

# Tourism spending continues to rise in Whatcom County

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Whatcom County posted some decent growth in the tourism industry last year, and it already appears to be off to a strong start in 2017.

Last year visitors spent \$588 million in Whatcom County, a 3 percent increase compared to 2015, according to a report by [Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism](#). The data was compiled by [Dean Runyan Associates](#), a national tourism research firm.

Whatcom County now ranks fifth in the state for visitor spending after King, Pierce, Spokane and Snohomish counties.

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Lodging posted the biggest increase locally, rising 7.6 percent year-over-year to \$76.2 million. That went a long way in offsetting the 10.6 percent drop in air and ground travel, [a category impacted by the weakening Canadian dollar](#).

## Visitor spending on the rise

*2016 was a big year in Whatcom County for booking rooms in hotels, motels, bed and breakfast places and vacation rentals. The 7.6 percent increase went a long way in offsetting the 10.6 percent drop in air and ground travel.*



## Visitor spending in 2016

| Sector                | Millions     | Percentage change from 2015 |
|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Food service          | \$151.9      | +1                          |
| Retail sales          | \$88.7       | +1                          |
| Air, ground travel    | \$82.8       | -10.6                       |
| Accommodations        | \$76.2       | +7.6                        |
| Entertainment         | \$61.1       | Flat                        |
| Transportation, gas   | \$50.2       | Flat                        |
| <b>Total spending</b> | <b>\$588</b> | <b>+3</b>                   |

SOURCE: Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism

The Bellingham Herald

Lodging is already off to a strong start in the first quarter of 2017, in part because of what appears to be a very busy season for regular maintenance work at local refineries. Officials at the refineries don't publicly talk about the amount of turnaround work being done, but it has showed up in the hotel bookings, said Sandy Ward, president and CEO of Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism.

73.4 percent. The Whatcom County hotel occupancy rate in March. That's a rate typically seen in May and June.

The occupancy rate for Whatcom County hotels in March was 73.4 percent, up from 58.5 percent in March 2016.

February had similar numbers, with a hotel occupancy rate of 73.7 percent, up from 55.6 percent a year earlier. About half of the Whatcom County hotels participate in the survey. The February and March occupancy rates in 2017 are typically seen in May and June, according to the data.

Having that boost in hotel bookings in the first three months of the year is important for the industry, because it is considered a very slow time of year for visitor spending and helps provide job stability in what is typically a seasonal industry. Weather is a factor in spring and summer visitor spending; if it gets warmer and less wet in the coming weeks, it means another boost in visitor spending, Ward said.



The pool area of the Holiday Inn and Suites - Bellingham Airport is pictured at the end of construction on Thursday, March 9, 2017 in Bellingham. The lodging industry posted a 7.6 percent increase in visitor spending last year.

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The Dean Runyan report estimates visitor spending supported 6,800 Whatcom County jobs last year, an increase of 200 compared to 2015. Visitor spending also generated about \$51 million in state and local taxes.

One area of tourism Ward said could use a boost is the airport. For its population size, Whatcom County is lucky to have jet service, she said. With the Canadian dollar, currently at 73 cents compared to the U.S. dollar, expected to remain weak through 2017, it may mean finding ways to attract airplane passengers just south of Whatcom County.

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Seattle resident Angela Pegram and her dog Murphy sit by a fire outside Home2 Suites by Hilton in Bellingham in July 2015. The lodging industry posted a 7.6 percent increase in visitor spending last year. Evan Abell  
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