

Steve Grzanich (host): There is a new report: international travel to the United States is down. And there is some concern about that moving forward. As a matter of fact, the latest report shows that travel, international travel inbound to the United States, has contracted again in July, falling nearly 1.2% -- the fourth month this year that international travel has tumbled to the United States. Joining us this morning is the CEO of the US Travel Association Roger Dow.

We mentioned those numbers going down four months this year that we've seen that happening, what's the reason for this?

Roger Dow: The biggest reason is the strength of the dollar -- we've seen this since 2015. Our dollar is so strong it is getting more expensive. Second reason: some weaker economies around the world. You are seeing that in South America, Latin America, parts of Europe. And the third is a great growth of low-cost fares in Europe, and Europe is on sale to go anywhere except the United States.

Steve Grzanich (host): Talk to us a little bit about how your organization wants to turn this around.

Roger Dow: One of the biggest things we want to do is, there's this thing called Brand USA, which doesn't cost taxpayers a dime and markets the United States with the travel industry, and people coming into the US pay into it. We need to get that reauthorized. It's a system where we can talk to everyone in the world through Brand USA, and it levels the playing field, and it's so important for areas like Chicago because it allows you to market Chicago around the world. So we really need to get that done. We need more Visa-Waiver countries. The Vice President just announced that Poland is going into the Visa-Waiver program, which would be great for Chicago.

Steve Grzanich (host): That makes it a lot easier for people to plan their trips and come without a problem. Is there a sense that there is a political atmosphere in the United States that is keeping people away as well?

Roger Dow: We are seeing some loud noise from the media around the world about the political atmosphere in the U.S., no question about it. However, our research shows that people separate politics and place. In other words, you and I would go to China, go to Russia, we're not so thrilled about their politics. But I think the administration could do a much better job of welcoming people -- send a welcome message. That's why we need Brand USA because we're getting the word out as an administration that we want security, and we all want security, but we also have to say welcome. Welcome all the good guys, no bad guys.

Steve Grzanich (host): As congress returns to work, I'm guessing you want this front and center, this reauthorization of Brand USA.

Roger Dow: It's our top priority, and we have gotten huge support from the Senate, over 100 members of congress for it, so it's just a matter of getting it on the docket and getting it done. This is a no-brainer, congress has to do it.

Steve Grzanich (host): Domestic travel is still doing pretty good, isn't it?

Roger Dow: Leisure has been holding up the travel economy for years. It's very strong; people are travelling, they are getting out there; business is good, a lot of meetings and conventions important to Chicago, that's all very good. But if we can fix this international piece, we'll continue to be on a roll. We have had 116 months of straight growth to the travel economy, and this blip of going down internationally is costly, and we've gotta fix it.

Steve Grzanich (host): Talk to us a little bit about some of those costs. There may be some lost revenue, but this may also be impacting jobs in the travel industry. How significant is that impact?

Roger Dow: Let me put it in perspective. We have gone up 1 or 2% in the last year in international. The problem is the world has gone up like 8%. In 2015 we had a share of the long-haul market of 13.7%. Last year we had 11.7%. It's, like, "okay 2% doesn't sound like that much." That's \$59 billion of the US economy, that's 120,000 jobs. All the talk about Amazon's 25,000 person headquarters, this is five Amazon headquarters. So this is crucial. It's a small amount, and a little tweaking here and there can bring a whole lot of jobs to the United States.

Steve Grzanich (host): Your message to congress and politicians would be what?

Roger Dow: Congress, this is a no-brainer, bipartisan issue. Get it done. Let's get the U.S. back on the international travel track again.