

Essex County Tourism Master Planning Project

Moriah December 2008 Progress Report

Key Discussions

A good deal of the Moriah discussion has hinged around the question of how ready local residents are to engage in the economic activities of tourism – and how eager they are to have visitors in their community. There seems to be agreement that Moriah should engage in tourism slowly, giving people a chance to see how it feels and then decide whether or not to grow tourism. Discussions have proceeded based on the assumption, then, that Moriah will take small steps in the early stages.

Moriah is working on two key fronts – 1) developing reasons for visitors to come and 2) developing infrastructure to support tourism and generate revenue.

While Moriah has a number of potential visitor experiences, few of those have been turned into products that return revenues to the local economy. The planning team has been looking at some of Moriah's unique opportunities and figuring out ways to build on those slowly.

One of those unique opportunities is Moriah's historic relationship with movie making. A number of films were made within the town years ago. A local committee of five is working hard to put together a Moriah silent film festival. The first festival is tentatively scheduled for June 6, 2009. The committee is working on funding support and on broadening community involvement.

The planning process has also spawned a local group that is working to create a GPS driven photography adventure in Moriah. Visitors will be able to find coordinates online (along with sample images of the local vistas they represent) and use those coordinates to find their way to the sites. Images they generate can be posted online, giving them web credit for participating. The team is working on how to include a sign off for purchases at local stores, restaurants, etc. to require for participants who want their work displayed online. The team plans to photograph sites and collect GPS coordinates for sites, and to begin posting them online!

There has been significant discussion related to fishing tournaments – and how to use that to generate more revenue into the local economy. Demand is significant. The barrier is local lodging. If people compete in tournaments based from Moriah, they still need to go to another town to sleep – and they take dining revenue with them when they go.

The group has wrestled for some time with the issue of lodging. The group would like to see 20 new rooms in Moriah. They understand that local lodging is key to driving business to local dining and other visitor expenditures.

At this point, there are two areas of focus to improve local lodging infrastructure. First, Rick Dolliver, owner of Port Henry Marina, has joined the working group and is giving serious consideration to developing a lodging component. Second, the group has recognized that there are some ways to generate more revenue (and create more business and employment opportunities) by making some changes at the campgrounds owned by Moriah and Port Henry. There is interest, without giving up any local access to the lake through the campgrounds, in looking at ways to increase revenue there.

At the request of Supervisor Tom Scozzafava, Egret Communications will participate in a Special Board Meeting on January 22 to discuss ways that the campgrounds might generate more revenue. That discussion will include installation of small cabins, upgrading amenities, changing some of the sites from seasonal to transient occupation, and operating the sites with contracted services.

Visitor Perspective

While there is much of potential interest in Moriah, there has not been much recent activity related to drawing visitors to the town, nor many opportunities for the visitors who come to contribute to the local economy.

As noted above, there are energetic efforts underway to create a Silent Film Festival and a GPS/photography adventure, to draw visitors to Moriah. The planning group is still working on issues related to fishing, fishing tournaments, visiting boaters, Lake Champlain access, mining history, and more.

Local Perspective

The local planning team believes that Moriah is supportive of and friendly toward people who want to start new businesses, including those that would be set up to serve visitors. There is some concern that residents (who have a long history of employment relationships with mines and mills) might not be ready for a big (to Moriah) influx of visitors.

It is clear to the planning team that any tourism moves should not jeopardize residents' ownership of or access to lands (especially fronting on Lake Champlain) that are in public ownership now.

At the same time, the planning team has a strong interest in growing tourism (slowly) in a way that generates employment and entrepreneurial activity. All planning discussions have taken place with an understanding that new developments in tourism must come about slowly and also must find ways to channel employment revenue for local families.

Structural Perspective

The most important structural aspect to planning a tourism future for Moriah is associated with the development of lodging, providing a way that visitors can stay overnight (which will open the door to more dining and other visitor spending). The current goal of the planning team is to get 20 new rooms up and operating – and then to see whether there is local interest in future expansion. That seems to be a good level to get Moriah in the game without huge impacts on or commitments by local residents.

As noted above, one local business man is considering the development of a lodging component related to the marina.

The planning team is also thinking through the implications of replacing some of the campsites at the town campground with modest cabins. Those, rented on a transient basis, coupled with a potential similar move at the Port Henry campground and the new private lodging units, would give Moriah the capacity to lodge 20 couples or even more with families. That could generate a number of jobs – and it has great implications for local restaurants and stores.

Over time, if an initial foray into lodging sits well with both visitors and residents, Moriah has the potential to expand the flow of visitors and support that with an increase in lodging, dining, docking, retail, and other opportunities. Those all have the potential to generate business and employment opportunities for local residents.