

Niagara Falls Review (ON)

Common voice can take tourism to the next level

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As we've been documenting for the past three days, there are significant challenges facing the tourism industry in Niagara Falls - namely, how to bring more visitors here and how to keep them here longer.

Tourism isn't, and must not be, a dirty word around Niagara Falls. It's a major industry in our city. While we lament the loss of manufacturing jobs and try to figure how we can compete with Mexico and China to get them back, the homegrown tourism industry offers a realistic chance for growth.

It's estimated 11.5 million people visit here each year, resulting in a \$1.64 billion economic impact.

There are significant effects on taxes, as well. It's estimated tourism offsets residential taxes by \$3 million and that Fallsview hotels alone generate \$2.1 million annually.

Tourism is an integral part of the economic makeup in Niagara Falls. The industry and those involved with it deserve enormous credit for recognizing its potential and changing the face of the city, mostly for the better.

Look at the alternatives. We are sandwiched between places like Niagara Falls, N.Y., and St. Catharines, which are stagnating as they cling to the false hope that someday manufacturing jobs will return.

Guess what? Those jobs aren't coming back anytime soon.

In the meantime, Niagara Falls through the efforts of forward-thinking entrepreneurs has got itself ahead of the economic curve.

Sure, there are the well-documented issues in the industry: A Canadian dollar trading higher than its U.S. counterpart, meaning it costs more for Americans to visit here; a United States proposal to eventually force everyone entering the country - even its own citizens - to produce a passport to get home, and the global war on terrorism.

Add to that the lack of a cohesive strategy by tourism operators and various levels of government to market the city as a whole, and it's not hard to see the city faces an uphill climb.

But there remains great potential for more growth. New attractions have steadily been added to the city. Growth over the past 10 years has been unprecedented in scope. But what's also clear is that while a number of the major tourism players in town have their own plans to bring visitors here, there's no cohesive strategy for marketing and branding the entire city as a destination.

We've often heard from higher levels of government that to get action, regions need to speak with one voice. There is no common, unified voice for the tourism industry in Niagara Falls. That is counterproductive. It's bad for business. And it just doesn't make sense.

The maddening aspect is that those who work in tourism know all of this. They know they need to work together. They understand the benefits. They just don't (or won't) do it.

We're told by some corners of the tourism industry that the silos are gradually coming down. We hope so, because there is much to be gained. The convention centre project is a perfect example of what can happen when the industry pulls together: An important initiative that will benefit all, and hopefully help turn Niagara Falls into a year-round destination.

But it can't stop here. There is too much at stake.

If we use a sports analogy, consider the National Football League. There is a collection of 32 often disparate voices, each with their own parochial interests. Still, they manage to find common ground... enough to make the NFL the envy of professional sports leagues around the world. The NFL is growing leaps and bounds, stretching its traditional borders into a global concern.

The Niagara Falls tourism industry has much to learn from the NFL.

A unified approach to business does not mean surrendering individuality or autonomy. And it does not mean reducing the bottom line. Quite the contrary.

A common strategy would mean more visitors to Niagara Falls. For everyone. It would mean visitors staying longer. It would mean more return visits. And all of that would mean more money. More money for everyone.

As mercenary as it may sound, making money is the bottom line, isn't it? And like tourism itself, there is nothing wrong with that.

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