

Wilmington Analysis

4 September 2008

Santa's Workshop will have its 60th anniversary next July 1 – that will be sixty years in which Wilmington has focused on family tourism. The people gathering to plan the future of Wilmington's tourism ratified that Wilmington wants to continue targeting and hosting families as it evolves its tourism economy. Wilmington also made it clear that it wants to manage the scale of the tourism economy to keep the character of town – it does not want tourism to eclipse the sense of community there now.

Wilmington has other key tourism infrastructure, including the Whiteface Memorial Highway, the Whiteface Ski Area, the High Falls Gorge, the Ausable River, and surrounding wild and natural areas. Fishing is a big deal for Wilmington, perhaps stronger now than skiing.

Wilmington does have some issues that need attention in order to succeed in growing its tourism economy:

- Wilmington needs new lodging facilities with more current amenities – and it needs to shape up many of the current lodging products.
- Wilmington needs to develop its own strong dining and retail component, hopefully clustered in an area that is pedestrian friendly.
- Wilmington needs to work on curb appeal – especially evolving the major intersection in town to invite visitors to stop and explore its tourism offerings.
- Wilmington needs to make it easy to get back and forth from local lodging to Whiteface – and on to dining and shopping in Lake Placid, especially in winter.
- Santa's Workshop will need to refresh and renew itself to keep pace with changing tourism patterns
- Wilmington needs to develop and make known a broad selection of family related experiences and tourism products
- Wilmington has the elements for a year round economy – but will need time to make that economy strong

Wilmington needs to develop new tourism lodging that is current, resource oriented, and matched for mid or upper-mid level of visitors. This is imperative if Wilmington is to house its share of Whiteface skiers and it will be important as Wilmington works to compete for family tourism in an increasingly competitive environment. Wilmington's older style lodging establishments need to be updated as much as possible and brought to a uniform standard of upkeep and cleanliness. Wilmington cannot afford to have any of these properties (especially those facing the tourism corridors) sitting untended, decrepit, or abandoned.

In order to reduce leakage of tourism revenues to Lake Placid, Wilmington needs to attract new family oriented dining and retail businesses and locate them in a manner that invites visitors out of their cars and into a pedestrian friendly area.

The planning process needs to identify one or more such areas and foster such a development. Some of the retail might consider changing themes with changing seasons to respond to changing visitor interests.

Wilmington needs to work on curb appeal. The issue of aging tourism properties was discussed above. But the issue also includes non-commercial properties. Family tourism is a business the whole town has to endorse and “be in” for it to succeed – and that means that the town needs to wear its pride in houses that are kept up and lawns that are maintained. The major intersection needs to be upbeat and friendly and there should be very welcoming signage that invites visitors to explore Wilmington’s many family oriented experiences.

In order for Wilmington to compete for its share of Whiteface skiers, Wilmington needs to make it easy for those skiers to move back and forth between lodging, Whiteface, local dining, and Lake Placid’s more diverse dining and retail offerings. The growth and evolution of Wilmington’s dining and retail offerings will, at some point, make the Lake Placid part of the connection less mandatory – but that will take some time.

Santa’s Workshop is a sixty year old attraction that is well maintained, but also in need of reinvestment and renewal. It has had a special relationship with both Wilmington and several generations of regional visitors – but times are changing and tourism is evolving. In order to stay viable, the attraction will need to embrace some newer technology and understand some changing expectations. Wilmington will need to keep track of this situation, as Santa’s Workshop is important to its family theme. It would be a good idea for local leaders and Santa’s workshop leadership to visit the Wild Center and take a look at both the relationship of technology to visitor experience and the difference in clientele. There is a lot to be learned from such a visit that can be applied to the evolution of several products in the area.

Wilmington has great family experiences, but it needs to both develop more family products and experiences and to help visiting families understand (before they come) all that is available. Existing core products include Santa’s Workshop, the High Falls Gorge, the Whiteface Memorial Highway, Whiteface ski area, and the town’s own beach. There are great potential products related to Wilmington’s natural resources that need development. And the town and industry need to work together to foster awareness of all of the family products and experiences that can make a vacation based in Wilmington fantastic. That may take the form of Wilmington family adventures website, a downloadable brochure, or a concerted effort to highlight all the experiences on every lodging property’s web offering.

With skiing, the Whiteface Memorial Highway, fishing, Santa's Workshop, the High Falls Gorge, mountain biking, the town beach, fall colors, tram rides and more, Wilmington has the elements to develop a year round tourism economy.

Those experiences need to be matched up with a better lodging component and more dining and retail. The calendar year starts with skiing, spring time brings fishing and Ironman, then come families as the backbone of the season, fall brings colors and sightseeing, and then Santa's Workshop wraps up a season. Weekends are stronger in this drive market scenario as fly fishers, grandparents bringing grandchildren to Santa's Workshop, and those seeking fall colors are more prone to weekend travel. There are holes in this calendar, but with work – and promotion – and time - a year round economy can evolve that means jobs that don't go away seasonally and lodging businesses that are more profitable.

Egret Communications believes that Wilmington has strong potential to grow its tourism economy and to use that economy to support an improved local lifestyle. If the above issues can be addressed, we feel that Wilmington will be able to easily deal with other issues and opportunities related to its tourism economy.