Tourism in Hart County: 

A Vision for the Future

A Report of the Assets, Challenges, and Action Planning of Tourism Efforts in Hart County, Georgia

Photo Courtesy of Bill Powell
Community leaders assembled on Thursday, August 7, 2008, at the Hart County Literacy Center to discuss the future of tourism efforts in Hart County. The meeting was called by representatives of the Hart County Chamber of Commerce and Hart County Board of Commissioners. Elected officials, city/county administrators, business leaders, and regular citizens attended the meeting. The meeting was facilitated by Matt Bishop and Sandy Christopher of the University of Georgia’s Archway Partnership Project.

The intended outcome of the meeting was to generate ideas that could enhance Hart County’s tourism efforts. As such, the primary purpose of the meeting was twofold:

1) identify some of the assets and challenges of tourism efforts in Hart County; and

2) brainstorm some actions that could be implemented by community entities in the future.

The following represents the findings of the meeting.

“Tourism” Defined

As a way to generate discussion on the different viewpoints of tourism in Hart County, attendees were asked to individually define “tourism.” Attendees listed the following definitions:1

- Getting people who don’t live here to come here and spend money.
- Someone who visits, spends, and leaves.
- Industry.
- All travel.
- Creating and promoting a destination.
- Relaxing, fun, leisure, and learning.
- Facilities, environment, agribusiness, amenities.
- Support and promote.
- Jobs.
- Exploration outside our own environment.
- Business travel (consumer).

Success/Victory

After brainstorming ideas about how tourism is defined in Hart County, attendees were asked to list ideas about what success would look like if community leaders were able to

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1 Individual responses for “Tourism” Defined can be found in Appendix A.
effectively address tourism efforts (e.g., if the community were successful in its tourism efforts, what would victory look like?). The following ideas were listed:\(^2\)

- Enhanced services.
- More amenities.
- Steady cash flow.
- Conference center on lake.
- Increase in population.
- Waterpark, hotels, theater, mini golf.
- Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CVB).
- Full restaurants.
- Increase in SPLOST.
- Increase in profitability.
- Variety of businesses.
- Full hotels.
- Decrease in property tax.
- Decrease in tax abatement.
- Tourism staff to do marketing.
- Increase in jobs.
- New facilities.
- More tax revenue.
- Increased wages.
- More customers.

**Current Reality**

When asked about the strengths and weaknesses in Hart County that can lead to success/victory in the area of tourism, and the benefits and dangers of being successful, community leaders responded with the following ideas:\(^3\)

**Strengths of Hart County**

- Available land
- Taxes
- Lake
- Close Proximity
- Good retail mix
- Historic
- Active
- Commitment
- Leadership
- Friendly
- Local events
- Existing regional art center
- Restaurants
- Good people
- Diversity
- I-85

\(^2\) Individual responses for Success/Victory can be found in Appendix B.

\(^3\) Individual responses for Strengths/Weaknesses/Benefits/Dangers can found in Appendix C.
• Ready work force
• Climate
• History
• Cateechee Golf Club
• Rural setting
• Hometown atmosphere
• Train turntable
• Sense of place
• Churches

Weaknesses of Hart County

• Perception of fragmentations
• Too close to Anderson and Athens
• Lack of investment in tourism
• No zoning in country (gas, infrastructure, water, sewer, roads)
• Lack of vision
• Lack of staff, funding, expertise
• No long range plans
• Few hotels and facilities
• No sign ordinance
• No marketing plan
• Lack of inventory of needs
• Lack of proper training for hospitality industry
• No coherent policy on lake levels
• Lack of entertainment

Benefits of Success/Victory

• Low taxes
• More activities for youth
• Diverse economic base
• Better educated workforce
• Maybe a college
• More amenities
• More infrastructure
• More entertainment
• Enhance services
• Ripple effect on local economy
• Cultural awareness
• Pride to stay here

Dangers of Success/Victory

• Losing small town atmosphere
• Increased traffic
• Increased demand on services
• Increased crime rate
• Increased footprint
• Increased pollution
• Entrance of outsiders
• Noise
• Eclipse of current businesses
Actions

After processing the community’s strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and dangers of tourism efforts, attendees were asked to develop a list of actions that would lead to success on the topic of tourism in Hart County (e.g., Given the current reality in Hart County, what actions need to take place that will lead to an improvement of tourism efforts in the community?). Attendees were then asked to vote on the most pressing actions that need to be undertaken for successful tourism efforts in Hart County. The following lists the actions with the number of votes received.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Identify and hire professional staff.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Local Government Buy-in.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Identify funding mechanisms, including local community investment.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Develop long-term strategic vision of tourism.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Develop central organization for implementation.</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Identify target markets.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Community awareness.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Develop land use plan.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Research other like communities efforts.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Legislative /policy advocacy of state/federal elected officials.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Inventory assets/weaknesses of tourism in Hart County.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Conduct feasibility and impact study.</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
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Action Planning

Finally, attendees were divided into four groups to develop action plans for the top four actions identified above. These action plans represent ideas for how Hart County officials might move forward with addressing tourism efforts in the future.

1. **Professional Tourism Staff**

   **Goal Statement: Identify and hire professional staff to implement tourism efforts in Hart County.**

   Actions:
   1. Create job descriptions with goals and objectives.
   2. Determine salary range, benchmarks (commit ability to pay).
   3. Determine who we are going to compete against.
   4. Visit similar communities (best in class) for guidance.
   5. Determine office site, amenities, etc.

4 Appendix D contains the Actions listed individually without vote tallies.
6. Determine source of recruitment (advertise and/or recruiter).
7. Conduct interviews.
8. Hire individual.

2. **Local Government Buy-In**

   **Goal Statement:** Obtain financial and political support from local government officials for tourism efforts in Hart County.

   **Actions:**
   1. Solicit community involvement/promote public awareness about tourism.
   2. Organize group to develop a presentation to present to public and organizations/groups.
   3. Organize group to meet with city and county officials on what we want to do.
   4. Have each group come up with solutions to the problem.
   5. Have a commitment contract written up and presented as solutions to both local governments (present to Board of Commissioners/City Council to approve/disapprove).
   6. Let the public know what their officials are not doing.
   7. Discuss/identify funding for staff.

3. **Identify Funding Mechanisms**

   **Goal Statement:** Identify funding mechanisms to create and support long-term, sustainable community tourism efforts in Hart County.

   **Actions:**
   1. Identify local and statewide resources to tap into for specific funding and resources.
   2. Create Memorandum of Understanding with local and state entities.
   3. Explore federal grants with tri-county area.
   4. Define requirements to acquire said funding.
   5. Appeal to local government entities for local participation.
   6. Compare limitations of funding against marketing plan.
   7. Establish appropriate allocation of available funding.

4. **Strategic Plan for Tourism**

   **Goal Statement:** Develop a long-term strategic plan for tourism efforts in Hart County.

   **Actions:**
   1. Identify long term plans for principal local partners.
   2. Study other community strategic plans.
   3. Organize a small steering committee, one member from each local partner.
   4. Identify current real tourism assets.
   5. Identify assets/weaknesses.
   6. Undertake a demographic assessment.
   7. Create future scenarios.
   8. Identify all other strategic plans in the community and identify duplication areas.
Appendix A: Individual Responses for “Tourism” Defined

- All travel is tourism.
- Recreation, business travel, attractions, food, entertainment.
- Agribusiness.
- Jobs.
- Folks that pass through and leave money.
- Usually those having a good time.
- Revenue generator for the community.
- Creating and promoting a destination, expansion.
- The process of visiting areas different from one’s present home for fun, relaxation, learning, and leisure.
- A resource for bringing in revenue into our community. The people do not impact our schools, as the people leave the community, but hopefully will have spent money in the community while visiting.
- Travel for pleasure.
- Getting people who don’t live here to come and spend money.
- The initiative to draw visitors from out of town to engage in activities and leisure.
- Someone traveling to a destination for the purpose of spending money, special events, visiting.
- Individuals, families, or groups visiting or traveling through an area that they stop to visit, participate in activities, see sights, and spend money.
- The industry, the facilities, the attractions that encourage visitors to want to come to your area for leisure and recreation. Also the providing of services by the community for these ventures.
- The cleanest industry in the world that produces major dollars to the economy of a city, county, state via businesses that accommodate the tourist in leisure.
- Travel and exploration of areas outside the usual and then return to normal, everyday life.
- The 2nd largest industry in the state of Georgia.
- Product development.
- Exported tax burden through sales taxes.
- Economic development for community in partnership with other EC activities such as industrial recruitment.
- Travel to pre-determined destinations, getting away from the rat race of one’s life and enjoying the activities involved in that area.
- Any activity a person or group of people participates in outside of where they normally live.
- Paying to go somewhere else and stay there awhile.
- Tee-shirts and caps.
- Folks not knowing my name, not caring, and bringing me stuff.
- An industry that encompasses any business, location destination, etc where visitors/travelers spend time on money- both. Examples- museums, art centers, farms, aquariums, restaurants.
- Traveling for recreation and leisure. For our city and county, tourism could be and should be considered one of our major industries and revenue producers.
- Recreational travel and those facilities and amenities that support and promote it.
- It encompasses the entire travel industry; business and recreational.
- The activity of promoting what is good about your community and encouraging enjoyment of these assets by people from outside the community.
Appendix B: Individual Responses for Success/Victory

- Prosperous business.
- Economic growth and development.
- Jobs.
- Larger tax base for county and city.
- Lower taxes for residents.
- Recognizable identity - brand.
- Provide immediate services for tourists: information, facilities, entertainment.
- 1/3 of all money spent on lake tourism in Hart County.
- Flow would be steady, not seasonal.
- Property taxes would be reduced by 10%.
- Average wages would improve.
- Promotion.
- Charming, attractive downtown.
- Expanded conference center.
- Multifunctional events and attractions on the lake.
- Enhanced infrastructure.
- More amenities.
- Attract new businesses.
- Export tax burden.
- Increased traffic - auto/pedestrian.
- General positive attitude towards visitors.
- Controlled growth.
- More tax money spent on amenities.
- Conference center on the lake.
- More lodging, entertainment, restaurants.
- Physical improvements.
- Higher sales tax.
- Organize it: Convention and Visitors Bureau.
- Hartwell maintains positive characteristics.
- Greater awareness as a positive tourist destination.
- Everyone is happy.
- More money available for social programs.
- More money available for economic development.
- Countywide water/sewer.
- First class roads, law enforcement, EMS.
- If HC were to initiate tourism it would lead to new, non-polluting jobs that offer opportunities for residents to improve their quality of life.
- SPLOST grows.
- More exciting for existing citizens because of more to do for our families.
- Increase in property values.
Appendix C: Individual Responses for Strengths, Weaknesses, Benefits, and Dangers

**Strengths**

- Leadership
- Resources
- Government support
- Lake
- Good workforce
- Improving education system
- Abundant property available
- City has infrastructure to attract businesses
- Within 100 mile radius of many natural attractions
- Large pool of interested, talented people
- Rural vistas
- Semi-private golf club
- 1st class YMCA facility
- Active churches
- Agriculture
- History
- Not too crowded
- Close to Atlanta and Greenville
- Room for growth
- 965 miles of shoreline with 220 miles in Hart county
- Good school system
- Community theatre
- New performing arts center at HCHS
- Historic downtown
- Cateechee
- I-85
- Good retail mix
- Diversity
- UGA/Clemson
- Annual local events
- New task force willingness to address new avenues of tourism
- Warm, friendly people
- Ability to build tourism brand
- Economic development
- Strong Chamber of Commerce
- Concerned citizens
- Open space
- Good road network to county
- Forward thinking leaders
- Warm climate for snow birds
- Safety from hurricanes
- Excellent healthcare systems
- Lowest tax rate in GA
- Walmart
- Municipal governments that work together in supporting tourism
- Easy to get to
- Regional trade center
Weaknesses

- Water within the county (infrastructure)
- Leadership in agreement on how to reach a goal
- Resistance to change in population
- Available jobs
- Increased property prices
- Action plan- hopefully now in progress
- Financial funds to accomplish goals
- Cohesive leadership
- Lack of money being spent to hire tourism director
- Need for large conference center
- Short-term thinkers
- Lack of desire to commit to “seed money”
- Lack of national recognized food purveyors
- General population weary of outsiders
- Lack of properly-trained workforce
- Poorly managed lake levels
- Lack of entertainment facilities
- Lack of controlled growth considerations
- Lack of a real year-round attraction
- No large group facility providing bed and board
- “Someone ought to” “Not my job” mentality
- Lack of public restrooms in downtown area
- Land use regulations and planning
- Opposition from some citizens on growth and future development
- Fragmentation of groups
- Lack of investment
- Lack of marketing plan
- Lakeshore access
- Conflict with “no growth” vs. “pro growth” mentalities
- Lack of provision
- Not taking advantage of available opportunities
- Lack of know-how to organize a group that would lead
- Too narrow a focus by certain sects of the community (ex. boat ramp, lake)
- We believe that we are apart and that belief puts people in a negative mindset
- No mission statement
- Zoning
- County vs. City
- Political ineptitude
- Small population
- Don’t know what to market
- Lack of identity
- Greed
- Too close to Anderson
- Press
- Noise

Benefits of Success/Victory

- Planned growth and infrastructure development
- More homes, more tax money, more businesses
- Organized and planned tourist development
• Jobs
• Diverse economic base
• A good community with the amenities - entertainment, infrastructure, plans
• In-flow of capital, revenue, etc
• Improved employment for service sector
• Growth!
• Some people benefit
• Some increase in revenue
• Lower taxes
• Quality of life
• Entertainment for local people as well as tourists
• Profits for business owners
• Pride in community
• Possible college in community
• Happier people
• More variety of retail
• More for our children to do
• Yong people will not have to leave home for jobs
• County/city will be more attractive due to more tax dollars to spend on facilities
• Improved atmosphere will bring community together
• More exchange with people outside the city
• Increased property values
• Things will come here that would not without tourism
• Investment made in community
• Business growth
• More dollars to spend in schools
• More educated people
• Controlled growth
• Stronger workforce
• More support of cultural events
• Community pride
• Better financial climate
• Greater publicity
• Improvement in attitude as we develop pride in what we have
• Can afford more/better services
• Desire for change
• Brings clean dollars into community

**Dangers of Success/Victory**

• Increased traffic
• Loss in small town atmosphere
• Yankees
• Pollution/environmental issues
• Losing small town atmosphere
• Increased traffic
• Increased demand on services
• Increased crime rate
• Increased footprint
• Increased pollution
• Entrance of outsiders
• Noise
• Eclipse of current businesses
Appendix D: Individual Responses for Actions

- Hire a tourism director to spearhead effort (need someone who has experience; compensate appropriately; organize, staff, and fund it)
- Central organization (CVB)
- Fund agency
- Provide staff and location
- Establish mission and plan to implement
- Check in on other communities
- Develop long-term strategic plans and short term measures
- Multi-faceted approach (lake, historic district, agriculture)
- Develop action plan (funding, goals, leadership to accomplish goals, measure, marketing plan)
- Identify target market
- Identify goals and ways to measure goals
- Destination location (e.g boardwalk on the waterfront)
- Develop a Reynolds Plantation style development
- Decide on a brand (ditch the “dam site” slogan)
- Local government
- Long range plan- plan for implementation
- Local govt. buy-in
- Inventory of tourism assets, resources and a companion inventory of our weaknesses
- Develop a community consensus on the positive aspects of tourism
- Develop a marketing plan
- Complete development of the lakeside
- Plan your work, then work your plan!
- Must have separate dedicated tourism entity with a specific board of directors
- Re-address land use ordinances within the city
- Create local enterprise zones for leisure activities
- Encourage/develop local business owners
- Inventory of weaknesses and plan to address each
- Prioritize
- Workshops/training for general population- need for people to be knowledgeable of community, never know what a tourist will ask.
- Get commitments from city and county for financial support
- Develop a job description for tourism director
- Create a body of people to work on tourism- task force
- Pursue Archway relationship
- Advertise!
- Identify our recreational needs
- Encourage entrepreneurs
- Explore ways to promote our history
- Better maps and tours of county
- Develop mission
- All entity involvement- govt. and private
- Look at regional aspects to save on money
- Gov. needs to respond to the infrastructure needs to pursue this
- Plan and research
- Provide economic help to encourage entertainment industry