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Economy drags on travel plans — holiday and otherwise

By Myles Ethan Lascity

Talk about trickle-down economics.

As consumers worry about what's on the economic horizon, travelers are feeling the pinch.

And while some may still be making holiday travel plans, it's also time to look beyond.

"Sometimes we'll get people who call in November looking for a December air fare around Christmas that isn't there anymore," said Cookie Manganelli, senior travel consultant, Boscov's Travel, Laurel Mall. "If they don't book it early enough, (the price) tends to get real high as it gets closer to the day."

Regina Scherer, office manager at Lizrick Travel, Hazleton, said her customers are already looking beyond the holidays.

"Everyone now is booking for the colder season," Scherer said. "They are looking to book after the Christmas holiday."

Both agents have noticed that customers are becoming more cost-conscious and believe the economy has been a factor in that.

"Up until last Tuesday, we had a couple weeks that were flat-lined," Manganelli said. "We were just maintaining what we had booked."

Katrina's Travel owner Katrina Lennartz is having a similar experience.

"This is usually for us a slower time of the year," Lennartz said. "For holidays, it's a little too late to book it ... and (people are) busy with Christmas shopping."

Meanwhile, some people may cut holiday travels, said Catherine L. Rossi, manager of public and government affairs for AAA Mid-Atlantic.

"Without a crystal ball, I really can't say for sure," Rossi said. "What we do know is motorists are being very cautious about their travel."

Gas is at its lowest point this year, but that may not translate into increased traveling, Rossi said.

"While I'm sure there are some people who will visit family and friends," she said, "there's enough of a fear factor about economic conditions to hold people back."

Last year, AAA estimated 65.2 million people traveled for Christmas and 38.7 million

headed out for Thanksgiving.

Both were increases over 2006 measurements, but that trend may change this year.

“The economy ... has everyone wary about what’s going to happen next,” Rossi said.

The Air Transport Association of America, the trade association representing many U.S. airlines, is expecting a 10 percent decrease from last year’s Thanksgiving fliers.

And according to AAA, airline passengers are looking at rates 8 percent above last year’s holiday rates.

With the price of gas falling, more people may again be taking to the roads.

“Automobile travel is the most popular form of travel,” Rossi said, “because it’s the cheapest form of travel.”

Local agents said the coming months will really determine how the economy is affecting them.

“Generally people get together over the holidays and figure out what they want to do next year,” Managanelli said.

Additionally, Managanelli said many people use their income tax refund for vacation expenses.

Scherer said while travel has been affected, the economic slump hasn’t dampened her customer’s spirits.

“I think everything has been affected,” she said, but noted, “I still have a following of people who regardless go every year.”

Scherer said that people are cost-conscious with their travel plans.

“They’re shopping for price,” she said.

And while some believe last-minute bargains will net a great deal, Manganelli said that may not be the case.

“People have the misconception that if you wait long enough they are going to get a bargain,” she said. “But not everything goes on sale.”

However, as Lennartz pointed out, the economy might help last-minute shoppers this year.

“This year you might have something (available) because of the economy as not as many

people are traveling,” Lennartz said.

And bargain shopping isn’t out of the question.

Scherer said shopping around for price is important.

“One of the things I do, regardless if (customers) are (cost-conscious) or not — we do shop around for price” Scherer said. “We research packages; we look to see who has the lowest price.”

Manganelli said, “Be a little bit flexible as to where you want to go and how you want to get there.” She also pointed out that leaving from destinations such as Philadelphia as opposed to Avoca can net savings.

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