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Church Street Station's Train Ride to Mount Dora: Focus Groups of Central Florida Residents, Tourists, and Convention Delegates

Ady Milman

University of Central Florida, Ady.Milman@ucf.edu

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CHURCH STREET STATION'S TRAIN RIDE TO MOUNT DORA
FOCUS GROUPS OF CENTRAL FLORIDA RESIDENTS, TOURISTS, AND
CONVENTION DELEGATES

Prepared by:

Dr. Ady Milman
Dick Pope Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies
University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida 32816

PURPOSE:

The purpose of the focus group sessions was to identify major areas of concern among Central Florida residents, tourists, and convention delegates with regard to a new train ride attraction between Orlando and Mount Dora. In particular, the discussions focused on the **appeal** of the new attraction to these three groups and their suggestions for features to present on this unique ride.

The methodology used was to start each discussion by introducing broad issues of vacation travel, traveling modes to/or in Central Florida, familiarity with Central Florida attractions, experience with train rides, in particular old-fashioned, and incrementally narrow down to a full discussion of the proposed new attraction.

GROUPS' CHARACTERISTICS:

Six focus groups were conducted in Winter Park (local residents), Lake Buena Vista, International Drive, and Kissimmee (tourists and convention delegates). The focus groups were conducted between January 12 and February 22, 1989.

Each of the focus groups consisted of 10-12 participants representing different age groups and an array ethnic, educational, occupational, and economic backgrounds. The groups also consisted of equal representation of males and females.

The focus groups of local residents consisted of Floridians who have resided in Central Florida for at least two years. The tourist and convention delegates groups consisted of out-of-state participants from Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Canada, and Switzerland.

VACATION AND LEISURE TIME:

1. Local Residents:

Participants were asked what they like to do on their vacation. They mentioned that they prefer to stay in warm weather areas and to go to the beach, or just to "sit and relax."

Some respondents said that they spend their vacation with family around the country "...We go visit our families..." "...We always go back to our hometown in Michigan..."

Others prefer a "different" scenery, like mountains ("snowmobiling" "camping"). Sports activities like golfing and fishing were also popular. Cruising was presented as a relative new and exciting vacation activity. Some participants said that they prefer to go with groups ("...I went with groups of friends to Europe, New England, skiing...") An older woman said that she likes to take bus tours.

One participant mentioned that last year he had taken a vacation in Central Florida (Daytona Beach), but never enjoyed it because he "did not get a good value for his money."

2. Tourists and Convention delegates:

For out-of-state tourists the weather was an important factor of their vacation experience. This is quite understandable, since most of the tourists and convention delegates interviewed were from northern states.

They also liked to be involved in sports and other outdoor activities like swimming, golfing, camping, bird watching.

Others preferred to be involved with in "cultural" activities like theater, music (classical, opera), etc.

CENTRAL FLORIDA LEISURE ACTIVITIES (residents only):

The participants said that there are many things to do around Central Florida. They go to the beach, and are involved in sports activities like boating ("...we have seen so much by boat when we went to Silver Springs..."), parasailing, or deep sea fishing.

One group emphasized the available day trips that one can take around Central Florida ("...you can go to the coasts...Cypress Gardens...Mount Dora Canal...")

Some participants enjoy going to art shows, festivals, museums, rock concerts ("...there is a new place to see them: the Orlando Arena..."), and theater. Others prefer to visit the local attractions like Church Street ("...a unique situation in the United States, it's getting better and better..."), Sea World, Busch Gardens, Cypress Gardens, Boardwalk and Baseball ("...the best park for a person who lives here...") and EPCOT Center ("...we go to see the new pavilions...")

Although some of the participants said that they "...won't go near tourists..." some are interested in going to the newly developed hotels and "look them over or have lunch there..." or take part in their "activities."

One group emphasized the good value of an annual pass. ("...if you live in Central Florida you are silly not to have a yearly pass...they (the attractions) bring extra stars in the summer...you can go to the parks for dinner...")

CENTRAL FLORIDA ATTRACTIONS:

1. Local residents:

Most of the respondents resent the presence of tourists during season and visit the attractions at off times ("...we go in October...")

Some appreciated the great supply of the parks, but usually go to the parks with friends and relatives that come to visit. The majority of the respondents complained about the high prices of the parks. The high prices prevent many residents from attending the parks ("...I don't know how families manage...You have to pay \$100 to go through their door...They charge almost the same adult price as they charge a 3-year old...")

With regard to specific attractions, men seemed to favor "Boardwalk and Baseball" where ball games can be seen. Most of the respondents favored attractions like the "Florida Festival."

2. Tourists:

Tourists were familiar with Central Florida attractions. They mentioned EPCOT Center, the Magic Kingdom, Busch Gardens, Cypress Gardens, Kennedy Space Center, Sea World, Silver Springs, Wet N' Wild, and Gatorland Zoo.

Some tourists mentioned night entertainment at Church Street Station. Other referred to the factory outlet shopping malls as tourist attractions.

3. Convention delegates:

Most of the convention delegates were familiar with the Central Florida attractions, and some visited them as a convention group (EPCOT Center, Kennedy Space Center, Gatorland Zoo).

Some of the attractions offered an "extra" experience for large groups ("...we were taken to see EPCOT Center behind the scenes...all the mechanics..."). This experience, not shared by "regular tourists" may have increased the self-esteem and level of visiting satisfaction of some convention delegates.

PERCEPTION OF TRAIN RIDES IN GENERAL:

The conversation was directed into modes of transportation used when a vacation is taken. The majority of the participants (local residents and tourists alike) preferred the private car as a major mode of transportation ("I prefer the car because I have more freedom..."). However, some mentioned trains as an interesting way to travel.

Train ride was perceived a **luxury**, particularly on the west coast ("Eastern trains are not as luxurious as western trains..."). Some experienced train travelers suggested to take a compartment - "if you really want to enjoy the ride..."

Train ride was also perceived as a **good value for money** ("a good deal for students.")

Some participants mentioned the **old-fashioned trains** and recalled the era of World War II. Older participants shared their train ride experience in the past: "...The last time I took a train was fifty years ago..." an 84 year old women said: "I used to take the train to school everyday..."

The recreated old fashioned train ride was perceived as a **leisure** experience. Short rides between Orlando and Kissimmee and Jacksonville and "some destinations" in Georgia were mentioned. Some participants were familiar with "old fashioned train rides" in Colorado (Durango-Silverton?), West Virginia, Sault Ste. Marie, Massachusetts ("to go to the Cape"), Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kentucky (Chattanooga), Minneapolis and Duluth, and Scotland ("...You can take a 50-60 mile trip that will last four days..."). One tourist mentioned her recent experience with the Blue Train in South Africa.

One convention delegate shared his experience in detail with regard to an old-fashioned train ride in Atlanta. The train ride with is an attractions directed to local residents who want to see the mountains in the fall, "tourists who like to visit around Atlanta," and dinner rides during holiday seasons.

Train ride was also perceived as a **family experience** ("kids love trains...We always go to Church Street...I would like to take my grand children...")

One participant perceived the new attraction as a social leisure activity: "The train ride is an excuse to get people together...families, grandparents..." Another participants said: "...Amtrak new trains are very nice...You can walk around the trains and meet people..."

However, some participants perceived a train ride as a dangerous experience: "...because of the deterioration of the tracks...last time we rode we went through areas where we had to go about 5 miles an hour because the tracks were so bad..." Tourists and convention delegates also were concerned with the **safety** issue. The U.S. rail system was perceived to be old ("...they need to replace those old rails...old engineers..." "People are afraid to take them..." The rail system was also perceived to be too "unionized."

Riding on trains did not leave positive impressions among some people with regard to the **esthetic** condition of the trains: "The trains are not clean...the service is no good..." Some tourists added that "...the food is usually horrible..." In addition, while some participants perceived a train ride as a relaxing experience, some experienced **discomfort**: "...pretty rough rides...never smooth..."

Some tourists thought that taking a train is not a **convenient** experience: "...You still have to use ground transportation to get to the train station...it is time consuming and you have only one train a day...the stations are also located in depressed areas..."

Some convention delegates who traveled extensively said that the U.S. trains have "an image problem" mainly because they are compared to the European trains ("...Trains in Germany are a pleasure to take...they are a reliable form of transportation...") Another tourist mentioned the convenient rail service in foreign countries: ("...When you go overseas the trains are always there...connections are good...")

THE TRAIN RIDE ATTRACTION BETWEEN CHURCH STREET STATION AND MOUNT DORA:

A short slide-show was presented to the participants showing a turn-of-the-century steam train. The slides included photos of locomotives, cars, and interior decoration of train cars including dining compartments.

First Reaction to the idea:

1. Local residents:

The first reaction to the idea presented was "great idea" "super," "fantastic," "it will definitely go," however, the participants asked not to "commercialize" the new attraction. One participant even said: "...I'll give you 5-6 customers right away..." The train ride attraction was also perceived as a change of environment from Orlando's hassle and bustle."

2. Tourists and convention delegates:

This group was less enthusiastic after the description. They were very concerned with issues about the attraction like authenticity of the cars, accessibility to the train station, and so on.

Decor of the cars:

The participants suggested red velvet seats, chandeliers, "lots of English Rose Pattern." The decor should not be unified all over and "one car could have wicker furniture." Some participants reminded the importance of pull down shades for the windows.

Some participants said that the decor of "turn of the century" would be "too much antique" and suggested to emphasize decor of the 1930s and 1940s.

Tourists emphasized authenticity. "...We don't want to see too much Mickey Mouse...if it will be a mock-up it will take away the nostalgia..." Others were interested in an intimate atmosphere.

Entertainment on board:

Although some thought the train was "a good idea," they said that "the train ride alone won't be motivating to go...I would like to have some partying..." In addition, the entertainment component of the two-hour ride should be offered at the second part of the ride because the "...first hour passes quickly..."

The major recommendation of most participants was to offer different types of entertainment on different rides and on different days. Different trains should have different motifs or themes and each train should be named ("children car" "dinner car.") Some suggestion was made to offer different types of entertainment on different cars ("...a car for children, a car for yuppies...")

In addition, the participants asked to keep the entertainment "as it's suppose to be" - not "touristic." Some suggested to use "local talents."

Among the entertainment options, the respondents mentioned: Dixieland music, big band music of the 1920s and 1930s, piano player with sing-along type of entertainment, barbershop quartets, jukebox, music of the era, floating accordion, casino car (including slot machines), card playing, live comedy, bingo, old time motion picture on a large screen (Charlie Chaplin), or even show a movie "that is not shown in the movie houses around town."

Some people were concerned with the music to be performed on board. The convention delegates preferred background music so they could socialize with others ("I don't want to have the music right in my face...I am not going to be on a rock N' roll train...I get tired of hearing music for two hours...") Others said that brass music would be too loud on a train.

Some entertainment should be targeted for young children like magicians, clowns, cartoonists, "balloon makers," etc. The car should be designed appropriately. Other entertainment for children should include some educational aspects ("...teach them some history...")

Other entertainment options suggested by convention delegates included a reading car with newspapers and magazines from around the world or wine tasting, chamber music, and a mystery to be solved during the train ride. The winners will be presented with prizes. Some local residents also suggested to fill one car with hay and provide a "hay ride."

The option of "being robbed" was also discussed. The participants suggested to include on board an actor posing as a passenger that will rob the train. Other suggestions included Seminole Indians following the train with horses ("...in Michigan's **Cowboy City** they do it...On the Chicago-Rockford train-ride bandits come on board..."), or a stage coach going by. It was also important to some participants that the conductor be shot!

However, some tourists did not like the idea. They preferred the idea of getting social with others. Furthermore, some mentioned that this type of entertainment may not be accepted because "...some things (crime) happen in this area..." It was suggested that the "train robbery" ride will be offered a few times a week. This type of ride was perceived to be appealing to children.

Food and beverage on board:

The food issue was perceived to be very important: "I think you have to have food...People wouldn't like it if you don't have food..."

Some participants said that they would like to see a dining car on board, something like the old fashioned **dining cars** as seen in the slide presentation. Some suggested to offer a dining car only in the evening "...make it like a dinner cruise to enjoy and relax..." One group had an almost consensus that elegant dinner car would draw a big adult crowd ("...I like an excellent meal...") Others said that the actual trip is too short to call for a dining car.

The dinner car concept was also almost a consensus among convention delegates ("...If it was my money I would have only dinner rides...") They suggested that a dinner car should be available at nights only and cater for people who wish to have an elegant, quiet dinner experience. Some mentioned the ambience of a candle-light dinner aboard the train.

With regard to snacks on the train, local residents suggested "food of the era" like fried chicken, thick potato chips, ham sandwiches, old fashioned donuts, and New York style deli sandwiches. Other suggested snacks included hot dogs, pop corn, peanuts, and mugs of beer.

Tourists and convention delegates were concerned with the quality of the food ("...good tasty things...not sloppy Joe or hot dogs...If you offer sandwiches, it has to be good bread, chicken salad, turkey, roast beef...also good brownies, pies, and cookies...they should offer fruits too...). Some tourists were concerned with the hygiene of the food ("...you have to serve food that will not spoil...")

One tourist group suggested to serve a **speciality** dish that will be identified with the train ride, like triple decker sandwiches. A few specialities should be sufficient. Some suggestions were made with regard to food offerings of local cuisine. Another tourist group also mentioned gourmet coffees, ice cream ("make your own sundae"). A different group opposed the idea of "dripping ice creams" aboard a train.

Some local residents and tourists suggested that picnic lunches be sold on board to be consumed in Mount Dora. Others said that sandwiches could be sold by an attendant going through the cars with a basket.

Some raised a concern about the bar. "Will the bar be congested?" was a major issue. To solve this problem, some suggested an "airline bar" where an attendant will pass through with a rolling cart.

The Issue of children on board:

One group was concerned with the appeal of the attraction for children. One participant who was a veteran elementary school educator said: "...Kids will not be interested in a four-hour trip...it's too long...I don't know if I could keep them entertained..." Another tourist said: "...try to keep kids on a train for two hours...they would run around all the time..."

Others said that the turn-of-the century decor will not be appropriate for kids. One young participant said: "...as a kid I was always bored with subways and trains..."

The Mount Dora destination was also not perceived appropriate for kids: "...Mount Dora is great for adults but not for kids..."

Another tourist group found it necessary to include different cars for families and adults. ("...Parents tend to unload kids on vacation...this is not relaxing...children need their own place to play...")

Seating:

One participant was concerned whether assigned seating will be provided to the excursionists ("...will I have a seat or will it be mass attraction?...")

The general consensus of local residents was that assigned seating is important at any type of seat (window, smokers, families with children, groups etc.) The participants suggested not to overbook the train and to offer additional seating in the lounge area "as long as you can still come back to your original seat..." The concept of assigned seating was raised by only one resident group.

Tourists did not raise the issue of seating. Convention delegates, however, were concerned with assigned seating ("...I don't want to look at someone for two hours...I feel locked in and would like to move around the train...")

The idea of first class and economy class was rejected by both resident and tourists groups ("...it's too segregated...this is not a travel train. It's a fun train...")

Accessibility to the departure point of train ride:

Tourists and convention delegates were concerned with transportation from their hotels (International Drive, Kissimmee, Lake Buena Vista) to downtown Orlando. Shuttle service was perceived to be an important issue for this attraction. As one convention delegate mentioned: "If you want to promote this idea, you have to bus the delegates to downtown Orlando...To take a cab it will cost \$25..."

Some convention delegates suggested to have a departure point near the Lake Buena Vista area.

Some tourists were concerned with the attractiveness of the train station ("The Orlando train station looks like a greyhound bus station...")

Drivers were concerned with parking facilities in the downtown area.

Information about the ride:

Some participants suggested to provide the train riders with information about steam trains. It could be hanged on one of the car's walls, a "tour director" could say a few words shortly, or a pamphlet could be distributed with tickets.

Some information would also be sought about Mount Dora. ("...Let people know what is available there...what activities are there...")

Pricing of the train excursion:

1. Local residents:

The question of pricing came near the end of the discussion about the attraction's feature. The local residents were willing to spend between \$9.95 and \$30. The top figure that an informal consensus made was \$20 with a children discount of 50%.

The participants thought that \$30 was too expensive. For this sum they would expect to include some food. This price was also compared to a Disney's attraction admission price (\$28). The participants said that "...at Disney you can spend a whole day...you get more in those places..."

A different group was very reluctant to spend money on this type of attraction: "there is nothing to see, nothing to do...nothing to do in Mount Dora...you just look at the car..." The group suggested to keep prices down in order to draw business and some gave an example from Church Street Station increasing admission prices: "It used to be reasonable...The prices of these drinks are ridiculous...It's unbelievable now...I am embarrassed to take (out-of-town) people there...they charge for a sweater \$80-90 that can be bought elsewhere for \$30-40...We don't take our company there anymore..."

A consensus of pricing in that group was reached on the condition that the ride would include food. Some participants were willing to pay \$25 for dinner and ride ("...the meal has to be great for \$50 a couple") per person and about \$10-15 for a similar lunch-ride. Others were willing to pay \$5.95 for a buffet ride - the same price that many local restaurants charge. It is clear that for this particular group the actual train ride experience was not important and emphasis was put on good value for money for the food. Furthermore, younger participants whose annual income was not necessarily high were willing to pay more for this attraction than older participants.

2. Tourists:

The tourists also had the \$28 Disney admission price as a frame of reference ("You don't have the same entertainment as Disney...") In addition, some tourists compared train-ride fares around the country ("...it costs only \$6 from Boston to Hyannis).

The fares suggested by tourists ranged between \$15 and \$100 ("for a good ride") with an average of about \$25-30 for a round trip ride. It is important to mention that a price tag of \$40-50 did not cause a major concern with some tourists as long as there is "a good value for money."

Some tourists perceived a low price as an indicator of an inferior product: "If you make it too cheap it will not be exclusive...too many people will come..."

3. Convention delegates:

Convention delegates also referred to Disney's admission price ("...It's got to be less than that...Disney is your competition...") In general, convention delegates were willing to pay \$30 for the round-trip ride.

However, some were willing to pay \$40 for a four-hour entertainment ride that will be composed of the convention group.

The Mount Dora destination:

1. Local residents:

The train excursion to Mount Dora was perceived very favorably. All the local resident respondents were familiar with the town and said that they will "...definitely take the train ride to Mount Dora for its arts and crafts..." Others said that in Mount Dora they would "...walk and commune with nature..."

Some participants suggested that the success of the train excursion is conditioned with the organization of activities in Mount Dora ("...It's important to coordinate things around Mount Dora...things to do there..."

However, some said that they would not expect to be entertained in Mount Dora. Some suggested that the train ride should be coordinated with a steamboat ride in Mount Dora.

A different perception was evident in another group. Many of the participants thought that Mount Dora was not an exciting destination ("...What's in Mount Dora?...It's boring...There is nothing going there during the week..."). Mount Dora was perceived to be alive only during the week-ends when train rides "will be shuttled to the flea markets." The town was also perceived to "...close early in the evening...no nighttime entertainment..."

These participants also commented about the route to Mount Dora which is not necessarily scenic and suggested that the train ride will include multiple destinations like Sanford (stop over at the zoo), Daytona Beach, or Silver Springs. It appeared that if different destinations were chosen, the train ride would be more appealing: ("...There is something in Mount Dora that doesn't ring a bell for me...")

2. Tourists and convention delegates:

Tourists and convention delegates conditioned the appeal of the new attraction with activities at Mount Dora ("...something has to be at the other end of the ride...a picnic...bar-b-que...a dinner theater...a special restaurant...gambling")

Mount Dora as a tourists attraction was compared to the Disney competitive product: "You are here for four-five days and have Disney on your mind..."

Tourists and Convention delegates also thought that Mount Dora will not appeal to families: "I don't think it would be appealing to my kids...It doesn't have a feel for kids..."

Some convention delegates compared Mount Dora to similar quaint towns near their place of residence, and said that similar experiences can be found there ("...I have cute little antique towns in Illinois...My wife wouldn't even go...We have similar trains outside Toledo...").

One convention delegate said that Mount Dora might be appealing to **female spouses** of conventioners who might have an afternoon off.

Frequency of the train ride between Orlando and Mount Dora:

The local residents said that their frequency of riding the train will depend on their actual experience.

Some participants questioned the appeal of the attraction to call for frequent visits: ("...How many times can I go on the train?...(especially) if you are talking about only one destination?")

Their frequency will also depend on their expenses on board ("...if drinks will be \$5 we won't come back...")

Some said that they might go only once but will publicize the attraction among their tourist relatives.

Perceived potential market:

Many tourists conditioned their perception of market appeal with the price of the ride. The following potential markets were identified by the participants:

1. Groups.
2. Senior citizens ("...They even take a bus ride just for the fun of it...for nostalgia...").
3. Teenagers ("...parents will let them go...it's a safe environment for high school graduation parties...they may have never ridden a train before...")

4. Schools (educational purposes).
5. Dating couples.
6. Out-of-town visitors ("...we always have to take them somewhere...")
7. Business meetings (lunch, dinner)
One group said that the attraction will be appealing to young adults (ages 20-30).
8. Convention delegates: as a group experience, however not for more than "half a day." Also to hold meetings on board.

Some participants said that the train ride will not be appealing to European tourists "...because they have them all over..."

Competition with other Central Florida attractions:

Tourists and convention delegates were concerned with other Central Florida attractions that might appeal better. They said that they don't have enough time to see all the attractions, and consequently, the train ride will be appealing only to "people who come back for the third or fourth time... Some even added that Disney theme parks keep adding attractions and create a demand for even "old timers."

One convention delegate said: "...If I'm coming down to Orlando I come for Disney...I am not going to take a train ride to see antiques in the middle of Florida..."

For convention delegates, the available recreational facilities in their hotels were also a major competitive issue; "...If you spend \$100 or more on a hotel you have many facilities that you could use...You have to offer something very attractive to compete with them..."

The limited time available for sightseeing was a major concern and some tourists said that "if I have a few days to mess around I'll go there..."

Other issues raised by tourists and convention delegates:

1. How will you turn around the locomotive once it arrives in Mount Dora?
2. Environmental issue: pollution of a steam train ("Some people will sue you...")
3. Behavioral mode of the train riders ("...What type of people will be on the train ride...This is a nice hotel and I want the same kind of people to be with me on the train...")

THE LAKESIDE INN HOTEL (package deal concept):

The participants were shown slides of the Lakeside Inn hotel in Mount Dora. the slides included pictures from the various buildings, the lake, the swimming pool, the hotel's lobby area, dining room, bar, and a luxury accommodation room.

1. Local residents:

All the respondents liked the hotel concept ("it ties real well") and some even suggested a "draw that will tie in the train ride" like a horse and buggy from the train stop or a steam boat ride.

However, The participants said that this excursion will not be appealing to Central Florida residents. First, they would prefer driving there rather than taking the train ride ("what will I do with the luggage?"). The

participants also said that if they want to go to Mount Dora, it would be faster to go by car and "avoid downtown Orlando traffic."

In addition some argued that "locals do not stay in hotels near by..." The concept of staying overnight is linked to long distance travel far away from home.

Another concern that was raised was "will Mount Dora be commercialized?...Will they have another Wet N' Wild right away?"

With regard to pricing of the train package and a week-end at the Lakeside Inn, the participants were willing to pay \$150-200 per couple.

This price should include the train ride, accommodation for two for two nights, breakfasts and dinners. When one of the participants said that this price is unrealistic the majority of the participants said that "they can think of other things to do for \$500...that's a week in Daytona..."

It is important to note that the package deal was compared with other package deals taken by Central Florida residents. The participants raved about wonderful deals that were offered around the State ("Out of season you can get great deals...our vacation in Treasure Island was \$99 per person per week-end all meals included...In Daytona they almost give away rooms...")

Finally, most local residents said that this type of package will be suitable for tourists who will probably "buy it."

2. Tourists:

Some tourists, especially older "snow birds" liked the idea. They thought a night or two in the hotel "sounds very romantic."

One group of tourists were willing to pay \$250 for a two-night package (per couple, food excluded). A different group was willing to pay for the same package \$150. The tourists' hotel rate in Orlando was a frame of reference as to how much they were willing to spend.

Tourists mentioned that this package is not attractive for families: ("Children will not be interested in staying overnight...")

Tourists were concerned with available facilities in Mount Dora that will justify an overnight stay ("...good shopping...boat rides...")

3. Convention delegates:

Convention delegates said that in order to attract them to go and stay overnight in Mount Dora, a particular event or a festival will have to be offered ("I will be bored there out of my mind...")

In addition, convention delegates who come on a particular package would not like to have "two hotels rooms on one vacation...who wants to start packing again?"

Some convention delegates said that a gambling license would attract many to stay overnight at the hotel.

Since the Mount Dora overnight concept was not welcomed by the majority of convention delegates, the price of the package was not discussed.