

Sustainable Tourism For Downtown Lancaster

Tourism can be a success or failure, friend or foe depending on how you plan for it. Ed McMahon, from the Urban Land Institute and a past Hourglass presenter, spoke recently at a Pennsylvania Wilds Conference. His observations and recommendations on the topic of sustainable tourism provide valuable insights into how best to make downtown Lancaster a successful tourist destination.

He reminds us of the importance of tourism. It's the second largest industry in Pennsylvania. Economic development initiatives aimed at sustainable tourism are often more effective than being one of the 37,000 communities nationwide competing for 300 new manufacturing plants. When done right, with the proper planning and management, sustainable tourism can help bring desirable new jobs, investments, and residents. When done poorly, it can ruin your image and build resentment. That's why Mr. McMahon is quick to point out the difference between mass-market tourism and sustainable tourism. Mass market is all about the numbers – “more heads in beds”, while sustainable tourism isn't about trying to be everything to everyone, rather capitalizing on your unique positioning, and communicating it to your target audience. It's about maximizing the benefits and minimizing the burdens of tourism. Sustainable tourism also isn't about one big attraction, instead it advocates thinking small in a big way; creating synergism that contributes to a total visitor experience.

The most important criteria for sustainable tourism focus on being authentic, real, and unique. People want to visit places that are different from where they live, and different from all the other places competing for their attention. Places with a special character that can't be found anywhere else. Ideally, everything a visitor encounters should reinforce the feeling; the food, the music, the art, the architecture, the shops/restaurants, the museums, the culture, and the neighborhoods. How you protect and demonstrate your authenticity is what builds your brand image. That means understanding your unique positioning, and not allowing national chains, regional developers, or local entrepreneurs to construct new buildings with inappropriate design, scale, and content that will diminish the authenticity of who you are. And when you market yourself, you need to be sure you can fulfill on visitor expectations or you won't have extended stays and repeat business. Mr. McMahon is critical of what visitors experience when they visit Lancaster County. The non-authentic Rt. 30 honky-tonk doesn't support the total visitor experience, and isn't consistent with the marketing message of beautiful farms and peaceful lifestyle. A rush toward mass-market tourism has created an insensitive sprawl that has eroded what makes Lancaster County special.

History and historic buildings form the foundation for successful tourist destinations. They are the heart and soul of a town; the connection with the past that defines a special sense of place. Telling your stories to visitors reminds them where they are and why it's special. Every community has stories to tell. Some communities are lucky to have better stories to tell, and some are better at telling their stories. When you speak to the past you

create a path to your economic future. Preserving historic buildings, enhancing an area's unique culture, and artfully interpreting it for others to appreciate is a manifestation of your pride. No one wants to visit a place that has lost its soul.

Image, aesthetics, and appearance are fundamentally important to an area's economic wellbeing. People decide on where to visit, where to live, where to invest, and where to open a business by the way it looks. First impressions are very important. As visitors enter a town they quickly size-up whether it looks attractive and authentic. They notice everything, looking for visual clues as to whether this is a special place to stop and explore. Remember— they have to get out of their cars to spend money. And when they start walking, they are seeing everything for the first time. They don't see the town the same way people living there do. Everything needs to reinforce the brand positioning. Everything needs to contribute to the overall experience; inconsistencies and mixed visual messages detract. Stories not told and places not seen are not only lost opportunities, they greatly reduce the likelihood that the visitor will fall in love with the town and want to return.

America's great towns, the ones tourists love to visit always deliver a unique sense of place. It's fun, interesting and exciting being there. Rich history, historic buildings, authentic character, and great storytelling abound. While some towns have greater assets to begin with, they all work deliberately to plan and manage their destiny around those assets. They understand what makes them special, how to protect it, and how to share it with others. They know what will enhance the visitor's experience and what will detract from it. And they know who and how many to invite to visit their community. That's all part of sustainable tourism -- maximizing the economic opportunity and minimizing the burden.