

## Visitors bureau defends contract with Suffolk

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Leaders of the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau yesterday urged Suffolk legislators to keep funding their work, despite a recommendation that the county itself could better promote tourism and still save \$1 million.

President Moke McGowan and board chairman Kevin Moran appeared before the legislature's economic development committee to rebut county Comptroller Joseph Sawicki's recent audit that found the bureau misspent \$806,000 in 2009 and 2010 by not specifically promoting Suffolk destinations, and favored its members over other local businesses.

Suffolk paid the bureau \$1.98 million last year from its 3 percent hotel/motel tax, while Nassau provided \$726,000 for regional bureau promotions. In a letter to officials that accompanied his audit, Sawicki recommended that the county eliminate its contract with the bureau and spend the funds to specifically boost Suffolk tourism.

But McGowan argued the county gets a high rate of return on its investment. He said \$629,000 of the money it provides above Nassau's contribution goes to Suffolk-targeted advertising and promotion that yields an estimated \$32.4 million annually in tourist spending and \$16 million in local convention and event bookings.

"Taking it in-house, and doing away with the contract for our organization . . . would be penny-wise and pound-foolish," McGowan said.

Moran, who runs a Courtyard by Marriott hotel in Ronkonkoma, added: "We object strenuously to any attempt to divert these funds to any entity but" the visitors bureau.

Pressed by lawmakers, McGowan acknowledged his \$32.4 million investment-return estimate was based on a formula from a years-old phone survey of people who requested the bureau's travel guide and said they later visited the area.

"A \$32 million return on investment is very impressive, if that is the case," said Legis. Lou D'Amaro (D-North Babylon).

Legis. Lynne Nowick (R-St. James) suggested the bureau work with the comptroller to address the audit issues, saying she doubted that county workers could generate the same kind of international interest in Long Island travel -- most of which comes to Suffolk.

"I do believe it would be very difficult for the county to run a visitors bureau like this," Nowick said. "It is a specialty and I don't know that we can handle a specialty with the same amount of money, and give the same attention to all the venues we have here."