

Economic Development Insight

Downtowns and Tourism

By Joan Bethell

Last week's article stated, "Before we move forward to the next phase in developing this very diverse industry, 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."

As we develop the tourism industry, each Greene County community, whether incorporated or unincorporated, has to determine to what degree it wants to court outside visitors and how much effort its citizens are willing to work to make that happen. Most have an event or events that they sponsor on an annual basis. The Greene County Chamber Coalition is currently seeking information on the dates and details for 2009. This information will be developed into a second visitor handout, in addition to the map and ongoing attractions handout that was developed last year. The information will also be posted online at www.gcedc.us/visitors.

The next consideration is the 'flavor' of a community, which is primarily determined by its downtown area. According to Roger Brooks of Destination Development, Inc., (DDI) an organization dedicated to helping communities to plan, brand and market itself, "The health of a community can instantly be portrayed by the vitality of its downtown. It is the litmus test for all your economic development efforts – both tourism and non-tourism. Downtown provides that all-important first impression of the community."

We know from the 2006 Shifflet study spoken of in the first tourism article (two weeks ago), that dining, shopping, entertainment and sightseeing are the top activities for visitors. DDI further states that "The average visitor is active 14 hours a day, yet they only spend four to six hours with the primary activity that brought them there. Then they spend eight to ten hours with diversionary, or secondary, activities. Diversionary activities are things they could do closer to home but will do while in town;" and, "Secondary activities are where 80% of all visitor spending takes place ... 70% of which takes place after 6:00 p.m." (More info and ideas on tourism development can be found on DDI website at: www.destinationdevelopment.com.)

Obviously, one of our next steps is to critically assess our downtown areas from the perspective of the tourist. If our downtown isn't a place we hang out in, especially after 6:00 p.m., then visitors aren't going to find it appealing either. "They want to be in a lively, thriving environment. If downtown has the activities and attractions to draw residents, visitors will want to go there too." (DDI)

This is not just a matter of having places to go to eat, shop, be entertained and sightsee, it also involves merchant training and preparation, so that each vendor is comfortable being a primary ambassador for the community. Every merchant and their staff need to know what's going on, where it is, how to get there and is able to effectively yet unobtrusively track visitors. The latter providing the information necessary for the community to continually improve the visitor experience and to evaluate the impacts. This applies to those "non-tourist" merchants like

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pharmacies and grocery stores, too. In other words, any place a visitor may go to while they're here.

Also, the visitor handouts will need to be produced in sufficient quantities that every merchant has an appropriate supply, with a greater supply being available to those vendors involved directly in tourism activities, such as destinations, accommodations, eateries, etc.

Finally, we need to give visitors as many opportunities as possible to spend, both while they're here and even after they return home. A Greene County products catalog is another essential handout that needs to be developed.

As I've said before, to be successful, this process requires the input of the community at large. If you have any interest in any aspect of tourism, please contact the Chamber Coalition through GCEDC.

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