

Ticonderoga Analysis

4 September 2008

Ticonderoga's forte is history. The Town of Ticonderoga owns a significant piece of the history that shaped the political and cultural evolution of North America – and the beginning of the United States. Some of that history is “captured” by the experience of Fort Ticonderoga, but much more of it lies undeveloped, with the potential to strengthen and broaden the history market and underscore Ti's authenticity!

The same geography that set the stage for Ti's exciting history provides a basis for the second leg of Ti's developing tourism economy – outdoor recreation. The Lake George/LaChute River/Lake Champlain water connection is unparalleled and exciting. Ti also has great wild country with more lakes and streams and miles of trails! Most of the experiences currently enjoyed are not products, but opportunity abounds to bring the outdoors in as a strong leg in the local tourism economy.

It is important to add here that a key development took place in the last year which has already begun to change the patterns of tourism in Ticonderoga. The construction and opening of the new Best Western has enhanced the lodging component of Ti's tourism offerings in a way that has already rewritten patterns and opens the door for future progress. Now (and we didn't observe this last year) people spending a day at the fort are more likely to spend the night in town. That promotes local dining and retail, and exposes them to Ti's other visitor experiences. This pattern that puts people in town longer underwrites existing businesses but also increases the viability of proposed new visitor-related businesses.

There are some key issues and opportunities that will make significant differences in how Ticonderoga evolves as a tourism destination:

- Developing world class history-based experiences outside the fort property
- Stabilizing the fort economically and making it a sustainable part of the economy
- Strengthening the partnership between the fort and the people of the town
- Continuing to grow the lodging component
- Continuing the development of downtown and adjacent zones in a way that makes sense for tourism
- Developing products based on outdoor experiences that broaden the economy and make it more year round

Ticonderoga has unique and authentic opportunities related to heritage tourism. However, the experiences “on the table” at this point are rather static – and focus on talking about history or pointing to where something happened. The LaChute River Trail is a good beginning, but Ti needs something more dynamic and iconic – and something interactive.

Plans to rebuild the French Sawmill true to the original designs open just such a door. Making it a working sawmill that visitors can explore and understand take it to the next level. This project needs to move to the front burner – and this process needs to stimulate action. It will, if properly developed and managed, become as iconic an experience for Ticonderoga as the fort should be.

Recent developments at Fort Ticonderoga have jeopardized the viability of this important part of Ticonderoga's tourism economy. While the decisions about the fort's future belong inside that organization, the impacts will impact the Ticonderoga tourism economy significantly. Simply put, the fort needs to solve its financial dilemma and get on stable and sustainable footing.

The organization that operates the fort and the people of the Town of Ticonderoga are getting along better these days than they have in the past. But, there are lots of misunderstandings and held grievances on both sides that get in the way of a strong and mutually beneficial relationship. Both sides (or maybe it's all sides) need to work hard to solidify and reinforce a good working relationship.

The addition of the Best Western to Ti's lodging component is great progress, but a strong tourism economy will need more. In particular, Ticonderoga will benefit from the development of lodging that is 1)resource oriented and 2)aimed at a higher-spending market segment. New lodging may take the form of several smaller lodges or one significant destination resort – or some combination in between. That lodging will facilitate the stays of more affluent visitors – and necessitate the development of more (and more sophisticated) dining opportunities.

As Ti grows its capacity to "sleep" more visitors, there will be more time spent by visitors in the town – and town needs to be ready for that with a vibrant zone of historic downtown ready to serve them with retail and dining options.

Ticonderoga has made exciting progress related to stabilizing and reclaiming its historic structures. The paving of the LaChute River Trail has opened the door for wedding the histories of downtown and the river in the minds of visitors – and presents exciting developmental opportunities for tourism-related businesses. There are many places in the Town of Ticonderoga that dining and retail can locate – but there is much to be gained by clustering those offerings so that visitors can park once and move among them. Ti has a better opportunity than almost any other regional town to cluster tourism-related businesses and provide nearby parking – all in a visitor-friendly manner. And one that reinforces stability of downtown and a visitor's relationship with history and the LaChute River Trail. There is a present need for more family-oriented dining to match families attracted by fort and staying at the Best Western. Similar needs are presented by Ti's new opportunity to host and house motorcoach tours.

Ticonderoga has exciting ways that visitors can explore the outdoors – and the success of efforts to facilitate those outdoor activities through four seasons of tourism products will greatly impact the year-round nature of Ti's tourism economy. Outdoor recreation is important to locals – and it is quite possible that there are locals who would enjoy and excel at helping visitors interface regional waters and trails. The new lodging already changes what can be offered as winter products and experiences (because a visitor can start and end the day in Ticonderoga). More lodging that targets clients who are more likely to stay longer and spend more opens the door for a wide assortment of supported and facilitated outdoor experiences – which in turn make that lodging (and dining and retail) more viable year round.

Egret Communications believes that these are the key issues that must be addressed in the planning of Ticonderoga's future in tourism. There will be a number of other facets to the developing economy that will need to be addressed, but if good progress can be made on these six points, most other issues and opportunities will be easier to address.