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Warren County is Successfully Growing The Tourism Economy

Lake George, NY - "The Warren County Tourism Department has undergone a much-needed overhaul in the last two years ago," says Joanne Conley, Tourism Department Director. The jump to increased social media engagement and digital campaigns was long overdue. Gone are at least six niche print publications that became one consolidated, content rich, year-round travel guide. Digital and social media have eclipsed print ads. Television commercials, while still important, are evolving into versatile video that can be leveraged in native ads and on YouTube.

As the destination marketing organization for the entire County, the Tourism Department has data to support the good health of the tourism industry, has an aggressive marketing program in place, and continues to cultivate valuable relationships with local, regional and statewide tourism partners.

THE HEALTH OF THE INDUSTRY

"The health of the tourism industry in the Lake George Area is strong and there is measurable growth across a number of industry segments to support this. If you look at a snapshot of the past four years, you can see that tourism indicators are showing sustained growth in Warren County," says Conley.

From 2013 through 2016, STR (Smith Trend Report) demand totals have increased 1.73%. Year-to-date room sales are up 1.8% over 2016.

For the same period, sales tax revenue has increased 4.9%, Occupancy Tax collections have increased 12.5%, and *Tourism Economics'* direct traveler spending has increased 7.7%.

New construction in Warren County includes a 119-room Courtyard Marriott in Lake George Village, in addition to three properties at Exits 18-19 which are adding to the supply of rooms available. Some hoteliers are concerned about the addition of new rooms, but when David Kenny announced the construction of the Courtyard Marriott in Lake George Village, he astutely pointed out that "Marriott doesn't open a hotel anywhere without doing some research." And after the Holiday Inn Express opened at Exit 18, developer Jerry Nudi stated "This hotel is right at the entrance to Glens Falls and Queensbury,

and they need something fresh.” New hotel construction points to a healthy tourism economy and demand within the marketplace.

Other segments of the hospitality industry that are showing growth include campgrounds and vacation rentals by owners. While there is not a single collection point for campground data, according to a 2017 *Tourism Economics*’ report, camping is a \$1.2 billion industry. Campground owners in Warren County have reported a good 2017 season. There are approximately 5,000+ campsites in Warren County and approximately 9,000+ hotel and motel rooms.

In terms of the private rental market segment, Airbnb rentals and revenue have doubled from 2015 to 2016. With an average length of stay of 2.7 nights and 2016 revenue at \$1,527,000, this segment cannot go unnoticed. Traditional hotels are seeing sustained growth at the same time as the burgeoning shared economy market is growing. More and more travelers are coming to Warren County, however their lodging preferences are changing; a shift that the Tourism Department is closely monitoring.

FIND OUR FAMOUS

Every vacation destination has the best hotels, restaurants, attractions and events as their sales pitch. What sets this area apart?

Conley’s first order of business was to “Find our Famous.” She and her staff brainstormed to find a marketing message that would be a cornerstone for years to come. The end result was the revelation that the Lake George Area is “The Original Vacation.” This is the destination that inspired mid-1800s city dwellers to travel by train to the lakes and mountains. This is a branding goldmine that eluded the department for 80+ years and is the perfect platform for year-round promotion.

WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In mid-2017 the Tourism Department launched a responsive, mobile-first website with Search Engine Optimization. The site offers more than just listings; it is based on content people are looking for. User sessions in the first five months total more than the entire 2016 year. Outbound clicks to business partners total 205,000 and the “Book Now” button allows guests to book directly with properties who have online booking capabilities.

The department’s leading social media platform, Facebook, is approaching a quarter million followers that are truly engaged in the content shared. Cost per engagement is pennies on the dollar and generates highly coveted peer-to-peer recommendations.

TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Tourism Infrastructure is critical to providing visitors the level of quality they expect in a vacation destination. Warren County occupancy tax collections have been used to support such “attractors” as the Cool Insuring Arena (Glens Falls Civic Center), Festival Commons in Lake George, the Bolton Landing Visitor Center and mountain biking trails in Queensbury, to name just a few.

EVENTS

Events are the catalyst for growth in the Lake George Area and beyond. Events drive both overnight and day trip visits and help to lengthen the ever-popular summer season. This is evidenced with annual favorites like Thurman Maple Days, the Adirondack Balloon Festival, World's Largest Garage Sale and newer events like Ice Bars, Adirondack Wine and Food Festival, and the Lake George Music Festival. The Warren County Tourism Department enthusiastically supports events with a comprehensive website calendar, a weekly top to-do blog post, and featured Facebook posts. In 2018, the Tourism Department will fully optimize top tier events to insure they result at the top of search ranking lists.

PARTNERSHIPS

Over the years, and in particular over the past two years, the Department has fostered close relationships with local businesses and stakeholders, regional tourism partners and state-level promotion agencies. Recognized as the Official Tourism Promotion Agency (TPA) for the State, the Department works closely with the Adirondack Regional Tourism Council and I Love New York. These relationships are invaluable in terms of market recognition and industry research.

CONCLUSION

The Tourism Department's mission is to "responsibly promote and support the tourism industry in the Lake George Area through marketing, collaboration and honest communication with regional tourism partners and visitors," says Conley. "And we do just that." The end result is a destination that serves the overall visitor experience.

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