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Recent crimes did not victimize tourists

By Jaquetta White, Business Writer

After spending the past year battling images of flooding, looting and soldiers on New Orleans' streets, the city's tourism leaders now must fight a recent uptick in crime in tourist areas.

"The one thing that is absolutely intolerable to us is that spillover of crime into the tourism areas," said Stephen Perry, president and chief executive of the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau. "We're going to do everything in our power to make sure that does not happen."

Tourism officials are taking a proactive approach to the crime problem after the highly publicized domestic murder last month in an apartment above a voodoo shop on the edge of the French Quarter; a fatal shooting Oct. 10 outside a Faubourg Marigny restaurant in which two other men were injured; and last week's shooting inside Club Decatur, a French Quarter bar, in which five were injured.

There also have been reports of a series of armed robberies in Marigny and the Quarter. The Club Decatur shooting was reported in the International Herald Tribune, which bills itself as the world's daily newspaper online.

"It's horrific. It's saddening," Perry said. "But it should not indicate to a visitor that coming to New Orleans is not a safe thing to do."

The visitor's bureau provided explanations of the crime to upcoming conferences and to national news media. He said the tourism industry wants to make the point that while the recent crimes were in areas that tourists populate, they were not committed against tourists. "It's very important to discern what type of crime it is," Perry said. "There may be nothing more important than the safety of the city for visitors from a business point of view because that's a key part of our recovery."

While there have been no convention or conference cancellations, Perry said his office did receive calls from clients after the most recent shooting. The outside perception that the city is unsafe could mar New Orleans' reputation as a premier convention and leisure travel destination, he said.

After a rash of violence and the return of the National Guard to patrol parts of the city this summer, the visitors bureau distributed hundreds of fliers in hotels to reassure tourists that New Orleans was safe. The flier told visitors that a wave of crime that included the murder of five teenagers in Central City was "enhanced drug-related violence concentrated in a couple of isolated neighborhoods miles away" from the CBD, the French Quarter and the area around the Convention Center.

It also recommended against "venturing into areas of the city that are sparsely populated, particularly after dark." That still is the message the industry is giving, said Darrius Gray, president of the Greater New Orleans Hotel & Lodging Association, though the industry has not released a new letter in light of the recent crime wave. "I don't think there's anything we could have said that would have deterred traffic in that location," Gray said, referring to the Decatur Street bar. "As best we can we try to communicate with our guests on a continual basis, not just when crime occurs."

The hospitality industry is coordinating with the New Orleans Police Foundation, the New Orleans Business Council and Greater New Orleans Inc. to create a coalition that focuses solely on preventing crime in tourist-trafficked areas. Perry said the group will get together in about two weeks to discuss ways to make the French Quarter, Marigny and the Central Business District safer.

Robert Stellingworth, president and CEO of the New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, said law enforcement is working not only to reduce crime in tourist trafficked areas, but also in the entire city.

Crime is a systemic problem, Stellingworth said, with no quick-fix solution. The crime in New Orleans, he said, is no different than that in other major cities. Still, he said, there is an effort to try to suppress crime, through increased patrols, in areas visited by tourists. "It's very, very important in improving tourism that we show zero tolerance in the areas that the tourists frequent," Stellingworth said.

Last week, the visitors bureau requested additional patrols in those areas, Perry said, especially when conferences and conventions are in town. This month, about 35,000 Realtors will be in the city for the National Association of Realtors conference. A spokesman for the group said they were aware of the recent incidents, but not concerned. "We expect the city to do its duty, protect its residents and visitors," Lucien Salvant said.

Kathryn Goldstein, a spokeswoman for Meeting Professionals International, an association for meeting planners, said the hospitality industry is taking the right approach. MPI will host its national conference of about 3,000 meeting planners in the city in January.

She said the recent crime wave has not dampened their excitement about returning to New Orleans. But the group is telling its members to be cautious when they arrive, Goldstein said. "You just have to use common sense," she said. "But these are things you do when you travel to any city."

Jaquetta White can be reached at jwhite@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3494.