



Heritage Area Development: Is it right for the Flint Hills of Kansas?

This is one of a series of papers on issues of interest to the Center of Business and Economic Development (CBED) and the ESU School of Business. Each paper summarizes readings, analysis and synthesis by the Director, William L. Smith, Ph.D., for discussion, to provide background information to direct our planning processes and to build content for the Center web site at: <http://www.emporia.edu/business/ibed/center/>

Rural economic development continues to be a challenge in 2006 in the heartland of Kansas as it is across the nation, and the world. A trend (Cremin, 2004) that began nationally a little over twenty years ago has now emerged in discussions across the Flint Hills of Kansas that may provide a new perspective worthy of serious consideration and possible implementation if circumstances are right, as it appears they may be. This trend is the use of reciprocal partnerships to create heritage area development. Before we provide more on this, the following section provides background to these considerations.

Background

In recent years, economic development efforts to bring industry to local communities, especially rural ones, has not been as successful as it was in prior time periods because of both increased competition and incentives offered now in many places and as a result of some systematic changes in the economic landscape in America. Many industrial activities have been replaced through automation and other technologies and others have been shifted to lower cost provider environments around the world.

One response to this change has been an increased awareness of the need to “do economic development” with “what we have – where we are” rather than depend entirely on seeking to bring in outside industry to create local jobs in order to retain and attract our young people and their families to live and work in our local communities. One local effort, recently initiated, for example, has created a commercial development task force to work along with the traditional industrial economic development group to actively seek commercial and retail establishment development to enhance local ‘quality of life,’ without additional incentives. A local inventors and entrepreneurs forum has been initiated to encourage “growing our own” business opportunities.

Another approach has been to recognize the assets in the greater community region that would make the area amenable to increased experiential tourism activity, thus bringing in outside dollars from visitors of only a few days duration, sustainable year around, perhaps, without the environmental impact of mass tourism programs. This approach has been incorporated in a twenty-two county effort (the Flint Hills Tourism Coalition), which includes numerous partnerships with existing organizations and development of a specific marketing tool website focused on the twenty-two county region of the Flint Hills of Kansas. A closely related effort is also under way to identify



and assist additional local agritourism entrepreneurs to add attraction activities that are nature based and authentic to the Flint Hills environment. This initiative has recently received a small federal grant to the local RC&D organization to enhance success of the project. These efforts have all been enhanced by the results and recommendations of an outside consulting group (Fermata, Inc., 2005), funded by the State of Kansas, that the Flint Hills region consider heritage area development as an overarching approach to internal economic development for the region.

Heritage area development

A heritage area has been defined in the following manner:

“Heritage areas are meaningful places where residents, property owners, nonprofits, businesses, and governments work through reciprocal partnerships to enhance, conserve, interpret, and promote community resources, peoples, and traditions that define their region as a special place worthy of conservation for the benefit of the present and the future.”
(Barrett and Van West, 2005)

Reciprocal partnerships are at the heart of the concept of heritage area development. Reciprocal partnerships are “ongoing and evolving;” they embrace “a dynamic relationship grounded in mutually agreed-upon commitments and responsibilities. Partners work toward shared goals based on mutual interests and consensus (p. 9).” A reciprocal partnership “can be elastic and creative, bringing the flexibility in approach, funding, and perspective that any successful heritage area needs (p. 9)” (Barrett and Van West, 2005).

Heritage areas can, over time, become congressionally designated National Heritage Areas as defined under National Park Service regulations (National Heritage Areas, 2006). However, that can only happen where the local people have shown a dedication to “acting like a heritage area.” Therefore, whether the national designation occurs in future years is really only one goal, a far distant one, to be considered in heritage area development. The more useful, and current, goals of heritage area development involve “buy-in” by the various local constituents (noted in the definition above) to work cooperatively and productively together to provide related, definable attractions and support systems that will both preserve and conserve local resources which at the same time enhance economic growth and minimize environmental impact.

Barrett and Van West (2005) recommend the following five principles as the best practices for heritage area development:

1. Heritage areas must embrace the region’s most significant resources and embody its most compelling stories.
2. Without meaningful inclusive stories and resources, a heritage area lacks a sense of place, a sense of the past, and a sense of identity and authenticity.



3. Reciprocal partnerships are the foundation for effective, efficient heritage area administration and management.
4. Heritage areas strive to enhance community capacity and to bring about a covenant between people and places defining a region.
5. Without effective resource conservation and enhancement, a heritage area lacks authenticity and distinctiveness, making it impossible to distinguish the region from Anywhere, USA.

The initial steps, then, moving toward heritage area development are to assess who you are and what you have, followed by extensive communications: talk with other regionally-focused groups to incorporate the best ideas, talk to local officials and elected representatives, and hold open meetings and creative public forums to engage property owners and listen to their concerns.

The first criteria recommended by the National Park Service for heritage area designation (National Heritage Area, 2006) is also informative:

The area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as such an assemblage, through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities.

The second through fourth criteria are even more succinct:

- It reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the nation's story.
- It provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features.
- It provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities.

Each of these aspects, taken seriously by local people, communities and organizations internally will generate increasing visitation by those external to the region and enhance economic growth.

Conclusion

These sets of activities, then, when all taken together, in concert under the "heritage area development" concept provide the opportunity for substantial internal incremental economic growth for the region, in this case, the Flint Hills of Kansas. Preservation and conservation of local resources and assets, seen as attractions by outside visitors, under the big umbrella of heritage, nature and agritourism, for example, encourage modest tourism growth which brings outside funds into the communities of the region. Portions of these funds, properly recognized and utilized, can be fed back into



local communities to enhance the preservation and conservation efforts of heritage area development which then attracts additional outside tourism dollars and so forth, generating measurable economic impact into future years.

References

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