

AUGUST 22, 2019

VISIT QUAD CITIES

DESTINATION VISION
& STRATEGIC PLAN

STAKEHOLDER
ENGAGEMENT

SUMMARY ISSUES &
OPPORTUNITIES



The following material is a summary of issues and opportunities identified in the Stakeholder Conversations conducted in the Quad Cities region by Resonance Consultancy during the week of June 24, 2019 and additional calls held the week of August 12th. Approximately 45 stakeholders participated in 25 sessions.

The primary purpose of these discussions was to identify participant opinions, aspirations and ideas for the future of the Quad Cities region, while also building an informal group of “champions” for the project who will be critical to the endorsement and implementation of the Destination Vision and Strategic Plan upon completion.

The stakeholder engagement conversations focused on:

1. The trends impacting the Quad Cities tourism industry and the issues and opportunities they represent;
2. Current tourism activities and marketing efforts and their impact on the Quad Cities’ economy, employment, tourism quality, environment and quality of life;
3. Growth and expansion opportunities for the Quad Cities’ tourism industry;
4. Hidden assets that may offer potential for growth;
5. Tourism industry actions and activities that can and do impact the region; and
6. Issues and opportunities needed to inform and direct governance, management, funding, planning and development in a manner that supports tourism development and community goals and objectives.

The issues and opportunities are listed in alphabetical order:

- Agritourism
- Air Service Development
- American Discovery Trail
- Bi-State Regionality
- Biking & Biking Trails
- Brand Identity
- Casinos & Gaming
- Destination Development
- Festivals & Events
- Gathering Place
- I-74 Mississippi River Bridge
- John Deere
- Maker Movement
- MICE Business & Economic Development
- Mississippi River
- Music
- Passenger Rail
- Q2030 Regional Action Plan
- Regional Connectivity
- Resident Perception
- Rock Island Arsenal
- Seasonality
- Sports Tourism
- Talent Attraction
- The Arts
- Tourism Ambassador Program
- Tourism Investment
- Workforce Development

AGRITOURISM

Stakeholders have suggested the Quad Cities region has an opportunity to develop and promote more agritourism experiences within the region, highlighting the region's deep-rooted connection to agriculture. Agritourism enterprises might include outdoor recreation (fishing, hunting, wildlife study), educational experiences (farm-to-table dinners, cooking classes, or wine tasting), entertainment (harvest festivals), hospitality services (farm stays, guided tours or outfitter services) or on-farm direct sales (u-pick operations or roadside stands).

AIR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

Air service development is increasingly becoming a priority for destinations across the globe and more Destination Marketing & Management Organizations (DMMOs) have joined the dialogue as the benefits of aviation connectivity have become clear. Although it is unlikely that the Quad Cities could ever compete with O'Hare International Airport or Midway International Airport—which serve as the nearest major aviation centers in the Midwest region—the Quad Cities should continue to cultivate and invest in additional non-stop and specialty market airlift development that provide additional opportunities for growing aviation traffic.

AMERICAN DISCOVERY TRAIL

The American Discovery Trail (ADT) is a cross country trail composed of many other existing trails and some unique connector routes between them. Stakeholders have suggested that the trail's route through the Quad Cities offers an opportunity to connect the trail to the greater Quad Cities visitor experience.

In 2006, the region was host to The International Trails Symposium and stakeholders suggest there is also an opportunity to further develop and promote the region's trail systems. Trail tourism has many benefits to destinations: it increases the length of stay of low-impact tourists, it can promote repeat visitation by tourists who do one section of a trail at a time, and it drives tourism dollars to local businesses.

BI-STATE REGIONALITY

Stakeholders have reported that being a region stretched across two states (Illinois and Iowa) often creates challenges in the form of funding, public policy and legislation. Stakeholders have also suggested that being a multi-state region contributes to the parochial mindset of residents.

BIKING AND BIKING TRAILS

The Quad Cities biking trails have served to connect communities, provide alternative transportation options and create recreational opportunities in the region. Stakeholders have suggested that future development, enhancement and expansion should focus on building more and better bike lanes and pathway connections to downtown areas and important regional venues, attractions and places; creating pedestrian and cyclist amenities along the trails; and ensuring activation and programming that bring the infrastructure to life for residents and visitors alike.

BRAND IDENTITY

Increasingly, reputation, quality of place and the perceived brand of a city is determining where talent, capital and tourism flow. Stakeholders have suggested that creating a regional brand identity for the Quad Cities should be a priority for the Destination Vision & Strategic Plan. There was near unanimous consent amongst the stakeholder group that success for this plan should mean that the Quad Cities becomes a recognized destination brand, though there were differing opinions on the scale of success, i.e. being a known regional, national or international brand.

CASINOS & GAMING

Stakeholders have reported that legal sports gambling in Iowa offers the Quad Cities an opportunity to attract new visitors and increase tourism revenues. Illinois is also considering legalizing sports betting, which has been one goal included in Gov. J.B. Pritzker's agenda. The Quad Cities should explore opportunities to develop and promote these new gaming experiences.

DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholders have suggested that the counties, communities and neighborhoods could benefit from destination development services organized and provided by Visit Quad Cities. The organization would act as a consultant, advisor, educator, facilitator, catalyst, funding source and general resource for helping regional destinations develop products, services, amenities, events, marketing, promotion, technology and social media for their local communities.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Stakeholders have reported that festivals and events have been successful in bringing together disparate communities within the region, and help promote the region's amenities and experiences to both residents and visitors. There may be a need for a comprehensive Events and Festivals Strategy, along with professional resources and a dedicated stakeholder committee (Visit Quad Cities, cities and communities), that brings together public sector officials, industry stakeholders, venue owners / operators / organizers and event producers. Their purpose would be to agree on a destination-wide strategy, program, calendar, sponsorship, seasonality and operating plan to deliver the full potential of events and festivals to the Quad Cities.

The Quad Cities regional municipalities and the county governments should provide resources that facilitate and encourage events and festivals and make it easier for organizers and venues to create, develop and grow this business.

GATHERING PLACE

Stakeholders have reported that the Quad Cities does not have a central outdoor gathering place that serves to anchor the community, and where locals and visitors can gather to celebrate major events and festivals. The Quad Cities should examine if such a gathering place, with its purpose defined and location determined, would be a positive opportunity to enhance the quality of life for residents and increase the quality of experience for visitors. Stakeholders have suggested that the riverfront could serve as an ideal gathering place.

I-74 MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE

Stakeholders have reported that the I-74 Mississippi River Bridge has the potential to become an icon for the Quad Cities. They are supportive of the development and see the opportunity for the project to deliver spinoff and spillover activities (residents and visitors) to neighboring downtowns, neighborhoods and businesses. Stakeholders have suggested that in order to maximize the potential that the new bridge, the neighboring cities and neighborhoods must invest in development and placemaking opportunities at the foot of the bridge and surrounding areas.

JOHN DEERE

Stakeholders have reported that John Deere plays a critical role in the economic and social well-being of the Quad Cities, and has a key role to play in the destination brand and experiences offered in the region. Stakeholders have reported that the relationship between John Deere and Visit Quad Cities has improved, yet there is still room for greater engagement.

MAKER MOVEMENT

The Quad Cities' Maker Movement is an important element of economic development and can contribute to creating a robust creative economy. The Maker Movement includes legions of artisans, craftspeople and entrepreneurs who are reinventing and reshaping the Quad Cities experience one handmade product at a time. As the Maker Movement gains momentum across the globe, there may be an opportunity to showcase the Quad Cities' Maker Movement to visitors and provide them with a shared sense of localism. The "Make It Here" promotional video developed by the Quad Cities Chamber illustrates the opportunity.

MICE BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholders have suggested that greater efforts should be made to connect the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Expositions) business with economic development efforts. County, City and regional development agencies, organizations and officials can take advantage of professional and association groups meeting in the Quad Cities region to engage in a strategic and concerted effort to recruit talent, tourism and investment. As well, Mayors or other top government officials should make a special effort during large MICE events to welcome and engage with visitors, and promote the Quad Cities region as an excellent destination to live, work and invest.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Stakeholders have suggested that the Mississippi River is an underutilized community asset, and that additional planning, development, activation and access to the river could deliver significant resident and visitor activities, enhance the quality of life and have an important economic impact. Stakeholders have suggested that riverfront development needs to be bold in vision, yet practical in feasibility. The RiverVision Plan, working with the cities of Davenport, IA, and Rock Island, IL, was given as an example of such a plan.

MUSIC

Stakeholders have suggested that the Quad Cities growing music scene represents an opportunity to attract new visitors and improve local quality of life. Stakeholders suggested that new venues such as the Rust Belt, along with the TaxSlayer Center, Adler Theatre and others offer an opportunity to position the Quad Cities as a region with a bustling music scene. The Quad Cities should continue to encourage and present music styles, genres and artists that are unique to the region, and which differentiate the region's music scene from that of other destinations.

PASSENGER RAIL

Stakeholders have suggested that the proposed Moline-to-Chicago passenger rail project could be a “game changer” for tourism in the region. Stakeholders have reported that continuing to advocate for the project and maintaining the political will to see it through to completion is the greatest challenge.

Q2030 REGIONAL ACTION PLAN

Stakeholders have reported the Q2030 Regional Action Plan provides a framework for the development of a Quad Cities Destination Vision and Strategic Plan. Stakeholders suggested it is imperative that this Destination Vision and Strategic Plan build off and align with the Q2030 Regional Action Plan.

REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

Stakeholders have reported that the array of experiences in the region is dispersed and disconnected, making it difficult for residents and visitors to easily experience the region. Stakeholders have indicated that public transportation should be enhanced to better serve visitors’ needs and increase services between hotels, restaurants, shopping, entertainment and other visitor activity venues. It was also suggested that additional river transportation options between communities could also have a significant impact on the visitor and resident experience.

RESIDENT PERCEPTION

Stakeholders have reported that residents of the Quad Cities often have a pessimistic or parochial perception of the region, and because of these viewpoints and lack of knowledge of local experiences, they do not make effective tourism ambassadors. Stakeholders have suggested that resources need to be invested in marketing to local residents to enhance their understanding and perception of the region.

ROCK ISLAND ARSENAL

Stakeholders have reported that the Rock Island Arsenal plays a critical role in the economic and social well-being of the Quad Cities, and has a key role to play in the destination brand and experiences offered in the region. Stakeholders have reported that there is an opportunity to provide greater access to the Arsenal and improve the overall visitor experience.

SEASONALITY

Stakeholders have suggested that greater attention should be paid (marketing, conferences and conventions, events and festivals, and sports tourism) to growing business and leisure travel during the off-season periods to maximize value and minimize resident impact. Stakeholders have also suggested greater focus should be paid to indoor activities designed to increase visitation during the winter off-season.

SPORTS TOURISM

Stakeholders have suggested that Sports Tourism is an important component of the region's group tourism business, particularly with the addition of the TBK Bank Sports Complex in Bettendorf and the TaxSlayer Center. Although there are positive developments in this direction, there does not appear to be a comprehensive Sports Tourism Strategy in place to properly and fully develop this market. Stakeholders have also suggested that the scale and depth of Sports Tourism could be better leveraged by using sports venues to feature the Quad Cities' regional message and connect visitors to the broader regional experience.

TALENT ATTRACTION

Stakeholders have reported recruiting and retaining young and talented workers to the region is a top economic development priority in the region. Stakeholders have suggested there is an opportunity to better align tourism and economic development efforts for talent attraction. A recent report entitled "Talent Wars", examined what young skilled workers are looking for in jobs and locations. It found that first-hand experience and word of mouth are the dominant factors for forming community impressions. It's clear the best way for talent to learn about locations is to visit the community themselves, underscoring the importance of tourism.

TOURISM AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Stakeholders have reported that front-line hospitality staff need better training and education in order to deliver a high-quality visitor experience in the Quad Cities. Visit Quad Cities should examine existing third-party tourism ambassador programs, such as the Certified Tourism Ambassador (CTA) program, as well as the potential to develop its own custom ambassador program, to educate front-line ambassadors on the wealth of experiences in the destination and the importance of tourism in the Quad Cities.

TOURISM INVESTMENT

Stakeholders have suggested that Visit Quad Cities is underfunded because of the current investment structure, and therefore the region is unable to compete with destinations on a regional, statewide and national level. Stakeholders have also suggested that the playing field is not level in terms of tourism investment from varying municipalities and counties in the region.

In addition, stakeholders have suggested that funding is a general issue in moving forward the types of large-scale, high-impact development projects that region needs. They suggest that a funding mechanism needs to be developed to support future development initiatives.

THE ARTS

Stakeholders have suggested that the Quad Cities “punches above its weight” with its prominent arts institutions and offerings, including the Figge Museum, Putnam Museum, Quad Cities Symphony Orchestra, Ballet Quad Cities and more. Stakeholders have suggested there is a greater opportunity to position the Arts community into the tourism experience, while the biggest challenge is attracting and retaining artistic talent to the community.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Tourism generates more than 8,000 jobs in the Quad Cities region. However, the global tourism industry is in the midst of a growing labor shortage problem, from which the Quad Cities region is not immune. When hotel properties and other industry companies can’t find enough qualified workers to meet their needs, the visitor experience is impacted. As a result, stakeholders have suggested the region needs a collaborative effort aimed at attracting tomorrow’s talent to the industry, improving employee retention, and exploring ways to use emerging tech to empower smarter workforces.



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