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Tourism leaders explore ways to 'sell' the Valley's history

Wednesday, 15 July 2009

By ANDREW THOMPSON

WOONSOCKET — Like the Gare du Nord in Paris, the downtown train station was filled with activity, several members of the Blackstone Valley Interpreter's Network in 19th century period dress, and the sounds of the French national anthem on the occasion of Bastille Day.

Those present were not tourists eager to arrive at their vacation destinations, however. Instead, the crowd of local historic site managers and small tourism-focused businesses in the main room of the station was working hard to brainstorm ideas on how to transform the Blackstone River Valley into a world-class tourist destination itself.

"The main questions we're asking are, what is working [to bring tourism into the area]?" said Jan Reitsma, Executive Director for the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, "and also, what is the greatest challenge going forth for tourism [in the area]?"

The discussion was first led by a panel of six local, regional, and state level agencies from both Massachusetts and Rhode Island working to increase tourism's presence as an engine of economic development in the bi-state region.

"You have history here," said Donna McCabe, President of the Central Massachusetts Convention and Visitors Bureau. "History sells, especially for anyone coming to Massachusetts. And it's complimented by the natural beauty of the Blackstone River."

McCabe's organization works to promote all of Worcester County's tourism features to potential visitors outside the area.

McCabe's Rhode Island counterpart, President Martha Sheridan of the Providence/Warwick Convention and Visitors Bureau, said that her organization focuses on recruiting groups for the Dunkin' Donuts Center in Providence. However, as an effect of Rhode Island's small size, her bureau effectively markets for the whole area.

"Visitors don't care about state lines, and the corridor is bi-state," said Sheridan. "They just want to go to a destination."

Tara Rendon, chief of staff for the Massachusetts Legislature's Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development, spoke about the connection between tourism and economic development. "The state has realized arts isn't [just] the fun stuff, it brings in money," she said. According to Rendon, each dollar of investment in cultural tourism brings five dollars into the local economy.

Jeannie Hebert, President of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce also asserted the effect of tourism on business and the economy. "We need to think of tourism as a business," she said. "[It's] not fluff."

Bob Billington, Executive Director of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, said that the national presence provided by the National Heritage Corridor was a gift that needed to be taken advantage of while it still could. "The Rangers here tell the story the same way it is at the Washington Monument [and other national sites]," he said.

Reitsma clarified that the Corridor Commission will sunset in late fall of 2011, and while the National Park Service is studying a proposal for a National Park, "as for a cohesive organization that ties people together, things are very uncertain," he said.

"There's an attack," Billington said, "that the Blackstone's had it for 25 years, and its time to give somewhere else a chance. But it takes more than 25 years to take a region and transform it."

The most salient challenges to growing tourism in the area included limited transportation and lodging options, a lack of promotion resources in the current economy, and history's image problem.

"You have to get in your car," McCabe said, emphasizing the distance between the various historic sites spread out across the valley.

"The Europeans and Asian [tourists] that come here are looking for adventure tourism," said Hebert. "We have that, but [not] transportation. It's not like Europe where you can get on a train and be in the next city."

The Blackstone River Bikeway project plans to provide an alternative mode of travel to the area, though progress on the route in Massachusetts has been limited to date.

Partnerships and packaging with the hotels that in the area were suggested as ways to do more with

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less promotion resources and link the area’s history with lodging options. Said McCabe: “Visitors want the thought taken out of it, [which happens] if you put the products together.”

“We have the history of the industrial revolution, which is a great story, but it’s the perception of history as being dodgy and dusty. How do we make it sell?” asked Katrina White, Director of Tourism for the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation.

Billington agreed. “History is getting harder to sell across the country,” he said. “You look at the sites here that have national presence, the Sturbridges and the Newport mansions, attendance is down [and] not going in the right direction.”

The way to change the image, White said, is to “put a human face on the stories we’re telling. People need to relate to what happened at these mills and its significance to the nation. They changed everything, and people don’t know that.”

“We need to tell the story better,” said Billington, “[An industrialist] once described Pawtucket as a ‘bucket of crabs,’ referring to the competition and fighting inside. That’s the story behind the [history], and that’s what the public would like to hear. It was about trying to survive.”

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