

Economic Development Insight

Developing Tourism

By Joan Bethell

We know that tourism has the potential to be very lucrative, abounds in entrepreneurial opportunities and adds diversity to the local economic base, thereby making it more balanced and stable. Now we need to determine how best to approach the development of this entire, complex industry.

We know we want to maintain the natural environment and quality of life that traditionally has been enjoyed while, at the same time, take advantage of our community's existing resources. These range from the natural environment, historic and cultural attractions and traditions, to specifically-developed entertainment events.

As in any endeavor, there are pros and cons. Tourism creates new jobs and businesses, and draws in new dollars from outside the community for existing businesses. Most of the dollars generated from outside visitors stay within the local economy and visitors contribute to the tax revenues collected. This increase to the tax base supports existing community services and can influence the quality of life by financing community facilities, such as swimming pools, park facilities and golf courses, plus the increased sales generated creates indirect benefits, such as attracting new restaurants, hotels and shopping facilities.

Frequently, tourism can be accommodated with relatively few additional demands on local services. Indirect benefits may also include increased land values, plus events designed for tourists can also serve local residents. For those visitors looking to relocate, the more pleasant the visit, the more likely they are to become a permanent resident. Also, a community that provides high quality services and recreational resources is more attractive to potential industries.

On the downside, tourism is only for communities that have, or are willing to develop and maintain, the resources, amenities or attractions that would draw visitors, can sometimes involve major investments in improving infrastructure, and periodically increases congestion and, potentially, crime. Industry development may also incur additional costs for surveys, impact analyses, insurance, business development, operations and promotions. Just like any business endeavor, you have to spend some money to make more.

Tourism creates varied opportunities for visitors to enjoy new or educational experiences and hospitality services that focus on a real or perceived rural way of life. Currently, many people come to Greene County to visit friends and relatives. Other reasons people may visit include business trips or attending conventions (WestGate@Crane will stimulate more of this), attractions like Goose Pond, sight-seeing and visiting historic attractions, attending a special event, participating in a sporting event, and passing through en route to another location.

Managing natural, financial and human resources is an important part of tourism development so, since the tourism industry development was identified as one of Greene County's top three priorities, GCEDC formed the Greene County Chamber Coalition with representatives from

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around the county. This group, with other community partners, has conducted an inventory of the things we have to offer to tourists by identifying our existing resources, attractions and events.

During the initial phase, we developed our brand image that symbolizes our uniqueness and what distinguishes us from all other communities. (By the way, this symbol is available through GCEDC to any organization that is promoting Greene County.) Then we focused on encouraging our existing visitors to travel around the county by designing a touring path on paved roads, interspersed with directions to various attractions. This was translated into a tri-fold handout complete with map and information about the attractions. To support the handout, temporary wayfarer signs using the Greene County brand image and directional arrows. Utilities District of Western Indiana REMC was gracious enough to allow us to place the signs in their utility easements, in time for the 2008 tourism season, Spring through Fall. We will be checking the status of these signs and using them through the 2009 season, in hopes of securing public and private funding for more permanent signage in time for the 2010 season.



Now, as we have completed all of the Phase I activities, before we move forward to the next phase, we need to engage in more strategic community conversations, review our priorities, lift our sights to regional collaboration, and identify which agencies or groups of individuals will lead the development efforts in each tourism sector.

It's not a matter of *if* we do tourism, but *how* we do it. Can Greene County and the surrounding region practice tourism in a way that benefits residents as much as visitors, the environment as much as the economy, local businesses as much as industries we want to attract? The place-based tourism approach argues that these goals can be accomplished by making the 'place' itself, rather than just an event or isolated experience, the primary attraction. In doing so, the community becomes the 'product,' with the process being one of product development, not the historic approach of destination marketing.

To be successful, this process requires the input of the community at large. The Greene County Chamber Coalition invites all who are interested in being a part of the upcoming activities, in other words, anyone who has an interest in any facet related to tourism, to register by contacting GCEDC.

Joan Bethell is the executive director at Greene County Economic Development Corporation and can be reached at (812) 847-4500 or jbethell@gcedc.us.