



INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE

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Tourism executives sound off

FUNDING SOURCES AND CONVENTION CENTER ARE HOT ISSUES



JIM COURTNEY

Leaders of 13 Western New York businesses and organizations shared their views on a range of issues influencing the hospitality and tourism industry. The discussion was the latest installment in Business First's Industry Roundtable series.

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When it comes to laying a foundation for the region's tourism and hospitality industry, many of the elements are already in place.

But more needs to be done.

That's the opinion shared by 13 industry leaders who gathered for the recent Business First Tourism/Hospitality Industry Roundtable sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP.

"Niagara Falls is a deal clincher,"

said Patrick Kaler, president and CEO of Visit Buffalo Niagara. "It definitely plays into the process."

Niagara Falls plays an obvious role, but not to be overlooked are such destinations as the Darwin Martin House, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, HarborCenter and the Buffalo waterfront.

"The Theater District brings in more people to the city than a lot of people give it credit for," said Michael Schmand, executive director of Buffalo Place Inc.

Yet issues remain. That includes

the need to secure more public sector funds to help promote tourism and hospitality.

For example, of the nearly \$10 million generated annually by the Erie County bed tax, approximately 40 cents on the dollar makes its way to Visit Buffalo Niagara.

"Funding is a key issue," Kaler said. "We are being outspent by our competition. Even Grand Rapids, Mich., has a larger budget than we do."

Then there is the lingering issue of whether to lobby for a new

convention center or renovate and perhaps expand the current facility.

The consensus among the panelists was to renovate and expand the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center instead of building a new one.

"Building a new convention center is absolutely wrong," said Mark Hamister, chairman and CEO of the Hamister Group.

"We have an outdated convention center," he said. "The current box is not competitive but its location is."

► TOURISM/HOSPITALITY BY THE NUMBERS

\$1.6 billion

Economic impact in Erie County

8 million

Annual visitors to Niagara Falls, NY

30,000

People in Erie County employed in hospitality/tourism industry

217,016

Number of hotel rooms in Erie County booked through May

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► What are the top three regional draws that you use to help bring people to the area?



JOHN PERCY
President/CEO,
Niagara Tourism
and Convention
Corp.

The list could be a mile long but of course, for us, when we're on the international stage or even the domestic stage is the state park and the Niagara

Falls State Park and the products that exist within that realm. The Niagara Falls State Park is the oldest state park so that really is our crown jewel. That is the draw for visitors with the falls themselves, the Maid of the Mist that resides within the state park, the Cave of the Winds product. Once you get beyond the state park, we really look to the other products that are within the region. But within Niagara County is the new, budding wine trail. It is now 22 wineries across the trail and growing every day. Old Fort Niagara is always a wonderful place to promote and get across, as well as Lockport Locks because we have the only double set of locks on the Erie Canal here in Niagara County.

JAMES SANDRO

Founder and executive director,
Buffalo Transportation
Pierce-Arrow Museum

My top choices would be, of course, Niagara Falls, the whole Niagara Falls park in the area. Our waterfront, now the canal zone, and our sports. The Bills, Sabres, Bisons. I think those would be the top three regional assets we have that bring most people to Western New York and Buffalo.

MAJED FARAH

General manager,
Hyatt Regency Buffalo

I want to tell you that I've been all over with Hyatt Hotels for the last 14 years and I've been internationally all around. I could stand here and say this is the best city I've ever lived in. And this is coming from me, from my wife, from my family. We love things around here; we love the people. We enjoy it here every day. This is how I sell to my guests. I sell it based on the city. You walk outside my doors on Main Street and you look to what's happening there. It's just beautiful. A lot of time this is what it takes. We go outside and we walk on Main Street and we show some of the restaurants, some of the beautiful sidewalks. And that is a great, great selling

► CLOSER LOOK AT THE ROUNDTABLE

The Hospitality and Tourism Industry Roundtable continues a series of discussions with Western New York business leaders.

Throughout the year, decision makers from diverse industries meet for a discussion moderated by Business First journalists.

Excerpts are published two weeks after the roundtable.

Upcoming topics include education and sports business.

Roundtable discussions, sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP, are held at the law firm's Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

point. Absolutely the historical structures that are around us, also; it's wonderful. And one thing that I'll say is the proximity. Everything is accessible in this city. This is how I sell it. This is what I love about this city. It's wonderful.

HUSEYIN TARAN

General manager,
Buffalo Marriott
HarborCenter

I've been traveling with the Marriott for 10, 11 years now. I've been to so many different states, seen so many different cultures. I can say I've been to Buffalo three

times before I took the job. And each time I came here I went to either Rochester or Niagara Falls or Letchworth State Park. I never made it to downtown Buffalo to know what Buffalo has to offer. When the job was first offered to me, I'm like, oh, no, definitely not, why would I go to Buffalo? That was the impression I had and then they said, "You need to come see it." And when I came here I was pretty shocked to see in July 2014 people doing paddle boarding, jet-skiing and the whole scene that I haven't seen in Buffalo before. So just like Majed said, this is a very, very welcoming and livable city just because what it has to offer. When you say Buffalo, the first thing that comes out of everybody's mouth is Niagara Falls. I would say that history is a big aspect here, including the Canalside that opened, probably No. 2, and then the sports, the major sports. The NFL and NHL are a big draw.

GARY ROULEAU

Director of development, Riviera Theatre & Performing Arts Center

Obviously the Riviera Theatre is the best place; you know I'm biased on that. But I would say overall I tell people when they come that we are a year-round destination. Obviously Niagara Falls and the Buffalo waterfront are two things people talk about, but I tell people about the Tonawandas, the Erie Canal and the Niagara River. It's a beautiful

place. There's plenty of things to do in the region. There's way too many destinations within the region that people could come and see. But most of the people we get when we get visitors, they mention Niagara Falls as an attraction. And they start asking questions related to the Erie Canal, the Niagara River, Niagara Falls.

DENNIS ESHBAUGH

President and CEO, Holiday Valley

I would answer that question in two parts. The first for the greater region would be Niagara Falls and the power of water. Next would be Buffalo, One Buffalo. There's a message that we should be proud of and that we should tell the world. And, of course, outdoor adventure. By community perspective, I would say that we're there to serve the renewal of the mind, the body and the spirit. We do that through golf. We do that through skiing. We do that through biking. We do that through feeding people well and sometimes drinking too well. There are a lot of ways to accomplish that, but that's our goal. I think that's what our community is about and I think that's how we thrived over the years.

PATRICK KALER

President/CEO,
Visit Buffalo
Niagara

I'm going to take this in a couple of directions. But I think first and foremost our arts and culture, our history; definitely purposes of trips

here with the Albright-Knox, the Darwin Martin complex. Regionally I would throw in shopping, especially for the Canadian market when the dollar is much more in our favor. Niagara Falls is a deal clincher for us because of our proximity to the Falls. It's not the purpose for a trip to Buffalo but it plays into the decision-making process because it's 20 minutes away. Finally, I would definitely say on the meetings and convention/sports side of things, it's our value proposition that we're able to present when we're up against other destinations such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh and our neighbors here in

New York state, as well.

PAUL SNYDER, III

President/CEO, Snyder Corp.

The Hyatt hotel is celebrating our 33rd year coming up. We've seen a lot of change in what's happened in downtown Buffalo. In the last five to 10 years, the degree of planning and leadership that's come out of the community, out of the private sector, out of the political sector has changed everything in the way we look at this area. We've had the Sabres for over 40 years. But it took the Pegulas to develop a plan in One Buffalo, but also in what they built in the HarborCenter to create real energy along with the convention center for amateur sports. We have had Darwin Martin House and Frank Lloyd Wright treasures here for generations. But it took the leadership and the fundraising to bring those diamonds in the rough to life. We've had Niagara Falls for a thousand years, but to be candid, although we're coming into our own on the American side and we're involved in the gaming industry on the Canadian side, it took the Canadian government, the Ontario government, an enormous amount of planning and energy to create a gaming industry that made it a worldwide destination, not a regional draw. So I think the draw is that we as a community and the leadership, both private sector and public sector, have created something out of this community that we saw 100 years ago that's special again. And what's to come, we hope, is that further investment, whether that be in our convention center, whether that be in our downtown Canalside, whatever the investment is that we need to make to continue to build in this momentum that we see what we've already accomplished. But don't stop here. We have an opportunity to continue to invest in what are our regional draws, but to take them to a broader audience.

MARY ROBERTS

Executive
director, Darwin
Martin House

At the risk of being redundant, I endorse pretty much what everyone else has said. I think when we talk about Western New York, the top three regional draws really are nature, architecture and art, and we've talked about it. Niagara Falls, the state parks, our position on the Great Lakes, our four seasons – you know,



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all the wonderful things you can do here year-round. It's fabulous. This is a great city. People come here and are often pleasantly surprised, which is wonderful. But the architecture – we really do have one of the top cities in America to experience basically an architectural museum in an outdoor setting.

PATRICK WHALEN

Director, Niagara Global Tourism Institute at Niagara University

In my previous careers, and I've had several of them, I had the good fortune to travel internationally a lot. There are three things that Buffalo is known for. We have to really stress those three things over and over again because they can't be taken away from us; they can't be duplicated. That's really Niagara Falls, the architecture and the art. Those three things are unique. Other cities are going to have brew pubs and revitalize and redo old buildings, but we've got some treasures here that are really unique, obviously starting with Niagara Falls. Everywhere I've traveled in the world, rarely outside of North America do people know where Buffalo is. But always they know where Niagara Falls is. I usually start my meetings by saying, I'm from Buffalo or Buffalo Niagara

Metro Campus and the question then becomes: Where's Buffalo? And I always say: "Do you know where Niagara Falls is?" because everyone knows where Niagara Falls is.



MARK HAMISTER

Chairman/CEO,
Hamister Group

I think I would start with the natural and manmade attractions. Certainly Niagara Falls, our architectural assets, our cultural assets all the way from our great art galleries to our great theaters and beyond. Sports tourism has become something special in this community and something that we need to continue to expand. We can thank the Pegulas for their investment in HarborCenter and the great vision that they have brought to sports tourism in this community. We can thank what we're doing from an entertainment perspective, what the state has been doing with Canalside and tying

those elements together. I think we need to not lose sight of the fact of what is happening in the health care campus is creating an environment where we can have medical tourism in this community, as well, to a much greater extent than we have ever seen.

THOMAS DEE

President,
Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.

Nobody said the Walden Galleria. I know that attracts a lot of people. I would just follow up with pretty much what everybody said. Certainly Niagara Falls is huge. And then following up on what Mary said in terms of the architecture – Sullivan, Richardson, Frank Lloyd Wright. Buffalo and Chicago are the only two cities that have those three great architects, and that's the kind of thing that we should boast about, our great architecture. And then I think, lastly, 84 percent of our North America fresh water is in the Great Lakes. I don't know why we're not known as a waterfront destination, and I think we have so much to build on. And the fact that we have that kind of statistic living on a great lake – we really should develop that. That will definitely help our tourism industry.

MICHAEL SCHMAND

Executive director, Buffalo Place Inc.

Obviously internationally everybody speaks about Niagara Falls. On the national I think it's the sports, I really do. I think when you have two major-league sports teams in one area, that has a brand that says Buffalo. I think that's very important in what the Pegulas have done. And what the state has done on the waterfront is just magnificent. Then you have the regional draws. Architecture ties into that, but we also have a very thriving theater district. The theater district brings in more people to the downtown area on a continual basis than we give it credit for. And that drives the restaurants and downtown Buffalo.

► What are we doing right when it comes to tourism and hospitality? And what do we need to address?

PATRICK KALER

Visit Buffalo Niagara

At VBN, what we're doing right is our media relations. Last year we were in over 230 publications through the journalists we have brought here and that generated \$4.1 million worth of



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ad equivalency. With an organization that's working on about a \$4 million budget, that's a pretty good return on our investment. We're doing really well in the area of sports marketing: 51 percent of all of the sales business that we bring in, meetings, conventions, sports, international – 51 percent of that is related to amateur athletics. On the product-development side, over the last few years we've got great new inventory of hotels, the investment that's being made in our attractions. The medical campus – that was brought up – that does put us on a different playing field for medical tourism. The types of groups that we're able to bring in for meetings and conventions and training. HarborCenter is a huge game changer for us on our shoulder season with bringing in different ice hockey events. Now what can be done, addressed? Funding is a huge issue. As I said, we're about a \$4 million organization. We're being outspent by our competition by more than double in some cases. Even Grand Rapids, Mich., has a larger budget than Buffalo. That's a huge block for Visit Buffalo Niagara. We have very outdated way finding (signage) in our community. Even since we've moved our visitor center, the signage to our visitor center hasn't moved in almost two years. But we do need overall way finding throughout Erie County into Niagara Falls. That's why we implemented a customer service destination training program because we need to make sure that our front-line staff are able to intelligently have the resources to direct all of these new visitors coming in. We get about 8 million visitors to our destination every year. We need to be able to direct them to the resources of getting them throughout our community into Niagara Falls.

MICHAEL SCHMAND
Buffalo Place



Curb appeal for tourists is very important. The question is, what are we doing right? I think we're investing. The public sector is investing. The private sector is following with major investments. Look at what the state has done at the waterfront. The Pegulas, take a look at the investment they did.

JOHN PERCY
Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp.

I have to follow Michael on that comment. I was going to say we're

so pleased with the local investment. Mark Hamister is investing in Niagara Falls. Buffalo developers or Western New York developers would never touch Niagara Falls 10, 15 years ago. I think there's been a total change of the mindset and of the marketplace by local developers, Mark being one of them. It's not from people from the outside the region; it's people within the region. And that's had a huge impact on us.

PATRICK KALER

Visit Buffalo Niagara

The other thing that I forgot to mention is our convention center as something that needs to be addressed. I know it's a question that's probably going to come up a bit more, but with all the other development taking place around it, that is the missing piece for us because we're bringing in meeting planners to our destination. We're taking them to Canalside, taking them to HarborCenter, showing them all this new hotel product. And then we go to the convention center and unfortunately the air is taken out of the balloon a little bit. Now, the convention center does a great job as far as customer service and the quality of food, but just the physical plant of that facility has got to be updated.

► Do we need a new convention center or do we just fix up what we have?

PAUL SNYDER III

Snyder Corp.

Once again, the county is going through a process to do another feasibility study for the current convention center or possibly a new convention center. We're years away from shovels in the ground on a new convention center. In the meantime, we have to take care of the current convention center and do some modern upgrades to it because it is the driver that we have right now, especially with all the hotel inventory that we have surrounding it. Who knows what will come out of the study and maybe we'll say that we need a new convention somewhere else. Well, that will make me lay awake at night because, again, that will require infrastructure. We have great infrastructure around the current convention center with being attached to the Hyatt. We have the



Embassy Suites. We have the Westin that is going to be opening up. We have the Curtiss Hotel. So lots of hotel inventory. We have the Hilton Garden Inn just down the street. We have all these fantastic restaurants. We have retail that's coming back. The NFTA down to the Marriott, down to Canalside. Where are you going to build it where you have all that currently? So you hear about some other places. Well, if you build another convention center that's larger than what we have right now, you're still going to have to build another hotel that's attached to it. Plus, you're still going to have to have restaurants and dining and other activities for people to do afterward. So that's where I'm hopeful that whatever comes out of this plan, we can do something with the current physical plant.

MAJED FARAH

Hyatt Regency Buffalo

We are at a disadvantage now, a complete disadvantage when you have the groups that come. They go to the convention center. I do a lot of groups that come and they're formal, casual and always that topic

comes up. So I couldn't agree more with Patrick that we need immediate improvements. If we continue with this, that will hurt the city. We are in a time of resurgence. This is our time; this is the time to make things happen. We need to talk for the future.

MARK HAMISTER

Hamister Group

What we're doing right, I think, if we didn't acknowledge the impact of the – and this is kind of challenging for an avid Republican to say – without the commitment of the current governor and the Buffalo Billion, half of what we're talking about would not have occurred. Our current governor is focused on doing the right things for this region. He has put money on the table and he has brought talents to the table – Tom Dee being one of them – to make sure that these things happen from the state's perspective. So for us to not understand and give credit to that I think would be a huge mistake. This governor is extremely focused on doing the right things and putting party issues aside, and I think that's critical to this community. Secondly, private sector investment has followed that incentive of the Buffalo Billion and this governor's

commitment to this community. And thirdly, in Buffalo and most of Western New York for the last 10 or 15 years, the private sector stopped competing for raising the tide and started working together to raise the tide, not worrying about what was in it for them individually. Niagara Falls, I think, is maybe – I hope, I'm praying, given my \$34 million investment – starting to get there, as well. And if we continue to push the concept that the private sector has to work together and we have to raise the tide and it doesn't have to be something in it for each one of us individually when we do it, this entire region, including Niagara Falls and Niagara County and Erie County and Buffalo, will continue to do good things. I'm absolutely opposed to a new convention center. I think it is the wrong thing for this community. It's all about the infrastructure that was being discussed to date. If we move it to a new location, where is the infrastructure? We have an outdated convention center. It's outdated from a technological point of view. It's outdated from a resource point of view. It's outdated, frankly, right down to finishes. We need to invest in that current convention center, do whatever it is that we need to do.

JAMES SANDRO

Buffalo
Transportation
Pierce-Arrow
Museum

We need to invest right now in the convention center; no doubt in my mind we need to do that. But we haven't talked about in the event that there's a domed

stadium or a stadium that goes on the Outer Harbor or the Inner Harbor. Patrick, can we have a place to put bigger events and still maintain what we have? How do you feel about that? And what would happen if the Pegulas were willing to build it with that in mind that it could be for major events where the size of the event would fit more to the dome stadium?

PATRICK KALER

Visit Buffalo Niagara

I'm all in favor of the stadium moving downtown if it's going to be utilized more than eight times out of the year than just (for) football. If we're going to be able to have other events take place in it, it makes sense for it to be in the downtown core area because, again, that's where you have the infrastructure in place for a stadium

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that will hold tens of thousands of people. So I'm in favor of something like that being in the downtown area if we're able to utilize it more than eight times out of the year.

JAMES SANDORO

Buffalo Transportation
Pierce-Arrow Museum

Will you be able to use it for other events?

PATRICK KALER

Visit Buffalo Niagara

Absolutely, yes. If it is made available for us to be able to use and to be able to market it and sell it for those other types of events, absolutely.



THOMAS DEE
Erie Canal Harbor
Development Corp.

I have a bit of a micro-view on this in terms of what we're doing right and what we need, what needs to be addressed. And I just wanted to speak a little bit about the investment, which

everybody is talking about. So what we do right in terms of things to do is we've increased by about 4,000 percent since 2007 the amount of things you can do at the water's edge. That's an amazing statistic, and if you take every presentation I do, I show a picture of what it looked like in 2009 and what it looks like today. It's just unbelievable, and the comments we get back are it's a sea change. One of my goals moving forward is to keep that sustainable. So while we make the investments with the state funds, with the NYPA proceeds, it's to attract development, to attract people like Mark and developers to come into town and to build stuff. And so far with the Pegulas – and it's not just the Pegulas – there's a boatload of other people who are investing. The Doug Swifts over at River Works, the Paladinos, the San Marinos – there's about \$350 million worth of development that has all resulted as a result of what's happened at Canalside and the creation of the Ohio Street Corridor. I talk about Canalside being the front door of Buffalo and doing something great and spectacular down there. So we lit up the grain elevators, but I'd like to take that to another level, which is really a heavy lift, and have some digital shows that go on those grain elevators that would be an anchor to Niagara Falls. It would be very expensive to do and we

probably wouldn't want to do it with taxpayer dollars, but I'm looking for investors and thinking about how that show could be something so spectacular. And then you'd have to come to Canalside at 10 at night to see it, which means you have to have a hotel room where you'd stay, spend the night. So I think our formula has been accessibility. It's been to create things to do. It's diverse use and use for four seasons. We opened up ice skating in the winter and ice bikes and curling, which has been phenomenal. We had 60,000 skaters two years ago, 80,000 last year. So our curve with everything we do is constantly, constantly rising. And I love the opportunity because we're not known as the four-seasons place, with the exception of Holiday Valley and the skiing and the great, great things that are done in Ellicottville.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global
Tourism Institute
at Niagara
University

I want to pick up on the winter aspect. Obviously you've all talked about all the things we are doing right. We're doing

plenty right, and I think the key really is the water's edge. We are going to see the same thing in Niagara Falls with the Moses (parkway) coming up, so that will get people to the edge of the gorge. I'm like a broken record in Niagara Falls, talking about it's all about winter. In Niagara Falls there just isn't enough product to keep people for more than a day in the winter. And I'll let Mark speak to this as he's been front-and-center on what that means to financing products in Niagara Falls. But from a workforce perspective, we just went through the month of May where collectively in Niagara Falls they hire 8,000 to 10,000 people. The Maid of the Mist and the state park, the hotels, the restaurants, Fort Niagara and on and on and on. These employers hire an awful lot of people in the summer. And even though Niagara Falls could use the jobs, people are not coming out for those jobs because, after all, they're summer jobs. We need to create careers. We can't do that unless we get people to stay in the winter, raise the occupancy rates in the wintertime. The way to do that right now is by taking advantage of all the wonderful, wonderful product there is in Buffalo. The Albright-Knox, the Martin House, Canalside and a lot of those things. So we have a connectivity problem and we have a mindset problem, especially in

Niagara County. But we have to get above this somehow and talk about this region. There's an awful lot of people, especially in the winter, who come to Niagara Falls that we could convince to stay another day. They've never heard of Buffalo because they are coming from China and India and other places, and to offer them the opportunity to come to Darwin Martin House or the Albright-Knox I think is a win for everyone. Stay another night in Niagara Falls and we get more people in our venues in the winter in Buffalo. So that, to me, is a really a piece of low-hanging fruit that we should be after right now.

MARK HAMISTER

Hamister Group

My son may shoot me for saying this, but about two years ago we hired two Disney imaginaries there, an architectural and development group, as consultants to help us address that very issue. Because one of my biggest concerns in building this hotel in Niagara Falls was after a day and a half there's not a lot much more for tourists to do. They came up with some interesting ideas. It would probably take another \$60 million to \$100 million, unfortunately, probably half of which would not be supported privately.



DENNIS ESHBAUGH

Holiday Valley

I think a greater thing we're doing well is believing in Buffalo. And why is that important? Well, it's not to make us feel good. It's because if we want a future, it's about the young people.

And if we don't believe in what's going on in Buffalo, then the youth of today don't believe in it and they won't stay. You can blame it on jobs or other aspects, but the fact is that young people today need a sense of community; they need to believe in where they are. I've watched it in a lot of our customers. About a third of our customers are from Ohio, primarily the Cleveland area, and 10 percent from Pittsburgh. And it's amazing watching over the decades the change in the view of those cities. They're ahead of us in terms of their transformation, but they have gone through very much the same path that Buffalo has. We have to have structure that works. We have to have transportation, bridges and conference centers, convention centers, etc. Those are the things that I think we're doing better and have a lot of work to do.

GARY ROULEAU

Riviera Theatre &
Performing Arts
Center

Additionally, we need to invest in the private, small businesses and the community, small community infrastructures. We're bringing in people to these destinations. We really want to have quality-of-life destinations for people coming here for work or coming here to visit. I think there needs to be more focus and investment on the communities around some of the larger venues.



► **If you're coming from the airport and go down the Kensington, when you look at either side you see areas that aren't particularly pretty. Are we hurt that by the time an out-of-towner gets from the airport to their hotel?**

MARK HAMISTER

Hamister Group

No, no.

GARY ROULEAU

Riviera Theatre & Performing Arts Center

I don't think you really focus on that, but you focus on the area where you end up being. So if you go to the Buffalo Sabres game in the winter and you park and you walk and then right outside the arena you're falling down because they haven't shoveled, that becomes an issue. We can't fix everything.



MARK HAMISTER

Hamister Group

My company has operated in over 50 cities in this great country. Every community has those types of image issues if you are looking for them. We are sometimes too self-conscious about the fact that we have an abandoned plant here, an abandoned plant there. Every community has that. Maybe they are not plants, maybe they're something else, but every community has some areas within them that may not be up to the standard of perfection that we're looking for. We need to instead focus on the spines of why people are coming here. Whether it be around the Riviera Theatre, whether it be our Main Street spine here in Buffalo, which we started to improve,

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or whether it be Old Falls Street in Niagara Falls. We need to focus on the spines of where people are going and what they want to do.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute at Niagara University

I think in a vast majority of the cases we actually have it better than a lot of places. I was the chair of the conference last year that was held here. We stayed at the Hyatt, went to the Darwin Martin House for dinner and we took three busloads of people up the Olmsted Parkway system to the Martin House. And I was in the front of the bus just listening to the comments from people blown away by how beautiful Buffalo is and by all these beautiful homes and all these beautiful parkways. I couldn't have been prouder that night of Buffalo. The next night we went to the Top of the Falls, and I was very concerned about driving up the Robert Moses because all the chemical plants are on the right. I stood in the front of the bus and looked back, ready to get the mic and start to point out things on the other side so they wouldn't look at the chemical plants, but there was not one head turned to the right. Everyone in that bus was looking at the river. I think Mark's right. We get too self-conscious about what we have, what we don't have. We just have to accentuate the positive.

MARY ROBERTS

Darwin Martin House

One of the things we're beginning to focus on, too, is the built environment in terms of landscape. People call Buffalo one of the best designed – the best designed – city in America. We have the Olmsted parks and parkway legacy. What we're not capitalizing on yet, but I think we will, is the landscape aspect of our built environment and tying into Niagara Falls – the natural and the design element of it. I think that's our next big marketing tool.

PAUL SNYDER III

Snyder Corp.

In Western New York, between the county and state taxes and bed taxes, we're one of the highest-taxed hospitality industries in the United States. In this region we are seeing the largest variable expense we have in our industry growing faster than revenues by significant amounts. Setting aside whether you support raising the minimum wage or not, setting aside whether you want the bed tax to increase or not, the reality is we are being taxed as an industry at a greater proportion and at a higher pace than any other industry in the state or in the region. We don't get funding that is planned for other

than on an annualized basis. We can't even develop advertising plans beyond the current year. I've said this before: We need better planning by the public sector, particularly in the county and the city levels. And we need investment by the county and the city. We were one of the original hotels that negotiated the original bed tax. It was supposed to be a partnership between the hotel industry and the county on how those monies would be spent. That day has long since gone and today most of the bed tax is used as a subsidy for the county's budget – period. It's not used for the CVB. It's not used for marketing the community.

► Is tourism and hospitality, in some respects, almost an invisible industry?

PAUL SNYDER III

Snyder Corp.

It isn't treated like an industry; it's treated like a taxing entity. Basically what we're looked at is – and you will hear this from politicians quietly – they will applaud people like ourselves or Hamister or others that have built hotels and so forth, but quietly what they will say is they don't create real jobs. They simply live off the demand that exists in the community. That's been the rap on the hotel industry forever. That's not true. Quality hotels, quality entertainment, quality hospitality are what brings people to cities.

THOMAS DEE

Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.

I want to follow up on the positive attitude and how we changed the perception of how Buffalo and Western New York are looked at. A lot of consultants we hire work throughout the country and they're consistently coming back to us and saying, "It's amazing what we're hearing about Buffalo. It's amazing what other parts of the country are saying." And yet we still have this negative impression about ourselves, about driving by the factories. I think we just have this attitude – maybe it's ingrained in us as the "armpit of the East" as we grew up and the snow belt and all these negative things and then amplified through the media. And I don't know what we can do to corral all the media stations in and say, "You have to stop scaring people." Buffalo is not bad weather-wise. It can be tough, but it's not like other major climates where you have tsunamis and forest fires. We get snow but we blow it out of proportion. I think we are our own worst enemy in that regard. I always make the statement that I can run outside every day of the year,

every single day. All I have to do is change the layers, and that's so true. I've suggested to our chairman at Erie Canal that maybe we find a way to spend \$1 million and advertise about how great Buffalo is, but I don't know how we do this, how we get the taxi drivers and get the taxi union to say, "Hey, when you get the customer in the car, tell them what a great place it is." Then you get all the weather stations together and say, "You guys have to just stop hyping this bad weather. It's not that bad."

MARY ROBERTS

Darwin Martin House

Buffalo has got the spirit, talking proud.

THOMAS DEE

Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.

Talking proud, it is so true. Every presentation that I do, I go up and I talk about how great Buffalo is. And everybody in the crowd is nodding, yeah, it is great. It is great. You are right. I talk about the weather and we shouldn't hype it, but I can sit home and watch a football game and at the bottom of the screen it is beep, beep, beep, don't go out. We're overhyped on the negative stuff and we really need to hype up the positive stuff because we have such a great message.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute at Niagara University

This is a good opportunity to give Tom Dee some credit. I tell this story of Niagara Falls all the time. About five years ago, eight years ago, you could go to Pearl Street Grill, walk up to the bar, order a beer and say, "Buffalo sucks." And everybody would slap you on the back and have a good time with you, buy more beers. If you did that today, you'd get punched in the nose. Tom, probably more than anybody else, has had an impact on changing our own psyche about this community because of Canalside, I believe. The tide has changed in Buffalo. I think we're over this. I didn't realize how far we've come in Buffalo until I started going to work every day in Niagara Falls.

JOHN PERCY

Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp.

Careful, Patrick.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute at Niagara University,

The population in Niagara Falls has to have the same change in mindset that we've seen in Buffalo for the last five years. I believe it will come

There is a lot happening in Niagara Falls that will change that, but I think, Tom, hats off to you for what you've done at Canalside. I think it has changed the mindset of people in Buffalo.

MARY ROBERTS

Darwin Martin House

We are riding a wave of success here. You all know and have invested in your own areas. Patrick knows it. It used to be we'd pitch people to come to Buffalo. Now they are calling us and saying they want to come. You know, the Boston Globe, the Guardian, you name it – we're riding that wave. We need to believe it. We need to be more positive about it. I absolutely agree with that. And I think the connection between Buffalo and Niagara, I often think about that, how do we force that collaboration, that spirit of connectivity that will benefit both ends of that Niagara River? We have to be positive.

► Any parting comments?

MARK HAMISTER

Hamister Group

I just want to make sure we don't lose one point that Paul Snyder was pushing a little bit, and I think this goes for both counties. We need to be pushing our county executives and our county legislatures to dedicate a significant portion of that bed tax to the promotion of tourism and stop this craziness of this annual rite of fighting over every freaking nickel.

MICHAEL SCHMAND

Buffalo Place

Everybody had something to say. I think what Dennis said, when he said the word enjoy, that's the words the taxi cab driver said. We just enjoy the area. I think that's what Western New York is doing right now: We're all just enjoying the area. It's not over with. There's a lot of hard work to continue. I think we have the politicians. You have the private sector. You have the nonprofits. You have the business community. You have newspapers all in line. We have a great future. And it started a while ago and just continues to build.

GARY ROULEAU

Riviera Theatre & Performing Arts Center

I support that.

MAJED FARAH

Hyatt Regency Buffalo

We all do.