

# Essex County Tourism Master Planning Project

## Lake Placid December 2008 Progress Report

### Key Discussions

In November the planning process proceeded with discussions by four key subcommittees:

- Community Relationships and Issues
- Visitor Experience
- Sustainability and Redevelopment
- Competitive Events

There is, inevitably, overlap among these discussions that will need to be reconciled as the output of these working groups is brought together and channeled toward the destination master plan.

*It is also important to note that many of the topics under discussion have related processes in motion by the town or village or some other related entity. This process will need to embrace those efforts and weave them into the overall destination master plan.*

The **Community Relationships and Issues Subcommittee** has a number of topics where tourism can “contribute” to the solution – and some of those are issues where tourism needs to be managed to reduce impacts or avoid a future problem.

It is clear that tourism contributes to quality of life (it brings employment, business opportunities, dining options, youth activities, etc.) but that it also detracts from quality of life (through congestion and traffic issues, tourism’s contributions to higher costs of housing, etc.). It is also clear that there is not a clear channel of communications between community residents and the tourism industry. It is also clear that tourism sometimes wears blame for more impacts than it generates.

The committee is grappling with these key questions, many of which will relate to goals, actions, and timelines in the final destination master plan:

1. Quality of Life – how can tourism generate positive impacts and reduce negative impacts
  - a. This may dovetail with Joint Planning Committee
  - b. Affordable housing an important issue that tourism is closely related to
    - i. Tourism “invites” people who then want to have a second or retirement home here
    - ii. Tourism employees need places to live
      1. Year-round tourism economy will help address tourism employee ability to afford housing

2. Would neighboring communities embrace affordable housing for tourism employees as an economic opportunity?
            - a. What transportation issues would this present?
          - iii. Part time residents are “linked” to tourism, and not always best participants in a cohesive community
          - iv. Village has someone working on affordable housing
            1. Is tourism participating in this?
        - c. Cost of Living – Second and retirement home ownership is contributing to a rising cost of housing, which is the major factor in an escalating cost of living in the region
        - d. How do we maximize job opportunities for people who live here/grow up here and who are committed to the social health of the community
2. Managing growth – to enable a thriving industry while supporting goals of local residents (less congestion, more affordable housing, access to all parts of the community, etc).
  - a. The Town and Village are in the process of a code rewrite, which may address some of the growth issues
  - b. Growth can also be addressed by expanding tourism patronage during current slow periods rather than building bigger peak days
  - c. Growth can also be addressed by raising the spending per day and per arrival, rather than increasing visitor counts
  - d. Moving to a year round economy also impacts growth issues by raising the income level of some tourism employees, changing the way they view housing, and changing the way they contribute to the community
  - e. The Town Center Project looked at the conference center – what is the future on this.
  - f. The museum project was tied to the parking garage. Can the parking garage move forward without the museum?
3. Government Relations – While tourism and government interact (Lake Placid's economy is driven by tourism), it would be good to see a stronger partnership and better line of communications.
  - a. Government has been good about supporting tourism (especially related to events and infrastructure (like playing fields)).
  - b. The committee would like to find a way to capture and channel visitor dollars to
    - i. Deal with the impacts of tourism
    - ii. Support costs of infrastructure development that support tourism
  - c. The committee would like to foster a partnership between Lake Placid's tourism economy and local law enforcement that helps visitors understand local traffic laws and guides law enforcement practices toward the visitor-friendly approach taken by many destinations.

#### 4. Transportation and Congestion

- a. The free shuttle is working well for both visitors and residents
- b. How do we capture more visitors sooner and further reduce vehicular congestion, especially in the retail district
  - i. Can we reach them before they arrive?
  - ii. Can we pull off the highway sooner by situating a welcome center/parking lot/shuttle connection near the Horse Show Facility?
- c. Need to figure out a way to perpetuate the funding for the trolley as it is such an important component of the solution to congestion – and both quality of life for locals and visitor experience

The **Visitor Experience Subcommittee** is focused on making sure that Lake Placid is doing everything it can to deliver a great experience to patrons of the destination, recognizing that changing times and evolving tourism patterns are reshaping who is coming and what they expect to do in and from Lake Placid. There is also an understanding that the destination serves different visitors (with changing expectations and travel styles) as the seasons change. As Lake Placid seeks to become a year-round destination, new visitors will be courted that match up with opportunities created by present calendar gaps – and the destination will need to respond in ways that serve these new visitors well.

The committee discussed that Lake Placid is different things to different travelers, including:

1. Adirondack Experience
2. A base camp for adventures
3. Touring Visitors
4. Competitive Experience
5. Event Experience
6. Approaching a year-round Destination
7. An increasingly upscale destination

It is clear that there is an overlap among visitor types, and no clear boundaries. It is also clear that within a traveling group, the orientations of visitors can be different.

In the minds of potential travelers, at this time, the Adirondack Experience resonates more strongly than the Olympic draw. While it is important to maintain Lake Placid's image as an international destination, marketing targets the drive market which has inherent travel patterns. The destination needs to look at itself through those seeking the five experiences above and make sure it delivers on those expectations.

The subcommittee acknowledges that changes in rooms (styles, price, amenities) can drive a change in travelers. About half the rooms in Lake Placid have undergone significant upscaling and upgrading. The group noted that there has not been a comparable upgrading of restaurants, attractions, entertainment, and experiences. This has the community in an awkward transition as “higher spending” travelers come, expecting amenities in the destination that are just not available at this time. The committee also noted that retail will need to evolve to match the evolution of the clientele.

The committee envisions a future where Lake Placid moves quickly to upgrade dining, adding more high end dining, creativeness of menu, diversity, level of service, and dining with a view.

The committee envisions improvements in retail that include more “true” Adirondack products, more evening hours, friendlier front liners, and a cleaner looking retail district. The committee notes that the Business Association is a positive force and could be a great connection between retail businesses and the Visitors Bureau.

There is a general desire to reorganize the downtown retail zone. There is recognition that having more dining on the Mirror Lake side of the street would mean more dining with a view. There was, at one time, a plan to build a waterfront walkway, which would do some reorientation of pedestrian traffic and open up new retail and dining opportunities. The committee would also like to see fewer businesses that are not related to visitors in the Main Street retail district.

The group is exploring the idea of architectural standards. The Planning and Re-Zoning Boards are currently working on this. The group would like to see future construction and improvements on existing properties underscore the Adirondack and “European Alpine” feel of Lake Placid.

The committee envisions a more welcoming community that shows its pride by being more “kept up” and “cleaned up”. The chairman spoke of developing a better sense of community pride where each business and property owner works to keep their parts of Lake Placid clean and presentable.

James McKenna reported that studies have shown that 70% of arriving visitors come in past the Horse Show grounds. The committee agreed that visitors sense they have arrived in Lake Placid when they see the ski jumps. The committee envisions a more inviting arrival corridor that features fewer empty storefronts and more of a sense of a “kept-up” community.

This committee would like to see a higher percentage of visitors engage with the trolley. They note the increase in use, but feel more use would create a better visitor experience, especially on the Main Street retail corridor and in relation to parking. To that end, they would like to see hotels communicate trolley options to visitors at the time of booking.

The committee notes that there are efforts underway (that need financing) to address traffic routing – and that those efforts should take away some congestion on the downtown retail corridor. Perhaps financing can be addressed in the Destination Master Plan.

There is a general, but cautious, excitement about the possibilities of having more people arrive by train and air. The Amtrak schedule is not particularly good for Lake Placid, and arrivals are notoriously late, but several hotels now offer an option to arrive by Amtrak and shuttle to Lake Placid. It appears this has not, at this point, been embraced heavily by visitors. There is a significant opportunity (especially if the Amtrak schedule were to improve) for rental cars in Westport, Ticonderoga, and Port Henry). There is a growth of air options to both Saranac Lake and Plattsburgh airports, but there are few seats and connecting to rental cars and shuttles seems to be a barrier that needs attention. The committee would like to see better options for travelers to arrive by train and air.

The **Sustainability and Redevelopment Sub-Committee** focused on opportunities to “grow” the tourism economy without increasing visitor counts on “peak” days. One of the chief strategies they looked at is related to truly achieving a year-round tourism economy by filling gaps (parts of the calendar that are historically low in occupancy).

They have also begun to grapple with the issue of “who do you want as a Lake Placid visitor – and how long do you want them to stay?” They are looking at Lake Placid’s historic inability to attract sizeable spectator patronage for events. They are also looking at issues related to growing visitor spending per arrival, which relates closely to the issue of “who is coming and why?”

One of the key discussions relates to sports competitions and the evolution of the destination of Lake Placid. As lodging facilities are becoming increasingly upscale, there is more of a mismatch between facilities and youthful athletes. Some lodging facilities are becoming increasingly reluctant to open their doors to youth hockey participants. A number of establishments set rules and openly apologize to other guests when such groups are “in house”.

The sub-committee recognizes that part of the Lake Placid identity (with both patrons and residents) revolves around competitive sports. There is not a desire to end that relationship. In fact, the committee recognizes that competitive sports have given Lake Placid a unique opportunity to build a year-round destination. And the committee looks at competitive sports events as key to filling current patronage gaps.

Some of the key patronage gaps include:

- April 15 - June 15 (late spring)
- October 15 – November 15 (mid to late fall)
- November 15 – December 25 (early winter)
- Mid Week Winter

The committee has suggested that more competitive events are needed for the April 15-June 15 timeframe. They suggest timber sports or outdoor games. They would like to attract events that come with a crowd, rather than those needing Lake Placid to generate spectators for them.

The committee feels that another event is needed in September, to keep the energy going. The Xterra race was mentioned as a possibility.

The group discussed the winter mid-week dilemma in the context that “drive markets” tend to fill weekends and “fly markets” tend to attract longer staying visitors that travel on the weekend shoulders. In the current economy, the committee is happy to have the drive market, but is considering the value of attracting some winter “fly market” visitors over the long run. The local airports at Saranac Lake and Plattsburgh do not offer sufficient capacity (in the short run) to put a dent in mid week visitor count. And the current Amtrak schedule is not a good match for arrival to and departure from Lake Placid, although several local lodging establishments have Amtrak arrival packages available.

The group is also looking at indoor opportunities for the shoulder seasons. As Lake Placid looks to the future, there is a desire to have a more rounded set of opportunities indoors (and in the evening) to strengthen the year-round appeal and performance of the destination.

In a marketing sense, the committee is exploring ways to build a relationship with Albany (and perhaps Montreal) that encourages more frequent patronage, especially related to attending events. The key question is how to create a Lake Placid habit among the people who live in those nearby cities.

The group has also begun to examine ways to leverage additional tourism spending from existing events and competitions. How can Ironman and the Horse Show yield more lodging nights, dining, and retail revenue. How can the hockey season yield more spending per arrival (and specifically how can it better support the Olympic venues).

The committee reviewed Lake Placid as a destination, finding

- Lake Placid appeals to a wide variety of visitors
- The lack of chain restaurants is appealing
- There are upscale restaurants, but visitors have difficulty figuring out where they are
- Lake Placid is a real town, not a “made-for-tourism” built attraction – and that is something everyone wants to preserve
- Visitors have the opportunity to walk around Mirror Lake – a real plus
- Main street is not as presentable or kept up as the committee wishes it to be
- There is a sense that the retail component of the destination has not evolved at the same rate as the lodging component

- Kids fit into the destination well when events are underway, but they are often at a loss for activities in the evenings or when weather is inclement
- Lake Placid is set up for people to arrive by car (or fly/drive). Arrival by train and air (to close by airports) is still a challenge.

This sub-committee will put future efforts into looking at Lake Placid as a green destination, and will work more on planning for growth and redevelopment and workforce lodging.

The **Events and Sports Sub-Committee** has strong views about the future of Lake Placid as a competitive sports destination.

The committee remembers the passion that came from the Lake Placid community twice to gather resources and support and land the Olympics. They want that passion back, on the community side. There are strong voices hoping that ORDA and a new “Lake Placid Sports Council” could be partners and work together toward a mutually beneficial future.

There is concern that the Olympic venues are showing their age – and that if Lake Placid is to continue to attract and serve quality sports competitions and events, there will need to be increased maintenance of existing facilities and new funds to modify or replace facilities with state-of-the-art competition venues. There is concern about the economic health of ORDA, especially in light of the current economic times, and about progress toward the new conference center.

Committee voices spoke passionately about making the Olympic venues more profitable and about attracting new events and competitions to drive that profitability. The committee sees a similar set of opportunities outside the Olympic venues, noting the Horse Show, athletic fields, golf courses, and the Ironman route. There is general agreement that Lake Placid has the reputation and facilities that enable it to attract new events.

The committee also spoke of managing events so that the community does not grow weary of hosting big competitions. They spoke of adding in a mix of cultural events. They also spoke of building and attracting competitive events at times when the local tourism industry has patronage gaps – particularly in the May to mid-June time frame.

There was a good discussion about quality of events – in terms of benefits to the community. Clearly there are events that can be “landed” that take more investment than there is return – and the committee doesn’t support going after those events. Some non-profit events require a destination to pay substantial cash into the event – or offset other expenses. There is a clear understanding that Lake Placid’s economy depends on events being profitable and that there is a need to grow the bottom line rather than the number of people showing up in town.

If the Events and Sports Sub-Committee could vision a future for Lake Placid, it would probably be something like this:

*Lake Placid and the Adirondacks are a destination known around the world for competitive events and infrastructure. That infrastructure is state-of-the-art and constantly being renewed. The most exciting events in the world vie for the opportunity to be hosted in the Adirondacks at Lake Placid. The local community, led by a strong sports council, partners with the operators of the Olympic venue and other venues to promote and improve Lake Placid's future in competitive events.*

While it is too soon to bring the work of the sub-committees together into a vision, some things are becoming evident. We'll begin to describe that below (with the understanding that these points are subject to change, deletion, and evolution):

### **Visitor Perspective**

- Lake Placid will be seen as a year-round destination that has a strong Adirondack appeal coupled with a rich competitive sports draw.
- Lake Placid looks and is a destination built around a real town rather than becoming a built-for-tourism experience.
- The destination will gradually become more upscale, continuing to improve lodging, adding more diversity for dining, and improving both the presentation and selection of its retail corridor.
- Lake Placid will become a friendlier destination in terms of traffic flow, patterns, public transportation, and law enforcement.
- Lake Placid's appeal will expand into the evening hours as the retail corridor is more alive (and open) and there are more opportunities to enjoy entertainment and dining with a view.
- Those arriving in Lake Placid expect to engage with public transportation and that transition is accomplished in a way that is a positive visitor experience.
- Visitors to Lake Placid will have opportunities to witness exciting competitive events, to visit state of the art Olympic venues, and to test themselves on the same courses that world class athletes compete on.

### **Local Perspective**

- As Lake Placid becomes a more year-round destination, there will be fewer seasonal employees and more year-round employees who are also fully invested residents.
- Improvements to the traffic flow will make this a more satisfying (and less frustrating) place to live.
- Lake Placid will conquer the issue of escalating real estate values and have a substantial number of its houses occupied year round.
- Residents in Lake Placid understand that Lake Placid's economy evolves around tourism – but they also know that the future of that tourism is being managed with their input and their quality of life in mind.

- Young people who grow up in Lake Placid feel that there are competitive career opportunities available to them in Lake Placid.
- Lake Placid will work to rekindle the energy, spirit and community pride that dominated this community for so many years, put Lake Placid on the world's sports map, and brought the Olympics and other competitive sports to the area.

### **Structural Perspective**

- Those approaching Lake Placid, from any direction, feel a great sense of arrival into a well-maintained, welcoming destination.
- The combination of structural improvements (routing, parking) and public transportation have virtually eliminated the sense of congestion, and have made the downtown retail and dining corridor a friendlier place to be a pedestrian (for both residents and visitors).
- The Olympic venues and all other event-related venues are constantly maintained and renovated or replaced to always be current and competitive.
- There is an economic tool in place that captures some visitor revenues and routes that revenue to both offset the impacts of tourism and enable the destination to evolve its capacity to host events and enable quality visitor experiences.
- The overall tourism economy of Lake Placid is thriving, sustainable, and resilient, continuing to rely on the current strategy for funding and executing tourism marketing.
- The average length of a visit to Lake Placid has increased, along with a steady escalation in the spending per arrival.
- A true year-round economy has been achieved by adding new events into key patronage gaps and mixing in some "fly-market" visitors to strengthen winter mid week patronage.