

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0906

July 23, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write you today to express my concern with federal travel policy that discourages government travel, business meetings, and conferences in cities because they are perceived as leisure destinations. A story appeared in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal*, which quoted officials from both the Department of Justice and the Department of Agriculture, stating guidance that specifically prohibits travel to cities like Orlando or Las Vegas. I am asking that you direct agencies participating in such practices to end them immediately. Any directive or guidance on federal travel policy should be based on the value to the taxpayer, not arbitrary perceptions about a specific destination.

In June 2009, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid expressed similar concerns that I share today in a letter to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. In his reply to Leader Reid he stated, "Our view on the issue of government travel is not focused on specific destinations, but rather on the justification for and the cost/benefit ratio of the individual exercise." I could not agree more with this perspective. My concern, however, is that this policy is not being implemented in our federal agencies. According to the General Services Administration (GSA), Orlando has the lowest government per diem of many major meeting destinations and Orlando International Airport has among the most affordable airfares in the country. Despite these facts, the federal government continues to cancel meetings and events and appears to give the impression that cities like Orlando are off-limits.

The State of Florida is heavily reliant on a strong and vibrant travel and tourism economy. According to the U.S. Travel Association, over 750,000 jobs in Florida are dependent on the travel economy, and in my hometown of Orlando, nearly one in four jobs in the area is directly related to these industries. Because of the hard work of countless employees and business owners in the hospitality industry, Orlando has become one of the top destinations in the U.S. with a thriving economy based on tourism, meetings and conventions.

These arbitrary policies prohibiting travel to popular destinations might make for a good talking point, but they are costing hard-working families in Florida their jobs. I urge you to issue new guidance to correct this situation, and I appreciate your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mel Martinez
United States Senate