

May 29, 2020

Dear Room Tax Commission,

As General Manager of Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, member of the Greater Madison Hotel & Lodging Association, Board Vice Chairman of the Wisconsin Hotel & Lodging Association, and current serving board member for both Monona Terrace and Destination Madison, I ask for your thoughtful and deliberate consideration of any revisions to the distribution of our room tax funds this year. I understand these revenues are severely damaged beyond anyone's control as a result of COVID-19 protections. But it is for that very reason that I urge you to fund Destination Madison to the greatest extent possible.

As we begin to slowly emerge as a nation and community from the restrictions, it is more critical than ever that you place Destination Madison on the front line of this recovery fight. And a fight it is going to be. Travel and tourism has been decimated around the world. Every destination, city and facility is going to be competing hard for visitor dollars.

In the short-term, with continued restrictions on large gatherings that tamp down use of convention facilities, theatres, sporting venues and events, festivals, concerts and more, it will be the individual and family leisure travelers that we need to attract. Destination Madison is uniquely qualified with years of demonstrated creativity to place Madison in the minds of a regional drive-in market as a safe and fun place they want to come and visit, to patronize our businesses, to spend the night and most importantly get more substantial room tax revenue generating again.

In the medium-range term we need corporations to know Madison is a safe place to send their employees on business related travel in order to meet in person again and know that our hotels, restaurants, retail and other businesses, the city at large will be careful and protect them while they are visiting. As individuals or businesses consider moving away from more densely populated areas to start anew, we want them to think of greater Madison. This is a marketing and branding fight that Destination Madison is best equipped for.

And for the long-term, as we look to fully utilize our large gathering facilities again, we need the on-going sales effort of Destination Madison to keep prospecting and securing groups and events for Madison. This is where I believe the fight will be the most challenging, with competition from all over the country. It takes time, working with clients over years sometimes to secure and place business into future years. We do not yet even fully understand what the COVID-19 impact will be on this business sector of meetings, conventions and large events. We must keep the Destination Madison Sales Team supported and engaged with clients so they can adapt to the changes that unfold in this sector and get business secured for future years if we ever want to get back to the strong business levels and room tax generation we have enjoyed over the years. Any gap in funding a strong sales effort will show-up in critical future years, as this kind of business cannot suddenly be cultivated again in the short-term.

I know your work will not be easy. Some entities may have to rely on other funding sources or remain closed or reduced for a bit longer in order to provide as much investment as possible into Destination Madison so they can lead the fight for the future benefit of all. Thank you for your leadership and service to this commission.

Respectfully,

Skip Harless  
General Manager  
Hilton Madison Monona Terrace