

USA

Destructive protests hurt Portland's standing as a destination

By Sara Cline, Associated Press | Oct 31, 2021



Portland International Airport. Photo Credit: Port of Portland

Portland's "badly damaged" reputation -- marked by months of destructive protests, a homeless crisis and record year of homicides -- is hurting the standing of Oregon's largest city, according to the city's main tourism promoter.

Travel Portland, the city's tourism-promotion group partly funded by taxes, presented data to the city council and mayor this week showing the city has declined to its "lowest levels" of being a likely destination for delegates to attend conferences. Just 64% of surveyed tourists said they would visit Portland again.

"There's an old old saying, 'It takes a lifetime to build a reputation and you can ruin it in an instant.' That's true of cities, as it is people," Portland mayor Ted Wheeler said in response to the Travel Portland data. "And we're just going to have to commit to that long-term

process of improving the safety and the livability and the economic prosperity of the city."

The liberal city had long been known nationally for its ambrosial food scene, craft breweries and nature-loving hipsters. But last year, it became the epicenter of racial-justice protests following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis.

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For months, a small downtown area was consumed by protests that often turned violent, with clashes between demonstrators and federal agents, plumes of teargas, fireworks exploding in the streets and rubber bullets flying through the air.

While Portland's violent protests have largely eased, there are still outbreaks, including earlier this month. Amid a vigil for a slain activist killed two years ago, a crowd of 100 people smashed storefront windows, ignited fires in dumpsters and caused at least \$500,000 in damage to city buildings and businesses.

Protests take a big toll

Travel Portland presented data collected by MMGY Travel Intelligence. The travel research and consulting company asked people how likely they are to attend a meeting, conference or convention – either for business or leisure purposes – in Portland in the next 24 months. The question was asked about 21 different destinations, and Portland was "toward the bottom" of the list.

The survey showed that half of event planners and two-thirds of attendees surveyed recently indicated that their "likelihood" to book or attend meetings in the city over the next two years was heavily influenced by the "visibility" of racial and social protests.

"The impact of this is that we likely won't even get the opportunity to bid on many conventions for the next two years, which will affect our long-term successes well into the future," said Jeff Miller, president and CEO of Travel Portland.

Portland City Commissioner Dan Ryan said one of his friends who recently volunteered at a convention texted him about her experience with visitors who felt unsafe in the city.

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The woman told Ryan "it was really depressing to have so many people approach her, that looked angry, that we allowed ourselves to even host a big convention ... like we weren't ready for it."

While the most recent Portland consumer research showed that the likely return rate of visitors to the city represented an improvement from earlier this year, the level was lower than surveys conducted before the pandemic and the protests.

Hotel recovery lags other cities

Portland's central city hotel occupancy rate has also improved since the start of the pandemic, but Miller said the number of hotel rooms booked in September lags behind 14 competing visitor cities that Travel Portland tracks except Minneapolis and San Francisco.

"Recovery is happening elsewhere, just not here," Miller said.

Portland is in the midst of a homeless crisis that local businesses, organizations and residents are urging the city to do something about -- in the form of additional housing, mental health resources, cleanups and increased public safety.

At a recent city council meeting, workers in a Portland neighborhood with many medical services buildings spoke about their experience that staff and patients endure because of a large nearby homeless encampment.

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– Travel Portland CEO Jeff Miller ↗

"The first thing that they see is garbage, RVs and tents blocking our sidewalks and discarded drug paraphernalia," said Sonia Bouchard, the director of operations at the Oregon Clinic Gastroenterology East at Gateway. "They're often yelled at, approached for money and in some cases threatened."

Employees often witness erratic behavior, fights, nudity and drug use, she said. Patients have told staff that they feel unsafe and some have decided to switch doctors.

"We've added fencing and security," said Dr. Harry Bray. "But, we feel at this point, we are unable to make things better and we need your help."

The spiraling homeless crisis has already impacted some major events in the city.

Over the summer, Oregon's largest annual golf event was relocated from Portland and the site's proximity to a sprawling encampment of homeless people to the far-flung suburb of West Linn.

The city is also in the midst of its most violent year with at least 69 homicides reported so far this year, surpassing the previous annual record of 66 set in 1987.

Mayor says 'a lot of work' lies ahead

Despite the challenges, Wheeler insisted the city is resilient and that with "a lot of work" Portland will re-emerge as a safe and desirable travel destination.

Travel Portland has increased its marketing of the city, but officials said more is needed and city officials expect a budget windfall soon with an anticipated \$60 million in extra funding that the City Council could use as it wants -- including tourism promotion and efforts to make the city more appealing and safer.

"I'm not saying stop your marketing, but right now people don't buy it," Wheeler said. "They want to see the results. They want to see action."

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