

BURKE AREA DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE: PHASE 2

Summary of Project & Results

In August of 2014, The Burke Area Chamber of Commerce (BACC) was awarded a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from USDA Rural Development to complete Phase 2 of the Burke Area Destination Development Initiative. The objective of the project was to increase awareness of the Burke Area as a vacation destination and draw more visitors to the area on a year round basis while assisting emerging & existing area businesses to succeed amidst the growth in the community.

Summary of Project Accomplishments

Connecting Businesses with Local Resources

Throughout the project, several measures were taken to connect area businesses with the many local resources available to help them expand their businesses including:

- A Monthly e-newsletter was sent to over 300 local businesses with information about workshops, training, resources, chamber initiatives, member business news, etc.
- Business Resources and Business Workshops pages were added to and are regularly updated on the Burke Area website, burkevermont.com.
- In December of 2014, the BACC hosted a Business Networking meeting called Forging Connections which over 40 local business owners/managers attended. Representatives from Northern Community Investment Corporation (NCIC), Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA), Vermont Small Business Development Center (VTSBDC), the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship at Lyndon State College, Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and the Vermont Procurement Technical Assistance Center were at the meeting to talk to people about the services they offer.
- Three local businesses took advantage of the financial assistance that was promoted as part of the grant. Many others were referred to organizations listed above which offer free business services or cost sharing programs.
- The BACC also assisted with the start-up of the Burke Farmers' Market via promotion, paying for signage, setting up a page on burkevermont.com for the market and otherwise providing guidance and support. The Burke Farmers' Market Committee is temporarily working under the umbrella of the BACC until they complete the process of becoming their own separate non-profit organization.

Website Enhancements

- Business listings (200+) on the site were enhanced so that each business has their own page on burkevermont.com dedicated to showcasing only their business including a description, contact info, website & email links, multiple photos and a video if one is available.
- A translation feature was added to the website.
- The website is now mobile responsive for easy access on smartphones and mobile devices.
- Pages on burkevermont.com showcasing local vacation packages and local business deals were enhanced to better showcase the offerings.
- A Relocation page was added to the site to assist new and future residents and/or those looking to start a business in the Burke Area.

Membership Directory

The printed directory was designed by our graphic designers at Flek and contains listings for all BACC member businesses as well as courtesy listings for schools, churches and local business resource organizations. 1,000 copies were printed and a directory was mailed to each chamber member as well as distributed locally to stores, markets, real estate agencies and any other business requesting copies. Directories are free of charge for any of their customers/clients to take. The directory is also available in pdf format on burkevermont.com. The directory is meant to encourage residents, visitors and business owners to shop local for goods & services.

Press & Publicity

From August of 2014 – 2015, the BACC assisted several national travel writers with visits to the area and articles were published in the following print or online media pieces:

- The Boston Herald in September of 2014
- Johnnyjet.com in March of 2015
- Pinkbike.com in March and June of 2015
- Bike Magazine (online edition) in June of 2015

Press releases were also regularly sent to and published in local Northeast Kingdom and Vermont newspapers, magazines and websites regarding local events and BACC business news.

Creation of Promotional Videos of the Area

- BCN Productions created a Summer/Fall Promo video and a Winter Promo video which are in use by the BACC on the website, e-news, and social media. The video links/embed codes are available to any business or organization wishing to share the videos. The videos showcase a variety of Burke Area offerings including recreation, dining, arts and culture.
- Vince Franke of Peregrine Productions attended the New England Mountain Bike Festival and filmed a video which will be used and shared for promotion purposes.

Burke Area Brochure & Distribution

- The Burke Area brochure was updated by Flek in the fall of 2014.
- 30,000 copies were printed in English and distributed throughout VT welcome centers, in metro and suburban MA and in NH locations along Interstate 93.
- An additional 20,000 copies were translated entirely into French-Canadian and distributed at 50 locations throughout Montreal, Canada.

Welcome Kiosks

Updates are in progress for the welcome kiosks in East & West Burke including some minor repairs and new, up-to-date information about the area including the QR bar code which allows people to go to burkevermont.com via mobile devices to get specific information about lodging, dining, services, events and view all business listings.

Online Advertising Campaign

- The BACC invested in online advertising with Vermont.com which includes several banner ads and listings on the site that link to the website. Vermont.com is one of the top performing tourism sites for the State of Vermont with over 65,000 visits per month. Our ads generate an average of 60 referrals per month to burkevermont.com.
- The BACC also invested in a Facebook winter ad campaign which featured 6 banner ads showcasing various recreational and cultural offerings. These ads were tremendously successful. Facebook 'likes' to the BACC page have gone from 800 to now over 3,500.

Print Advertising Campaign

Print ads showcasing the Burke Area and local events were designed by Flek and placed in several publications including:

- Vermont Sports
- Kingdom Guide
- Bike Magazine
- Vermont Vows
- Vermont Life
- Burlington Airport Guide
- VAST Snowmobile Magazine
- The Boston Herald
- Montreal Families
- CyclePresse

Travel Trade Show Participation

- Kingdom Trails attended the Boston Ski Show in November 2014 and the Vallee Bras-du-Nord (Salon du Velo) Travel Show in Quebec, Canada in March of 2015. At each show, they placed Burke Area pop up displays and brochures at the booths and promoted the range of area offerings including recreation, dining, lodging, arts & culture. Each show was a 3 day event with 2,000 – 3,000 visitors per day.
- Brochures were also shared with the Northeast Kingdom Chamber of Commerce and Vermont Gay Tourism Association for distribution at several New England and Canadian Travel Shows they each attended in 2014 & 2015.

Event Enhancement, Creation & Promotion

The BACC organized or assisted with several area events including:

- September 2014 – **Annual Burke Fall Foliage Festival** – organized and hosted by the BACC. Attendance at the event was up 15% from the previous year. Over 50 local businesses sponsor, donate or volunteer to make the event a success.
- October 2014 – **CircumBurke Mountain Bike & Trail Run Challenge** - Organized and hosted by Kingdom Trails, Conservation Collaboratives and the BACC. Attendance at the event was up 25% from 2013. This event is only in its 4th year and has grown tremendously from when it began with only 30 participants. The BACC assisted by promoting the event, providing volunteers, obtaining sponsors and sharing advertising costs.

- February 2015 – **Burke Wine & Art Snowcase** – organized and hosted by the BACC. Despite increased advertising of the event, attendance was down from previous years. The BACC has decided to no longer hold this event since there does not seem to be a demand for it.
- March 2015 – **WinterBike** - Organized and hosted by Kingdom Trails with some assistance from the BACC. Attendance at the event was up 35% from last year. The BACC assisted by providing volunteers, promoting the event and paying lodging costs for a travel writer from Pinkbike.com to attend the event.
- ***NEW EVENT*** April 2015 – **Rasputitsa Gravel Road Race** – organized and hosted by Dirty 40 Races and Kingdom Trails with some assistance from the BACC. 500 people from New England, Canada and other areas participated, visiting Burke during mud season. The BACC assisted by providing volunteers and promoting the event. The event was very successful and will return in 2016.
- May 2015 – **Coyote Scramble Trail Run** – organized and hosted by Kingdom Trails with some assistance from the BACC. The event was expanded into a weekend event giving runners the option of participating one or two days for various course distances. Thirty people participated which is up slightly from last year. The BACC assisted by promoting the event, paying for event t-shirts and other items provided to participants. The event will return to the area next May and is expected to grow steadily in popularity.
- June 2015 – **New England Mountain Bike Festival** - organized and hosted by the New England Mountain Bike Association, Kingdom Trails, The Wildflower Inn, Pedro's and the BACC. Attendance was up 30% this year from last year with just over 1,900 people in attendance each day. Of note was a noticeable increase of women and families at the event. The BACC assisted by providing volunteers, obtaining sponsors, promoting the event, sharing expenses including costs for a promo video and ads in Bike Magazine, VT Sports and CyclePresse. We also paid for event staff shirts and paid the cost for a travel writer from Bike Magazine to attend. The event will return to the area in 2016.

RESULTS

Although it is still early to know the full effect of Phase 2 of the Burke Area Destination Development Initiative, based on the numbers we have collected as well as in speaking with area businesses and visitors, it appears that our efforts are having a very positive impact on the local economy, there has been an increase in tourism to the area and project sustainability within the BACC has grown.

The Impact on the Local Economy of the Burke Area

One goal of this project was to improve the local economy of the Burke Area and to see an increase of jobs in the area as well as help emerging & existing area businesses expand. To better understand the impact of this project on the local economy several measures were taken including sending out the 2015 *Burke Area Business Survey*. Based on the survey results and in speaking with area businesses, we know that many have added new employees to their staff and several new businesses have opened in the area including vacation rentals, a dog training facility and the Burke Farmers' Market. Many others have expanded their operations including utilizing local business resources such as NCIC, NVDA, The Center for an Agricultural Economy and other organizations.

Also of note is that improvements are being made to the village of East Burke to accommodate the increase in visitors to the area. This includes additional parking offered at Mike's Tiki Bar and the Burke Publick House for bikers and other visitors. Kingdom Trails also gave up part of their office space which has been renovated into much needed public restrooms. Several local contractors donated time and/or building supplies to build the new public restrooms which were completed in

July 2015. The BACC plans to help pay part or all of the costs to clean and maintain the public restrooms on a regular basis.

Additional benefits to the local economy are evidenced in the results of the *2015 Burke Area Business Survey* which revealed the following:

- 57.6% of responding businesses report maintaining the same number of employees within the year.
- 26.9% of responding businesses report increasing the number of employees in the last year.
- 60% of responding businesses report being able to improve wages for their employees.
- 46.6% of responding businesses report being able to increase hours for their employees.
- 38.4% of responding businesses report an increase in net profit.

Please note, that the BACC in no way takes credit for these economic improvements or the expansion efforts of local businesses. We recognize that there are many factors involved in the improvements to the local economy over the last year including the entrepreneurial determination and hard work of each of these business owners and their employees. However, we do believe that our Destination Development efforts played a role in improving the local economy. The enhanced promotion of the Burke Area has led to an increase in tourism which most likely played a role in the decision of these businesses to enhance their offerings to meet an increase in demand.

The Impact on Tourism to the Burke Area

Another goal of this project was to increase tourism to the area in a steady and responsible way that benefits our community. Tourism plays a huge role in the health of our local economy as evidenced in the *2015 Burke Area Business Survey*:

- 42.3% of responding businesses stated that tourism directly & positively impacts their business.
- 30.7% reported that tourism indirectly and positively impacts their business.
- No businesses reported a negative impact of tourism on their business.
- 88.4% reported that tourism benefits the Burke Area as a whole.

The *2015 Burke Area Visitor Survey* also indicates an increase in tourism to the area. Numbers of note include:

- 85% of those who responded said they visited the Burke Area in the last year.
- 8.4% had never visited the Burke Area prior to the last 12 months.
- 9.3% responded that during their last visit to the Burke Area they stayed longer than before.
- 83.1% responded that they plan to visit the Burke Area within the next year.

In addition, many respondents reported visiting the area specifically to attend events. Many also reported seeing ads for the Burke Area or reading local or national articles about the area. Comments about the Burke Area were mainly positive with many writing about their appreciation for our outdoor recreation offerings, friendliness of the community and small town atmosphere.

Other numbers that prove there has been an increase in tourism to the Burke Area include:

- Kingdom Trails usership has increased 18% so far this summer versus last summer.
- Visits to QBurke Bike Park have so far increased 26% this summer versus summer of 2014.
- Local Occupancy for the first quarter of 2015 increased 9% over Q1 of 2014.

- Local Occupancy for the second quarter of 2015 increased 13.3% over Q2 of 2014.
- There has been a steady increase of attendance at area events.

Interest in the Burke Area has also increased as evidenced by the following:

- Visits to burkevermont.com increases an average of 30% each month in 2015 versus 2014.
- Website visits to burkevermont.com in 2014 increased 46% over 2013 visits.
- In the last year, subscribership to the Burke Area e-newsletter has increased over 20%.
- The Open Rate for e-newsletters is consistently between 30% – 40% which is much higher than the industry average of 10% (as reported by Constant Contact, our e-news service).
- Burke Area Facebook followers have increased over 400% in the past year from just over 800 'likes' in June of 2014 to now over 3,500 'likes',

CONCLUSION

Sustainability of the Project within the BACC

An important goal of this project was to create sustainability within the BACC to fund our Destination Development efforts in the long term without needing assistance from grant funding. The grant funding has provided a huge boost to our efforts and has helped to increase tourism to the Burke Area, increase attendance & BACC proceeds from events, increase membership revenue and increase awareness of BACC activities among local residents and businesses.

We have realized much benefit from the many aspects of this project including, most significantly, an increase in investment from local residents and businesses. At the start of this project in 2014, the BACC had 155 members (135 businesses and 20 individual, non-business members). **BACC membership has increased over 50% in the last year and to date we have 235 members (157 businesses and 78 individual, non-business members).** Of note, is that the BACC does not actively recruit new members or hold membership drives. The increase in membership is due entirely to good word-of-mouth advertising from other members. In addition, more members are becoming involved in BACC activities by attending meetings, volunteering at and sponsoring events.

The 2015 *Burke Area Business Survey* also revealed the following about member satisfaction:

- 57.6% of respondents feel that the BACC is doing a 'very good' job meeting the needs of local businesses, promoting the area, organizing events, etc.
- 34.6% of respondents feel that the BACC is doing a 'good job'.
- NO respondents felt the BACC was doing only a 'fair' or 'poor job'.

The grant funding has come to an end, but the BACC is in an excellent position to continue our Destination Developments efforts, and do so effectively and with positive results, on our own with the support and investment of the community as well as the increased proceeds from events. We plan to continue our marketing strategy and make good use of the accomplishments of this project, many of which are now solidified as new member benefits. We will also continue to support our business members by promoting and encouraging them to utilize local resources to achieve their business goals. While we will not be able to market the area to the extent that we can with the substantial funding of a grant, we are able to fund most aspects of the Destination Development Initiative to a degree using our own financial resources. This was the plan from the beginning and we are immensely grateful to USDA Rural Development for the grant opportunity and to our Chamber Members for continuing to support our efforts.