Editorial: Tourism rebound faces challenges

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Louisiana tourism officials have a line to straddle when they promote the state as a travel destination nearly one year after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

On the one hand, many Louisiana officials at all levels of government have been trying to communicate to the rest of the nation that the state still has a long way to go in recovering from last year's hurricanes, a process that could take years. On the other hand, tourism officials have tried to project an air of calm and point to a plethora of tourist attractions that are open and ready for visitors.

One can understand why an outsider might scratch his head at these apparently mixed messages. Is Louisiana still under reconstruction, or is it ready to play? The answer, apparently, is both. Louisiana is still trying to rebound from last year's storms, and a part of that recovery - and a renewed sense of normalcy - must come from a return of the tourist trade.

Communities along the Gulf Coast have had a challenging time trying to communicate that the region is open for tourists, according to Bill Hardman,
who heads the Southeast Tourism Society in Atlanta. The society recently received a $500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce to promote tourism along the Gulf Coast. Hardman said the lingering images of Hurricane Katrina have made it more difficult to draw tourists back to the region.

Louisiana began a campaign to lure outside visitors after a survey of potential tourists found 46 percent of the respondents were less interested in visiting the region because they feared attractions would not be open. Louisiana is using a $7 million marketing campaign to urge prospective visitors to "Fall in Love With Louisiana All Over Again."

But New Orleans historically has been the center of Louisiana's tourism trade, and recent negative international publicity about the Crescent City threatens to mute the potential benefits of the "Fall in Love With Louisiana All Over Again" campaign.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco recently ordered National Guardsmen into the city to help with security patrols for the first time since Hurricane Katrina, in addition to sending in additional State Police, after a bloody crime wave that included the slaying of five teen-agers in a single incident.

Blanco's assistance to New Orleans is a welcome development but not a long-term solution for the city's ills, and neither the governor nor anyone
else has suggested that it is. Ultimately, New Orleans must get its own handle on its crime problems, and if it does, then residents will benefit from the change even more than tourists.

In other words, the best way to make a city a nice place to visit is to make it a nice place to live.