

CALLING ALL TOURISTS

Virginia City, Nevada City number 1 state owned tourist attraction for 5th consecutive year

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For Madison County residents, it will come as no surprise that Virginia City and Nevada City is the number one state owned tourists attraction for the fifth consecutive year, according to Montana Office of Tourism traffic counts. When you drive through the Alder Gulch in the summer, it is easy to spot license plates from across the states.

The Montana Heritage Commission manages Virginia City and Nevada City for the state – it also owns Reeder's Alley and the Pioneer Cabin in Helena. According to MHC's biennial report for 2015 – 2016, more than 500,000 tourists travel to the area from Memorial Day to Labor Day each year.

Economic benefits

Cars stopping in Virginia City and Nevada City translate into dollars for Madison County and Montana as a whole, according to a study from the Northern Rocky Mountain Economic Development District.

"I can't see a downside of having that wonderful attraction right there," said Rob Gilmore, NRMEDD representative for Madison County.

In December 2015, NRMEDD reported the towns' economic footprint was \$62.2 million for the state, with \$37.6 million benefitting Madison County directly.

Gilmore said NRMEDD took visitor counts from MHC and made "some assumptions" about what percentage of people were just passing through, and what percentage stayed in the local market area. Then they took the state's rate for a tourist group – 2.3 people per group – which is \$100 per group per day and applied it to tourist expenditure items like gas, hotels, meals, retail, automotive repair and more.

"Now, are they able to capitalize on it as much as possible or as much as they will in the future?" Gilmore asked. "Probably not."

Gilmore referenced

the "fabric" of the community – a denser and well-woven community fabric has the ability to capture more and more money passing through.

"In Virginia City, a lot of money passes through but doesn't stop," he said. "Though everybody there is doing the best they can."

The seasonal nature of Virginia City and Nevada City inhibit building a strong economy, Gilmore said.

"That will probably change with time," he said.

Madison County commissioner Dave Schulz lives in the Ruby Valley and has an office in Virginia City. Schulz said he be-

lieves tourism is up countywide this year.

"I always like to look at license plates and I see many from quite a ways away," Schulz said. "I've talked to a number of the business owners in Virginia City and quite a number I talk with say this year is a bit better than what they've seen the last couple years."

Schulz said he is "encouraged" when he sees packed main streets elsewhere in the county, whether it is in Ennis or Sheridan.

"I think it's been a good summer," he said. "Part of it is probably the price of gas."

ABIGAIL DENNIS/THE MADISONIAN
Tourists explore Virginia City this summer.

