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## Becker's travel rivals Rocky's, but focus stays on SLC

Frequent flier » No protests, but freshman mayor piles up miles pushing city's agenda.

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If you thought Rocky Anderson bolted the Beehive State more than freshman Mayor Ralph Becker, you'd be right -- by three days.

By month's end, Becker's travel outside the Wasatch Front during his first year as Salt Lake City mayor will notch 96 days compared to 99 for his predecessor during the heyday of Anderson's pro-environment and anti-Bush rallies in 2006.

"It's certainly more travel than I would have anticipated," Becker said, recalling a campaign promise to have a "laserlike focus" on the city. "I don't think any of this is a distraction from or a diversion from that focus."

Delving deeper into the itinerary, differences surface between the two mayors' journeys and styles. Anderson's global treks frequently involved headline-popping environmental panels and awards, while Becker's trips almost exclusively entail low-profile municipal meetings on the city's dime. The six stops in his native Washington, D.C. -- Becker saved taxpayers money by staying with his mother or friends -- were considered key to court the beltway brass who will control the purse strings when President-elect Obama takes office. There also were getaways to Atlanta; Orlando, Fla; New York; Madison, Wis.; and New Orleans (twice) -- all for leadership or policy conferences.

Becker's 2008 calendar includes weekend road trips to hike the San Rafael Swell or to camp in southern Utah. Anderson's 2006 tally also had some personal leave -- an 11-day European vacation.

But if you toss in Becker's 24-day summer float trip down the Grand Canyon, his away time exceeds Anderson's by three weeks, according to a review of the mayors' travel logs.

Becker's lone foreign jaunt to (sister city) Matsumoto, Japan, then China in September was paid partially by the mayor's personal campaign fund.

Few, if any, are critical of Becker. City officials are convinced the travel will pay off for Utah's capital. And one key player -- the city's longtime D.C. lobbyist -- argues Becker isn't gone enough. If Len Simon had his way, the mayor would be in Washington every six weeks, at least.

"He could come to Washington even more," Simon said. "It was absolutely essential for the mayor to establish himself as someone who would be vigorous and active in setting the city's agenda."

J.T. Martin, a city councilman who took office the same day as Becker, calls the mayor a workaholic whose trips already have produced "great information, great networking."

"It's kind of surprised him how much he's traveled," Martin said. "But if you want to be innovative, progressive, cutting edge, you've got to get out of your own sandbox."

Becker, whose workload is inching toward Anderson's robust schedule, labors many evenings and most weekends. For every drive to the airport, Becker made many more field trips, often on foot, to every neighborhood in the city and even logged multiple bridge-building missions to Davis County.

What's more, the mayor's office notes the boss turned down nearly as many trips as he took -- including Salt Lake City's inaugural direct flight to Paris and a European swing to tour transit sites with the Utah Transit Authority.

Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah, says taxpayers should wait two years before deciding whether a mayor's travel is excessive.

"The first year in office there may be a lot of relationships, especially D.C. trips, that are absolutely critical," he said.

"He's made a lot of trips he feels are important to move the city forward."

But what about three weeks of carving the Colorado River white water in the Grand Canyon?

Becker says that one included plenty of soul-searching and second-guessing. At the same time, he and his family had waited 15 years to draw the permit.

"I thought, 'This is really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,'" said the mayor, who packed a satellite phone just in case. The fact Becker can get away on some excursions to rejuvenate is "commendable," according to City Councilman Carlton Christensen.

"The mayor, more so than any official in the state, [his] job never really ends," Christensen said. "He's been there for all the really key elements. I've never felt like any of the trips were junkets."

Much of the schedule is common fare. Becker hit a U.S. Conference of Mayors function in January and a National League of Cities conference in November. He also eyeballed trolley cars in Portland, Seattle and Vancouver (with a large city contingent), and was one of four mayors selected for a look at sustainability practices in China. Each time, Becker carried a BlackBerry, regularly returning staff and reporters' calls.

On two weekday trips, to New Orleans and New York, Becker purposely worked a full day, caught a red eye that night, then returned the next day.

"I will travel at the end of the day, or the beginning, to avoid missing work," he said, noting much of his downtime still is consumed by catching up on official e-mail.

Angie Vorher, chairwoman of the Jordan Meadows Community Council, shrugs off the fact a mayoral meeting had to be rescheduled to accommodate Becker's journey to Japan.

"He has an open ear for us," she said. "I feel I can go to him and talk to him when it comes to issues on the west side."

Key on her wish list: Lure more business west of the freeway.

On other fronts, Becker says much of his Washington travel already has paid dividends. He points to federal cash for the Fisher Mansion, Jordan River trails, bikeways and the proposed Sugar House streetcar. Becker also snatched \$1 million more for a Homeland Security grant and shored up funding for the airport TRAX line.

Anderson made similar solicitations in Washington and attended his share of mayoral conferences. He trumpeted his more unconventional trips (paid by private donors) as a way to dispel myths about Salt Lake City and enhance its image.

Besides working with Utah's delegation, Simon notes, Becker has had valuable face time with transportation honchos and congressional leaders connected to the progressive elements of Obama's envisioned economic-stimulus program.

"I wanted him to start relating to the new leaders in Congress," Simon said, "and also for them to know there was someone out there in Salt Lake, 2,000 miles away, who will be a leader on these things."

And there may be more frequent Washington tours, especially considering Becker is one of a handful of mayors who already has written Obama's new Office of Urban Policy.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there are more based on White House invitations," Simon added. "This is shaping up to be an all-star Cabinet. I need him in D.C. to be establishing relationships."

Becker is planning to be at Obama's inauguration followed by another flight to the nation's capital in February. He says there shouldn't be more overall travel in future years, but concedes it could be about the same.

"I certainly intend to be active, especially with D.C. trips to help the city," Becker said. "There's some people who would say if I ever left the city, that would be wrong. It's one of the things I weigh every time."

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