



Tourism and Economic Development

Tourism is a major source of economic vitality to the State of New York and within the Catskill Region. Many rural communities, in particular, rely on the economic benefits derived from tourism and travel-related activities. Tourism can represent an economic development alternative for communities in addition to agribusiness and other industries. Increasing the economic benefits from tourism to rural communities is an important part of a community's economic development strategy. Rural tourism appeals to travelers seeking some type of experiential tourism product such as auto touring, bird watching, nature tourism, and cultural and heritage tourism. While rural areas often serve as the backdrop for these types of natural resource and cultural/heritage activities, the rural stakeholders do not always derive direct financial benefits. However, through careful tourism development and focused marketing strategies, the Durham Valley can increase the traveler's length of stay and the amount of traveler spending.

Development of Tourism in the Durham Valley

Even prior to the Civil War, tourists have been drawn to the scenic beauty and natural grandeur of the Durham Valley. East Windham was a popular spot and had at least four large and successful boarding houses. Built in 1848, the Summit House was considered the grandest and largest for its time. By the mid 1880s, the establishment could accommodate 90 guests.

"The splendid hotels and boarding houses here have a vast throng who are spending the beautiful August days at the summit of the mountain, where they can see the world at their feet."

-New York Times (August 14, 1910)



During the mid 19th century, many farmers in the Durham Valley supplemented their income by opening extra rooms to guests. Typically, a family would give their best rooms, often their own bedroom, to the boarders. Tourism is still active in the Durham Valley, but it has changed dramatically from this 19th century foundation. By the mid 20th century, bungalow colonies often developed in conjunction with the smaller boarding houses. Over time, East Durham, situated prominently on New York State Route 145, became a center for the Durham Valley's tourism.

Today, tourism in the Durham Valley is largely event based. The largest annual event is the Irish Festival, which takes place Memorial Day Weekend in East Durham. Featured are music groups from the U.S., Canada, and Ireland. Each July, East Durham is also the host for the Catskills Irish Arts Week. The best teachers and students of Irish culture, particularly musicians, travel to East Durham from throughout the world to attend classes and perform together at the local pubs. In addition, the Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival takes place over four days in July in Oak Hill.

Other Tourist Attractions

Other tourist attractions in the Durham Valley include the Zoom Flume Water Park, K&K/Ravine Farm or Tanglewood Ranch for horseback riding, and the Hull-O Farms family farm vacations. The Durham Valley Scenic Byway, the Durham Center Museum, and antiques and restaurants in Oak Hill are other tourist draws.

Also of great importance to tourism in the Durham Valley are Windham Mountain (a ski resort in the neighboring Town of Windham), and the established hiking trails such as the Long Path and the Escarpment Trail in and around the Catskill Park. These trails are popular destinations for eco-tourists visiting for the day or weekend from the nearby population centers.

Visitor Amenities

Most traveler amenities in the Durham Valley are concentrated along New York State Routes 23, 81, and 145. Some, such as gas stations, convenience stores, and banks are scattered outside of developed areas, especially along New York



State Route 145, detracting from the beauty of the setting. There are only a few retail commercial enterprises remaining in the Durham Valley. The Milk Run sells both gasoline and diesel fuel and operates a convenience store and grill. Lawyers is a small general store situated in East Durham. Dean's Mills is a grain and feed store. There are five restaurants, two each in Oak Hill and East Durham, and one on New York State Route 23.

High-end accommodations, such as a large inn in a historic building, are missing from the Durham Valley. In addition, the Town of Durham does not have a full-service grocery or department store. Some visitor amenities, although they may be appropriately located, are not yet fully "visitor ready" in the sense that their standards of service, quality of facilities, and maintenance may not be at levels expected and demanded by travelers.

Preservation, Conservation, and Economic Sustainability

The economic benefits of historic preservation and land conservation are not readily familiar to the broader community. Tourism and agriculture are better understood for the positive benefits they provide to the Durham Valley's economic viability.

- There is an opportunity to promote historic preservation within the local community for the benefits that it offers, including its role in environmental sustainability such as returning potentially underutilized buildings and sites to a productive use, and the local economic benefits that are gained in the form of new jobs and increased tax revenue.
- The Durham Valley has a local land trust that can act as catalyst to promote how land conservation has helped communities grow smart, attract investment, revitalize areas, boost tourism, protect farms, prevent flood damage, and safeguard the environment.

- Additional opportunities exist for expanding the Durham Valley's tourism base to include heritage tourism, agri-tourism, visits to public lands, and other sectors of the tourism industry that respect the qualities of unique places. Travelers in these categories generally bring a high level of respect to a place with historic or agricultural significance, and are usually willing to pay a premium for quality lodging, food, and collectibles.



Management Actions - Tourism and Economic Development

Work with partners on their existing historic sites to bring the sites up to a high level of service (visitor ready) and authentic quality for interpretation, programming, and events.

- Work with partners on those sites that are already identified as high priority for improving facilities and interpretation (i.e., getting them visitor ready).
- Work with partners and private property owners to secure funding and technical support for implementation.

Develop and enhance tourism to increase the economic base.

- Educate the community about the Scenic Byway Corridor's resources and tourism benefits. Raising community awareness is key to the promotion and maintenance of the Scenic Byway's intrinsic qualities.
- Design programs to heighten local familiarity with the Scenic Byway Corridor's assets. These programs could take the form of a bus tour, photo or painting exhibition, or school field trips. Restoration of a particular landmark or installation of interpretive signage along the Scenic Byway will also call attention to the Scenic Byway Corridor.
- Continue to catalogue and monitor existing visitor services in the Scenic Byway Corridor, including accommodations, restaurants, and other pertinent businesses.
- Determine priorities for new and/or improved services based on community input. The attractions and amenities within the Scenic Byway Corridor provide its character and make the Durham Valley a unique destination. It is important to consider the fabric of the community as well as the needs of the visitor.