

July 2013 Letter to Editor

As a 25-year veteran of the tourism/lodging industry, I have mixed feelings about the proposal to remove the tourism function from the Chamber and place it directly under the city. First some background:

The tourism tax passed by only a 3.4% margin (44 votes) in 1998. Obviously, many voters doubted the money would be effectively used. Initially, the Chamber was allowed to take 20% off the top, possibly to cover support to the function by chamber staff. However, the Chamber then charged the tourism function an additional amount as a share of “overhead.” While the 20% rake-off has been eliminated, there has never been adequate accounting for expenses, nor has there been any allocation of tourism staff hours spent on other activities or of staff support for tourism activities.

Tourism efforts were initially ineffective. The first several “tourism” brochures dealt more with “newcomer” and “economic development” than with touting the tourism attractions. In recent years, they produced more targeted brochures, but nothing has been done to help develop more attractions. The tourism website (www.visitwarrensburg.org) has been separated from the Chamber website; while it lists restaurants in Holden & Knob Noster as well as Warrensburg, shopping & lodging information is limited to Warrensburg. Some information is outdated. The Tourism Coordinator position has been subject to frequent turnover.

Based on the above, I should welcome the city taking over tourism, but I have concerns about the city’s proposal to spend almost the full amount received through the tax to hire a “tourism professional.” I do not see where this allows any money for promotion/advertising, website optimization, outreach materials, travel or communications – or for attraction development. Surely, the city does not propose to fund all these functions from its already-stretched general revenue?

A further question is just who would be promoted if the city takes over the function. Currently, tourism-related businesses outside Warrensburg can be promoted by joining the Chamber. Certainly anything in the area that attracts tourists should be promoted, and options should be provided to allow support businesses (food/lodging/shopping, etc.) to be promoted. Potential visitors should have accessible information for enjoying their interests in this community while the visitors are here. A strong independent tourism effort also entices those who read about what's going in this town to consider seeking more information about the all our area’s attractions.

Tourism funding can only grow by increasing occupancy at Warrensburg’s lodging facilities, and that cannot be done without creating and promoting reasons to come to Warrensburg and to stay here overnight. Sporting events and tournaments, theater and arts, festivals, outdoor recreation, and unique shopping should all be marketed. This wouldn’t require a high-salary “professional;” just a solid plan and someone dynamic to carry it out.