



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA | EXTENSION

TOURISM CENTER

Sustainable Tourism Development in Houston, Minnesota



MINNESOTA SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ASSESSMENT FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES PROJECT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION REGIONAL
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Sustainable Tourism Development in Houston, Minnesota

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Authored by Cynthia C. Messer and Bruce Schwartau

With support from Kelsey O'Connell, Undergraduate Research Assistant, University of Minnesota Tourism Center

Editor:

Joyce Hoelting, Assistant Director, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality

With support from Mary Vitcenda, Senior Editor and Betsey Hodson, Web Production Assistant

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Expert Team members and Report Contributors:

Cynthia Messer, Tourism Specialist and Extension Professor, University of Minnesota Tourism Center
Bruce Schwartau, Community Economics Educator, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality
Liz Templin, Community Economics Educator, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality
Erin Meier, Executive Director, Southeast Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership
Sheila Craig, Community Wastewater Facilitator, Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative
David Vogel, Regional Manager, Explore Minnesota Tourism
Okey Ukaga, PhD., Executive Director, University of Minnesota Extension Northeast Regional Sustainable Development Partnership

Community Leadership Team:

Christina Peterson, City Administrator, City of Houston
Audrey Hegland, City Deputy Clerk, EDA, Planning & Zoning, Marketing, City of Houston
Karla Bloem, Naturalist and Director, Houston Nature Center
John Loken, Owner of Sawmill Inn & Suites
Richard Carr, General Manager, Root River Market
Marlene Schultz, Owner, The Bunkhouse, Chamber of Commerce, Trail Towns Committee
Elizabeth Benedum, Owner, Barista's Coffeehouse
Justin Treptow, City Park and Recreation Board, Director, School On-Line Program
Randy Steinfeldt, Supervisor, Houston Township, City Zoning Administrator
Connie Edwards, Mayor
Cheryl Sanden, City Council, EDA/Planning Commission
Kevin Knutson, City Council, Library Board, International Owl Center Board
Matt Schutte, City Council, Elementary Teacher, Tourism Assessment Tour
Tony Schultz, City Council, EDA/Planning Commission
Krin Abraham, President, EDA/Planning Commission
Vicki Olson, EDA/Planning Commission
Jim Edwards, Houston Development Authority
Kelly Porter, Girl Scout Leader, Tourism Assessment Tour
Hein Bloem, Tourism Assessment Tour
Erin Frauenkron, Park and Rec Board, School On-Line Program
Kristi Treptow, Houston Dental Office, Chamber
Missy Pedretti, Eastwood Bank, Chamber
Lynn Stampka, Girl Scout leader, Tourism Assessment Tour

Partners/Sponsors:

University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships
University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
MINNESOTA SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ASSESSMENT FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES: REPORT FOR HOUSTON, MINNESOTA	7
Introduction	7
Defining Tourism	7
Sustainable Tourism	8
Minnesota Tourism	8
Local/Regional Tourism	9
Developing Tourism Opportunities	9
Harnessing Assets via the Community Capitals Framework	10
Project Description	11
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN HOUSTON: PROJECT FINDINGS, IDEAS AND STRATEGIES	12
Evaluating, Maintaining and Enhancing Attractions and Services: Findings and Strategies to Consider	13
About Houston	13
Findings	13
Key Findings	13
Findings from Observations of Community Members	13
Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors	15
Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors	15
Next Steps for Consideration	17
General Recommendations	17
Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)	17
Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies	17
Developing Leadership for Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider	19
About Leadership and Organizations in Houston	19
Findings	19
Key Findings	19
Findings from Observations of Community Members	19
Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors	20
Next Steps for Consideration	20
General Recommendations	20
Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)	21
Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies	21

Building Community Support for Tourism in Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider	22
About the Houston Community	22
Findings	22
Key Findings	22
Findings from Observations of Community Members	23
Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors	23
Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors	23
Next Steps for Consideration	25
General Recommendations	25
Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)	25
Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies	25
Marketing Tourism in Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider	26
About Current Marketing Efforts in Houston	26
Findings	26
Key Findings	26
Findings from Observations of Community Members	26
Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors	26
Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors	27
Next Steps for Consideration	28
General Recommendations	28
Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)	28
Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies	29
CONCLUSION	30
RESOURCES	31
REFERENCES	32
APPENDICES	33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In spring of 2013, the community of Houston, Minnesota applied for and was 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. This 18-month project was created to assist small non-metro communities to 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 Houston County, tourism generates approximately \$9.8 million in sales and about 300 jobs (Explore Minnesota Tourism, 2014). Expanding regional assets attracts more visitors and keeps 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.

Houston 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.

Before beginning, the community should come to clearly understand what tourism includes. Several leaders in the community recognize tourism as a potential in the region, but the overall awareness and understanding of tourism within the community is limited. Creating a shared understanding of tourism will help prepare residents and build interest to get involved.

This report presents the findings and provides general recommendations as well as specific ideas and strategies to consider in developing sustainable tourism initiatives.

General recommendations include:

- Maintain awareness that tourism is just one important element of the community's economy.
- Build on Houston's existing natural and cultural capital.
- Encourage sustainable tourism practices across private and public sectors.
- Create and maintain quality products and services
- Build local awareness, provide information and increase support for tourism and tourism development from city government, civic organizations, user groups and faith-based communities.
- Engage 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 a formal task force or organization to provide leadership going forward.
- Maintain awareness that tourism development is just one important element in a broader community development program.
- Build on Houston's existing social and human capital.
- Provide information and engage residents to build local awareness and increase support for tourism.
- Create and enhance authentic tourism experiences.
- Ask *"how does this reflect Houston and our values?"*

- Pay attention to the usability of information about Houston on the internet and in the community.
- Better understand and address the needs of tourism markets already interested in Houston.
- Promote stop, play and dine opportunities.

As a next step, Houston should consider short- and long-term projects that could address opportunities discovered in this project. Options for 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, build and maintain assets and attractions...	
<p>Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The empty lot on the southeast corner of highways 16/76 is the most visible spot in Houston. Use it to welcome visitors and provide way finding. • Think about the bike trail differently. This trail could be promoted as <i>the starting point</i> for the bike trail rather than the end when folks are tired. • Develop a common look for general signage and create high quality signs using this look. • Promote fall color tours. • Create a sustainable practice ideas board on your community or Chamber website. 	<p>Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create quality signs that clearly mark public access to the river. • Create a way that visitors do not have to enter the gravel/sand operation to reach the public access. • Address confusion regarding signage to South Park. • Capitalize on scenery touring by car and motorcycle by developing and promoting well-signed routes. • Promote fishing and hunting options. Develop maps. Support guide businesses. • Open the scenic views to the public on Scenic View Drive.

To build community support for tourism...	
<p>Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the Weaving Tourism into Communities video, especially the segment on the Villages of Van Buren, to community groups. http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/tourism-development/materials/weaving-tourism/ 	<p>Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve the Boy Scouts in tourism projects such as building picnic tables, and signage. • Hold public meetings to discuss and plan for current and future tourism activities. • Continue to plan tourism development so that it is cohesive, sustainable and fits community values. • Engage community members by asking them about their needs as they entertain visiting friends and family. • Help Houston’s businesses and entrepreneurs become “concierges” that help visitors enjoy the natural beauty in the area.

To develop leadership for tourism initiatives	
<p>Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a staffing plan for supportive activities: Who will do the work? • Commit organizational supports to improve signage. • Find non-paid or low-paid staffing via students or interns. • Explore additional resources and programs to enhance downtown. 	<p>Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead a multi-organization effort aimed at branding Houston. • Partner with community and area businesses and organizations to grow available funds to market Houston. • Become active in the Southern Minnesota Tourism Association (SMTA). • Take advantage of resources available through Explore Minnesota Tourism’s southern regional office.

To market Houston to tourists...	
<p>Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn how to place businesses and attractions into online maps such as Google Maps and Mapquest. • Improve your listing on the Explore Minnesota website. • Take advantage of Explore Minnesota Tourism travel information centers. • Improve signage within key tourism locations. • Visit all of the tourism sites and assure that brochures for local attractions are available and are placed in prominent locations. • Use available secondary research information on current markets to better understand and address their needs. 	<p>Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To feature scenic views, consider marketing to new target audiences. • Use market research to understand current and potential target markets. • Use the Explore Minnesota Tourism grant program to market Houston. • Use news releases to promote Houston. • Partner with area communities to increase marketing opportunities. • Work with Explore Minnesota to host a Familiarization Tour of the area to travel writers and group tour operators. • Explore partnering with the Mayo system and other hospital systems to encourage “down time” visits to Houston. • Work on town branding. • Partner with community and area businesses and organizations to grow marketing resources. • Survey people already using horse facilities to understand them as a possible target market. • Analyze and further develop existing lodging, trail head locations.

Houston has good potential to develop a strong sustainable tourism initiative, given its many assets and a core group of enthusiastic supporters. Houston can build on this momentum by leveraging its assets, developing its leadership potential, strengthening community involvement, and marketing effectively. We want to thank the community leadership team and the residents of Houston for their hard work in assessing this potential.

MINNESOTA SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ASSESSMENT FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES: REPORT FOR HOUSTON, MINNESOTA

Introduction

The community of Houston, Minnesota was selected to be part of the Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities project in 2013. The University of Minnesota Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and the University of Minnesota Tourism Center sought communities ready to identify, assess and develop local assets as part of a sustainable tourism development initiative. This effort, led locally by a community leadership team in Houston and facilitated by Extension educators in Community Economics and Tourism Center faculty, had four goals:

1. To inventory local tourism assets;
2. To assess tourism assets from local, visitor and expert perspectives;
3. To help the community uncover opportunities for tourism development; and,
4. To help the community identify action steps for sustainable tourism development.

As the city of Houston continues to work with Extension, it is hoped they will use this report to consider their options and to align their efforts with community values, concerns, and hopes for the future. Extension looks forward to continuing to be a resource to Houston.

To provide some strategic direction, this report is structured about project discoveries around four key ingredients of sustainable community tourism development – evaluating, maintaining and growing attractions and services, providing tourism leadership; developing community support; and marketing tourism. To begin, a brief overview is provided of definitions and core elements important to sustainable community tourism development.

Defining Tourism

One of the overarching findings in each of the project communities is an opportunity to learn more about tourism. Tourism has many definitions. This project centers on “person-trips” as defined by the U.S. Travel Association: “one person on a trip away from home overnight in paid accommodations or on a day or overnight trip to places 50 miles or more (one-way) away from home.” This definition includes specific criteria of distance, time and paid accommodations, which allows measurement.

However, this definition does not describe the purpose of travel. Tourists are not just vacation travelers. Business travelers, pass-through travelers and travelers visiting friends and relatives (VFR) are also “tourists.” For smaller communities, pass-through travelers or day-trip visitors are important tourists to consider—even if they do not stay in paid accommodations. Getting them to stop, stay a while and spend money is the goal. Day visitors can generate income and if the community offers sufficient tourism opportunities they may return and stay longer and use overnight accommodations.

Identifying and differentiating current and potential types of visitors is important. For example, the VFR market is a significant segment of the tourism market in rural areas. Marketing to reach the VFR market is done primarily through community residents. VFR marketing is strengthened by informing community members on a regular basis about attractions, events and happenings

available in the community and region. Building awareness of local tourism activities and happenings gives residents information to share with their friends and family. It holds other positive benefits such as increasing involvement and generating community pride.

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism considers the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of sustainable development in both the planning and operation of tourism. It requires the informed participation of community members and stakeholders, strong political leadership and organization, and continuous effort to create a high level of tourist satisfaction.

For more information about sustainable tourism development for destinations see Appendix A.

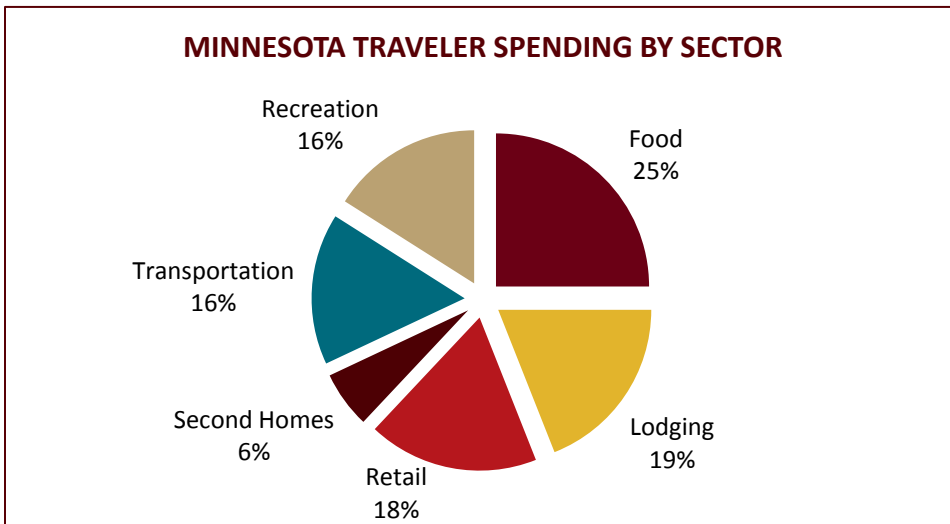
Minnesota Tourism

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. Spending during Minnesota’s 71 million annual person-trips (overnight and day trips) is distributed throughout the economy (Explore Minnesota Tourism, 2014).

For more information see Appendix B: Explore Minnesota Tourism and Economy Fact Sheet, 2014.

The United Nations’ Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization say sustainable tourism should:

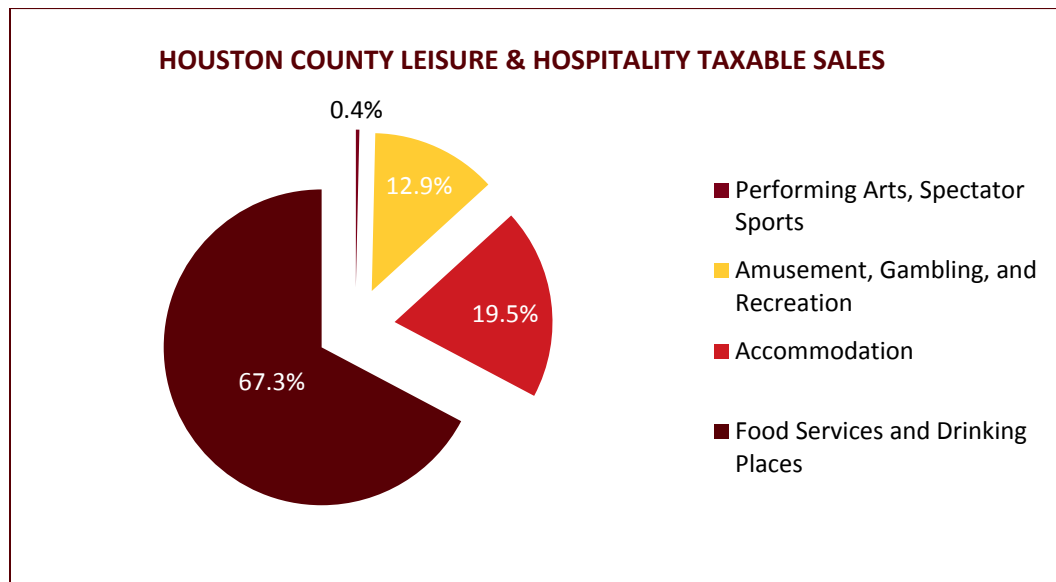
- Make use of environmental resources in a way that maintains essential ecological processes and helps to conserve the natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the authenticity of host communities, conserve the cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing benefits across the community—including employment and income-earning opportunities.



Source: Explore Minnesota Tourism, 2014 based on 2012 revenue data.

Local/Regional Tourism

Tourism happens in virtually every county of the state. In Houston County, the leisure and hospitality industry generated approximately \$9.8 million in gross sales and \$9.3 million in taxable sales during 2011 (Tax Research Division of the Minnesota Department of Revenue, 2013) and employed about 300 people in full-time, part-time or seasonal jobs (Explore Minnesota, 2013). Those sales translate into over 3% of gross sales and about 14% of the sales tax generated in Houston County. The leisure and hospitality industries make up a similar percentage of the sales tax in Fillmore County (15%) but both counties trail the pace set in Winona, Mower, and Winona (21%).



Developing Tourism Opportunities

In his book, *Marketing for Entrepreneurs*, Frederick Crane (2013) says that opportunities can be “recognized, discovered or created.” This is particularly true of tourism opportunities because tourism is about experiences.

Recognizing opportunities requires a community to match existing assets—supply—with current or potential tourist markets—demand. For example, Houston has a pretty regional park with bike trails. Bike tourism is a growing trend in Minnesota. So, one suggestion is for Houston to promote the community as the starting point for using the Root River Bike Trail, rather than the end.

Discovering opportunities means supply or demand exists, and the other must be found, or “discovered.” For example, tourists around the world are becoming more interested in local foods. What supply can be found in a community? Supply could include cafes and restaurants, but also attractions such as wineries, farmers’ markets, and farm visits.

Creating opportunities is necessary when neither demand nor supply exist in an obvious manner. Thus, the community could create new opportunities. For example, Houston might leverage the new efforts in Rochester, Minnesota to create a destination medical center over the next decade. Will there be opportunities to provide nature-based recreational activities for visitors with physical challenges?

Harnessing Assets via the Community Capitals Framework

A phase of data collection in the project asked communities to identify and evaluate their assets. Assets can be physical resources, such as rivers or buildings, or less tangible resources, such as volunteer networks, cultural heritage, or individuals' skills.

The Community Capitals Framework (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2004) helps describe and categorize unique assets as a starting point for community and economic development—including tourism development. The creators of this framework name seven categories of resources which they call capitals: built, cultural, human, natural, political, social, and financial.

Assets become capitals when they are leveraged to improve communities. (Emery, et al, 2006) The inventory forms used in this project draw upon the Community Capitals Framework to help communities harness their assets for sustainable tourism development.



Flora et al define the capitals as:

Built capital: These are man-made, tangible assets, such as factories, schools, roads, restored habitat, and community centers. Built capital contributes to the building of other community capitals.

Cultural capital: Includes both values and approaches. Cultural capital can be thought of as the filter through which people live their lives, the daily or seasonal rituals they observe, and the way they regard the world around them.

Financial capital: Consists of money used for investment, rather than consumption. Financial capital is important for communities and residents because it can be transformed into built capital—which in turn supports other kinds of capital.

Human capital: Refers to the skills and abilities of each individual in a community. Human capital includes potential abilities and acquired skills; both formal and informal education contribute to human capital. A person’s health and leadership skills are also part of human capital.

Natural capital: includes landscape, air, water, soil, and biodiversity of plants and animals. Natural capital can be consumed or extracted for immediate profit or maintained as a continuing resource for communities.

Political capital: This kind of capital involves the ability of a group to influence the distribution of resources within a social unit, including helping set the agenda for what resources are available and who is eligible to receive them. Political capital includes organizations, connections, voice and power. Note that “political” does not mean “partisan” or “party politics” in this context.

Social capital: This consists of the networks, trust and engagement of people that exist among and within groups and communities. Social capital contributes to a sense of common identity and shared future. A community’s social capital facilitates groups’ working together.

Project Description

The Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities project was launched to help small, non-metro communities identify and develop local assets that will attract tourists. Assets include natural and built attractions, services, facilities, people, organizations and more.

Five communities or clusters of communities, with populations under 1,500 were selected to participate in the project through a competitive application process. Located throughout the state, the communities are Akeley, Warroad, and Houston. The community clusters are Clinton, Graceville, Beardsley, and Orr-Pelican Lake, Crane Lake, Ash River, Kabetogama Lake, Rainier—working collectively as Destination Voyageurs National Park.

Each community has a unique set of assets that can be used to develop tourism opportunities. The process engaged each community in identifying and evaluating their tourism assets. The Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities process included three data collection phases that involved community members, University of Minnesota Extension faculty and educators, Explore Minnesota Tourism staff, and regional volunteers.

In Phase 1, community residents identified local tourism assets by completing inventory and assessment forms.

In Phase 2, a resident team from one project community visited another community to conduct a mystery shopper-style visit and provide visitors’ “first impressions” of the tourism in the community.

In Phase 3, a team of tourism experts assembled by University of Minnesota Extension visited each community to conduct an assessment and on-site consultation. The visit also included a community meeting to solicit ideas and insights from residents on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) for local tourism.

This report represents the aggregated data, observations, and suggestions from all three phases.

For more information about the project and process, see Appendix C, Project Application.



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN HOUSTON: PROJECT FINDINGS, IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

To focus Houston’s future community tourism development efforts, this report organized findings and the suggestions from each of the teams around four areas important to create and sustain tourism:

- 1) evaluating, maintaining and enhancing attractions and services;
- 2) developing tourism leadership;
- 3) building community support; and
- 4) marketing tourism.

To build tourism in a sustainable manner it will be critical to consider each idea and strategy in a holistic and participatory approach. What are the key values of Houston and how does each opportunity fit with those values? What should be protected and what can be developed? How will developing or enhancing assets leverage others? Who in the community can and should be part of the decision? These and other questions should be asked throughout the process.

REGIONAL LOCATION

City of Houston, MN



Source: Minnesota Dept. of Transportation

Evaluating, Maintaining and Enhancing Attractions and Services: Findings, Ideas and Strategies to Consider

ABOUT HOUSTON

Houston is located in the northern half of Houston County, Minnesota's most southeastern county. Much of this area is known as "bluff country" because of the beautiful wooded hillsides and picturesque creeks and streams that run through them. The Root River runs west to east on the northern edge of the community and the Root River Bike Trail follows the river.



FINDINGS

Key Findings

Responses from the community, First Impressions visitors and experts all paint a portrait of an asset-rich area. Though there is no "wow feature" attraction in Houston, the community can capitalize upon its existing attractions better to grow the number of visitors. Of particular interest is re-thinking the community's assumptions about what their attractions hold for visitors. Specifically, Houston could reshape their assumption that Houston is "at the end of the bike trail." Why not make Houston the beginning of the bike trail? Moreover, seizing the benefits of the river, despite the problem of floods, provides an opportunity.

Findings from Observations of Community Members

Assets identified, inventoried and evaluated by community volunteers include an array of resources, facilities, amenities and events. The inventories paint a portrait of an asset-rich area. Key examples are offered in the table below. At least three insights can be drawn from the local analysis of area attractions:

- Based on local evaluations, nature-based activities of using the bike trail, horseback riding, fishing and hunting was rated highest in quantity and authenticity.
- Some built attractions such as the Houston Nature Center, the parks, the Root River Trail, and the golf course were rated high in quality and had good to excellent ratings in their ability to bring visitors from greater distances.
- Special events in Houston such as the triathlon, tractor pulls, Houston Hoedown and hunting seasons have successfully brought visitors to Houston from the region, and the owl festival has received national attention.

Inventory Type	Key Asset Examples and Observations
Attractions – Natural and Scenic	Bluff views, elk farm, buffalo ranch, trout streams, Root River, canoe launch
Attractions – Cultural and Historic	Stone church, Swede Bottom, Through the Grapevine Restaurant, war memorial, Schechs Mill
Attractions – Recreational Activities	Built environment-based activities bike riding, golf, Houston Nature Center, camping, parks, ball diamonds, playgrounds
Attractions – Nature-based Activities	Bird watching, deer hunting, turkey hunting, fishing, canoeing, tubing, nature trails, horseback riding
Special Events	Owl Festival, Triathlon, Hoedown, tractor pulls, Bluegrass Festival, fall craft show, Bluff Country Studio Art Tour
Other Attractions	Hardware store mural, sculpture garden
Private Services	7 Bridges Pottery, Loken’s Sawmill, campgrounds and retreat at Money Creek, Cushions Peak campgrounds, Bunkhouse, bed and breakfast, Barista’s Coffeehouse
Public Services – Physical Environment and Infrastructure	Houston has most of the public services expected within a municipality, plus a bandshell, parks, ice rink and ball fields. The trailhead building includes showers.

The well-attended SWOT analysis identified many local assets and services that should be leveraged or addressed.

- The Nature Center, bike trail, trailhead building and preserved natural resource assets were identified as local strengths.
- Local weaknesses included a lack of businesses that tourists could use to stay for a full day experience. The community also noted that The Root River trail ends in Houston, compared to communities where round trip hikers might visit the city twice.
- External opportunities included the quality highways in the surrounding area.
- An obvious threat is that weather and flooding creates issues for water-based and land-based tourism development.

Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors

The First Impressions visitors provided important feedback about what it is like to be a user of Houston's attractions.

Initial impressions. The initial impression upon visitors' arrival was that Houston is a busy and clean community with lots of natural beauty surrounding it.

Community entrances. On a scale of 1 to 6 (poor to excellent), they rated the community entrances signs as 3.67 on clarity and 3.17 on location.

Availability of attractions and recreation opportunities. Visitors strongly agreed (rating of 5.5) that the Houston area is rich in natural resources and slightly agreed (4) that there was a variety of lodging options, festivals and events. Men gave a higher rating (of 5+) of available cultural resources and the variety of activities and entertainment options. Women, however, rated them only 2 and 3 respectively. The variety of dining options was collectively rated 3.5. While neither group was satisfied with retail options, the women rated it lower (2 vs. 3). Men identified tourism amenities in the downtown area and the women found them in the nature center.

Quality of access to different resources. The recreation assets that visitors found easily were trails, the Nature Center, and the ball diamonds. They questioned why they had to travel through the sand pit to get to the canoe launch.

While the Nature Center's location in town makes it easy to find, the signage for the Nature Center is set back from the road and is difficult to see until you are near it. One visitor mentioned that they passed the entrance several times before seeing the sign.

Access to WIFI. Visitors found good cell phone reception within the city, but found the wifi/internet service only fair.

Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors

The expert team of observers suggest that Houston has "good beginnings" and opportunities – gems at various stages of polish and some exceptional existing infrastructure for a town of its size. They generated ideas that could leverage natural and built capital to help visitors. "stop, play and dine."

Leveraging natural capital. Visitors are already coming to the region and to this beautiful small town. The community's goal should be to enhance current tourism and build new opportunities. The city of Houston does not have major attractions with a strong *wow factor* that provides tourists with an incentive to stop. However, there is natural beauty. Drivers would like roadside parking spots so that they can take advantage of vistas. From there, other attractions can lead visitors to "stop and play".

The area's primary asset is the natural wooded scenic beauty. This natural beauty is probably the primary reason bicyclists, horseback riders and campers travel to the area. The wooded bluffs and wide valleys are extremely appealing. There are designated trout streams a few miles southeast of the city. The hardwood forest provides autumn color and supports a healthy wildlife population. There are rustic rural farmsteads that don't scream "industrial agriculture" as you drive by. Much of the bottomland is untilled grazing land and the planted acres are not 80 acre rectangles of row crops.



The Root River flows from west to east on the north edge of the community. The river poses both problems and a blessing. The levies usually protect the town well, and there are many opportunities to utilize natural resources in the area to draw visitors, including tubing, kayaking, canoeing and fishing. Careful planning to enhance tourism opportunities without diminishing the resources will be critical for success, quality of product, and sustainability.

Leveraging built capital. An analysis of local horse related tourism in Minnesota and nationally could help Houston understand potential opportunities for growth of businesses and services. For example, what other services are needed to support customers who visit ranches? Is horse rental a business option? This might be an opportunity for a student research project.

The *Houston Nature Center*, trail head, band shell, and new playground are a wonderful amenity and attraction. The 24/7 access to restrooms and showers benefit all outdoor sports enthusiasts visiting the community. The Visitor Center provides a good education about the wildlife and area. The new playground is creatively designed, and features a labyrinth that is handicapped accessible, a sand pit for children to dig in, a built-in slide and thoughtfully designed seating with logs of different heights and even campfire rings. These will attract families who spend time at the Nature Center and in Houston.

Families coming off the bike trail will need additional amenities – a meal, for example. More built capital could give families reason to come into town and stay. Improved signage could encourage visitors to leave the Nature Center and venture one block into town. Biking is a growing trend in Minnesota and better understanding the needs of this market could help Houston identify opportunities to more fully capitalize on the bike trail.

There is unique metal art in the outside areas of the HNC, but it is lost among the natural prairie plants. Visitors may be puzzled by this exhibit. The artwork could be elevated by 2-3 feet and interpretation could be made more explicit.

Since there is an area for camping, an entrepreneur could start a small outfitting business that rents tents and other camping supplies to be used at that campground and other natural areas in the area. Outfitters might also consider bicycle, canoe, or kayak rentals.

South Park is an asset that presented mixed reactions among expert visitors. It is a beautiful spot, was nicely mowed, and had expansive capacity. However, it had several “blemishes.” The first issue is that South Park is not well signed. The sign was so faded that it appeared to be a sign for a park that “used to be there.” There is a low-hanging power line as you enter the area. The park needs additional trash and recycling bins. The one available bathroom is very basic and has no water. Once in the park, most signs say “no-no-no”, creating an unwelcoming feeling. The team felt there needs to be a clearer vision for this park. Who uses it? If this is a site for off road activities, more parking, facilities, waste receptacles and perhaps more picnic tables are needed.



Restaurants, bars, lodging options, a bank with ATM, a gas station and quick mart, a full-service grocery store, community center, parks, ball park, and more are nice facilities and amenities that round out the users’ experience of the town.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION

General Recommendations

- Maintain awareness that tourism is just one important element of the community's economy.
- Build on Houston's existing natural and cultural capital.
- Encourage sustainable tourism practices across private and public sectors.
- Create and maintain quality products and services.

Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)

- The empty lot on the southeast corner of highways 16/76 is the most visible spot in the community. Take advantage of this by putting something on the bare board that welcomes visitors and provides way finding.
- Think about the bike trail differently. This trail could be promoted as *the starting point* for the bike trail rather than the end when folks are tired. This might include promoting local restaurants as having "deli food for the trail" in the summer. Businesses might promote homemade bread or local food at the trail head.
- While there are a few nice signs as you enter Houston, there are very few high quality signs. Develop a common look for general signage and create high quality signs using this look.
- Promote fall color tours to Houston in Rochester, the Twin Cities and other mid-sized cities in the region.
- Create a sustainable practice ideas board on your community or Chamber website and invite the community to share their ideas.



Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies

- Create quality signs that clearly mark public access to the river. Consider ways that visitors do not have to enter the gravel/sand operation to reach the public access.
- Address confusion regarding signage to South Park. Visitors went through what was assumed to be South Park, but signs were confusing. After looking at Google Maps team members were still unsure of exactly where South Park is located.
- Capitalize on scenery touring by car and motorcycle by developing and promoting well-signed routes. The drive off of Highway 76 is very misleading. And ends in dead ends and driveways.
- Promote fishing and hunting options. Develop maps. Support guide businesses.
- Open the scenic views to the public on Scenic View Drive.

- Consider developing scenery touring by snowmobile, moped, Segway, bike, mountain/off trail biking, horseback riding, roller blading, cross-country skis, hiking, etc. Outfitters might have an opportunity to supply these options.
- Similarly, the river and riverside access could be developed through outfitters for tubing, canoeing, kayaking, etc.
- Consider augmenting buildings and services for horse-based tourism; help promote those existing lodging, trailhead locations and set up data gathering systems about use.
- Prioritize a long-term project in developing the International Owl Center, perhaps wrapping in the need and support for a new community center.
- Host a sustainability fair to build local awareness and encourage sustainable practices. (See www.ironrangeearthfest.org as an example)

Developing Leadership for Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider

ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONS IN HOUSTON

Tourism development efforts in Houston are community led by a combination of public entities such as the Economic Development Authority and the City of Houston, in partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and committed volunteers from local businesses, organizations, groups, and citizens.



FINDINGS

Key Findings

Leadership and organizational development can be particularly difficult for small communities without the resources or critical mass of activities to commit public or non-profit organizations exclusively to lead tourism development. However, the project noted a number of organizational strengths in Houston that can be leveraged to maintain and grow tourism, and found some next steps that will be important to providing that leadership.

Findings from Observations of Community Members

The community identified several associations, institutions and individuals that support tourism. It is especially noteworthy that community members and leaders have successfully reached beyond their borders and into state resources to help them with their efforts, rather than working in isolation. Continuing to build local leadership capacity will enhance sustainability.

Associations Assets	Institutions and organizations like Lions, the Economic Development Association, schools, and Friends of the Nature Center are just a few associations mentioned that help support tourism.
Institutional Assets	The Minnesota Design Team, CEDA, and Regional Sustainable Development Partnership were identified as institutions that could be tapped to support tourism development.

Those attending the SWOT analysis meeting identified funding opportunities for helping smaller communities. However, they also noted a few external/outside threats that come from organizational structures, or that might be addressed:

Organized efforts to attract tourists to the region create competition for tourists among the small towns in southeastern Minnesota, and competition from other parts of the state.

Business taxes hinder entrepreneurship and the expansion of current businesses.

Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors

Expert visitors noted that Houston has strong local political capital that can be leveraged in Houston, but should consider new partnerships within the community and region.

It is clear that the city council and staff encourage tourism development opportunities to benefit Houston and will be active partners in moving efforts forward. This is an important factor.

There is political support from the mayor, who notes that “we have never tapped into the river. We just think of it as ‘we have a river and it floods.’”

A public/private partnership exists to create facilities for an international owl center.

Local leaders have identified some problems and have proactively reached out to state leaders to solve them. (e.g., signage problems on state roads have stimulated conversation with the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Houston must explore partnerships with selected organizations that can educate both locals and tourists about sustainable use of the natural, cultural and social resources in the area.

Stronger regional relationships could strengthen Houston’s presence within regional marketing and resource development.

Strong leadership structures allow community tourism initiatives to leverage financial, human, political and social capital.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION

General Recommendations

- Build local awareness, provide information and increase support for tourism and tourism development from city government, 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.
- The Houston leadership team should identify a formal task force or organization (for example, the Chamber of Commerce) to provide leadership going forward, especially toward the goal of naming and claiming community values in relation to tourism development. This organization can lead the development of a tourism plan that aligns with the values of the community. Once this plan is created, they can recruit, involve and work with tourism individuals and organizations in developing and implementing strategies that increase tourism and recreation in the area in accordance with that plan. While local business and economic activities are best left to private operators and their local associations, having a plan will guide stakeholders, including businesses, citizens and various levels of government, to facilitate sustainable tourism development in the Houston area.

Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)

- Establish a staffing plan for supportive activities: Who will do the work?
- Commit organizational supports to improve the signs to key tourism locations such as South Park and the Houston Nature Center.
- Find non-paid or low-paid staffing via students or interns to strengthen organizational support for tourism efforts. Sheila Craig, one of the expert team visitors, made a connection with Audrey about a resident interested in building his resume around marketing/promotion.
- Explore additional resources and programs to enhance downtown Houston. For example, consider the Minnesota Main Street program www.mnpreservation.org/programs/mainstreet/ or a University of Minnesota CAP student to develop a main street design project. <http://www.cura.umn.edu/CAP>.

Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies

- Lead a multi-organization effort aimed at branding Houston. Houston already has an evolving owl theme, building upon the national owl event. A branding study might determine if there is a need or opportunity to strengthen or change this theme.
- Partner with community and area businesses and organizations to grow available funds to market Houston to potential visitors from the Twin Cities, western Wisconsin, central and northern Iowa and markets that utilize the I-90 corridor.
- Become active in the Southern Minnesota Tourism Association (SMTA). Houston representatives should attend meetings whenever possible to take advantage of networking and relationship-building opportunities that the association offers.
- Take advantage of resources available through Explore Minnesota Tourism's southern regional office for facilitation, planning, and ideas that can help efforts to promote tourism in the Houston area.

Building Community Support for Tourism in Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider

ABOUT THE HOUSTON COMMUNITY

The City of Houston has maintained a population of slightly fewer than 1,000 residents over the past five years, while Houston County has had a slowly declining population. The current population of Houston County is 18,850. According to an ESRI demographic report, there are approximately 1,940 people living within a five-mile radius of the center of Houston. (www.esri.com/software/bao)

The median household income of Houston is \$41,450 and it is estimated that fewer than 22 percent of households have an income greater than \$75,000 per year. Approximately 39 percent of the population is in the prime income earning age of 25-54 years old.

Tourism is no stranger to Houston, and community residents have taken steps to make it welcome. The Houston Nature Center and trailhead building are just two examples of assets that the community has built together. The community has also made investments in good ballpark facilities and campgrounds suitable for horse trail stays. Private investors have built a motel, restaurants and campgrounds.



FINDINGS

Key Findings

The statement, “we want tourism but we don’t want to become a Lanesboro,” was heard repeatedly in Houston. This reflects a worry that the beloved small town of Houston – quirks and all – could be changed by tourism; that the town and its amenities will no longer be accessible or desirable to community members.

Participants at the community meeting discussed this and came to the conclusion that one way to address this is to manage tourism development. The values of Houston as a community are a priority to residents and should be a primary consideration moving forward. Discussion and identification of these values at the beginning of any initiative is recommended. Tourism development is a deliberate process done with community and stakeholder input, keeping community values at the heart of any development. Decisions should consider community values and the sustainability of tourism development, taking ecological, economic and social impacts of tourism into account. This strategy will garner broad-based support, conserve the local resources upon which tourism depends, and thus could be embraced by tourists and locals alike.

Findings from Observations of Community Members

In the community inventory and SWOT analysis, Houston residents identified assets and opportunities relevant to enhancing and growing community support. For example, the inventory identified as a key asset, residents with skills and knowledge related to local history, the arts and woodworking. Further:

- The SWOT analysis identified community involvement as a strength.
- In the SWOT analysis, “Community support for each other” was the most frequently mentioned asset.
- The SWOT analysis identified several internal/local weaknesses in community development:
“There does not seem to be a consensus on a tourism development plan or marketing plan.”
“The community center needs to be replaced or improved to provide for better community and tourism events.”
- The SWOT analysis identified as an outside threat that “tourism ideas have environmental impacts that will generate resistance from advocates.”

Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors

The First Impressions Visitors reported that they perceived positive feelings from residents about tourism. The visitors felt safe, secure and were treated with respect by residents. Moreover, visitors liked the fact that people recommended local businesses to them rather than sending them out of town.

However, the visitors came to Houston on a weekday and found that several stores were closed in the afternoon. Shorter business hours, and the general lack of readily available information about local attractions and events received the lowest evaluation scores. First Impressions Visitors recommended that businesses develop consistent hours in the businesses and post them.

The visitors indicated that Houston is a friendly community that had made many foundational investments in tourism.

Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors

Houston is generally well-maintained by people in the community. A Home Town Pride beautification committee contributes to this effort. The murals, flowers, public seating and signs promoting local apples, and the overall “feel” of the community leave a positive first impression. These assets should be considered “cultural capital” that can be leveraged.

While the mayor supports tourism, he has a healthy concern that “tourists forget you are a community”, and he commented that in Lanesboro, locals feel they have lost their community – everything is done for the tourists, not for the community. “We want it to be OUR community, with the tourists visiting.” Tourism development must be beneficial for everyone. Some residents at the community meeting suggested that Houston needs a brand company in town (for example a Casey’s or WalMart). Others didn’t see that as a positive. Residents must discuss their community values as they move forward. The University of Minnesota Tourism Center offers a video entitled *Weaving Tourism into Community* that features communities who have addressed tourism development successfully. This

Building community support for tourism leverages the community’s human, social and political capitals to support and maintain tourism.

video might provide perspective and ideas and could be shown to the community as they prioritize projects.

It is clear that residents of Houston are proud of their community and support local efforts to help Houston thrive. This is not true in all communities. Houston has grass roots interest in tourism development rather than outsiders that come in to start new ideas. This was evident from the enthusiastic group at the evening meeting.

The impressive attendance and engagement at the community meeting spoke to the interest in tourism from community members. Some expressed concern about tourism “taking over, like Lanesboro,” but that was tempered by the sentiment that tourism could be deliberately planned by and for the community. Small table discussions at the community meeting emphasized the asset of community cohesiveness and “being nice.” In fact, the group considered the possibility of marketing Houston’s nice people, and training business people to be “beyond good” at customer relations. A community initiative approach utilizing the At Your Service: working with multicultural customers program from the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, could support this effort.

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/customer-service-education>

There is a great group of volunteers for tourism, but this core group will need to be expanded going forward. The social capital that exists among the Friends of the Nature Center, the Boy Scouts, the faith community, and organizers of the local festivals can be leveraged to bring more residents to the effort. Residents are friendly and helpful, but could benefit from education on tourism and the impact it can have on their community. Houston might also consider a creative way to make them more aware of local assets. For example, a photo contest for students from the school could engage young people and nurture community pride.

Developing a planned, ongoing awareness campaign can both build awareness of tourism and generate community pride that improves quality of life for residents. Houston might host a “Clean up South Park Day” that ends with a community picnic. Local woodworkers could be tapped to create signs for the park that have a consistent look. These are all ways to strengthen community involvement in the tourism development effort.

A priority should be placed on agreeing upon and communicating a set of community values that will guide tourism development. Involve the community members as much as possible in Houston’s vision and action plan so that residents buy in and make positive contributions, rather than being nonchalant or negative. Generally, community collaboration and planning will be necessary to sustain any efforts and make them successful. Planning tourism opportunities will enable the community to consider options that benefit locals and their quality of life.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION

General Recommendations

- Maintain awareness that tourism development is just one important element in a broader community development program.
- Build on Houston's existing social and human capital.
- Provide information and engage residents to build local awareness and increase support for tourism.

Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)

- Share the Weaving Tourism Into Communities video, especially the segment on the Villages of Van Buren, to community groups (city council, EDA, Chamber) to create a shared understanding of how to capitalize on tourism in a slower paced environment. Use this viewing as an opportunity to generate ideas for tourism in Houston.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/tourism-development/materials/weaving-tourism/>

Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies

- Involve the Boy Scouts in tourism projects such as building picnic tables, signage, something at the canoe launch in South Park, etc.
- Hold public meetings to discuss and plan for current and future tourism activities, including opportunities for local stakeholders to come together and celebrate the unique natural resources, history and cultural background of the area.
- Continue to plan tourism development so that it is cohesive, sustainable and fits community values. Share the plans with the community and use the Tourism Development manual as a review tool.
- Engage community members by asking them about their needs as they entertain visiting friends and family. How conveniently can a family reunion find facilities and food?
- Houston's businesses and entrepreneurs can become "concierges" that help visitors enjoy the natural beauty in the area.

Marketing Tourism in Houston: Findings and Strategies to Consider

ABOUT CURRENT MARKETING EFFORTS IN HOUSTON

Houston has made a good effort to promote the community tourism assets, but there are opportunities to enhance and improve visibility both on the Internet and with print literature. Awareness of the free resources offered through Explore Minnesota Tourism was limited. Data on tourism marketing impact and market research is needed to inform decisions.



FINDINGS

Key Findings

Identifying and differentiating Houston's types of visitors, as well as additional attractions and services they might use, is important and will be needed as the community moves forward with tourism development. Also, there is an opportunity to review whether existing marketing materials are leading customers to easily take advantage of what Houston has to offer.

Findings from Observations of Community Members

The community SWOT analysis demonstrated that the community recognizes opportunities for marketing to new audiences, and a few barriers to attracting customers.

The community identified "retirees with money available for day trips in Minnesota" as an external opportunity, as well as the Destination Medical Center that could increase the population and the tourism population base. They also identified larger cities that are within easy driving distance.

An external threat that was identified in relation to marketing was that there are rules for signs on key highways that limit the ability to advertise to motorists. Also, high gasoline prices and the latest economic downturn have hurt tourism development.

Findings from Observations of First Impressions Visitors

First Impressions visitors provided excellent feedback from the point of view of customers seeking information about Houston and its attractions. Their insights are particularly instructive for considering future projects.

Websites. The visitors went to both the Chamber of Commerce website and the city government website prior to actually visiting Houston. While both were easy to use, visitors saw a few things that might be helpful. None of the maps available were particularly useful to tourists and the "click to enlarge" icon was a dead link on two of the maps. The appearance was judged to be slightly below average. Moreover, little tourist information was available on the current site. Visitors also said it was difficult to find the website and Facebook page. Visitors would like to see some links to social media from Houston tourism businesses.

Community Information. While the visitors eventually found the visitor center, tourism brochures, community bulletin board, they commented that those things were difficult to find. Some of the signs were difficult to find and hard to read.

On a positive note, the visitor center hours were convenient to visitors.

The visitors suggested that best audiences for marketing Houston would be outdoor enthusiasts and naturalists. They suggested:

1. Better signage to tourist information on main entrances to Houston.
2. Improved access to tourist information at the Nature Center.
3. An updated website to include better links and to develop the community's brand.
4. Information about seasonal recreation available year round (for example, snowmobiles and fall colors).
5. A sculpture walk could be developed and promoted to create an experience around the available sculptures.



Findings from Observations of Expert Team Visitors

The expert team was enthused about Houston's marketing opportunities, focusing mostly on how the community can take better advantage of existing markets and resources.

Consider horse owners. Houston has some unique assets for horse owners that sync well with the natural assets. The two facilities that show upon a Google search for "horse trails" appear to be well-used with high reviews. The calendar for the Bunkhouse shows no vacancy for the next 28 days. However, a web visitor needs to look closely to see that this is only for Bunkhouse lodging and not for the camping area at the rest of Silver Creek Ranch; therefore, opportunities may be missed. The Outback ranch also has 32 miles of trails and is set up to handle large outdoor and indoor events, such as musical concerts and wedding receptions. It has some lodging and campsites.

A Google Maps search for "horse trails" shows Houston's two businesses and not many others in Southeast Minnesota. However, a search using the terms *horseback*, *trail rides*, and *horse* didn't bring many responses and didn't always show these two businesses. These businesses should be sure that their Google business site is claimed and modified for better search results.

An analysis could help Houston understand how they are advertising, determine occupancy rates, and see if there are opportunities for growth with this market. What other services are needed to support customers who visit these ranches? For example, neither of these businesses rent horses to non-horse owners. Is this an option for another business? This might be an opportunity for a student research project.

Consider event goers. The Outback has a large entertainment venue. Local research about the people who attend these events could support marketing efforts. Where are they staying and eating? What else are they doing in the region? Can advertisements be available for local businesses there? Businesses and the community should consider ways to partner and capitalize on this target audience by offering family-friendly activities, amenities, food and lodging.

Consider outdoor enthusiasts. Houston is already a destination for outdoor enthusiasts who are aware of its built assets. Maximizing this tourism experience represents one of Houston's best opportunities.

The Houston Nature Center, trailhead, band shell and new playground are wonderful amenities and attractions. The 24/7 access to restrooms and showers are a benefit for all outdoor sports enthusiasts visiting this community. The visitor center provides good education about the wildlife and area. The new playground is creatively designed and has so many positive things for families. Improved signage and encouragement to leave the Nature Center and venture one block into town is needed. Businesses and the community should consider ways to partner and capitalize on this target audience by offering family-friendly activities, amenities, food and lodging.

Information about other area attractions is limited to those who enter the building and was not well organized for persons looking for LOCAL activities. Materials about Houston sites were on the very bottom of the rack.

Consider online high school students, graduates and parents. Another potential lies in the Minnesota Virtual Academy. The online high school offers an opportunity for both marketing and engagement. The students and their families are potential visitors. Consider marketing local opportunities to them, or creating reasons for them to visit. Consider working with staff and students to help entrepreneurial ideas emerge and to get this entity involved in tourism development through partnerships for community service projects. For example, English classes can write news releases about Houston sites and events. A computer class can develop a spreadsheet to track advertising activities. Students may also be good resources for assistance in improving the presence of Houston and its businesses on websites and social media.

Generate interest in Houston among students and their families and the alumni. For example, host a baseball game with students and families and end with a community picnic. Create a day of activities to bring alumni to town and make it an annual event - a homecoming of sorts. Faculty can compete against students; families against families, etc.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION

General Recommendations

- Create and enhance authentic tourism experiences.
- Ask: how does possibility reflect Houston and our values?
- Pay attention to the usability of information about Houston on the internet and in the community.
- Better understand and address the needs of tourism markets already interested in Houston.
- Promote stop, play and dine opportunities.

Short-Term Project Ideas and Strategies (Can be Done Within 12 Months)

- Learn how to place businesses and attractions into online maps such as Google Maps and Mapquest. Update current assets so that they show up under more search terms and add the unlisted attractions. (For assistance, visit www.extension.umn.edu/community/retail/e-marketing)
- Improve your listing on the Explore Minnesota website. Make sure that events are included on the calendars. Post a better image on www.exploreminnesota.com by using available free photos and more verbiage. The Houston Nature Center has a good image, as does the Historic Bluff Country National Scenic Byway, and Loken's Sawmill Inn & Suites; however, other listings are not taking advantage of the free opportunities to post photos and add

descriptive wording. Examples of businesses that might take advantage of this are Lilac and Lace Guest House, The Bunkhouse, and Outback Ranch.)

- Consider taking advantage of Explore Minnesota Tourism travel information centers to distribute the community brochure. Also, consider taking advantage of the opportunity to display at the Travel Information Centers during peak travel times to market Houston to visitors who are shopping there.
- Improve signage within key tourism locations such as South Park and the Houston Nature Center.
- Visit all of the tourism sites and assure that brochures for local attractions are available and are placed in prominent locations.
- Use available secondary research information on current markets to better understand and address their needs.

Long-Term Project Ideas and Strategies

(Note: As the community considers these projects, they should consider the need for community conversations described in the “community” section of this report. Opportunities should be chosen as they align with the community’s values, desires and dreams for the future.)

- In order to feature the scenic views, consider marketing to target audiences such as motorcyclists, sports car enthusiasts, hunting enthusiasts (deer, turkey), kayak and canoe enthusiasts, birders, people interested in genealogy.
- Use market research to understand current and potential target markets.
- Look into utilizing the Explore Minnesota Tourism grant program to market to existing and new audiences.
- Consider using news releases to promote Houston to potential visitors. For little cost, Houston could realize more exposure to the traveling public.
- Partner with area communities to increase potential marketing and marketing resources.
- Work with Explore Minnesota Tourism to learn how to host a Familiarization Tour with area communities that highlights the area to travel writers and group tour operators.
- Explore partnering with the Mayo system and other hospital systems in Rochester to encourage visitors of their medical facilities to travel to the Houston area during down time.
- Work on town branding. Houston already has an evolving owl theme. A branding study might determine if there is an opportunity to change or expand this.
- Partner with community and area businesses and organizations to grow available funds for marketing in the Twin Cities, western Wisconsin, central and northern Iowa and markets that utilize the I-90 corridor.
- Survey people who are already using horse facilities. Come to understand what is needed to make this a location that could be one of the best in the Midwest region.
- Analyze use of existing lodging, trail head locations and further develop based on findings.

CONCLUSIONS

Houston has the potential to develop and enhance existing tourism. The statement, “we want tourism but we don’t want to become a Lanesboro,” was heard and repeated in Houston. This reflects a worry that the beloved small town that is Houston, quirks and all, will be permanently changed by tourism and external sources to a degree that the town and its amenities will no longer be accessible or desirable to community members.

Participants at the community meeting discussed this and came to the conclusion that one way to address this is to manage tourism development. This suggests that the values of Houston as a community are a priority to residents and should be a primary consideration moving forward. Tourism development should be based on the values of the community and discussion/identification of this at the beginning of any initiative is recommended. Tourism development is a step-wise, deliberate process done with community and stakeholder input to keep community values at the heart of any future development. Considering community values and the sustainability of further tourism development to take into account the ecological, economic and social impacts of tourism activities will help guide decision-making. This strategy will help garner broad-based support, conserve the local resources upon which tourism depends, and, thus, have more staying power to be embraced by tourists and locals alike.

RESOURCES

- Getting listed on digital map and Google searches:
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/retail/roadside-advertising/>
- Minnesota Main Street, a program of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, provides participating local Main Street organizations with the training, tools, information, and networking they need to be successful in their downtown revitalization efforts.
<http://www.mnpreservation.org/programs/main-street/>
- Explore Minnesota Tourism www.industry.exploreminnesota.com
- Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation - grants and potential help forming a community foundation <http://www.smifoundation.org/>
- University of Minnesota - SE Regional Sustainable Partnership; Erin Meier
tegtm003@umn.edu
- University of Minnesota Tourism Center; provides examples of tourism research projects and catalogs previous projects conducted in Minnesota www.tourism.umn.edu
- The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs offers a Community Assistantship Program that gives student researchers the opportunity to apply their research and technical skills in real world community challenges. <http://www.cura.umn.edu/CAP>
- Southern MN Tourism Association; contact Dave Vogel, 888-975-6766
- Blufflands Alliance; works to protect natural areas in the four states of the upper Mississippi River. <http://www.mnland.org/>
- Minnesota Trails website is a continuation of Minnesota Bike Trails & Rides, published quarterly in cooperation with the Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota, a non-profit organization that acquires, protects and enhances critical lands for public enjoyment. Their purpose is to guide people to these places by telling the story of the people who use, manage and support these special places. <http://mntrails.com>
- Esri is a company that uses geographic information (GIS) to connect businesses with the analytic knowledge they need to find customers in target markets. <http://www.esri.com>
- Bike Alliance, MNDOT and Minnesota Department of Health have created a Bikeable Community Workshop to help communities embrace this opportunity.
<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/bike/lisa/BikeableCommunityWorkshop.pdf>

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APPENDICES

A: Sustainable Tourism

B: Explore Minnesota: Tourism and Minnesota's Economy Fact Sheet, 2014

C: Project Application

D. Asset Inventories

APPENDIX A: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations

The Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations (GSTC-D) and the related performance indicators have been created by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (www.gstccouncil.org). This is a worldwide effort led by a coalition of more than 30 diverse organizations, businesses and experts to come to a common understanding of sustainable tourism. Based on currently recognized criteria, certification standards, and best practices from around the world, the GSTC-D suggests minimum guidelines and a set of indicators to aid communities and businesses in establishing locally appropriate measures around four main themes:

- Effective sustainability planning
- Maximize social and economic benefits for the local community
- Enhance cultural heritage
- Reduce negative impacts to the environment.

The criteria are basic guidelines for communities seeking to be more sustainable in their tourism initiatives. In smaller communities, limited resources may prevent comprehensive application of all criteria. Smaller communities are encouraged to review the criteria and select those that are actionable locally. Using these criteria to monitor the effects of local actions will help the community identify improvement toward sustainability.

The GSTC-D is a tool gaining momentum globally, and the website mentioned above provides links to several community case studies demonstrating how communities of different sizes are applying sustainable practices. Reviewing these criteria and the community case examples may assist your community in applying sustainability in your own tourism development initiatives.

APPENDIX B: EXPLORE MINNESOTA: TOURISM AND MINNESOTA'S ECONOMY FACT SHEET, 2014

EXPLORE Minnesota **Tourism and Minnesota's Economy**

Economic Impact: Sales and Jobs

Travel/tourism in Minnesota generates:

SALES

- \$12.5 billion in gross sales
- More than \$34 million a day

JOBS

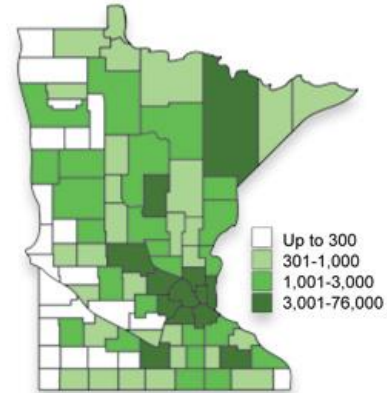
- More than 245,000 full- and part-time jobs
- 11% of total private sector employment
- \$4.3 billion in wages

REVENUE

- \$811 million in state sales tax
- 17% of state sales tax revenues

Note: Data for leisure & hospitality sector, 2012

LEISURE & HOSPITALITY JOBS BY COUNTY, 2012



GROWTH IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Sales at leisure and hospitality businesses grew 54% from 2000 to 2012, including 5% annual growth for 2012.



- Travel & tourism creates jobs and generates sales in virtually every county of Minnesota.
- Tourism jobs represent all levels of employment, from important entry level service jobs to high-paying executive positions.
- Traveler spending indirectly supports jobs in many other industries, as well, from financial services to printing.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Every \$1 invested in state tourism marketing returns an estimated:

- \$8 in state and local taxes
- \$84 in spending by travelers

CHANGE IN MINNESOTA LODGING OCCUPANCY

Source: STR (Smith Travel Research, Inc.)



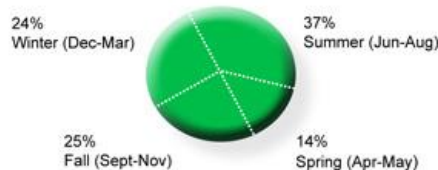
MINNESOTA RANKING AMONG STATES

The economic impact of travel & tourism in Minnesota ranks significantly higher compared to other states in:

Traveler Spending	22nd
Travel-Generated Employment	18th
Travel-Generated Payroll	14th
Travel-Generated Tax Receipts	9th

After a decline in occupancy in 2009 due to the recession, lodging properties have seen annual increases in occupancy.

TRAVELER EXPENDITURES BY SEASON



TRAVELER SPENDING BY SECTOR

Spending during Minnesota's 71 million annual person-trips (including overnight and day trips) is distributed throughout the economy:

- Food 25%
- Retail 18%
- Recreation 16%
- Transportation 16%
- Lodging 19%
- Second homes 6%

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2014

The FY2014 budget for Explore Minnesota Tourism is \$13.9 million, a significant, 66% increase in funding. With this additional investment, a new and expanded Explore Minnesota marketing campaign will debut in 2014.

Find more Information at: industry.exploreminnesota.com

Sources: Minnesota 2013 Tourism Advertising Evaluation and Image Study, Longwoods International; The Economic Impact of 2011 Travel in Minnesota, Tourism Economics; The Economic Impact of Expenditures by Travelers on Minnesota, June 2007-May 2008, Davidson-Peterson Associates; Minnesota Department of Revenue, 2012; Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 2012; Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Travel Association.

ECONOMIC IMPACT BY COUNTY

Minnesota's Leisure and Hospitality Industry, 2012

	Gross Sales	Sales Tax	Private Sector Employment		Gross Sales	Sales Tax	Private Sector Employment
Minneapolis - Saint Paul Area				Southern Minnesota			
Anoka	\$477,316,997	\$32,335,750	11,946	Big Stone	\$3,981,552	\$288,713	128
Carver	\$147,757,574	\$9,670,067	3,558	Blue Earth	\$163,413,193	\$10,761,636	3,812
Chisago	\$51,750,970	\$3,349,041	1,444	Brown	\$35,978,422	\$2,415,266	1,171
Dakota	\$756,875,628	\$50,422,799	16,657	Chippewa	\$16,097,127	\$1,116,951	382
Hennepin	\$4,240,067,280	\$280,741,109	75,525	Cottonwood	\$9,783,595	\$668,610	282
Isanti	\$32,486,466	\$2,263,043	871	Dodge	\$10,603,708	\$748,724	402
Ramsey	\$1,769,335,116	\$114,778,186	25,789	Faribault	\$11,001,957	\$720,257	305
Scott	\$309,920,392	\$17,654,986	6,168	Fillmore	\$20,503,063	\$1,444,022	578
Washington	\$437,255,748	\$29,667,435	10,378	Freeborn	\$42,175,002	\$2,830,232	1,092
Wright	\$181,130,118	\$10,836,093	4,406	Goodhue	\$69,132,826	\$4,750,638	1,733
Region Total	\$8,403,896,289	\$551,718,509	156,742	Houston	\$9,754,403	\$694,858	275
Central Minnesota				Jackson	\$10,890,094	\$671,491	313
Aitkin	\$20,692,436	\$1,425,354	497	Lac Qui Parle	\$4,071,170	\$291,795	88
Benton	\$54,858,985	\$3,625,581	1,286	Le Sueur	\$24,367,527	\$1,550,019	613
Crow Wing	\$201,073,526	\$12,686,611	3,892	Lincoln	\$3,565,954	\$263,732	103
Douglas	\$101,302,136	\$6,646,968	2,168	Lyon	\$66,993,915	\$3,048,196	1,381
Grant	\$3,031,590	\$193,803	47	Martin	\$31,101,613	\$2,085,872	840
Kandiyohi	\$77,016,965	\$4,829,598	1,582	Mower	\$56,191,224	\$3,363,419	1,306
McLeod	\$41,173,719	\$2,757,112	1,242	Murray	\$8,091,619	\$548,364	181
Meeker	\$16,657,239	\$1,122,629	431	Nicollet	\$34,746,412	\$2,416,047	923
Mille Lacs	\$50,259,624	\$2,704,777	905	Nobles	\$27,045,875	\$1,869,919	797
Morrison	\$37,953,902	\$2,650,027	1,069	Olmsted	\$396,425,482	\$26,354,806	7,982
Otter Tail	\$79,659,018	\$5,335,051	2,092	Pipestone	\$10,549,728	\$711,950	277
Pope	\$12,958,581	\$881,963	301	Redwood	\$27,583,097	\$1,953,300	399
Sherburne	\$78,969,255	\$4,882,658	1,990	Renville	\$9,121,424	\$647,690	274
Stearns	\$289,798,902	\$18,933,475	7,608	Rice	\$139,958,353	\$6,025,710	2,333
Stevens	\$16,022,664	\$944,069	463	Rock	\$9,424,079	\$651,954	215
Todd	\$20,289,225	\$1,411,145	406	Sibley	\$7,537,573	\$544,233	162
Wadena	\$14,577,092	\$983,273	371	Steele	\$61,538,609	\$4,121,598	1,401
Region Total	\$1,116,294,859	\$72,014,094	26,350	Swift	\$8,651,992	\$617,172	239
Northwest Minnesota				Traverse	\$2,187,294	\$164,983	NA
Becker	\$68,776,424	\$4,399,765	1,459	Wabasha	\$25,620,714	\$1,718,486	777
Beltrami	\$82,096,909	\$5,249,317	1,872	Waseca	\$14,349,281	\$907,047	388
Cass	\$102,411,781	\$6,196,420	1,736	Watonwan	\$7,821,691	\$535,815	213
Clay	\$73,111,131	\$4,653,784	1,872	Winona	\$93,844,551	\$6,407,935	2,448
Clearwater	\$4,562,173	\$328,117	138	Yellow Medicine	\$13,838,318	\$554,384	211
Hubbard	\$29,955,194	\$2,018,357	741	Region Total	\$1,487,942,437	\$94,465,824	34,024
Kittson	\$3,056,600	\$220,142	70	Northeast Minnesota			
Lake of the Woods	\$31,860,767	\$1,810,876	479	Carlton	\$59,989,204	\$3,928,136	1,018
Mahnomen	\$16,465,104	\$970,379	122	Cook	\$55,099,915	\$3,509,141	880
Marshall	\$4,864,753	\$375,197	144	Itasca	\$69,252,200	\$4,458,591	1,501
Norman	\$3,020,579	\$215,947	67	Kanabec	\$14,045,543	\$924,158	308
Pennington	\$24,035,703	\$1,637,725	536	Koochiching	\$28,709,105	\$1,898,868	519
Polk	\$43,504,674	\$2,711,711	1,099	Lake	\$29,804,253	\$2,053,201	881
Red Lake	\$1,927,256	\$137,787	66	Pine	\$63,658,221	\$3,423,625	1,022
Roseau	\$19,603,999	\$1,313,260	344	St Louis	\$473,912,454	\$32,100,727	10,354
Wilkin	\$4,021,685	\$299,055	159	Region Total	\$794,470,895	\$52,296,447	16,483
Region Total	\$513,274,732	\$32,537,839	10,904	Minnesota Total	\$12,467,603,066	\$810,615,926	245,411

Notes: State total does not equal the sum of counties or regions because some data is withheld to avoid disclosure of individual businesses; and some state level data is for businesses located outside of Minnesota. The Leisure and Hospitality industry consists of Accommodations; Food Services and Drinking Places; and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation.

Sources: Minnesota Department of Revenue; Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

Produced by Explore Minnesota Tourism, an office of the State of Minnesota. 1/14

Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities

Community Application

April 2013



The University of Minnesota Tourism Center
is a collaboration of the College of Food,
Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences
and University of Minnesota Extension.

Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities

The Minnesota Sustainable Tourism Assessment for Small Communities project will assist small non-metro communities to identify and assess local assets as part of a sustainable tourism development effort. Drawing on the Tourism Assessment Program (TAP), emphasis is on helping communities identify opportunities to develop and enhance regional assets for tourism. Expanding regional assets helps attract more visitors or keep visitors longer in the region. Sustainable tourism and recreation recognize the need for integrating various dimensions of sustainability: economic, environmental, and social. This program seeks to satisfy community tourism needs, protect natural and cultural resource attractions, and preserve development capabilities for future generations.

This Tourism Assessment provides:

- Community participation in identifying and assessing local tourism assets
- A community visit and on-site consultation with a team of tourism experts
- A facilitated community meeting to solicit ideas and input from residents related to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) for local tourism
- An opportunity for the community team to visit and assess another community in the project
- A report with analysis, observations, and recommendations to address identified tourism opportunities in a sustainable manner, and
- Comprehensive evaluation of the program outcomes and impact.

The process begins with a short community application. The community forms a team to lead the local effort and get the community engaged. They arrange for completion of the asset inventories, compile a packet of background information and prepare for the 1- 2 day visit by the team of tourism experts. The local leadership team invites residents to participate in a facilitated community meeting during the experts visit to the community. Each local team also visits another community in the statewide project to gain tourism insights and share ideas with other communities.

The University of Minnesota Tourism Center analyzes available data and prepares a final report with recommendations for the community. The report is presented to the community leadership team and an Extension Educator facilitates an action planning session based on the recommendations. The Extension Educator monitors community efforts and conducts a project evaluation approximately 12 months following the visit.

The Tourism Assessment Program utilizes materials from the *Community Tourism Development 2nd* edition by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center and is modeled in part on the Tourism Resource Team (TRT) program created by the Northeast Minnesota Sustainable Development Partnership (NMDSP). This statewide project is a collaboration of the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, and University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality.

Community Criteria:

Non-metro communities or townships in Minnesota with a population under 1500 or a group of 2-3 small communities (each under 1500) may apply. Groups of communities must be in geographic proximity and be willing to or have experience working together.

Community Preparation / Expectations

- 1) Prior to applying, assemble a Community Leadership Team representing a cross-section of the community which will be responsible for implementation of the program and for communicating with the rest of the community.
- 2) Complete and submit the 2 page application by May 15, 2013 to your Regional Sustainable Development Partnership office. (see last page)
- 3) If your community is selected for participation:
 - a. Prepare information regarding current tourism, assets and resources in the community.
 - b. Gather background materials including any previous studies, reports or strategic plans.
 - c. Prepare for 1-2 day site visit by the Tourism Expert Team, including arranging logistics, inviting residents to participate in the community meeting, and setting everything up with community participants. The community is responsible for providing these logistics as in-kind contribution to the program.
 - d. Keep community informed and engaged.

Anticipated Project Timeline

April –May 2013	Recruit and select communities to participate.
June 2013	First meeting with community leadership team to conduct training and launch project. Dates established for community work and visits.
June –August 2013	Local team completes community inventories and assessments completed, secondary data collected.
July-September 2013	Local team visits another community in project.
August-October 2013	Tourism expert team visits community, facilitates conversation with community.
October-January 2013	Reports drafted, reviewed.
January-February 2014	Report presented to community.
January –April 2014	Extension Educator facilitated action planning with community using report findings/recommendations.
April – December 2014	Community implements action plans. Partnership and Extension will provide suggestions and ideas for finding resources.
October 2014	Statewide Celebration with participating communities, facilitators and project funders.
November-December 2014	REM Evaluation of program conducted by Extension with each community

Benefits of Participating

Communities participating in this project will gain a deeper understanding of their tourism potential and ways to develop these opportunities. The program provides a unique view of your tourism potential – from tourism experts, visitors and self-assessment. Using this information, communities consider development of these opportunities and create action steps to move forward.



Is this program right for us? A quick self-assessment

Tourism development is a comprehensive effort involving many aspects of your community. To help you and your applicant team think about aspects of community life that can potentially impact the quality of tourism products and services; and to better gauge if undertaking a tourism assessment program would be of benefit to your community, please mark where on the spectrum you feel your tourism development team is in achieving these aspects of community-oriented tourism development. Communities just starting tourism development may not have achieved or even be working on these, but reviewing them can help you and your team consider ways of strengthening existing tourism and recreation products, services and assets.

a.	Planning : Tourism fits our community's shared vision for development and use of our resources	1	2	3	4	5
		We have no vision		We have a shared vision within our community		
b.	Building Community Support: Our community understands the value of involving people in the decisions that impact them	1	2	3	4	5
		Residents don't get involved in community efforts		We have at least 50% of our residents involved in community efforts		
c.	Organizing for Tourism Development: Our Community's boards and civic groups are assets in our tourism development strategies.	1	2	3	4	5
		We have boards and committees		Our groups provide effective leadership and management		
d.	Assessing your Tourism Potential: Our Community wants to understand its tourism strengths and opportunities compared to other neighboring destinations.	1	2	3	4	5
		We've never thought about it before		We have surveyed local businesses and know what our niche is		
e.	Assessing your Market(s): Our community wants to understand who our visitors are and can convey specialized messaging tailored to the unique interests, needs and wants of each.	1	2	3	4	5
		We've never thought about it before		We have surveyed visitors and know what their needs are		
f.	Marketing/Communication: Our community has a plan to communicate the availability of our tourism products and services to potential customers.	1	2	3	4	5
		We don't have a plan		We have a plan that includes the use of social media		
g.	Local Business Development: Our community values and encourages small business development.	1	2	3	4	5
		We haven't considered this		We have surveyed local businesses and work with their interests		
h.	Infrastructure and Appearance: Our community has made an effort to assess and upgrade its infrastructure and attractiveness to visitors and residents.	1	2	3	4	5
		We haven't made any effort		We have specific routes developed that guide visitors through town		
i.	Human Resources: Our community welcomes diversity and is meeting the customer service expectations of a diverse mix of customers.	1	2	3	4	5
		We haven't thought about this		We have trained our workforce and serve a diverse mix of visitors		
j.	Funding: Our community is aware of the financial resources that are available to us to implement our tourism development strategies.	1	2	3	4	5
		We have resources		We use our resources and external ones to effectively accomplish our development projects		
k.	Maintaining Tourism Vitality: Our community has a development plan in place that is used to periodically update business information, and assess if any changes are needed in the experiences, services or products that we offer.	1	2	3	4	5
		We don't have a plan		Our plan is in use and updated periodically based on the needs of our community and visitors		

Community Application Form

Applications are due by noon on May 15, 2013 and communities will be notified by May 31, 2013.
Please submit this application to your Regional Sustainable Development Partnership office listed on the last page.

Community Criteria:

Non-metro townships or communities in Minnesota with a population under 1500 or a group of 2-3 small communities (each under 1500) may apply. Groups of communities must be in geographic proximity and be willing to or have experience working together. Potential team members to consider:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chamber/CVB Director | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Resort/Hotel/Motel/B&B, etc. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Natural Resources Specialist |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parks & Recreation Director | <input type="checkbox"/> Attraction manager | <input type="checkbox"/> Museum staff |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> City planning or economic development staff | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Retailer | <input type="checkbox"/> Historical Society staff / volunteers |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Township supervisor or clerk | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restaurateur | <input type="checkbox"/> Arts / theater Organization |
| | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Youth representative | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Others as appropriate |

Contact Information:

Community: City of Houston	County: Houston
Partner Communities Names: (if applicable): n/a	
Local Coordinator: Chris Peterson	Email: houstonplanning@acegroup.cc
Street Address: 105 W. Maple Street, PO Box 667	
City: Houston, MN	Zip Code: 55943
Telephone: 507-896-4033	Community website: http://houston.govoffice.com
<p>Additional Team members & emails (minimum of two people in addition to Local Coordinator required and multi-community applications must include team members from each community)</p> <p>Audrey Hegland, EDA, Planning and Zoning, City of Houston, hegland@acegroup.cc Karla Bloem, Naturalist and Director, Houston Nature Center, nature@acegroup.cc John Loken, Owner, Sawmill Inn & Suites, lokenssawmill@acegroup.cc James Loken, Student, lokenssawamill@acegroup.cc Richard Carr, General Manager, Root River Market, rrmc@acegroup.cc Marlene Schultz, Chamber of Commerce, Trail Towns Committee, Owner of Bunkhouse Ranch & Lodging, jaschultz@acegroup.cc Wayne Fitting, Owner, Money Creek Haven Campground, moneycreekhaven@acegroup.cc Elizabeth Benedum, Owner, Barrista's Coffeehouse, baristas@acegroup.cc Justin Treptow, Chair, City Park and Recreation Board, justin.treptow@hps294.us Randy Steinfeldt, Supervisor, Houston Township, rgstein@acegroup.cc</p>	

Continued on next page

Please answer in one short paragraph: How ready do you feel your community is to engage in this project? How will you use the findings from this program to benefit your community?

Houston is a small town nestled in the heart of SE Minnesota's beautiful bluff country and the scenic Root River Valley. It is a perfect combination of modern conveniences and activities, coupled with the quaint feel of small-town America from decades gone by. Houston is called the "Best of Bluff Country" and is also perhaps the best-kept secret in SE MN – it has much to offer with its scenic beauty, many recreational opportunities, and warm, welcoming people. Tourism has long been a priority for Houston, and assets such as the Nature Center and Root River Trail have proven that the City can be a great destination. Houston has support for tourism growth which is evident in the vision of the City EDA, Comprehensive Plan and MN Design Team Report. Projects in the works, including an International Owl Center and DNR Off-Highway Vehicle Park, put Houston on the cusp of amazing tourism potential. A progressive City Council has recognized this potential and has recently hired a City Planner to assist with these projects and guide economic development. The Sustainable Tourism Assessment Program is just what Houston needs to provide an objective review of our local strengths and weaknesses, and identify how we can maximize the many positive assets of our community to attract new visitors and tourists to town. We have taken the first step by creating a strong Leadership Team for the Program; they look forward to learning and doing what they can to help the process.

Applicant Terms of Agreement:

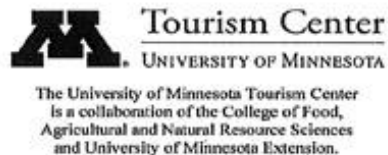
- Our community already has at least 3 people who have agreed to serve on the Community Leadership Team. This team will be responsible during the next 1-2 years for facilitating program logistics in the community and helping guide implementation of the program locally. One person will chair the Leadership Team and be the primary contact person.
- Our community realizes that implementing this tourism assessment program takes a commitment of time and requires financial resources to support meetings, the community visit and implementation of recommendations.
- Our community will host the visiting tourism experts for a 1-2 day visit by providing complimentary commercial lodging and meals, and arrange for interviews and meetings with community stakeholders. These may be in-kind contributions.
- Our community will send representatives to the statewide celebration of communities in this project.
- Our community is prepared to create action steps to develop tourism assets.

Sign & Date: Chris Peterson 5-13-13 *Application approved at City Council Meeting 5-13-13*

Partner community signatures as applicable:

Questions, please contact:

Cynthia Messer, Extension Professor
University of Minnesota Tourism Center
cmesser@umn.edu or call 612.624.6236



APPENDIX D: ASSET INVENTORIES

ASSOCIATION ASSETS				
Name	Purpose/Mission	Key Contact	Phone	Current or Potential Role in Tourism
Friends of the Nature Center				
Library Committee?				
Boy Scouts Troop 53				
Houstons Lions Club	To serve the community	Joan Redig	(507) 450-2029	

INDIVIDUAL ASSETS		
Skill/Knowledge	Name	Contact Information
Master Builder	Chris Nelson	
Wood Craftsman	Roger Myer	
Custom Cabinetry	Seth Hargrove	
Silk Painting	Jean Collette	
Area History	Lois Frauenkron	
Landscape gardening, past community educator, knowledge of area	Marilyn Fraunkron Bayer	(507)896-2301 15910 Catalpa Coulee Dr, 55943
Story teller, builder, fisherman/hunter	Bill Frutiger	(507) 450-4135 18254 Franklin Dr., 55943
Retired post office director, beef farmer, boyscout master for many years	Arlyn Frauenkron	(507) 896-3210 15651 Catalpa Coulee Dr, 55943

INSTITUTIONAL ASSETS				
Name	Purpose/Mission	Key Contact	Phone	Current or Potential Role in Tourism
EDA/HAD				
Houston Nature Center				
Houston Elementary				
Houston High				
Cross of Christ Lutheran				
City Council				

Evaluation of Existing Attractions																						
ATTRACTION	Tourism Development Assessment Criteria (Rate 1-4)						Market				Months of Use											
	Quality	Authenticity	Uniqueness	Drawing Power	Activities	Average Rating	Local	Regional	US	Int'l	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Houston Nature Center	4	4	3	2	4			x														
Root River State Trail	3	4	3	4	3			x														
Buffalo Ranch	?	4	2	?	2			x														
Houston Hoedown	4	4	3	4	4			x														
Bluegrass Festival	?	4	3	4	2			x														