

# Essex County Tourism Master Planning Project

## Saranac Lake December 2008 Progress Report

### Key Discussions

Saranac Lake's Planning team is focused on two key issues. The first relates to the need to generate updated and expanded tourism infrastructure. The second relates to the need to build an identity and a constituency that differs from that of nearby Lake Placid.

While Lake Placid currently holds a substantial edge in lodging (both in terms of room and quality choices) and dining (variety of price ranges, types of cuisine, and formality), Saranac Lake will not be content with a future where it serves Placid's overflow and where local residents feel they must run to Lake Placid for dining options. Saranac Lake intends to be in charge of its own tourism future – and intends to develop and serve its own flow of visitors that are matched with its strengths and served a quality experience.

The Saranac Lake planning team has reviewed a number of sites for the potential of the development of competitive and more upscale lodging. The site review largely included sites that are within walking distance (or a very short public transportation ride) to downtown and the river walk. Several of those sites provide both water views and access on Lake Flower (which connects into the whole Saranac chain). It should be noted that this planning effort and the site review proceeds without regard to county lines.

There has been considerable discussion (more needed) regarding visitors and the downtown retail area. There seems to be strong consensus that there is a need to be more inviting as visitors approach downtown (from all directions) and that visitors shouldn't have to search for visitor-oriented retail or dining opportunities. More work needs to be done on this.

The team has approached but not dealt directly with the need to expand dining, retail, and nightlife opportunities. This topic will need further discussion and a path to action.

The Saranac Lake planning team wants to build a tourism identity and a visitor constituency that separates it from Lake Placid, takes advantage of the many outdoor opportunities, underscores local interest and history related to wellness, and provides jobs and business opportunities well suited to outdoor-oriented residents.

To that end, the working group looking at learning vacations, a current tourism trend which describes travel in which urbanites could be teamed up with Saranac Lake guides who teach them specific skills and aspects related to “fitting” into the natural world and recreating in the wilds. Some of the potential learning vacations are listed at the end of this document. It will be necessary to shorten the list for initial launch and then expand it as qualified experiences come online.

The working group is exploring various configurations for delivering these learning experiences. This could develop as a number of small businesses. It could evolve as a single business that hires a number of independent guides. It could evolve as a number of independent guides who book (and share bookkeeping services) through a central agency charged with interfacing clients, maintaining a web presence, keeping books, finding insurance, coordinating training and certification, etc. The new website booking capabilities of the Lake Placid/Essex County Visitors Bureau could also play a role in connecting visitors to guides.

There has been group discussion about raising the bar when it comes to qualifying guides. While there are currently hoops that a guide needs to jump through (Adirondack guides have similar requirements to those in most states and National Parks), those hoops are not nearly as demanding as those in world class destinations outside the United States. There is a feeling that Saranac Lake (or even the Adirondacks) could develop a reputation for quality if higher standards were demanded or at least recognized. To that end, one idea is to form an “association” that would be charged with protecting the quality level of guiding. Some coordination or cooperation with the APA may be in order, too. In the end, it will be important to protect the quality of the guided experience, to ensure that those who develop top quality experiences don’t have that quality diluted by others who don’t work so hard, to protect the natural resources from visitor impacts, to ensure that interpretation is accurate, and to protect visitors from unnecessary risks when joining a guided outing.

Note that if Saranac Lake decides to pursue learning vacations that action does not interfere with or diminish other existing or potential tourism products and experiences. It simply adds a component that helps Saranac Lake differentiate itself in the marketplace and attract a new component of visitors that has the potential to be strong at repeat and referral. Saranac Lake will continue to excel at delivering outstanding experiences based on its incredible natural resource base, its history of wellness, and its strength in the art community. And there will be new products developed and new experiences identified as Saranac Lake continues to chart its course in tourism development.

### **Visitor Perspective**

Saranac Lake is already recognized for its unique position among great hiking, climbing, paddling, boating, and other year-round outdoor recreational opportunities. The changes planned will improve the opportunity to have a quality lodging base in Saranac Lake and to find exciting dining and visitor-related retail. Changes under discussion will make the destination feel more vibrant and inviting, leading to higher spending and greater visitor satisfaction.

The steps that Saranac Lake plans related to learning vacations will shape the image of Saranac Lake among visitors and potential visitors. This thrust is designed to specifically court a group of visitors who are more urban in nature and both needing and wanting assistance in learning their way through a more natural world. Saranac Lake intends to add value to each visit by having these visitors participate in guided experiences. It will also work to build a solid relationship with these visitors that will result in a repeat-and-referral clientele.

### **Local Perspective**

Through the pursuit of this learning vacation strategy, Saranac Lake hopes to establish a stronger brand identity and get further out of the shadow of Lake Placid. The team is strongly interested in developing a constituency that will value Saranac Lake for its strengths and will value the skills that local residents take for granted.

In January, the discussion will expand to include some of the local guides and those who might consider becoming guides in this new environment. It is important to understand this concept from the perspective of those who would be Saranac Lake's frontliners in the tourism economy.

While it is clear that both residents and visitors who sleep in Saranac Lake make use of Lake Placid's more extensive dining and retail offerings, Saranac Lake intends to take steps to invite locals, those visitors, and visitors from Lake Placid into a more vibrant and upbeat retail/dining district. The preliminary visioning of this district includes an expansion of existing offerings in a walking environment that includes downtown and the river walk. A clustering of visitor-oriented retail establishments will make the area more visitor friendly, and mixing in of dining establishments will pull both visitors and residents into this area.

### **Structural Perspective**

The Saranac Lake working group has focused strongly on upgrading the current selection of lodging establishments. There is strong sentiment for redevelopment of lodging on the sites where current lodging is behind times (or poorly maintained). There is also strong sentiment supporting lodging located within walking distance (or a short shuttle) from downtown retail and dining opportunities (and the river walk).

The team has spent time (and will dedicate more time) to options to invite visitors into the downtown retail corridor. The team will also look more closely at clustering of visitor-related retail and dining opportunities to create a more vibrant visitor experience.

Progress on the riverfront revitalization should pave the way for a more visitor-friendly downtown experience. It should also provide a nucleus for siting of retail and dining. There are even some possible sites for lodging that connects to the river walk.

## ***Addendum***

### **List of Potential Learning Vacations**

- Camp – winter
- Camp – summer
- Kayak – river
- Kayak – lake
- Canoe – river
- Canoe – lake
- Hike – winter
- Hike – summer
- Climb – winter
- Climb – summer
- Backpack
- Birding
- Wildlife spotting (including sign and tracks)
- Botany – wild flowers
- Botany – tree identification
- Fishing – summer
- Fishing – fly
- Fishing – ice
- Cooking – indoor
- Cooking – outdoor
- Mountain biking
- Road biking
- Orienteering
- Cross-country ski
- Cross-country ski racing
- Downhill ski
- Downhill ski racing
- Ski touring
- Tubing – winter
- Tubing – river
- Snowshoeing
- Horseback riding
- Lama trekking
- Snowmobiling

Sailing – ice  
Sailing – water  
Outdoor ice skating  
Chainsaw carving  
Wood carving  
Blacksmithing  
Pottery  
Plein air painting  
Nature photography  
Massage, etc. package  
Vegan living  
North Country gardening  
North Country farming  
Calligraphy  
Zip line  
Yoga  
Technical tree climbing  
Biathlon  
Creating Adirondack crafts (with a strong emphasis on gathering & using local materials)  
Basket weaving  
Snow sculpture  
Ice sculpture  
Rock Climbing, Bouldering  
History  
Personal Enrichment – life coaching, leadership, organizational skills, communication  
Dog Sledding