

Chisago Lakes Area Tourism Assessment Program Case Study 2008-2011

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About the Tourism Assessment Program

The Chisago Lakes Area Tourism Assessment Program was conducted by University of Minnesota Extension's Center for Community Vitality in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Tourism Center in 2008. The tourism assessment consists of three parts:

- Prior to the community site visit, collecting and analyzing data and information on tourism development in the Chisago Lakes Area
- A community site visit conducted on February 25-26, 2008 which included:
 - A tour of the city and area
 - Visits to sites and attractions
 - Casual conversations with local citizens about their community
 - A community forum to identify key values as well as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to tourism development
- A written report presented to the Lindstrom Economic Development Authority, sponsor of the program, on May 14, 2008

The key findings from the Tourism Assessment Program were as follows:

- Major strengths included the lakes and Swedish heritage
- Major weaknesses included lack of hospitality facilities as well as a lack of community cohesiveness (conflict over Highway 8 redesign was evident)
- Major opportunities included being a Swedish tour destination and proximity to the Twin Cities for day trips
- Major threats included failing lakeshore septic systems, lack of community cooperation, traffic congestion, and the lure of Wisconsin attractions

The Tourism Assessment Program report outlined the following potential tourism development strategy:

1. Establish a leadership group to "champion" tourism development projects
2. Develop the Swedish connection in a systematic way
3. Develop capacity for additional lodging – food – hospitality
4. Develop the day trip market
5. Develop methods for attracting re-aligned Highway 8 travelers to stop and shop
6. Build community awareness about tourism

This case study provides an overview of the tourism development work in the Chisago Lakes Area from May, 2008 through December, 2011. While this case study will be structured around the Tourism Assessment Report recommendations, the credit for the accomplishments lies with the communities within the Chisago Lakes Area. In the words of John Olinger, Lindstrom City Administrator, "The Tourism Assessment Program compiled various ideas and reports related to tourism and pulled them together." Thus, the Tourism Assessment Program was a launching point for local action.

Tourism Development Committee

The Chisago Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce spearheaded re-constituting a chamber tourism committee composed of business and city administrators. This group has been meeting monthly for the past three years.

Preserving the lake's water quality

Two major initiatives have been conducted in the past three years to maintain and improve the water quality of three of the four lakes with portions in the city of Lindstrom.

The first initiative addressed failing septic systems. Chisago County has agreed to not authorize upgrading septic systems on properties adjoining the lakes. The City of Lindstrom has negotiated an orderly annexation agreement with the township that after seven years, the township will not oppose annexation of lakeside properties into the city. This will allow the city to extend sewer to properties with failing septic systems and will be effective for three of the four lakes (South Center, North Lindstrom, and Kroon. Banks were hesitant to give loans to these properties prior to this decision.



Between the Chamber of Commerce building and the lake, the City has added a rain garden on the Linden overlook which opened in October of 2011. This improvement allows visitors to walk from the Chamber's Visitor Center to the lake. The rain garden also helps preserve the water quality of the lake. The rain garden was made possible through funding from the following organizations: \$30,000 from the Soil and Water Conservation District; \$70,000 from the Lakes Improvement District; and \$50,000 from the City of Lindstrom.

The City of Lindstrom is currently looking at improvements to other streets that end at the lake to preserve their water quality.

Swedish Heritage

Lindstrom is the setting for Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg's books "The Emigrants" which has been standard reading for school children in Sweden. As a result, Lindstrom has a long history of hosting individual and group visitors from Sweden. Several developments over the past three years built on the Swedish heritage.

The area was contacted by the National Park Service to explore eligibility for designation as a Preserve America Community. Following a visit & encouragement from the National Heritage Director, the Chamber is working on getting the area designated as a Preserve America Community (<http://www.preserveamerica.gov>) This designation will place the Lakes Area on the national web-based Preserve America Community directory, map, and give authorization to use the Preserve America logo. The application timing also dovetails well with the St Croix Watershed listening sessions held to identify what is historic in the area.

A new historical walking tour brochure has been developed for Lindstrom which is available at the Chamber office. Center City and Chisago City are both in the process of developing similar walking tour brochures.

In 2010, the East Central Regional Arts Council funded a local artist to develop four marquettes of historical figures: Daniel Lindstrom (founder of the city), Joris-Pelle Per Andersson (the Karl Oskar character in Vilhelm Moberg's books was based on Joris-Pelle's life), Nellie Gustafson (midwife), and Eric Norelius (Lutheran pastor). These models will be used to build life-size statues along Highway 8. Currently there is funding for Nellie.



Left to right: Nellie Gustafson, Joris-Pelle Per Andersson, Daniel Lindstrom, and Eric Norelius

Lodging & Meeting Facility

The community expressed strong interest during the Tourism Assessment Program in recruiting a hotel to Lindstrom which could also host events (ex weddings). There has been interest on and off from hotels over the past two years. The hotels that did express interest were seeking, but did not find, local investors. The hotels that expressed interest did not have the convention facilities the community was seeking.

Currently the Economic Development Authority of Lindstrom authorized creation of a marketing brochure to recruit a hotel. In addition, the Chisago County Economic Development Authority has contracted with the University of Minnesota Extension to conduct a Market Area Profile for lodging to assist in the hotel recruitment effort.

Over the past three years, the City of Chisago City purchased Ojakeda, a former Campfire, Inc. campground which contains cabins and large group facilities. The City's Economic Development Authority has been restoring the cabins (which include indoor plumbing) and had managed rental of the units.

Immigrant Trail

The Immigrant Trail is a bike path that Chisago County communities have been working on for a number of years. New residents and tourists see the value of a biking trail, while the Tourism Assessment Program helped show the value of the trail to area farmers who had less familiarity with the benefits of a trail.

During the redesign process for Highway 8, various options were explored for the Immigrant Trail. The Minnesota Department of Transportation indicated a bike lane would not be an option on this state highway. Businesses wanted to be visible to the bikers. The final plan is wider sidewalks through the Lindstrom business district so bikers can walk the three blocks through downtown. The wider sidewalks will also accommodate perennial flowering plants.

In the past three years, all the land but one parcel was acquired to build the trail. The remaining parcel is through hunting land with resulting concerns about safety.

The Chisago County Park Board developed a colored bike trail map in 2010, which was the first time this had been developed. The maps are available at visitor centers.

The trail is being used. Currently the Forest Lake Bike Club travels to the area on Monday nights, Wednesday nights, and Saturday mornings.

Business Development

With the upcoming highway 8 road construction scheduled for the summer of 2012, downtown businesses have been holding off making changes until construction has been completed. Funding has been obtained from the Small Cities Development Program through the Chisago County Economic Development Authority to provide loan funds to businesses for building improvements like roof, fascia, windows, etc. The first \$200,000 has been loaned out and the City has an application in for another \$250,000 for the program.

Chamber of Commerce



The Chamber of Commerce building has had several updates including repainting the exterior and new landscaping (designed by a local landscape architect) to make the building more visible to visitors. Inside, several strategies are being used to introduce visitors to the area including:

- A new and improved brochure display area
- Displays about area businesses (below)



Regional Marketing

The Chamber coordinated with communities throughout the county to do collaborative marketing of each community's Christmas lights festivals for better cross-marketing of these events.

The Chamber joined the St. Croix Valley Regional Tourism Alliance, a group composed of Minnesota and Wisconsin tourism-related businesses and organizations working to increase the impact of tourism through cooperative promotion of the Scenic St. Croix River Valley. (<http://saintcroixriver.com>)

The Chamber has seen an increase in calls and web-hits following target marketing of magazine ads including "What's Playing" and "Minnesota Trails."

The Chamber has also seen an increase in membership from retail businesses.

Communication

The Tourism Assessment Program report articulated the need for better communication within the community. As a result, the City of Lindstrom and the Chamber have made concerted efforts to increase the frequency and content of communication with businesses and residents.

Since mid-2011, the City of Lindstrom has been emailing a weekly Friday update on everything related to the city. In addition, the city has held a Business Breakfast twice a year for the past two years for dialog on business concerns which has consistently drawn 50-60 people.

The Chamber emails a weekly news flash on Wednesdays about upcoming events, including information about upcoming group tours, etc.

Opportunity

The Highway 8 road construction project will bring in crews who will be residing in the area for the duration of the project. The members of the crew have the option of a company-sponsored hotel room (in Forest Lake) or a stipend. The company indicated some crew members prefer to live in their camper. The City and Chamber saw an opportunity to increase local spending by these crew members through several techniques. First, the EDA owns a small house which they are looking at opening for the crew member's use. Second, they are developing a shaded picnic-type eating area for crew members to lunch locally and they are encouraging local restaurants to consider group orders / sandwich truck to serve crew members at their work site.

Challenges

Funding is an on-going challenge. The Lakes Area does not have a lodging tax which could provide funding for tourism development.