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HEADLINE: New Orleans tourism breaks record in 2011 ;
BP cash for marketing gives industry a boost

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BODY:

Crediting an influx of marketing cash from oil giant BP, tourism officials on Monday said 2011 was a banner year for New Orleans, with 8.75 million visitors spending a record-breaking \$5.47 billion.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu cited a new study by the University of New Orleans Hospitality Research Center that showed a 5.6 percent increase in the number of visitors compared with 2010, and \$180 million bump in spending. He said the tourism boom is due largely to an infusion of marketing money that BP doled out to Gulf Coast communities affected by the massive 2010 oil spill.

Mark Romig, president of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp., said tourism agencies last year had \$3.8 million more than the \$5.1 million they'd expected because of the oil firm's contribution. The extra cash allowed for TV and print ad campaigns that reached major metropolitan markets across the country, he said.

To keep the growth line heading skyward, the city's tourism agencies this year plan to spend another \$1.2 million in BP cash and also "are going to have to spend some of our rainy-day dollars to maintain that marketing level," Romig said.

With the bulk of visitors last year hailing from nearby states, tourism officials want to expand advertising efforts to markets including Los Angeles, Chicago and New York City, said Stephen Perry, president of the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau.

City and tourism leaders also plan to lobby for new local taxes on lodging, food, beverages and hotel parking within a new downtown "hospitality zone," with potential revenue dedicated to infrastructure and public service improvements within the zone, as well as marketing.

The tax proposals, authored at Landrieu's request by state Sen. Ed Murray and Rep. Walt Leger, both New Orleans Democrats, must be approved by the Legislature, the City Council and a majority of New Orleans voters.

"As we talk about jobs across the United States of America, this is something that's blowing and going in the city of New Orleans," Landrieu said, noting that the city's tourism sector added 3,000 jobs for a total 74,000 jobs in 2011. "The city of New Orleans is punching way above its weight."

Landrieu, who served as the state's top tourism official during his seven-year tenure as lieutenant governor, pointed to New Orleans' authentic culture as a major draw for visitors.

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"What you saw here today is empirical evidence that this is creating jobs, creating tax revenue," he said, adding that tourism officials have set as a goal of attracting 13.7 million visitors -- with an \$11 billion economic impact -- by the city's 300th anniversary in 2018.

"That's our big World Cup," he said. "That's our Olympics."

Officials said several of the UNO study's findings indicate a strong tourism industry.

For instance, more than 90 percent of the 15,713 visitors surveyed said they were likely to recommend New Orleans as a travel destination, said John Williams, interim dean of University of New Orleans' business school, which as part of the research center has gauged the city's tourism business since 1997.

He also cited several national reports and magazines that have ranked New Orleans among the top destinations for everything from live music venues to budget-friendliness.

"We are becoming the food mecca of the U.S.," Williams added, noting that more than 42 percent of last year's visitors reported eating at a fine dining establishment.

Three-quarters of visitors surveyed in 2011 were in town for pleasure, while the rest cited business travel or a convention as their reason for coming to New Orleans, the report shows. Nearly 60 percent of corporate travelers said they extended their stay for an extra two days.

"New Orleans is on a tremendously positive trajectory in leisure, special event and in convention and meetings business," Perry said, adding that "it takes all these to make it work. We've become one of the hottest destinations in the country."

The 2011 study results comes as New Orleans kicks off the 2012 spring festival season and as college basketball fans begin pouring into town for this weekend's Final Four match-ups. Also on the horizon are Navy Week and the 2013 Super Bowl.

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