

2013 McHenry County Destination Assessment

Performed by



ZeitgeistConsulting.com

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CONTENTS

Introduction 2

Overarching Impressions 3

Community-Specific Observations 9

Destination Recommendations 23

Addendum One: The State of the American Traveler 30

Introduction

During the Spring of 2013, Zeitgeist Consulting was engaged by the McHenry County Convention & Visitors Bureau to perform a Destination Assessment of the county in order to identify primary visitor attractions as well as areas for enhancement to make the area a more compelling choice for consumers seeking a travel experience.

Zeitgeist representatives toured McHenry County April 5-7, 2013, recording their impressions of the destination from an outsider's viewpoint. To be sure, our destination reviewers did not stop at every business, hotel or attraction in the destination. They utilized the CVB's Visitors Guide and other collateral materials obtained from the Bureau to make their way through the region as first time visitors. And, of course, given their visit was made during the month of April, they were unable to experience several facets of the destination that are only available during warm weather months. But, they saw and experienced as much as they could during their time in-market.

No community should take offense to our comments...unless it has been actively targeting a visitor economy. Communities are built for residents. With thoughtfulness, imagination and creativity, they can be both a place for a great Quality of Life and an interesting destination for visitors. We make these recommendations for enhancements to your communities with the understanding that the visitor economy is the rising tide that raises all boats...if done selectively with sensitivity to the culture of the community.

We would like to thank Executive Director Jaki Berggren and Laura Witlox Middaugh and the Board of Directors of the McHenry County CVB for their assistance in providing background and visitor-related materials for our visit and analysis. We also wish to thank the many public and community officials that made time for us to share their visions of the future of McHenry County.

Our findings and recommendations follow.

Overarching Impressions

McHENRY COUNTY AS A DESTINATION. It's about Location and Diversity. McHenry County's proximity to Chicagoland, Rockford and Wisconsin positions it as an attractive choice as a drive destination for weekend getaways. It's dual persona as suburban and rural offers a rich diversity of experience that few destinations can offer consumers. At the same time, that diversity makes marketing the destination more difficult than competing regions that are known for a single type of experience.

In its most recent "State of the American Traveler" study, Destination Analysts identified the top activities sought by consumers considering their getaways. McHenry County possesses 9 of the Top Ten and 17 of the Top 20 (see the report as an addendum of this document).

McHenry County is a bevy of contradictions...but that diversity of experience may just be the ticket to become one of the more interesting getaway destinations in the Midwest.

WAYFINDING SIGNAGE. Finding one's way around McHenry County can be both frustrating and easy, depending upon where one finds themselves and what they are searching for. Some sections of the destination are exceptionally well signed with the official blue and brown highway markers that consumers have come to easily recognize since their introduction on Illinois Highways in the 1980s.

Within some municipalities, however, wayfinding can be a maddening process, as there is a lack of uniformity from community to community. Crystal Lake uses two formats in its directional signage (yellow and white) while Harvard's are green and Woodstock's red.



When signage was available, it was generally easy to understand and follow with a couple notable exceptions. In some communities, placement of signage was too close to an intersection for a motorist in another lane to make the necessary turn. And, in one instance on Route 176 heading west, there is signage indicating that Woodstock, Marengo and Union are ahead. However, when the visitor comes to a “T” intersection at which they must make a decision, there is only directional signage for Marengo and Woodstock. Clearly, as some of the county’s largest attractions have Union addresses, this needs to be addressed.

TRAFFIC & THOROUGHFARES. In the urbanized portions of the county, our reviewers were often frustrated by the sheer amount of traffic they encountered. While we understand the constraints of local and state government funding for transportation enhancement, it’s clear that many of the county’s thoroughfares were never designed to accommodate as many vehicles as now clog these roads. Our reviewers were also surprised at the level of litter (including a discarded mattress) they found along major thoroughfares, especially in the eastern parts of the county.

THE PRAIRIE TRAIL. Connecting eight McHenry County communities, the sensational 26-mile portion of the Illinois Prairie Trail in McHenry County connects outdoor recreationalists to over 100 miles of additional trails, such as the Hebron Trail, the Fox River Trail, the Great Western Trail and the Illinois Prairie Path. In addition, it offers an amazingly diverse set of ecological, nature and recreational experiences, including Glacial Park, Larsen Prairie and Sterne’s Woods. Without brochure or mobile wayfinding services, Trail Heads in Algonquin, McHenry and Ringwood were difficult for our reviewers to find. But, once on the trails, they were first rate.



TOURNAMENT GRADE FACILITIES. Our Team was extremely impressed with the number and configuration of sports complexes throughout the county. Of special note, Lippold and Tamaso are ideally designed to host state and regional tournaments.

The 310 acre Lippold Park was especially impressive with eight baseball fields, four softball fields with synthetic turf infields, nine irrigated soccer fields, three football fields, sand volleyball courts and acres of “soft” recreation area for participants, families and fans between games.



However, in our discussions with Parks and Recreation officials, there appears to be a culture of “resident-first” tournament availability. Despite stating that they have an interest in hosting outside events, many facilities are already booked with local tournaments that draw few overnight teams.

LODGING. For its population, corporate base and number of attractions, McHenry County has a surprising lack of hotel rooms. Between eleven hotels and six Bed & Breakfast locations, the destination only boasts 1,000 rooms, which places the destination at a disadvantage for maximizing the impact of large events it can host. Indeed, neighboring Lake County offers over 8,000 hotel rooms and the Chicago Northwest region claims 9,000.

Thus, instead of capturing the lion’s share of the visitor spending that accompanies large events and tournaments, McHenry County will be limited to the number of overnight guests it can maximize from efforts to land such events, which is often an expectation of Destination Marketing Organizations (CVBs). This reality suggests that McHenry County’s strategy for enhancing the impact of the Visitor Economy is best focused on smaller events and positioning itself as a great getaway for couples and families.



The largest of the destination’s hotels is also its only full-service property. The Holiday Inn in Crystal Lake also features 20,000 sq. ft. of meeting space.

RECLAMATION OPPORTUNITIES. One of the region's playful nicknames is the "Gravel Pit Capital of America," thanks to the large number of excavations in the southeastern part of the County. One of those sites has recently been transformed into the sensational Three Oaks Recreation Area. And, as the remnants of the glacial till are almost exhausted, more of these sites will be available to be transformed into lakes. We encourage communities with these assets to not only reclaim these sites but also the region's heritage of being a summer getaway destination by encouraging the development of a resort on at least one of them.



AGRI-TOURISM. Agricultural tourism (or Agri-tourism) is a strategy employed in many parts of the world to improve and diversify the incomes and economic viability of farmers, producers and rural communities. Agri-tourism is defined as any business conducted by a farmer or producer for the enjoyment or education of the public, to promote the products of the farm and to generate additional farm income. It includes a variety of facilities and activities, such as agricultural festivals, farm or property visits, farm tours, demonstration farms, farm stays, farm product sales, wineries, nursery trails and agricultural museums. Combining the large tourism industry with the uniqueness and diversity of local agriculture also provides additional reasons for tourists to visit a locale that does not boast traditional tourist attractions.

Despite performing our assessment out of season, our reviewers were extremely impressed with the number, size and diversity of McHenry County's agri-tourism assets. From the Big Oak of Royal Oaks Farm Orchard to the maze at Richardson Adventure Farm to the sheep and chickens at Grace Farm Studios, the eclectic mix of assets in the genre will be extremely attractive to the visitor looking for authentic agricultural and culinary experiences.



ARTS, MUSIC & CULTURE. While there is an Arts and Culture component to the destination, it does not predominate McHenry County's visitor asset base. As often occurs in communities that are in the shadow of a major metropolitan city, the arts and culture of surrounding communities, with some notable exceptions, are designed more with residents in mind than visitors.

That said, the Woodstock Opera House and the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake bring eclectic performances to the destination that, in some cases, would encourage some visitors to extend their stay to include a hotel stay and dinner. Events such as the Folk Festival, Jazz on the Square and the Mozart Festival also attract visitors from throughout the region.

As to Cultural Heritage, the Dole Mansion at the Lakeside Legacy Arts Park in Crystal Lake and the Powers-Walker House appeared to our reviewers as the primary facility draws for the destination. And, while they are open to the public, both only offer interpretive programming on a limited schedule. Thus, unless the visitor has planned ahead to visit these attractions, chances are that they will be disappointed upon arrival. The cultural offerings in McHenry County seem to be more focused within the region's festivals and events calendar.



EQUESTRIAN-TOURISM. In our conversations with local leaders, we learned that McHenry County boasts one of the highest number of horses and equestrian facilities of any county in the nation. And, if the miles and miles of ubiquitous white fence is any indication, that is certainly the case.

While the interest in equestrian pursuits is somewhat limited (not unlike golf), those that are interested in the sport are passionate about their affinity. Thus, equestrianism would seem to be a logical extension for a DMO with limited hotel availability. The McHenry County CVB should enter into discussions with the equestrian industry beyond the Paddock Hills Equestrian Center (which already welcomes visitors) in the region to ascertain whether there is the same interest in opening their gates to visitors as has been seen in the agri-tourism market.

ANTIQUING. Many of the communities our Team visited boasted at least one (and, in most cases, several) antique stores. And, while we didn't access the State's database of antique stores to verify our supposition, it certainly feels as if the highest concentration of antiques in the Chicago Metro is centered in Lake and McHenry Counties. This positioning should be considered as a "call-out" for both counties to market themselves as different from other destinations in the Chicagoland Area.

DESTINATION MARKETING. While more of an Organizational issue than a Destination issue, the limitations of the the McHenry County CVB's promotional budget exacerbate some of the issues noted in this report. At only \$350,000, the destination is being dwarfed by Visit Lake County (\$1.4 million), Chicago Northwest (\$1.4 million), Chicago's North Shore (\$1.2 million), Chicago Southland (\$1.4 million), Indiana's South Shore (\$4 million) and Rockford (\$3 million).

While each of these regions have more hotel inventory from which to derive Hotel/Motel Tax revenue to power their destination marketing programs, that doesn't mitigate the fact that the MCCVB is getting outgunned in the marketplace. Indeed, a large part of the problem is that the municipalities collecting the Hotel/Motel Tax are investing a very small percentage of the revenues back into the very reason the Tax was established in the first place.

While each municipality has every right to utilize the revenues it collects as it sees fit, the re-investment of Hotel/Motel Tax to generate even more taxes for municipal needs is among the lowest we have seen around the country. Of the hundreds of thousands of dollars of Hotel Tax being collected by municipalities, McHenry invests only \$12,000, Woodstock only \$10,000, Richmond \$2,000 and Harvard and Algonquin not a dime in their Destination Marketing Organization. Crystal Lake, which generates hundreds of thousands of dollars in Hotel Tax, has recently increased its investment into its DMO to \$4,000 (and, just this year, added \$9,000 to support an event).

Of course, the belief that the only avenue for government to invest in its Local Visitor Economy is through Hotel Tax is fallacious. If it's in the best interests of the municipality, it doesn't matter which revenue stream funds the strategy by which the community increases visitor spending. Indeed, some McHenry County municipalities that do not have a revenue stream from Hotel Tax are investing in the CVB...but at extremely low levels. The combined investment of Lakewood and Lake in the Hills is well under \$5,000. Regardless of where the tax revenues come from, if communities value the economic impact that visitors offer, these investment levels need to increase substantially.

Community-Specific Observations

ALGONQUIN

Home to a wealth of both major name retailers and independent shops, Algonquin is one of the fastest growing communities in McHenry County. It is also home to one of the destination's top motorcoach attractions, the sensational Port Edward restaurant.

Algonquin has become a major center of retail activity and a growing business center. Additionally, the village continues to see considerable residential growth. In wake of the growth, the village has had to deal with challenges such as traffic congestion and overburdened schools. In spite of this, the Village has managed to grow its commercial tax base, preserve its character and history and substantially increase its recreational offerings.



Our reviewers were visually attracted to the quaint, well lighted downtown, gazebo, riverwalk and Riverside Park especially around the bridge at Route 31. Port Edward is clearly a focal point for the destination on the McHenry County side of the geo-political boundary that Algonquin shares with Kane County. And, the urbanized shopping and dining options on Randall Road are easy to access.

Traffic, as with many of the urbanized communities we visited, is a challenge, turning the experience into a chore rather than an experience to be savored. Welcome signage is uninspired, though signage for the Old Town District is well done.

CARY

Centered around the Rail Stop, Cary's downtown is reasonably compact with some independent retail and dining options. Tracks is the type of restaurant/nightspot upon which foodies would build a portion of their itinerary. With its multiple awards for "Best Burger" in both the County and region and 25 gourmet burgers, Tracks is a magnet for the destination.

Some ecologists classify the Main Street Prairie as one of the best in McHenry County. The park's nearly 70 acres offer many walking trails and it's one of the community's leading attractions.



CRYSTAL LAKE

Named for the lake within its boundaries, Crystal Lake is the largest municipality in McHenry County and offers a mix of big box retail and dining along Route 14, as well as independent offerings throughout the city.

Among the city's primary sites of interest is the recently revitalized historic downtown district, home to many small specialty shops and businesses. Also located in the downtown district is the historic Raue Center for the Performing Arts, which seats 750 and presents plays and hosts concerts throughout the year.

McHenry County is blessed with sensational parks...and Crystal Lake's Lippold Park is not only a fabulous asset for residents but for sports tournaments, as well. This 310 acre mixed-use park features eight baseball fields, four synthetic turf infield softball fields, nine irrigated soccer fields, three football fields and sand volleyball courts.



Crystal Lake's newest destination attraction is the Three Oaks Recreational Area, a jewel of a facility that boasts rowboats, canoes, kayaks, sailboats, and paddleboats from a rental marina. A grass picnic area and various overlooks provide patrons with breathtaking views of the water and lake islands, in addition to great fishing opportunities. Three Oaks also offers hiking trails, a beach, a playground/spray park and a concessions area. One of the advantages to the facility is its ease of access right off Route 14. And, while one of the most heavily travelled thoroughfares in the region, visitors to Three Oaks would be hard pressed not to feel that they have been transported into the country.

The revitalized Downtown is very compact, with only a few non-visitor economy storefronts, making this the premier walking destination for retail and dining pursuits. The Raue Center for the Arts adds an arts and culture feather to the destination and the location along the Metra makes Downtown a perfect daytrip for Chicagoans. We were also happy to see a spark of life on the other side of the tracks as a burgeoning district is gaining its footing with restaurants such as Duke's Alehouse, a spa and cycle shops.



Crystal Lake itself is a community jewel, but Main Beach has fairly limited public access. The majority of its shoreline appears to be residential in nature and, thus, the Lake is not a significant visitor attraction (as we're sure residents would rather it not be). The neighboring Dole Mansion at the Lakeside Legacy Arts Park is a jewel that the community should be proud to have saved. From the Lakeside Fest to an increasing number of internationally known artists performing in the Listening Room, this attraction is becoming a welcome addition to the cultural side of the destination.

As one of the fastest growing communities in the county, the existing roadways are often clogged and traffic can be frustrating. Inconsistent and irrationally located directional signage on major thoroughfares compounds the difficulty for visitors to traverse the city. Crystal Lake directional signage is deployed in two varieties. What appears to be the original attempt at signage are individual yellow signs, directing motorists to points of interest off main thoroughfares. These signs are so difficult to locate that one of our experienced assessors (who is trained to look for such signage) didn't see it until his third day and sixth pass. Placement of signs is after the intersection and often on wrong side of street.

In the example at right, the yellow directional signs (barely visible under the Citgo sign) for Downtown, City Hall and the Lake are on the opposite side of the street from the intended driver. Even if they could be easily read from across five lanes, this placement calls for an action at that very intersection, giving motorists in the right lane no time to make the turn.

The other signage style appears to be related to the historic downtown district. These larger installations are white and list all pertinent points of interest on a single sign. These are the best designed and located signs in the community and the style, format and size should probably be extended throughout the municipality. However, the white signs on Route 14 directing motorists to the downtown simply say “Downtown.” As many communities in the eastern portion of the county flow together, these signs should communicate to which downtown the community is referring.

Signage to Lippold Park and the Three Oaks Recreational Area, while present, is often hard to discover in the mass of traffic and development along adjoining roads. In addition, welcome signage at entryways into the community appears weathered and uninspired.



FOX RIVER GROVE

Primarily a residential community, Fox River Grove boasts one of the more unusual architectural structures and attractions in McHenry County. Construction of Bettendorf Castle began in 1931, the brainchild of Theodore Bettendorf, who continued adding to the building until his death in 1967. Featuring eight towers, the structure today serves as its owners' residence and is only open for scheduled group tours.



HARVARD

Home to Milk Days at (where else) Milky Way Park, Harvard boasts an attractive Downtown and the proudest welcome sign in the county (though another is one of the most dated). Its directional signage, like that in Crystal Lake, comes in different styles and colors and is often placed too close to the intersection for some motorists to be able to make the turn. However, this is mitigated on the approach to Downtown on Route 173 by the fact that there are three consecutive access points to Downtown so that motorists can turn at the second and third signs, after missing the turn with the first sign. Directional signage to the attractive Historical Harvard Museum was well placed, despite the facility only being open by appointment.



Our reviewers saw significant potential for another great downtown magnet in its clean architectural design and layout. We were especially intrigued by the refurbished warehouses that are now serving as incubators for small businesses (especially the Starline Factory). Currently, however, there are too many storefronts offering residential services (e.g., dog grooming, CPA, chiropractor, etc.) for there to be a critical mass for Harvard to be a compact, walking destination for shoppers. The recently completed \$1.8 million streetscape project downtown was a wonderful shot in the arm for downtown that should attract additional entrepreneurship to the community.

Just outside of Harvard is the eclectic RavenStone Castle. Part Bed & Breakfast and part event facility, its curb appeal is diminished somewhat with the “No Trespassing” signs at the entrance. Our reviewers understand that attempting to merge a family residence with a business is a challenge to privacy. However, the Castle could be so much more than it is by making the entrance more appealing and staging events that have a direct tie-in to the period, such “Game of Thrones”-themed functions.

HEBRON

A community that is clearly proud of its basketball heritage, Hebron boasts a compact, walkable Downtown with at least four antique shops within a few blocks. A number of eateries dot the community along with miniature basketball hoops on power poles and a water tower painted to resemble a basketball in commemoration of the High School’s 1952 overtime win in the State Championships.

With all due respect to being the smallest school to ever win the Title, that it was over 60 years ago means that additional interpretation is needed for it to be meaningful to today’s visitors. The community should look to establish an interactive attraction that celebrates this feat...and attempt to build upon its status as an antiquing destination.



HUNTLEY

A rapidly growing community that straddles the McHenry and Kane County line, Huntley's population has more than tripled in the past decade. Much of this has been driven by an aggressive economic development strategy and the location of the 50-store Prime Outlets Mall and the Sun City retirement community. An additional ramp onto I-90 is sure to fuel even further growth for the municipality.

Most of the retail and dining growth has centered on the Route 47 corridor. Huntley's downtown area, along Main Street (just east of Route 47) includes several shops, restaurants, bars and the village's signature gazebo. Welcome signage is generally small and understated, belying the community's size.

Like Crystal Lake, Huntley is able to host large tournaments at Tomaso Sports Park. Featuring multiple ballfields, basketball and tennis courts and the Community Recreational Center, the facility can host events year 'round.



LAKE IN THE HILLS

Once a sleepy lakeside village of cottages and small ranches, Lake in the Hills experienced a nearly 400% growth in population during the 1990s as the community became a favorite for residential developers. The community includes the northern edge of the Randall Road corridor and boasts a broad number of chain retail and restaurant choices.

Outside of a handful a community-based festivals (such as the Summer Sunset Festival and the Rockin' Rotary Ribfest), its primary visitor draw is the Lake in the Hills Airport, which averages just under 100 private flights a day.



LAKEWOOD

Sharing much of its border with neighboring Crystal Lake, the upscale Village of Lakewood boasts a couple golf courses, several nature areas and a number of mostly private beaches. The Village primarily views itself as a residential community, intent on developing retail, light commercial and office space at the Route 47 and 176 intersection in order to develop tax revenues to help offset residential taxes. One of the first retail acquisitions for the community is the first Lou Malnati's restaurant in McHenry County (a Chicagoland institution for over 40 years).



MARENGO

The City of Marengo is home to the Marengo Ridge Conservation Area, featuring a 3 mile trail loop and multiple shelters. It is also an Illinois Main Street Community and boasts a quaint historic downtown district. The welcome signage has seen better days, but promotes the annual Settlers' Days celebration (when the landscaping is pruned). A Historical Marker sign on Route 23 directs visitors onto a side street...but no further signage is apparent to lead people to the site, if one actually exists.

The Disc Golf Course at Indian Oakes Park is garnering some fairly positive online reviews, despite being a relatively new and developing facility.



McHENRY

Located along the Fox River, the City of McHenry is at the intersection of two major arteries and boasts two of the county's hotels; a Hampton Inn and a Super 8. The urban core of McHenry is a work in progress, as the City is progressing on the development of a Riverwalk and actively revitalizing its three downtown districts. All three offer a mix of quaint specialty retail shops and restaurants, as well as service-oriented businesses. While, none of the districts can yet be classified as walkable visitor magnets, the potential is certainly on the horizon.

From a visitor perspective, Stade's Farm Market and Orchard (just outside of the city) is one of the community's primary attractions. Stade's has embraced agri-tourism as a way to not only increase profitability but to provide people with an opportunity to witness a working farm in action.



One of the challenges for any visitor destination is identifying ways to encourage people to spend the night. Especially with the lack of nightlife in the county, Saturday night stays are often difficult. However, a Sunday morning event works just as well to encourage visitors to spend the night. Stade's hosts a unique outdoor experience every Sunday morning, Memorial Day weekend through the end of October with non-denominational contemporary Christian worship in the beautiful outdoors, surrounded by miles of nature.

Another opportunity to capture overnight business for the county's hotels that is somewhat related to the nostalgic feel of Stade's is the McHenry Outdoor Theatre. One of only 12 remaining drive-in movie theaters in Illinois (and only 6 in the Chicago Metro), this facility has the potential, if marketed properly, to be the perfect complement to a day of family fun in the County. Movie theaters are rarely visitor attractions. This one can be, with the right spin and targeting (e.g., High School Reunions for those from the '60s and '70s, Classic Car Shows, Themed Nights, etc.).

Nearby Moraine Hills State Park features fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, snowshoeing, birding and many other activities on roughly half of its 2,200 acres. To have such a spectacular natural sanctuary so close to the urbanized footprint of Chicago is truly an asset for McHenry County.

For outdoor recreationalists, McHenry boasts the only bike rental operation in the county and two access points to the Fox River for boating enthusiasts.

Directional signage within McHenry is fairly sparse and, at times, intermingled with Fox River Valley signage that doesn't effectively communicate what the visitor should be doing or considering. Especially downtown, one of our reviewers felt signage was sometimes placed too close to some intersections for first-timers in the destination to make necessary lane changes.

RICHMOND

Downtown Richmond has a certain vibe that places it among the communities within McHenry County that are visitor-ready. It certainly is not on par with a Galena-style destination...but, it has the underpinnings to evolve into something very special.

As its slogan so perfectly encapsulates, Richmond is the “Village of Yesteryear” (though we could do without all the paid advertisements on the community's welcome signage). And, our reviewers felt that quaint, old-world charm immediately with the mix of classic architecture and boutique stores (hand dipped candies, jewelry, leathers, honey, antiques, celtic and eateries).

Traveling east out of Downtown, we discovered a number of cool amenities that deserve destination marketing. Ginger Blossom is a destination store that blends a social awareness (Fair Trade) with an eclectic blend of crafts, furniture, pottery and antiques from around the world...with yoga classes on Sundays. Hunt Clubs and a Paintball experience are also part of the diverse “east side” of the community.



RINGWOOD

Just outside of the tiny town of Ringwood is another jewel in the McHenry County Conservation District's crown. The nearly 3,300 acre Glacial Park Conservation Area features spectacular views along with trails for hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing and water features for canoeing. Our reviewer ranked this as her favorite outdoor recreational site of the District's facilities.

Within the Park, the Powers-Walker House was also an enjoyable find. This 1850-era Greek Revival house features docents in period clothing and presentations by families of past residents, describing life in an earlier time.



SPRING GROVE

Home to Richardson Farm, Spring Grove is located on Route 12, one of the primary transportation arteries in the county. Roughly 80,000 people visit the Farm each year for agri-tourism, adventure and holiday experiences.

Laying claim to the largest corn maze in the world, the Farm also boasts a zipline, observation tower, karts and rides and picnic/campfire sites. During the holiday season, they offer the opportunity to cut Christmas Trees and sell over 5,000 annually to visitors. The Richardson's also provide educational tours for students and have educational information scattered throughout the farm, as well as offer the opportunity to cut fresh Christmas Trees each holiday season.



UNION

One of the smallest towns (in terms of population) in McHenry County, Union claims some of the destination's largest attractions. From Wild West Town to the Historical Museum to the Illinois Railway Museum, the town may well have the most visitors per capita in the county.

From a legacy perspective, Donley's Wild West Town is preparing to celebrate its 40th year as a McHenry County attraction. From its start as an antique museum, the Wild West Town has grown into a family amusement park that is perfect for young children. Activities such as panning for gold pyrite at the Sweet Phyllis Mine, shooting slingshots at Huck Finn and watching a live action Wild West Show, makes Wild West Town a great activity for young and extended families. The adjacent Steakhouse and Banquet Hall are welcome additions to host groups up to 400. Unfortunately, there is a lack of hotel availability nearby which limits the ability of the county to capture visitors overnight.



Union also boasts the Illinois Railway Museum. Our reviewers were amazed at the size (literally and figuratively) of the collection of railroad memorabilia offered in this attraction. Signage to the Museum is easy to follow. However, once on site, the signage required to guide visitors through the attraction is sorely lacking. Given the universally positive reviews on TripAdvisor, our experience on opening weekend may be uncharacteristic, as we see a number of posts referring to the volunteers that bring the artifacts of this 60 year old treasure to life.

While the “bones” of the facility (and the ambient sounds) are simply awesome, our reviewers found the attraction to be in dire need of a more current level of interpretation. From faded news articles and explanatory papers (that appear to be typewritten) on bulletin boards to the lack of directional signage once inside the compound, this is an attraction that appeals only to die-hard railroad fans. Those individuals have already found the attraction. Growth will come from the curious...and they will require a higher level of interpretation to come away as an evangelist.

The Historic Museum (celebrating its 50th Anniversary) was not open during our visit...and apparently never is on Saturdays (which makes no sense, as that is the day of the week that most visitation would occur).

All of these attractions are, unfortunately, only open from May through October.

WONDER LAKE

A small village of roughly 1200 citizens, Wonder Lake's claim to fame may yet be to realized. While its namesake lake is the largest man-made lake in Illinois, that lake is completely surrounded by residential dwellings and not available for visitor pursuits and activities.

However, the Galt Airport, immortalized in the 1995 novel by Lawrence Gonzalez "One Zero Charlie," may have more to capitalize upon than its current self-proclaimed status as "the friendliest airport around." Once home to a series of festivals and concerts, the airport may have a window of opportunity in the 2014 release of the third and final installment of the film adaptation of Ayn Rand's classic novel, "Atlas Shrugged." The storyline of the final step of the trilogy focuses on the protagonist's search for a man named John Galt, whom she finds after locating his secret airport.



While the mythical airport is supposedly located in the western U.S., there is an opportunity to position Wonder Lake's Galt Airport as the true location (since it is never revealed in the book). The availability of the staging left over from the airport's days as a festival ground could, indeed, serve as a foundation for a movie screen and securing the premier of the third installment (slated for July 2014) would be a PR coup for the county, especially in light of its proximity to Chicago and O'Hare International.

Such an event could also position the airport for a steady stream of "Atlas Shrugged" fans for years to come. The Airport could capitalize on this notoriety with festivals, tours, and photo opportunities. If there can be "Big Lebowski Festivals," there is definitely a market for a "John Galt Festival."

WOODSTOCK

It's the town made famous by the movie "Groundhog Day." And, despite it being named one of the top 50 movies of all time by several sources, the community has inexplicably seen fit to distance itself from the film. The Tip Top Cafe is now a Mexican restaurant and the Cherry Street Inn (while they note the connection on their sign and literature) is the Royal Victorian Manor B&B.

The ambiance of the Town Square is exceptional...except for the number of vacant storefronts that exist. Those boutique retail and restaurant options that do survive are a wonderful base with which the community should attempt to attract other like businesses to complete the ambiance of the downtown.

On that Town Square resides the stunning Woodstock Opera House, home to eclectic performances by musical artists such as Leo Kottke, Livingston Taylor and Lorie Line. It also hosts the three-week Woodstock Mozart Festival, rated as one of the Top 3 music festivals in the Chicago area by the *New York Times*.

Unlike many of its sister communities in McHenry County, Woodstock takes its wayfinding signage seriously with some of the best designed and functional directional signs we've seen.



Destination Recommendations

WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

With a few exceptions (most notably in and around the downtowns in Woodstock and Crystal Lake), finding one's way around McHenry County can be frustrating for visitors that have yet to learn the destination. ***If McHenry County and its tourism-focused communities desire to maximize their visitor economy, directional signage is one of the keys.***

While we may appear to come down hard on many communities' current signage, we do so because the opportunity to correct the imperfections in current signage design and placement is relatively easy to accomplish. But, it must be designed through the eyes of a visitor (and not a local) to avoid some of the simple mistakes that have been made, especially in placement. We are confident that past signage attempts have been made in good faith; just not with a first-time visitor's needs in mind.

The Quad Cities recently embarked upon a sensationally effective Wayfinding Signage program that not only engaged the five primary communities in the destination but two different states. The initiative utilized a standard signage design that was color customized for each community within the destination. Each community invested revenues into the program and, because it was done jointly, saw cost savings that would not have been available had each done their own signage separately. CVB Officials credit the collaborative program to building better working relationships throughout the two counties, not to mention making it easier for visitors to find additional attractions and spend more money in market.



OWNING YOUR AGRI-TOURISM BIRTHRIGHT

Many residents and community leaders are rightly proud of the rich agricultural base of the county. And with the growing number of farms that have discovered (and are succeeding in launching) agri-tourism businesses, McHenry County has a significant asset in drawing visitors that few other regions possess.

To maximize this birthright, ***McHenry County should take steps to support the agri-tourism industry through incentives designed to enable existing attractions to expand and become more profitable as well as encourage new entrants into the arena.***

So as to not directly compete with existing enterprises, an inventory of agri-businesses should be undertaken to identify the types of produce and experiences that are presently not being offered. These should be the opportunities that would be perfect for incentives to round out the county's experiential offerings to make it a more complete destination.



As to the role of the DMO, ***the McHenry County CVB should work with its existing agri-tourism businesses to build itineraries and packages*** for prospective visitors that need assistance to envision how much there is to see and do in a day. Indeed, many of these packages should connect agri-tourism experiences with more traditional visitor attractions to take full advantage of the destination's rich product diversity and encourage overnight stays. And, the CVB should look beyond the traditional U-Pick options and encourage those with more exotic agri-tourism opportunities (as is your mink and alpaca farms) to open their doors for tours.

The CVB should also work with the Farm Bureau to assist agri-tourism farms in working with the County Health Department to better mutually understand the issues that have caused some friction between the two sides over the past few years. ***The CVB should also represent the interests of the agri-tourism industry in the process currently in play to develop the County's Uniform Development Code and sign ordinances that challenge farm profitability.***

DOWNTOWN FOCUS

As the suburbanization of Chicago continues to grow, commercial development is increasingly driven by architecture and name brands that are the same from locale to locale. As destinations attempt to capture the attention of a consumer that has a myriad of choices, their uniqueness can often be captured in their downtown.

No two downtowns are identical; each has its own definitive vibe. Architecture is often more unique in a municipality's core than its more recently developed outskirts. And, downtowns often feature more of the independent retail, dining and nightspot choices that attract visitors from other points across the globe. With no disrespect to national brands such as Applebee's and Bed Bath and Beyond, they are almost never the reason a visitor chooses a destination for a weekend getaway. A farm-to-fork culinary community and quaint antique shops and galleries are.



As such, ***the municipalities within McHenry County that are interested in increasing visitor traffic and spending in their communities must get serious about encouraging the types of businesses that attract tourists to locate in their central downtown cores.*** Crystal Lake has probably done the best job in the county of developing a walkable visitor destination and McHenry is obviously working hard at doing the same in its three downtown neighborhoods. In other cases, the ambiance of the downtown is inviting...but the businesses that line the first floor space on the main streets are not visitor centric. Instead, the mix of businesses in the town has been designed (or organically evolved) to serve residents, who could be served anywhere in the community. Insurance Agents, Dry Cleaners and Sewing Machine Repair Shops don't need to be downtown. Eclectic restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques do.

Downtowns that are interested in the visitor economy may want to consider taking a page from the playbook of Paducah KY. As a way to fill empty storefronts in its downtown, the City worked with building owners, developers and the local creative community to offer low rent space in exchange for a pledge from the artist to be open and creating art for visitors to watch and purchase. Today, Paducah's thriving downtown is a model for urban renewal and its Artists Relocation Program has won several national and state awards.

CONTINUE TO ENHANCE OUTDOOR RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Our reviewers were very impressed with the Park and Conservation assets found throughout the county. And, as in most places throughout the country, these facilities and attractions were primarily designed for the residents that live nearby. However, if these are to also be utilized as visitor magnets, an eye to the different needs of these consumers must be considered. Until visitors become acclimated to an area, they have little idea how long experiences will last or how long it will take to get from one point to the next. Many will also arrive without the equipment they may need to consume an experience.

As future enhancements to Parks and Conservation assets are contemplated, we encourage an eye to how the first time visitor would react be incorporated into the upgrades. Trail

Heads need to be larger and more effectively signed. Comfort Stations, concession areas and outfitter opportunities should be added, where appropriate. And, as so much of the existing attraction base in McHenry County already targets young families, signage and trail loops designed for younger participants would be a welcome addition.

Look, also, toward the development of facilities to host small to medium groups that are engaged in niche outdoor pursuits. Based upon the experience of the Haigh Quarry in Kankakee (in which actors filming the latest version of “Superman” trained and were certified), Three Oaks Recreational Area could become a center for SCUBA diving weekends and PADI certification.

And, as the destination fares well during the summer months, the CVB should continue to identify opportunities to promote off-season activities (cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, sledding, etc.) in the destination’s fabulous array of outdoor facilities, packaged with warm stays at area hotels along with performances and nightlife. The opportunity to expand volun-tourism exists, if the Conservation District would expand (and the CVB promote) its bi-annual Restoration Getaways.



ENHANCING DESTINATIONAL STRENGTHS

As Gertrude Stein famously said, “there’s no there there.” With a few exceptions, McHenry County suffers from an absence of critical mass. There are lots of attractions...but they are generally spread throughout the destination. The McHenry County CVB should work with its partners to build unique packages and itineraries to capture the imagination of prospective visitors. Some of the opportunities our reviewers saw during their time in McHenry County:

- Connecting RavenStone and the RHC Paintball Fields.
Is there an opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of “Game of Thrones” for tournament weekends?
- Connecting the dots from agri-tourism to local artisans to “Farm-to-Fork.”
With three chocolatiers and three wineries (apparently not yet open to the public), the opportunities for a Wine and Chocolate Tour would be a hit. Letting visitors make their own chocolates would be an even bigger attraction.
- Develop one or more of the farms into an opportunity for children to actually “work” a few hours, days or a week.
Is there a package opportunity with a local stable to develop a “City Slickers” style experience?
- The development of an Antique/Barn Quilt Trail or Tour
With the abundance (and geographic distance) of antique stores, visitors need this experience to be designed for them, or they likely won’t see the opportunity.
- Connect the area’s Heritage to its Conservation Areas
The Power-Walker House is on the right path. Re-enactors don’t have to be soldiers in battle. Some of the most successful re-enactors are those that sit down and explain their way of life with today’s children. From recreating old homestead living to reliving McHenry County’s 1910s as a resort community (complete with women in period resort clothes and bathing suits), give people a reason to come and see something they can’t get anywhere else.

- Create an Artisans Tour

With the number of painters, potters, weavers and other creative craft people throughout the county, we see the ability to develop self-guided driving tours to watch these artists make their magic. This would be especially impactful during the off-season when the artists have the time to be their most creative and when the hospitality industry most needs visitors. As Girlfriend Getaway weekends are more attractive when there is an educational component, McHenry County would also have quite an opportunity during the off-season to offer workshops with local artisans.

To be sure, there are several more opportunities out there to be developed. We merely offer these as thought starters.

To be successful at such enhancements, the CVB would clearly need to shift its present focus or add professional staff, as this strategy is extremely time consumptive. We address the CVB Budget in the next section.

INCREASING RESOURCES INVESTED IN DESTINATION MARKETING

As noted previously, McHenry County's ability to capitalize on its visitor economy assets is hampered by the limited budget of its Convention & Visitors Bureau. However, this isn't just about getting outgunned in Sales and Marketing by other CVBs in the region. It's more about not having the professional staff power with which to do everything that needs to be done to connect the dots for area businesses and visitors to the destination. And, frankly, a lot of what needs to be done to elevate the county to a more attractive and top-of-mind destination simply can't be done by two people, no matter how many hours over 40 they work each week.

Several of our recommendations in this documentary are made to paint a compelling picture for community leaders of what McHenry County's economy could become with the right mix of creativity and promotion. The County should be commended for its foresight in investing revenues into the marketing and sales of the destination, despite not having a dedicated visitor-generated revenue stream, such as Hotel Tax. We strongly encourage municipal officials to match the County's investment in the CVB. We also look to the Bureau to develop more opportunities for the private sector to invest in cooperative marketing programs. This joint public-private initiative should have, as its goal, a total CVB budget of at least \$750,000.

Such a budget figure would ensure that the web and mobile site are consistently current, Social Media is engaging with residents and visitors on a daily basis, Group Sales opportunities are pursued and events are properly serviced and packages are developed and successfully marketed. And, the CVB can step up its efforts to assist municipalities with their marketing needs.

All these require additional destination marketing professionals that an expanded budget will be able to support. No longer can a couple people design and place ads to create the impact that is expected from a CVB. In this new internet-fueled world, it's people that power successful marketing initiatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to be of service...and we look forward to great things for the future of McHenry County from its CVB.

Bill Geist
Terri White
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