

Sustainable Tourism Development in Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley, Minnesota

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MINNESOTA SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ASSESSMENT FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES PROJECT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Spring 2013, the communities of Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley (C-G-B) collaboratively applied for and were selected to be part of the Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities project conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and University of Minnesota Tourism Center. The project was created to assist small non-metro communities as they identify, assess and develop local assets as part of a sustainable tourism development effort.

Tourism in Minnesota is a \$12.5 billion dollar industry that generates 17 percent of state sales tax revenue and more than 245,000 jobs from entry level to executive level positions. This happens in virtually every county of the state. In Big Stone County, tourism generates \$3.9 million (Explore Minnesota Tourism, 2014). Expanding regional assets helps attract more visitors or keep visitors longer in the region. Sustainable tourism and recreation efforts integrate the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability by satisfying community tourism needs, protecting natural and cultural resource attractions, and preserving development capabilities for future generations.

One of the key pre-development needs is to clearly understand what tourism includes. Several leaders in the communities recognize tourism as a potential in the region, but overall awareness and understanding of tourism within the communities is limited. Creating a shared understanding of tourism will help prepare residents and build interest to get involved.

The Tourism Assessment process involved components designed to gather and understand the communities' tourism situation, and provide a basis for the core recommendations listed below. For example, the C-G-B Community Team spearheaded local tourism resource inventories and analysis, a First Impressions Team from another community quietly visited Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley to carry out a broad assessment of the local tourism strengths and weaknesses, and, in October, an Expert Team spent a day in the three communities, exploring the area and visiting with community members.

Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley (C-G-B) and the surrounding area provide both existing and potential opportunities for tourism development utilizing the natural and cultural environments. To successfully harness and sustain these opportunities, community involvement, collaboration and planning will be necessary. This report shares the data collected during this project and provides recommendations for action the three communities might consider to harness or expand tourism opportunities.

General recommendations for any sustainable tourism development initiative include:

- Maintain awareness that tourism is just one important element of the community's economy.
- Build on existing natural and cultural capital.
- Encourage sustainable tourism practices across private and public sectors.
- Create and maintain quality products and services.
- Continue to build local awareness, provide information and increase support for tourism from city governments, civic organizations, user groups and faith-based communities.
- Engage these partners in discussions, tourism development planning and action.



- Commit organizational supports to the development of opportunities for additional lodging, food and tourism-related businesses to meet the needs of tourism now and as it grows.
- Identify ways to measure success and impact.
- Identify an organization to provide leadership in creating a regional tourism plan that aligns with the shared values of the region. Once this plan is created, recruit, involve and work with individuals and organizations to implement strategies that increase tourism and recreation in the area in accordance with that plan.
- Build on existing social and human capital.
- Provide information and engage residents to build local awareness and increase support for tourism.
- Create, maintain and enhance authentic tourism experiences.
- Ask: *“how does each possibility reflect C-G-B as a region and our shared values?”*
- Enhance the availability of information about the region on the internet and in the community.
- Use research to better understand and address the needs of identified tourism markets.

As a next step, consider projects that can address opportunities discovered in this project. This includes evaluating, maintaining and developing tourism assets; building community support for tourism, developing a planned approach to provide sustained leadership, and creating a marketing strategy that focuses on identified target markets. Ideas and strategies are listed below. These are presented at more length in the report, as well as findings are provided to support these ideas.

To evaluate, maintain and enhance assets and attractions...

- Build a niche for the area by combining strengths in natural resources and farming assets. This includes wildlife-associated recreation and agritourism/culinary tourism.
- Enhance Toqua Park as an asset.
- Take advantage of the King of Trails Scenic Byway.
- Find ways to tap new talent available in the area to bring new ideas and potential business opportunities.
- Improve wayfinding and signage in the region.
- Generate a list of potential assets available in each community.
- Provide a nice (lodging) accommodation and guides (potentially) to build on strengths in friendliness and hunting and fishing opportunities.
- Expand the marketing for the Arts Meander to new places (using the brochures and Internet).
- Develop a kite-flying festival to take advantage of assets of open space, breezes, and large lakes.
- Develop lodging on farm(s) to overcome lack of accommodations and build on travel trends towards ag-tourism.
- Consider promoting day trips to area to targeted interest groups.
- Build an information kiosk to serve visitors need for travel information.

To build community support for tourism...

- Consider an education effort for residents and elected officials about what tourism is and why it

can benefit the communities and the area.

- Encourage businesses to cross-promote local businesses to retain visitors in communities longer.
- Celebrate the collaborative manner in which the three communities view each other.
- Develop an ongoing customer service training effort to reach all regional businesses.
- Community engagement and perseverance is key to building and maintaining support and involvement.
- Consider the plans of neighboring communities, counties and region beyond the communities involved in this project.
- Create regular communications about tourism and local success. How do residents get information about every day events and other one time or annual events?

To develop leadership and organization for tourism initiatives...

- Community collaboration and planning will be necessary to sustain any efforts and make them successful.
- Big Stone Area Growth (BSAG), can and should play a critical role by facilitating and leading a coalition of stakeholders including businesses, citizens, and various levels of government to develop sustainable tourism in the Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley area.
- Involve community members as much as possible in BSAG's vision and action plan. Continue to recruit, involve and work with individuals and organizations in developing and implementing strategies that will create and support tourism and recreation business in the area.
- Identify a formal organization or group to take the lead in implementing ideas and projects.
- Consider relationships with regional organizations such as Western Minnesota Prairie Waters and Big Stone Area Chamber of Commerce.
- Work with Community Development Services, Inc. to develop a plan for moving tourism development opportunities forward in an organized manner that is realistic and can be measured.

To market Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley to tourists...

- Create a marketing plan that incorporates multiple communication strategies to reach identified target markets.
- Utilize free promotional opportunities available on www.exploreminnesota.com
- Work with Explore Minnesota Tourism's regional office for help in planning, facilitation, and ideas to promote tourism.
- Develop print or online maps geared towards identified target markets such as
 - hunters, displaying public hunting grounds and associated fall festivals/attractions corresponding to the season, and
 - ag/food tourists with farms and food-related attractions.
- Get on the web with the area's assets by developing listings of things to do by city.
- Consider a Youtube video showing off the area and each community.
- Create a photo or video contest for residents and post winning entries on the website.
- Explore collaborative marketing with other communities along the King of Trails Scenic Byway.
- Explore the opportunity of becoming a Dark Sky destination. Local residents mentioned the beautiful skies at night and this is an attraction.
- Partner with community and area businesses and organizations like Big Stone Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and Western Minnesota Prairie Waters to grow the available funds to market the area to potential visitors.



The Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley cluster has potential to develop a realistic and sustainable community tourism initiative given its assets and a core group of supporters. This tourism assessment project represents a first step in the process. CGB can build on this momentum by leveraging regional assets in a strategic way, developing leadership potential, strengthening community involvement, and marketing effectively. We want to thank the community leadership team and the residents of Clinton, Graceville and Beardsley for their hard work in assessing this potential.