \$80 million to do what we want to do to get our economy going,” Hannemann said. “At the end of the day, if tourism is not humming, it affects everything else that we do in the state.”

Hannemann also shared more on his recent focus over the visitor industry.

The interview was edited for brevity and clarity.

Maui is now more than a year into recovery from the August 2023 wildfires. What challenges are you seeing today with the island’s visitor market?

I think the challenge is still making sure that people understand that Maui is welcoming visitors back. You know what I learned a long time ago, you gotta say it once. You gotta say it twice. You gotta say three times – and it’s going to take people coming here and seeing it. [For instance,] there are 6,000 to 7,000 people that are going to come to Maui for the [Maui Invitational], the top college basketball tournament in the country. ... HTA is funding it again, and this time, you’re going to see a strong emphasis on destination stewardship. We’re trying to do pop-up makekes around Lahaina when the game is being played, so those 6,000 to 7,000 people are going to be able to experience that while they’re there.

What else is top of mind for you right now?

Right now, a major priority for us at HTA is workforce development, and I would like to see that as a very high priority for Hawaii Tourism Authority. ... We need to take the lead in the workforce development area as well because there are labor shortages that are taking place. We need a coordinated approach with the government and the private sector to bring that about.

How is HTA addressing the labor shortage in the hospitality industry?

Before, [HTA] was just doing a major conference every year for public high school students to come and hear about tourism. ... But this past year, we just implemented a new program called HTA Work Wise, where we are employing public high school students in the summer to work in the private industry. I do really think that what’s going to change now is a stronger emphasis [on students] in middle school to understand that this might be your career path because of the number of jobs that are related to the industry, as opposed to waiting after you graduate from high school.

Mufi Hannemann

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