

Editorial: Perfect fit: Tourism plan pairs best parts of Muskegon



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Education adventures will draw families of tourists

Education adventures. What could better match the numerous attractions in the Muskegon area with families of tourists than those words.

The proposal to market the area's best qualities is smart. It's an idea that can breathe new life into our tourist attractions and it could be something as significant as Grand Rapids' Art Prize, if it's done right.

The Muskegon County Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Muskegon Area Chamber of Commerce will launch an Education Adventure initiative for 2010 and the organizations see endless opportunities for pairing our educational institutions with our adventure experiences. It's an approach we should have been marketing years ago and it's one that benefits businesses and nonprofit organizations alike.

For decades, families from throughout the Midwest have been bringing their music, drama and art students to Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp and dropping them off. Some families stay for the two weeks and some don't. But spotlighting the opportunities available to the families of the campers might keep more of them in the area during the same two weeks or at least until the mid-session Sunday.

Conversely, numerous families have spent a day or a weekend at Michigan's Adventure without taking advantage of the exhibits and programs at the Muskegon Museum of Art or the Lakeshore Museum Center — or even the beach.

The state also has promoted part of our attractions, but missed the boat on the others. One year, the state tourism bureau promoted lighthouse tours, which probably attracted a certain age group. Just think, if you promote Michigan's Adventure to the kids, the beach and golf to mom and dad and lighthouses and maritime history to grandma and grandpa, you've got an instant three-generation vacation. Maybe they would all rent a cottage and explore for a week, or more.

Another year, the state was big on history tours, which included the Lakeshore Museum Center's numerous historic sites and other area museums, but left out any of the adventure aspect of West Michigan. More recently, lakeshore chambers have discussed a revival of the West Michigan Pike or the Blue Star Highway. They're hoping a new generation of road trippers might follow Route 31 like they did Route 66.

Think of the opportunities there: Drive-in restaurants could offer the whole '50s nostalgia thing and there usually are plenty of summer events along the route to entertain riders when they're ready to take a break. In the evening, they could spend the night at the USS Silversides, LST-393 or the Milwaukee Clipper.

Initially, the plan is to set up a separate Web site where tourists will find a listing of education and adventure activities by date. A brochure also will be created and joint marketing is being planned.

But eventually businesses and nonprofit organizations could coordinate special events to fill a week with activities. This could be done for school holidays like spring break and mid-winter break or during early fall when childless couples are looking for a more leisurely color tour.

The potential is endless and right up our alley.