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Guest Editorial - Does Gettysburg sell itself?

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“Boy, you have an easy job!” is something the staff at Destination Gettysburg hears at times.



After all, the official destination marketing organization of Adams County, Pa., markets the most famous Civil War battlefield in the country as well as the site of our 16th president’s most remembered speech.

Everyone knows there’s a battlefield in Gettysburg, right? Indeed, most do. They probably can also assume that Gettysburg has a Civil War museum or two, maybe a hotel, a restaurant, some souvenir shops.

But that’s not what Destination Gettysburg does. The staff doesn’t spend too much time telling potential visitors that there is a battlefield in Gettysburg, or that Lincoln delivered his speech here. Even most international travelers know that already.

Destination Gettysburg’s role is telling them everything they don’t know – and that is key to the success of tourism in Adams County, Pa.

A battlefield alone, even accompanied by a museum or two, isn’t enough to attract a family to visit for several days – something the tourism industry counts on to sustain the local economy, contribute to the local tax base, and support more than 7,500 local jobs.

Potential visitors need to know that they can tour the battlefield in numerous ways, and that they can walk through the cemetery and be inspired by the heroics and sacrifices of so many Americans. They also need to know that there is an incredible amount of experiences beyond the Civil War.

Whether it’s the farmers markets in northern Adams County, the wineries in western Adams County, or the ski resort in southern Adams County – as well as every experience in between – visitors need to know that these opportunities exist. They all play a big role in the overall vacation experience and success of tourism in our economy.

Simply put, Destination Gettysburg sells the big picture; it puts together the pieces and presents the county as a complete destination.

Destination Gettysburg uses lodging tax money from visitors and membership dues – not revenue from local residents or governments – to market these experiences to visitors. In Adams County, it's a self-sustaining industry that taxes itself, and does not rely on citizens and grants to support its efforts.

In Adams County, Pa., visitors pay a 5-percent lodging tax on their overnight stays – usually equating to about \$5 to \$10 per night. That money is collected by the lodging property and turned over to the Adams County government who, for a 4.5 percent fee, administers the tax.

The balance is then split between Destination Gettysburg (75 percent), the county government (12.5 percent) and qualified municipalities (12.5 percent). A portion of Destination Gettysburg's share is to replace the \$380,000 it lost in state funding several years ago.

At times, the division of this revenue comes into question – mainly by those looking to find ways to support local government even further than what the tax currently supports.

The formula, however, is fundamental in the success of the county's top industry. Destination Gettysburg's share of that tax revenue is poured directly back into marketing the destination to travelers ... who, in turn, visit the destination, spend money and support jobs ... and, if they stay overnight, contribute back through the lodging tax.

If that money were to be re-distributed and directed away from Destination Gettysburg and its marketing efforts, the number of visitors would certainly decline, and so would the amount of tax revenue, the spending by visitors and the support of local jobs and hundreds of businesses that depend on visitors.

In this competitive travel market, arguably, no destination "sells itself." We all compete for attention, visitors' time and their money. Marketing, and the money to support that marketing, is crucial for any destination marketing organization to make tourism a viable industry within communities like ours.

Other entities, such as the Borough of Gettysburg, benefit greatly from tourism's strength including the revenue generated through lodging and amusement taxes (which also benefits local school districts), the businesses that exist because of tourism (and the local taxes those business owners pay), as well as the hundreds of jobs the industry supports in the local community.

Destination Gettysburg exists to develop a strong economy through tourism. The organization's marketing is key to the more than \$700 million impact that tourism brings annually to our community.