



# Downtown Economics

Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

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## Starting a Cultural Heritage Tourism Program

*Summary of guidelines provided by the National Trust for Historic Preservation*

In the February edition of *Downtown Economics*, we discussed the economic benefits of taking a historical perspective to economic development. One of the most promising opportunities provided by a historic perspective is the potential to create a market for cultural heritage tourism. Cultural heritage tourism is an industry created when a community promotes its historic places and stories as tourist destinations. Below we discuss the four critical steps to starting a heritage tourism program.

### Assess the Potential

To assess an area's potential for heritage tourism a community must evaluate their assets in five areas.

- 1) *Attractions*: This process attempts to identify the current and potential historic, cultural, and natural resources present in a community and the surrounding area. It is important to consider everything from historic buildings, to local cuisine and regional parks.
- 2) *Visitor Services*: Consider where travelers will eat, park, sleep and shop when they come to your community.
- 3) *Organizational Capabilities*: Identify local groups involved in the arts, museums, development and other related fields that may be potential partners or leaders in your effort.
- 4) *Protection*: Consider all measures to protect and preserve the value of historic, cultural and natural assets.
- 5) *Marketing*: Catalogue all marketing related potential already present in your community. *See the final step for more information on marketing.*

### Plan and Organize

As a community begins the process of creating a heritage tourism program it is important they prepare to effectively manage their human and financial resources.

#### *Human Resources:*

To organize human resources you must first secure widespread community support from the business,

religious, public and private communities. Once you achieve community buy in, you can begin coordinating the organizations critical to your success. You must remember to look for potential partners at all levels. For example, as your community organizes locally, be sure to reach out to regional and state organizations that are involved in tourism related activities and/or the preservation of important historic stories.

Once organized, define your community's mission, goals, objectives and timeline. When considering timeline, remember that most communities require more time than they expect to set up a tourism program.

#### *Financial Resources*

The first step in organizing your financial resources is to draw up a detailed financial plan that includes immediate and projected hard and soft costs. Once your community has a firm grasp on anticipated costs, it is time to look for funding. Funding can come from either the local, state or national level, including:

- grants and loans,
- membership dues,
- state tourism funds, and
- national foundations.

### Prepare, Protect and Manage

Before visitors arrive, your community must prepare their aesthetic environment and historic story. You must also consider a plan to protect and manage your resources.

#### *Prepare*

It is important to consider how your community will convey and interpret its unique historic story. Your message must be easy to understand and emotionally accessible to visitors.



Historic Deadwood, South Dakota ([www.mediasd.com](http://www.mediasd.com))

Some common tools used to present a historic story include:

- Signs
- Maps
- Brochures
- Guides
- "Living history" exhibits

Also, it will be important to train employees in proper hospitality techniques, because, the experience of your visitors will largely be shaped by their interaction with staff. Remember, you will most likely experience a high turnover rate among employees, so frequent retraining will be necessary.

#### *Protect*

With the economic benefits of heritage tourism tied directly to your historical and natural resources, it is critical that your community develop a comprehensive preservation plan to ensure a long life for those resources. A comprehensive preservation plan should consider, among others, the following actions:

- Seek official designation of historic resources (e.g. National Register of Historic Places).
- Consider zoning and land use restrictions to control development around sensitive areas.
- Establish design guidelines and review boards to ensure new buildings are aesthetically compatible with historic image.
- Develop a demolition ordinance so no potentially historic building is inadvertently torn down.

#### *Manage*

Creating and sustaining a heritage tourism program is a big job. Therefore, it is important your community develop a long term management plan to ensure continued success. Some things that should be considered in a management plan include:

- Long term plan to maintain and improve public services and tourism related infrastructure (e.g. roads).
- Tactics to manage the balance between bringing in dollars, and not exceeding the "carrying capacity" of your community. Too much business can destroy the very resources you rely on.
- Methods to monitor success of heritage tourism in your community.
- Ways of adjusting program or personal to meet objectives.

## **Marketing**

If people are not aware, they will not visit your community. To get the word out, develop a marketing plan that includes the following pieces:

#### *Public Relations*

Public relations is a method used to inform and educate the media. To do this, construct a press packet that includes stories and articles on people, places and events. Then, when there are noteworthy occurrences, follow up with a specific press release. Remember, you are targeting visitors, so do not focus only on local media.

#### *Advertising*

Advertising is efficient but costly. Match your message to your budget, and an appropriate medium. Always remember that advertising is only effective if it can be repeated frequently.

#### *Graphic Materials*

The most critical part of graphic marketing is creating a recognizable logo and using it consistently and repeatedly.

#### *Promotions*

Many industry and consumer tourism shows are held around the country. If it is within your community's budget, it may be beneficial to present at these shows in order to expose your community to a regional or national customer and media pool.

## **Conclusion**

If heritage tourism is a potential economic development tool for your community it will be important to lay a solid framework. To do this, remember to assess, plan, prepare and market your community and its cultural heritage program. If this formula fits your needs, visit the National Trust for Historic Places website for a detailed guide to the above steps:

#### Sources

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Getting Started:

<http://www.culturalheritagetourism.org/foursteps.htm>  
accessed March 28, 2007.

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