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## Matt Smith: Great lakes, great times, great waste

Let's say you're going to throw a party. Got the chips? Check. Dip? Ditto. Beverages and games? All set. Fifteen million dollars in invitations? Yup.

Sound flaky? Of course it does, and that might be one way to characterize the new plan to market Michigan outside the state.



According to a recent article from The Associated Press, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Republican lawmakers are earmarking \$7.5 million in each of the next two budget years to draw travelers to the state.

Now, don't all hold your hands out at once: That \$15 million is all going to Travel Michigan ([www.michigan.org](http://www.michigan.org)), the state's travel promotion agency, to spend on marketing. We, the taxpayers, are going to give the tourism office a few more bucks to tout Michigan to outsiders.

Guess what? Unless the money is going to provide out-of-state residents with gasoline vouchers, plane tickets or paving equipment so they can make themselves useful by doing something with the roads while they're in the state, I don't have a lot of faith in the success of a tourism campaign right now.

High gas prices aside, I don't have a lot of confidence in Travel Michigan succeeding in general. Let's not forget that it's the same agency which spent God knows how much money into crafting the state's corny tourism slogan.

Perhaps you've heard it: "Great lakes. Great times. Not a great distance."

Not a great catchphrase, either. I can only hope we paid by the word.

Before that slogan — it was adopted in 2001 — the state had a tourism campaign based around the phrase "Say yes to M!ch!gan!" The nicest thing I can say about that is it preceded the popularity of idiotic hacker leetspeak (or 13375p34k, if you prefer) by years, instead of just now jumping on the bandwagon.

Mind you, I don't have an especially high threshold of satisfaction for ad slogans. If it's clever or memorable, I'll give credit where it's due.

Here's an example of what I like: "Las Vegas — What happens here, stays here." That's one of the slogans the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority uses. It shows up not just in the ads the convention people use, but also in TV shows and on Web sites, and seldom is it ever referred to as an ad slogan. It's tourism's answer to Nike's "Just do it."

In other words: It's really clever. Makes me want to go to Vegas, far from the place with four of the five Great Lakes, supposedly great times and all these previously undetected exclamation marks in the state's name.

The best Michigan approximation of the Las Vegas slogan would be something along these lines: What happens in Michigan generally falls into a pothole and just dies there.

So, to reiterate: Michigan is looking to throw millions of your money and mine at bringing in tourists.

I don't think the notion of Great Lakes and great times is going to get it done, and I'm not convinced the tourism office really needs the money as much as other parts of the state may need it.

To illustrate the futility of the task, I'm going to throw out some slogans that illustrate what life in Michigan is really like, instead of how it might be portrayed to outsiders.

- Welcome to Michigan! We blew a lot of money on crummy tourism slogans! No time to fix those potholes! Glad you're here, though!
- Greetings! You're in Michigan! Please empty your wallet at the nearest available gas station!

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- Michigan: We don't use a lot of bread to fix our traffic jams!
- Welcome to Michigan! You're coming up on a pothole right now! Watch out!
- Michigan: We have the best restaurants in the Midwest! Be sure to tip your waitress! She's got a college degree and this is the best job she can get!
- Hello! We're the state that put the world on wheels! Nowadays, you can watch us buckle the Rust Belt!
- Welcome to Michigan! You're just about to hit that pothole!
- Experience Michigan! See what made Roger Moore such a bitter young man! Wait! Come back! You're going to miss the Autoworld reunion!
- Thrilled to see you in Michigan! No longer home to the nation's murder capital! But still in the top 10!
- Welcome to Michigan! Gosh! That pothole sure is deep! I'll call a wrecker! Maybe the medical examiner, too! Wish we had kept some of that \$15 million we're throwing at tourists and spent a few more bucks on the roads instead!

In case you haven't guessed by now, I have to believe that there are at least a few things around the state that might merit the attention of taxpayer dollars before our leaders start siphoning that money out of circulation and pumping it into a commercial campaign.

Sure, tourism is a vital part of the state's economic future. So are things like improving the infrastructure — \$15 million would pay nearly half the cost of the proposed Latson Road interchange at Interstate 96 — and punching up state allowances for lower-funded districts like Howell Public School. In Howell, a fraction of the state's ad budget would help the district open its second high school on time.

Instead of efforts like that, though, Michiganians are going to be on the sidelines while their tax dollars get spent outside the state.

Sad to say, but all we're going to get with that approach is the sound of one mitten clapping.


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