



2012

Rusk County Assessment

Executive Summary Report

Destination Assessment

Rusk County, Wisconsin

October, 2012

Wisconsin Department of Tourism
Strategic Mission

The Wisconsin Department of Tourism's mission is to market the state as the Midwest's premiere travel destination for fun. By executing industry-leading marketing programs, providing reliable travel information and establishing strategic partnerships, we will play a significant role in delivering exceptional customer service and generating greater economic impact and jobs for Wisconsin.

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Acknowledgements

The Rusk County Destination Assessment was conducted as a joint project between the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, Bureau of Industry Relations and Services and Rusk County. The project was coordinated by Krista Bethke-Peterson and the Department of Tourism's Regional Tourism Specialists, Sarah Fischer and Drew Nussbaum.

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Rusk County, Wisconsin: Tourism Overview

If outdoor recreation floats your boat, there are numerous reasons to visit Rusk County. And, if your vessel feels most at home on a wild river, Rusk County has four of them: Jump, Thornapple, Flambeau and Chippewa. These gems welcome paddlers of all types as well as visitors interested in birding, fishing and camping. With an abundance of natural resources, it is no wonder there are activities suitable for all ages across all four seasons.

Ladysmith is the largest destination in the county where the majority of lodging and dining choices are found. Yet, not unlike other destinations of similar size, further downtown development is needed.

Developing and promoting an appealing portfolio of assets allows Rusk County to take greater advantage of tourism as the basis of the region's economic development strategy. With this in mind, the key to success is to first determine what is different and special about Rusk County. Then, with the assistance of business partners, a strong vision, patience and a development strategy, the tools are in place to promote the unique features that result in visitors.

2010 and 2011 Economic Impact in Rusk County

Visitor Spend in Millions		Employment		Labor Income in Millions		Federal, State and Local Taxes in Millions			
2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	State and Local		Federal	
\$17.7	\$21.2	359	379	\$6.7	\$7.1	\$2.5	\$2.7	\$1.5	\$1.6

All economic indicators and benchmarks show an increase of 2011 over 2010. While two years does not make a trend, it indicates that the county is following the same path as the state as a whole.

What Does Success Look Like Here?

To effectively plan the tourism development strategy, it is necessary to bring together the right people who can plan what activities, events or attractions will bring in visitors and cash flow. The outcomes of such a process will set the stage for product growth and the platform for marketing plan development. It is important to answer the following questions:

- Who are your customers and what do they say is important to them?
- Do you have those assets and experiences or do you need to develop them?
- Is there a coordinated effort between your tourism and economic development programs?
- Are your stakeholders on board and do they understand the power of tourism and the contributions it makes to local and state economies?

Destination Assessment Process

Communities that believe they can compete for visitors should be commended for the vision to diversify their economies. In terms of job growth, the Travel and Tourism industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the new economy. And, these are jobs that can very rarely be exported outside the borders of the Badger State, much less the nation.

The Wisconsin Department of Tourism offers tourism partners a process designed to find the best path for maximizing strengths, appeal to visitors, and the tools to further develop the impact of visitor spending on the local economy and grow jobs.

The process begins by engaging a municipality or an independent not-for-profit agency such as a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Council, Sports Commission or Arts Council. These entities have the resources to launch the process and the administrative ability to keep it on track.

1) Lead Organization/Municipality to Assign Task Force

The first step in the Destination Assessment Process is to assign a Task Force to take the lead in the deliberations that will ultimately establish a framework for enhanced Destination Marketing and Development.

The Task Force should have some individuals with hospitality-specific, but other stakeholders in the county are vital as well. The Task Force should be made up of hoteliers, restaurateurs, retailers and attractions...but also individuals from the Arts Community, Agriculture, Finance, Healthcare, Media and Education. While every county is different, the optimum size for such a group is 13-20. This can be scaled back for very small destinations

2) Task Force Gathers Perception Research Data

The Destination Assessment Task Force embarks on a fact-finding mission to thoroughly understand how the county perceives itself and what visitors think. This two-pronged approach affirms that there is a base from which an effective tourism strategy can be launched and that the county would be supportive of welcoming more visitors.

The Department staff guides the Task Force through available primary marketing research, existing economic impact research and how to perform perception research through intercept surveys and online vehicles.

Once the data has been gathered, the Task Force reconvenes to analyze the findings and develop a case that increasing visitation to the county could significantly enhance the local economy and job growth.

3) Perform a Comprehensive Inventory of Destination Assets

Probably the most important facet of a Destination Assessment is the compilation of a comprehensive inventory of assets. With a complete understanding of what the destination offers a visitor, the destination can maximize those assets and plan for development of the missing pieces.

The goal is to identify every asset that a visitor to the county could find interesting enough to visit or utilize.

4) Analyze all Research

Once the intelligence gathering has been completed by the Assessment Task Force, the analysis process begins and includes:

- Destination Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

In addition, the Task Force performs an analysis of its competitors. From the list of competitors, the Task Force then assess whether their county wins, losses or draws in head-to-head competition. As every destination has several aspects of appeal to visitors, the Task Force breaks the comparisons into several experiences.

5) Identification of Destination Vision

Once the county's compelling strengths have been identified and the research data analyzed, the Task Force identifies a Destination Vision to drive future initiatives. Short of developing a brand identity, this process establishes the goals toward which the destination will strive.

6) Identification and Prioritization of Potential Destination-enhancing Development Projects

With a Destination Vision established, the Task Force can begin to identify and prioritize the types of initiatives that will propel the destination forward in its desire to expand its visitor economy.

Common Themes in County Stakeholder Perceptions

Most of the stakeholder input focused on outdoor recreation and the natural attributes of the area. This is not surprising as these attributes are some of the most important overall image hot buttons for travelers as evidenced in primary Department of Tourism research. The challenge is to differentiate the Rusk County strengths from the competition. The first step is to find out what locals think. There were nearly 90 responses for a good representative sample. Following is a summary of that research:

Q: If you did not live here, what about this county would encourage you to visit?

The majority of the answers were related to the outdoors, nature and water. The top 10 answers were:

- Waterways, Rivers and Lakes
- Nature
- Scenic Beauty
- Parks
- Fishing
- Hunting
- Friendly people and small town atmosphere
- Nothing
- Mardi Gras
- Camping

Q: What are the county's greatest weaknesses in being able to attract visitors?

Overwhelmingly stakeholders felt that cleaning up an unattractive downtown Ladysmith and the lack of unique retail options were serious weaknesses. Also, it was strongly obvious that more family friendly and kids-based activities are needed. With the first two getting 52 mentions combined, the top 10 answers were:

- Clean up and bring back downtown Ladysmith area
- More retail and variety of unique choices
- Need something for kids and families to do
- Better quality camping facilities and amenities
- More advertising outside of the area
- Lack of jobs and trained professionals
- Downtown lacks cohesion and needs aesthetics improvement
- People have attitudes that are resistant to change
- Need to draw a younger demographic as the community is older
- Need a new attraction

Q: What addition to the county would make it more attractive to visitors?

Answers to this question mirrored those in the previous question with the need for family activities topping the list with 20 responses. Following that was:

- Resort with indoor play area and water park activities
- Implementation of the Main Street program to improve downtown Ladysmith
- Additional retail and unique specialty shops
- Paved hiking, biking and walking trails that connect the county

Q: Knowing what you do about the economic impact of additional visitors to your county, do you support efforts to consider new ways to attract them?

Seventy seven people answered this question with 72 saying yes, 2 were indifferent, 1 was dependant on what was being considered and 2 said that they were not interested. There were many verbatim comments compiled with specific ideas and requests.

Visitor Perception Research

Intercept

→11 surveys were completed. Based on the responses received, the top 50% is presented here:

Q: What is the primary reason for your visit to Rusk County?

- Visiting family and friends

Q: What are the county's greatest assets?

- Nature and the great outdoors
- Rural area
- Blue Hills and Christie Mountain

Q: What are the county's greatest weaknesses?

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Undeveloped business potential
- Variety of businesses is lacking
- Small number of businesses

Q: What addition to the county would make it more likely that you'll return?

- Some kind of indoor family fun
- More businesses
- More things to do when not skiing

Database Inquiries

→39 surveys were completed. The responses were distilled into these common themes:

- 36% of the responses were either a landowners or people who owned a cabin
- The average time spent in Rusk County is between 4 -4.5 days

Q: What are the county's greatest weaknesses?

- The sense that residents don't want visitors and the lack of pride in personal property
- Lack of quality amenities like shopping and dining
- Other things to do if you don't hunt or fish
- Ladysmith has lost its charm with nothing that would keep people in the town

Q: What are the counties greatest assets?

- Natural outdoor attributes
- Clean air and water
- Wildlife
- Trails for ATV and Snowmobiling

Destination Asset Summary

Local= Drawing local residents

Regional= Day trips; people coming short distances from around the area

Destination=Drawing overnight visitors

Recreation	Description	Local	Regional	Destination
Amusement or Theme Park	Amusements during Mardi Gras, County Fair	X		
Ball Parks / Tournaments	Throughout Rusk County	X		
Beaches	Memorial Park, Holcombe	X		
Bicycling	Rusk County Bike Trails	X		
Bird Watching	Flambeau Mine	X		
Boat Rides	Flambeau Adventures	X		
Camping	Rusk County	X		
Canoeing	Flambeau & Chippewa	X		
Fishing - Fly	Flambeau & Chippewa	X		
Fishing - Ice	Flambeau & Holcombe	X		
Fishing Derbies	Lake Amacoy	X		
Geo-Caching	Thru GLACC, Tourism	X		
Golf	Tee Away	X		
Hiking / Walking	Flambeau Mine, Sisters Farm, Copper Trails	X		
Horseback Riding	Equestrian Trails at Flambeau Mine site, Flaters	X		
Hot Air Ballooning	Hudson, WI			
Hunting	All Rusk County	X		
Kite Flying	All Rusk County	X		

Jet-Skiing	Area Lakes & Rivers	X		
Marinas	Lake Holcombe Marina	X		
Marathons / Triathlons	RRR at Flaters, Mardi Gras	X		
Picnicking	All Rusk County	X		
Regattas and Boat Races	Canoe Race in Sheldon/Jump River	X		
Rock Climbing	Camp Strong at Christie Mountain (Bruce)	X		
Rock / Mineral Hunting	probably, maybe not legally	X		
Roller Blading	All Rusk County	X		
Running	Ladysmith	X		
Snow Skiing - Downhill	Christie Mountain and Blue Hills (Bruce)	X	X	X
Snow Skiing - Cross-Country	Christie Mtn (Bruce) Sisters Trail, Copper Trail, LHS	X	X	X
Snow Skiing - Snowboard	Christie Mountain (Bruce)	X	X	X
Snowmobiling	Rusk County Trails	X		
Sledding	Christie Mountain (Bruce)	X		
State Parks	Wissota (Eau Claire/Chippewa)	X		
Swimming	Memorial Park Beach; Ladysmith High School	X		
Tennis	Memorial Park, Ladysmith High School	X		
Water Skiing	Memorial Park	X		
Zoos	Eau Claire/Chippewa		X	

Cultural & Heritage Attractions	Description	Local	Regional	Destination
Archaeological Sites	Devil's Kettle, Indian	Blue Hills	Hayward	
Buildings of Architectural Interest	Mason/Mystic Lodge; Historical Society	X	X	
Ethnic Celebrations / Festivals	Blue Grass Festival; Mardi Gras; "Leaf" it to Rusk"	x		
Historic Theatres & Opera Houses	Miner Theatre	x		
Historical Tours	Historical Village/Senior Center	x		
Interpretive Centers	Flambeau Mine?	x		
Landmarks	Visitor Center, trains & info.	x		
Memorials and Monuments	Fire Station; Memorial Park	x		
Missions and Shrines	Masonic Temple	x		
Museums	Rusk Co Historical Society Museum, Hawkins Library	X	X	
Native American Burial Grounds	LCO		x	
Native American Ceremonial Dances	LCO		x	
Native American Historic Sites	LCO		x	
Recreated Villages	Rusk County Historical Society	x		
Religious Sites and Facilities	Various churches in Rusk County	x		
Walking Tours	Flambeau Mine, Downtown Ladysmith, Garden Tours	x		

Nature-Based Attractions	Description	Local	Regional	Destination
ATV Trails	Ladysmith, Blue Hills, other towns in Rusk Co.		Gandy Dancer	
Beaches	Memorial Park, small lakes	X	X	
Bird Watching	Flambeau Mine, parks	X		
Fall Foliage	Rusk County ("Leaf it to Rusk"); Blue Hills (Bruce)	X		X
Fish Hatcheries	Hawkins	X		
Forests (State / National)	Chequamagon, Flambeau River State Forest	X		
Geological Formations	Felsenmeer in Blue Hills	X		
Islands	Holcombe	X		
Lakes	Amacoy, Audie, Flambeau, Perch, Potato, Island	X		
Mountains, hills & Cliffs	Christie Mountain, Blue Hills	X		
Nature Trails	Flambeau Mine, Sisters Farm, Blue Hills, Parks	School trails	Ice Age Trail	
Protected Wetlands	Flambeau Mine site	X		
Rivers, Streams and Waterways	Flambeau, Chippewa, Thornapple, Jump	X		
Sand Dunes				
Star Gazing Sites	WITC?	X		
Waterfalls	Cedar Falls?	X		
Wilderness Areas	Slough Gundee, Perch, Audie, Murphy Flowage	X		
Woodlands	Throughout Rusk County	X		
Special Events	Description	Local	Regional	Destination
Agricultural Fairs	Rusk County Fair	X		
Antique Auto Show	Bruce Cruise Night	X		
Arts, Crafts & Hobby Fairs	Ladysmith Mardi Gras Arts & Crafts Fair	X	X	X
Auto / Motorcycle Racing	Rice Lake Speedway		X	
Culinary Fairs and Events	Winter Gifts & Gallery Tasting Events	X		
Dance & Opera Productions	Ladysmith Opera, Chalice Stream, FVAA	X	X	X
Farm Tours	June - Dairy Month	X		
Farmers' Market	Bruce, Tony, Exeland, Holcombe, Ladysmith	X		
Flea Markets	Van Wey, Ladysmith	X		
Golf Tournaments	Tee Away, Amacoy	X		
Harvest Celebrations	"Leaf it to Rusk"	X		
Holiday Celebrations & Festivals	Winter Magic; Mardi Gras; Bluegrass Festival; Gospel Bluegrass Festival, each town summer fair	X		
Horse Shows	Rusk County Fair	X		
Local Theatre	Miner movie Theatre; Bruce (closed), FVAA	X		
Livestock Exhibitions	Rusk County Fair	X		

Music Festivals and Concerts	Rock Rally; Music in the Park; Seniors Bluegrass jam; Bluegrass Festival; FVAA Performances	X		
Pageants	Mardi Gras Queen; Mardi Gras little miss	X		
Parades	Mardi Gras; Winter Magic	X		
Religious / Spiritual Observances	Day of Prayer, Veterans celebration	X		
Rodeos	Spooner; Stanley		X	X
Sports Events	Lumberjack competition (Hayward); Birkebinder (Hayward)		X	X
Symphony / Orchestral Performances	Flambeau Valley Arts Association	X		
Tractor Pulls	Rusk County Fair	X		
Other Attractions	Description	Local	Regional	Destination
Antiquing	Norte Antiques, Curiosity Shop	X		
Bed & Breakfasts	Free Library, Carnegie Hall B&B	X		
Barns & Windmills	Barns all over Rusk Co	X		
Bridges	Bridge at OJ Falge Park	x		
Climbing Walls	Christie Mountain	x		
Country Inns	Inn Greener Pastures	X		
Factory Outlets	Artisan's	X		
Hotel & Lodging	Ladysmith	X		
Hotel - Full Service	Ladysmith	X		
Hotel - Historic	Ladysmith	X		
Hotel & Lodging	Ladysmith	X		
Hotel & Lodging - Bed & Breakfasts	Ladysmith; Free Library, Carnegie Hall B&B	X		
Hotel & Lodging - Historic	Free Library Carnegie Hall B&B	X		
Hotel & Lodging - Cottages	Holcombe	X		
Hotel & Lodging - Cabins	Holcombe, Flambeau Lodge	X		
Hotel & Lodging - Camping	Holcombe & Ladysmith	X		
Movie / TV Locations	Miner Theater in Ladysmith, Bruce	X		
Murals / Outdoor Art	Ladysmith (Miner Avenue)	X		
Railroad Depots / Rides	Ladysmith Visitor Center Depot/GLACC	X		
Retreats and Learning Centers	Ice Age Trail (learning center)	X		
Roadside Produce Stands	Ladysmith & Bruce (Farmer's Market)	X		
Scenic Highways	Rusk County	X		
Scenic Views / Observation Towers / Observatories	River Road (voted best in U.S.) (? 35) (Cornell)	X		
Shopping & Retail Experiences	Downtown Ladysmith	x		
Skating / Skateboard	Ladysmith, Worden Ave.	x		

Parks				
Universities & Colleges	WITC	x		
U-Pick Farms / Orchards	Rice Lake		x	
Working Farms	Rusk County	x		

Rusk County Top 8 Assets ranked in importance by the Task Force:

Canoeing/kayaking
 Fishing
 Hunting
 Small Town Festivals
 Historical (train, museum, logging)
 Flambeau Mine site
 Winter Sports
 Number and Quality of Rivers

Strengths, Weaknesses Opportunities, Threats

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number/quality of rivers Wildlife watching Hunting (public) land Variety of trails County history Scenic beauty Paddle sports Tranquility Blue Hills County Supports Tourism Fall color (hardwoods) Small town atmosphere City/County Parks Variety of events 	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology (cell, internet) Lack of nightlife Geographical location Entertainment Lack of shopping Lack of indoor activities Lack of dining options Lack of local business support Downtown blight Lack of sustained business Lack of marketing dollars Lack of community pride (generational poverty) Lack of customer service Resistance to change
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amish barn Itinerary River outfitter Arts marketing Pontoon tours Marketing Co-op programs Flambeau Mine Education Farmers Markets Connected trails Paved biking trails Horseback rental Main Street program Development of local attitude UW Ext./WEDC grants Retail Business Incubator Develop 1st Impression Program Directional signage program Develop additional events 	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empty Store Fronts Alienated feeling of locals Entry Blight (coming into town) Hwy 8 parking Negative attitude to Ladysmith Lack of volunteers Aging population Weather Lack of non-weather dependent activities (indoor things to do)

Competitive Overview: Win, Lose, Draw

This is an exercise to analyze how Rusk County fares against the competition (as defined by the Task Force) by reflecting on the assets as being better, the same or inferior.

Rusk County competitive market:

Hayward Area

<i>Rusk County</i>	<i>Win</i>	<i>Lose</i>	<i>Draw</i>
Canoe/Kayak	X		
Fishing			X
Hunting (public land)	X		
Small Town Festivals	X		
Historical	X		
Flambeau Mine	X		
Winter Sports			X
Number of Rivers	X		

Rusk County competitive market:

Eagle River

<i>Rusk County</i>	<i>Win</i>	<i>Lose</i>	<i>Draw</i>
Canoe/Kayak			X
Fishing		X	
Hunting (public land)	X		
Small Town Festivals		X	
Historical			X
Flambeau Mine	X		
Winter Sports		X	
Number of Rivers	X		

Rusk County competitive market:

Hwy 53 Spooner Corridor

<i>Rusk County</i>	<i>Win</i>	<i>Win</i>	<i>Draw</i>
Canoe/Kayak			X
Fishing			X
Hunting	X		
Small Town Festivals			X
Historical		X	
Flambeau Mine	X		
Winter Sports	X		
Number of Rivers	X		

TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES SUMMARY

RANK: TOPIC- ITEM	RATING: EASY, MEDIUM, DIFFICULT	TIMELINE FOR COMPLETION:	COMMENTS/CONCERNS:	OWNERSHIP:
1. DEVELOP A POSITIVE LOCAL ATTITUDE	MEDIUM – DIFFICULT	START ASAP; 1-2 YEARS	ONGOING EFFORTS NEEDED	Drew Nussbaum, GLACC, and Shari Kavanagh
2. DEVELOPMENT of ARTS MARKETING	EASY	3-6 MONTHS- 1 YEAR	START IMMEDIATELY	Toad House (Eileen Zeisler) RAAA (Nancy Wheeler) FVAA and Writer's Group.
3. AG- TOURISM (Farmer's Markets, Amish)	MEDIUM-Difficult	2-4 YEARS	START IMMEDIATELY	Rich Toebe (UW- Ext) Martha Smart, Sue Moore to contact Drew, Wally Stanger
4. PAVED BIKING TRAILS & CONNECT our RIVER TRAILS	MEDIUM	2-4 YEARS	MONEY IS A CONCERN, get DOT & DNR & UW-Ext. & Tourism together for a meeting to advise on this.	Talk to Al Christianson, Pete Olson & Jim Kurz.
5. PADDLE the Flambeau/ECO RIVER Experience	MEDIUM	2-4 Years	Currently have some literature on Paddling the Flambeau. Tie in River Outfitter, camping at Mine site?	Jim Kurz, Jana Murphy will contact River Alliance.
6. DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE PROGRAM	EASY - MEDIUM	6 MONTHS – 1 YEAR	NEED MONEY TO FUND, look into current sign ordinances first, DOT & DNR have sign programs	Andy Albarado
7. RETAIL BUSINESS INCUBATOR (Tie in with 1 ST Impression program)	MEDIUM – DIFFICULT	START ASAP; 2-4 Years	MONEY CONCERN, Incentive program for new business? Downtown Forum already exists, has done clean up and banner projects.	Ladysmith IDC, (Industrial Development Corp.) Downtown Business Community Forum
8. MAIN STREET PROGRAM	DIFFICULT	2-4 Years	We tried this twice already, need money and to address entire county	Downtown Business Community Forum
9. MARKETING Plan CO-OP Program	MEDIUM	START ASAP 1-2 YEARS	PROMOTE FELSENMEER, BLUE HILLS, PARKS, ETC.	Drew Nussbaum
10. GRANTS (in General)	MEDIUM – DIFFICULT	START ASAP - 1 YEAR, THEN LATER AS APPROPRIATE	DEPENDS ON THE FOCUS	UW Ext. Federal

11. FLAMBEAU MINE EDUCATION CENTER	DIFFICULT	2-4 YEARS	FOCUS ON NATURAL BEAUTY OF THE AREA, WHY PEOPLE COME HERE	AIC, IDC, Jana Murphy, Andy Albarado, Rusk County
12. DEVELOP ADDITIONAL EVENTS	MEDIUM TO CREATE; DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN EVENTS BASED ON: ARTS, HORSES, BIKING, ETC.	ONGOING; 1-5 YEARS, LOCAL BUSINESSES CAN HELP TO DEVELOP, HAVE ONE IN PLACE BY 2015	FURTHER DEVELOP RAIL DISPLAYS IN LADYSMITH; AG TOURS FOR YOUTH/ADULTS ABOUT DAIRY AND BEEF FARMING	GLACC, Arlene Knops

Destination Vision Summary

What is a destination? A destination is essentially the ending point for any trip. There are as many different kinds of destinations as there are people to visit them. The important point is that you know who you are and what kind of destination assets you have that will appeal to your visitors and potential visitors.

This is what the committee thinks Rusk County will look like in the future:

September 2015: The Arts have become a lure to Rusk County. Toad House is a hub for the arts. Ladysmith is the cultural base of activity. We have a 3x3x3 rule (a modification of the Roger Brooks model). Arts, culinary, and shopping is plentiful and available until 6 pm. There is collaboration with Rusk Area Arts Association (RAAA), Flambeau Valley Arts Association (FVAA) and Toad House. Electronic linkages to the Wisconsin Arts Board, to travelwisconsin.com and mobile applications make it an easy visitor experience.

We promote our Eco-River experience because it has been fully developed. We have eco-ambassadors, adequate funding and county-wide financial support to make sure paddlers and kayakers know that Rusk County is the best place to experience their passion. Great signage shows people where to go, stay, and rent. Content and relevant information is posted on tourism related web sites.

September 2020: At the Flambeau Mine site, there is a new interactive educational center that has regional and state-wide travel information and highly trained travel information assistants. The mine displays, horse rides, and a campground complete the portfolio. It is kid-friendly and you see families panning for gold, using rented snowshoes and binoculars on the interpreted mine trails. The intersection of eco- wildlife, history, education, and arts is obvious. Events are staged regularly.

Local resorts and lodging properties are renovated and remodeled with amenities that exceed customer expectations.

Our very strong partnership with Chippewa County is unique and effective. We work on together with the philosophy that visitors don't care about county lines and we are stronger together than apart.

Destination Vision Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Develop a “First Impressions” program and a thriving downtown Ladysmith

- Buildings painted and tidy
- Appealing welcome and directional signage placed appropriately*
- Debris and unwanted eye sores removed
- Landscaping and flower planters added
- Consider belonging to the Wisconsin Main Street program

First impressions include many other elements such as your commitment to customer service. Most people think they have exceptional customer service, but truth be told, this is not always the case. Work with your Regional Tourism Specialist to craft customer service training that meets your needs.

A strong component of Rusk County’s development vision should focus on improving downtown Ladysmith; the business climate, the number of and variety of business and retail opportunities. The heartbeat of small towns is found in its people and in the vitality of its downtown. Keep in mind, if the locals don’t want to hang out downtown, likely neither will visitors.

Focus on the 10-10-10 “rule of critical mass”¹. According to Roger Brooks, in just three lineal blocks, you must have a minimum of ten places that serve food. Examples include a soda fountain, bistro, café, bakery, coffee shop or restaurant to name a few. The second ten are destination retail specialty shops and might include art galleries, wine shops, book or antique stores. And finally, ten places open after 6:00 p.m. Modify this rule to meet your needs with 3-3-3 Rusk County Rule. Start small, meet your goals and expand from there.

Recommendation #2: Create a “Be a Tourist in your own County” program

The visitor survey suggests that most of your guests are coming to visit friends and relatives. This is not unusual and in fact, the hospitality industry looks at visiting friends and relatives as a market segment with its own acronym: VFR. Leverage this by making sure residents know everything there is to do in the county so their guests experience it all. Essentially county residents become your sales people.

- Educate county residents on the depth of tourism
- Create a discount coupon book or a treasure hunt/passport program

Include Chippewa County once the program is running smoothly in Rusk County.

Recommendation #3: Develop Directional Signage with Supporting On-line and Off-line Information

Visually appealing and welcoming entry points/ gateways to your county are paramount. Just like the cover of a book or magazine, it should entice someone to look further. Research indicates stakeholders think that the downtown of the major destination in the county is a threat to success. Take a good look at your entry points to see if they project the feeling you want visitors to have of Rusk County and Ladysmith. The same applies to local storefronts, parks, and other attractions. Please note that there are restrictions and laws governing signage placement so a thorough understanding of limitations is in order. *

- Merge branding signage, maps and information (printed guides, itineraries, web content and mobile applications) into a cohesive program to move people around the county. Offer numerous points of interest and places for people to purchase services and amenities.

¹ Destination Development Inc. Amazing Facts About Downtowns, June 2, 2011

- Research state sign programs offered through the Department of Tourism, Natural Resources and Transportation. Use this insight to develop a fully integrated approach with the state offered sign programs and your own branded sign program.
- Explore ways that tie transportation routes together for canoes and kayaks (rivers), autos (scenic roads), bikes/hike/snowmobile/ATV (trails).

Recommendation #4: Revisit your county destination asset list and consider separating the train assets from the broader historic category.

- An investment was made into train renovation and building the depot for a visitor center.
- Train aficionados are an easy to target market segment and reaching them on-line is a cost effective communication channel.
- Wisconsin has a multitude of train related resources and assets which could be connected. A regional partnership with Spooner is a natural extension.
- Theme could be carried into downtown Ladysmith development and to other parts of Rusk County.

Recommendation #5: Look into the value of the ATV enthusiast as a target market and the need for more trail development.

- Feedback from property owners identified the need for more trails and information.
- A point of difference in Rusk County could be offering a rough rustic trail riding experience.
- Provide maps with obvious trail connectivity.

Recommendation #6: Gather more visitor perception data before finalizing the development plan

- Intercept people at events, while they are in the downtown, at boat launches (or other outdoor recreation venues) and checking out from hotels and motels.

Other Destination Development Resources:

1. Wisconsin Department of Tourism qualitative and quantities research
2. Fox Cities way- finding benchmarked
3. University of Wisconsin Extension toolkit