

Moriah Analysis

7 September 2008

The people of Moriah have a number of perspectives on what tourism could do for them and to them – and they haven't really made up their mind whether to embrace it or not. This destination master plan gives Moriah an opportunity to try on tourism, like a new shoe, and see how it feels. Rather than plunge into tourism, it needs to get its feet wet and then decide whether tourism is the tool Moriah wants to use to move toward a bigger economy, more jobs, and more business opportunities.

That said, Moriah has some unique attributes to bring to the tourism equation. Moriah has more public frontage on Lake Champlain than anywhere else on the lake. Two campgrounds are currently focused on seasonal visitors and each supports the ability to tie one's boat up near camp. There's great fishing for those waking up in Moriah. And Moriah has a unique relationship with Champ.

Moriah has a great connection to Amtrak (a beautiful historic station with an historic steam locomotive next to it) and is positioned near one of the bridges to Vermont. It has an exciting mining history to share with visible "artifacts" to discover and a focused museum to help explain. The hamlets and countryside of Moriah are dotted with historic churches and houses – and other exciting historic structures. And there are great hikes to take, some through old forests and others to ponds out in the woods.

Moriah also has a couple new restaurants that are "capturing" some of the tourism traffic passing through, and pulling a few visitor dollars into the economy.

The Moriah working group wants to move forward in growing a tourism economy, but in a way that is tentative and careful. Moriah needs to approach tourism on its own terms.

How does one go about that? There are some things that Moriah can tackle that won't degrade the experience of living in Moriah, won't take great investment, and will give Moriah a taste of tourism.

Moriah could explore:

- Creating an inventory of heritage structures that visitors could explore
- Target the development of 6-10 lodging units.
- Work on spiffing up the corridors that visitors might use.
- Consider refocusing those seasonal campgrounds on transient visitors
- Get the mining museum and welcome center open for reasonable hours

If Moriah could gather together a list of historic structures that visitors could explore and post those in a way that potential visitors could find them, then Moriah could generate the beginnings of a flow of visitors. Egret would suggest that the compilation include churches, cemeteries, old houses, mine buildings, historic retail areas, the town offices, the Amtrack station and more! It could be a fun project for people to get together and create a paragraph about each. The list should come with directions – and, to make the list attractive to those embracing technology, GPS coordinates. That list could be posted on a website, along with a few enticing photos. And it could be printed and made available at various places visitors now stop. The list could also list all visitor services available and how to find them.

Moriah should make it a goal to have 6-10 new lodging units up and operating within 5 years. These could be hotel rooms or rental cabins. And more than ten wouldn't hurt at all. There are a number of options for locating the units. They should target a mid range visitor – and it would be advantageous to site them with views of Lake Champlain, a pond, great woods, or another similar view. Ideally, some locals will be hired to construct the lodging units and local people will have employment managing and caring for them and the visitors that fill them.

If Moriah got together and decided to polish up the corridors visitors use, the town would be more inviting and more people would stay longer. Visitors who come to Moriah will come to experience the town, its history, its natural resources, and the people who live here. A cleaner, more polished, Moriah would send a clear message that Moriah is a proud community that is worth getting to know.

If the two publicly owned campgrounds were to serve more transient visitors, that change would leverage more spending in the town. Transient visitors are more likely to buy supplies locally and to eat out, while those parking a recreational vehicle for a season are likely to bring along the supplies and stay close to their campsite. That small change (which would make managing the facilities more difficult) would bring new faces into Moriah more often and leverage more dollars into the economy. It is also possible that a new campground could be constructed, perhaps at another scenic location in Moriah.

Moriah's commitment to trying tourism should be reflected in reasonable and dependable hours for both the museum and visitor center. Volunteers are hard to find – but if Moriah wants a shot at this, they need to be found. The visitor center is the starting place to guide visitors off the highway and through the town. The museum is already on people's radar screens – but many of them are frustrated when they arrive to find things closed. Tourism is a bit like a dairy – once you get in the business, you have to keep at it on a daily basis.

There is an old tourism adage that if you get people to spend 20 minutes more they will probably buy a meal or a refreshment. While the above actions are not going to suddenly create a substantial tourism economy, they will introduce Moriah to more visitors. Some of those visits will result in sales in dining establishments, others in groceries or camping supplies, and still others in lodging. Some locals will find some work in all of this. But, more importantly, people who live in Moriah will have a chance to get used to having more visitors in the community.

Perhaps someone will open another restaurant. Or sell his or her crafts from a stand in the front yard. Or someone will open a gift shop in one of the historic buildings. Perhaps, with a little time, Moriah will see opportunities in tourism and decide it needs to attract another lodging establishment – or to cultivate more entrepreneurs to step up and open businesses serving visitors.

Egret understands the hesitation that Moriah has toward sharing itself with visitors. Moriah has historically had bigger enterprises with lots of employees. Tourism is a substantial change in the way people who grew up around mines and mills see jobs and businesses. And the value of a load of logs or truck load of ore wasn't influenced by whether you smiled at a stranger or kept your lawn mowed.

Tourism is something that Moriah can feel its way through – and it's just fine if the people of Moriah decide that they'd rather create jobs and business opportunities in another way.