International Travel Gets President’s Attention
By Richard R. Kelley

I was very pleased and excited to learn last week that President Barack Obama had flown to Disney World, Florida, and, with the unique structures of the Magic Kingdom in the background, announced a number of new federal policies and initiatives designed to boost international travel to the United States.

Under the policies and initiatives Obama outlined and backed with an executive order, the departments of State, Commerce and Homeland Security are requested to come up with new procedures to facilitate and speed up the processing of visas for non-immigrant travel from international locations.

What a breath of fresh air! I hope this marks the beginning of the end of "The Lost Decade" in overseas travel to the U.S.

According to the U.S. Travel Association, since 2000, international travel around our planet has been rapidly and steadily increasing. In 2009, 46.3 million more international travelers took long-haul trips than in 2000. However, in 2009, the United States welcomed 2.4 million fewer international visitors than in 2000!

That has cost our economy dearly. According to studies done by the U.S. Travel Association in conjunction with Oxford Economics the impact has been:

- $509 billion in lost spending, including $214 billion in direct spending and $295 billion in downstream spending at restaurants, retailers and thousands of small businesses.
- 441,000 lost jobs, direct and indirect, in all regions of the country.
- $32 billion in lost tax revenue at federal, state and local levels.
- $270 billion in lost trade surplus, as international travel is our nation’s largest service export.

The causes of this decline in absolute numbers and market share of international travel to the U.S. are many, but certainly, the difficulty of obtaining a visa to travel to the U.S. and the treatment that international travelers receive when arriving at our points of entry have been major factors.

The policies and initiatives announced by President Obama last week will directly target those factors. They include a reform of the U.S. visa system with reduced wait times and the use of teleconferencing for interviews so visa applicants in areas without a nearby U.S. consular office, such as many parts of Brazil, China and India, will not have to travel to another city for interviews. Likewise, ports of entry will be better staffed with immigration officers, and quality of service will be monitored.

I hope that when these initiatives take effect, they will not only help boost overall international travel to our country, but will also have a strong positive impact on international travel to Hawai’i, particularly from the highly promising China market.

The announcement by President Obama was not something that came out of the blue, nor was it an idea initiated by his re-election campaign committee. Rather, it was the direct result of over three years of hard work by many in the Travel & Tourism industry.

Shortly after his inauguration in 2009, a delegation of industry leaders led by Roger Dow, President and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association (www.ustravel.org), visited the White House and laid out the facts about how much the U.S. has been losing in international visitors and market share. Since then, that group and others have kept the pressure on and provided the facts and research to back up their conclusions. I have added my voice through letters to our congressional delegation and President Obama plus a number of articles in Saturday Briefing.

If you want to add your own voice, consider joining the Power of Travel Coalition (www.travelcoalition.org). This is a grassroots project of the U.S. Travel Association defending and strengthening the American travel community. You can sign up through their website or on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or LinkedIn.

Yes, good things can happen if you work hard and are persistent. That’s what it took to get President Obama to make that announcement last week in Disney World.

As the late, great radio announcer Paul Harvey used to say to millions of listeners every week, "And now you know the rest of the story!"