

Tourism and the Potential for Growth in a Rural County

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Introduction -Henderson, TN - A Portrait of a Rural County

Located in the southwestern region of Tennessee there is a unique county with its own blend of small-town charm, rich history, and a strong sense of community. Henderson, TN is the county seat of Chester County and serves as the hub of county activities, tourism, and economic development. Henderson's historic downtown still retains much of its original architecture with well-preserved buildings that house local businesses and community institutions. Developed as a railroad town in the late 1800's, Henderson soon became the home of Freed-Hardeman University which contributes to the town's educational and cultural landscape. Community life in Henderson revolves around a network of churches, civic organizations, and local events. The county hosts the Chester County Barbeque Festival which is in its forty sixth year. This festival is the signature event for Chester County, and the largest gathering for community engagement and regional tourism.

The local economy is a mix of agriculture, manufacturing, and small business. These small businesses include locally owned shops, restaurants, and innovative technology services. These local small businesses contribute to a wealth of rural tourism from neighboring counties, seeking the tranquil atmosphere of downtown Henderson. Chester County is also surrounded by a beautiful natural landscape. Rolling hills, forests, and farmland offer a perfect backdrop for various activities available in the county.

Chester County has a small, but impressive list of tourism assets. Antique shops, restaurants and boutiques color Henderson with tourists looking for local flavors and cultural offerings. One such location, Bell's Drive In, known for the "Best Hamburgers this side of Heaven" is a landmark and has been serving Henderson for over 70 years.

Agri-tourism in Chester County consists primarily of two locations currently, Mesa Trail Alpacas and Forty Cannons Winery at Stillwaters Farm. Mesa Trail Alpacas is a great place to visit a working alpaca farm with a gift shop to take home various goods made from alpaca fiber, as well as experience the fabrication of yarns, and hand- woven goods. Forty Cannons Winery at Stillwaters Farm hosts Airbnb guests with a unique farm stay, and guests can also sample artisanal wines from property sourced grapes. Henderson boasts two downtown parks for recreation. Sue Shelton White Park provides a “center of downtown” experience. This square block hosts outdoor music events, lunch breaks, and a convenient place for wi-fi and quick breaks from walks around scenic downtown. Gene Record Park is the premier city park of Henderson. Here one can enjoy playgrounds, a splash pad, walking trails, a dog park, soccer fields, and pavilions for public or private occasions. These assets are anchored chiefly by the largest source for tourism in Chester County, Chickasaw State Park. This state park offers a retreat for canoeing, paddle boarding, kayaking, fishing, horseback riding, ATV trails, biking, swimming, hiking, and picnicking. Chickasaw also hosts the only area for recreational camping in our area and is the only equestrian campground in West Tennessee.

The search for growth is underway and the Henderson | Chester County Chamber of Commerce is actively looking for ways to conduct a tourism campaign to leverage all the county’s tourism assets. Currently Chester County receives around \$31,000 in hotel/motel tax revenue with \$28,000 coming directly as a result from Chickasaw State Park Lodging(*tn.gov*). The city of Henderson is welcoming a new hotel which is expected already to be at 60% capacity daily. The addition of new lodging and the availability of Airbnb rentals combined with state park lodging allows for substantial tourism growth in our community, especially in reference to

visitors from over fifty miles away. Chester County is hidden in some ways by a lack of promotion, as well as underserved in accommodations.

The potential for growth in this rural community is within grasp, but to move forward there is a need to develop a strategic plan. The Chamber of Commerce will assess the goals of the tourism plan, recruit out of county tourism partners, develop a cohesive Agri-tourism brand, research ways to move forward becoming a Tennessee Mainstreet Community, and explore additional grant funding opportunities.

Tourism Resources

The economic impact of Tennessee State parks was almost 2 billion dollars this past year, and there are fifty-seven state parks across the state. West Tennessee alone hosts a generous amount of these parks, directly contributing to our local tourism as well. Through lodging and recreation Chester County received over 5.2 million dollars in 2022 (*Tennessee Dept. of Tourist Development September 2023*). This spending is mostly contributed to Chickasaw State Park. Chickasaw State Park was built in the 1930's because of the New Deal. Many local families are directly connected to Chickasaw through their parent/grandparent's involvement in the Civilian Conservation Corps, the builders of the state park. Throughout the park's existence it has been a source of recreation for visitors from around the country, and park attendance for a single year is just over 300,000 guests. At any given time of the year, license plates from Mississippi, Ohio, and as far as Michigan can be seen. Cabins and Campsites for RV's remain full throughout the year. Equestrian and tent camping are more seasonal but are hugely popular. Hikers love the peaceful setting, and the centerpiece of the park is Lake Placid. This beautiful lake is where visitors can enjoy water sports such as fishing, canoeing, kayaking, and paddle boarding. With

so much to offer, Chickasaw State Park gives our rural community the springboard for continued growth.

Surrounding County Attractions

Many other state parks and attractions surround Chester County. Pinson Mounds State Archeological Area is only eight miles from downtown Henderson. Here visitors can see seventeen prehistoric Indian mounds and artifacts from the middle woodland period (200 b.c.- 500 a.d.) It is home to the second highest surviving mound in the United States at 72 ft tall. Casey Jones Home and Railroad Museum is located 22 miles away in Jackson, TN and just to the south is Big Hill Pond State Park in McNairy County. Big Hill Pond is home to a 70 ft observation tower that offers views of Travis McNatt Lake and a boardwalk. Guests at Big Hill Pond can also enjoy camping, hiking, mountain biking, and fishing. The park is home to thirty miles of overnight and day-use trails with four backpack trail shelters. McNairy County also has the Coon Creek Science Center, a 240 acre internationally recognized fossil site. The center has a museum, field laboratories, a weather station, and astronomy observing capabilities. Nearby Henderson County has two beautiful recreational lakes, Piney Lake and Beech Lake. The Natchez Trace State Park is located there as well and contains four lakes, and a 48,000-acre outdoor paradise.

Agri-Tourism and its Role

In the past four years, Agri-tourism has flourished throughout rural America. The pandemic brought changes to almost every aspect of our daily activities, including where visitors chose to spend their vacations. Vacation locations changed, but there was also a surge of new day trips and a revived sense of exploration of things close to home. Temporary layoffs and

work from home jobs allowed many families more time for activities, and with a trend to stay away from populated urban areas and popular vacation destinations, rural tourism found its stride. Now that the pandemic has subsided, these assets to rural areas now brought into view have continued to deliver and will hopefully be a mainstay in the rural landscape. Chester County has two great Agri-tourism locations and is actively looking for more.

Williams Auditorium and the Arts

Henderson, TN has quickly become a destination for live music. Williams Auditorium, which serves also as the auditorium for Chester County Middle School, is the new hot spot in West Tennessee for live music, comedy, and local theater productions. The space is used by the theater department, and the productions by the chamber of commerce such as the Hee-Haw Hootenanny and the Chester County Country Christmas. People are coming to Henderson in a way reminiscent of the Grand Ole Opry, but on a smaller “down home” scale. Visitors from surrounding counties and surrounding states can be seen almost at every weekend concert. Originally built in 1969, Williams Auditorium continues as a center for local talent and the arts and is continuing to break new ground as a music venue to be reckoned with.

Developing a Strategic Plan

In developing a strategic plan, the Henderson |Chester County Chamber of Commerce will be identifying the financial obligations and exploring ways to develop a tourism brand for Chester County. Starting with a Chester County tourism video made possible through a TN Department of Tourism grant, the chamber is currently working to link the tourism assets with the calendar of local events. The chamber is also publishing a yearly tourism guide, with the goal of expanding distribution to our surrounding county partners.

Tourism Partners

The two counties identified as the most like Chester County in size and in tourism are McNairy County and Henderson County. McNairy County has Big Hill Pond State Park and the Coon Creek Science Center. Henderson County has Natchez Trace State Park and Piney and Beech Lakes. McNairy County has been very successful with area wide marketing with efforts made by the McNairy Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. Partnerships have been discussed with McNairy County to cross promote attractions as a single day visit or weekend getaway. McNairy county has seen an increase with the development of a tourism guide. They have worked together with Big Hill Pond State Park to assist in marketing and connecting them to their tourism brand as well as added links to all tourism assets on their chamber/tourism webpage in a way to help promote. Henderson county is also willing to help with cross marketing and has experienced similar growth.

Developing a Local Tourism Brand

The Henderson | Chester County Chamber of Commerce has plans underway to acquire a tourism brand for Chester County. Currently with “Discover Chester County” as a working title, the chamber is moving forward to encompass a brand which will highlight the beautiful outdoor areas and the uniqueness of local rural tourism. In destination marketing, branding is not just about logos, it involves a 360-degree approach to crafting, developing and nurturing a unique identity for the destination according to key elements such as the destination proposition, heritage and values(*thinkdigital.travel*). The elements of this brand should reflect Reputation, Identity, and Perception.

Becoming a Tennessee Mainstreet Community

The Tennessee Main Street (TMS) Program serves as a statewide resource for communities seeking to revitalize and manage their traditional downtowns (tn.gov/ecd). The Main Street movement has been transforming the way communities think about the revitalization and management of their downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts for decades. The Main Street Four-Point Approach is a unique multi-faceted economic development tool that enables communities to revitalize their downtowns by leveraging local assets - from historic, cultural, and architectural resources to local enterprises and community pride. (tn.gov/ecd) Further development of Mainstreet Henderson will continue to bring visitors to downtown to enjoy shops and restaurants with attractive window displays and streetscape aesthetics. This part of the goal is at a standstill currently due to funding and the creation of a Mainstreet Director Position.

Grants and Funding

Chester County has been utilizing funds each year from the Tourism Marketing Grant Program. This grant provides funding to support marketing efforts that attract visitors to Tennessee's rural areas. This includes digital marketing, promotional materials, and events. The Discover Chester County Magazine has served as the tourism marketing publication for Chester County made possible through a fifty percent match from the marketing grant program. Remaining funds are procured through advertising sales and the chamber of commerce. The Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD) offers the tourism enhancement grant. This grant is designed to help communities enhance existing tourism assets or develop new ones. It's specifically aimed at rural areas that want to increase tourism traffic. The funds can be used for projects like infrastructure improvements, marketing initiatives, and

developing tourist attractions. The Chamber of Commerce intends on re-applying for this grant to acquire stage elements and sound equipment for Chester County to use in festivals and events. Additional funding is also being discussed through the Tennessee ARP (American Rescue Plan) Tourism Grant which is a funding program designed to support tourism-related initiatives in Tennessee, particularly in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Administered by the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (TDTD) in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD), this grant aims to help communities recover and strengthen their tourism economies.

Tourism Success in Rural Tennessee

Rural tourism has emerged as a significant driver of economic development in Tennessee, leveraging the state's cultural heritage, natural beauty, and community-driven initiatives to attract visitors from across the nation and beyond. The success of rural tourism in Tennessee is rooted in the strategic promotion of its unique assets, partnerships among local stakeholders, and effective use of state and federal resources. Tennessee's rural communities have successfully capitalized on their cultural and historical assets to create compelling tourist experiences. McNairy County has experienced growth by the development of their local tourism guide and have promoted their Agri center location as a host for events, fairs, and festivals. Henderson County has also gained tourism through promotion of Natchez Trace and funds allocated for Parkers Crossroads, a Civil War battlefield area along Interstate 40. Areas like Lynchburg, home to the Jack Daniel's Distillery, have drawn significant numbers of visitors interested in the state's whiskey heritage ("Visit Lynchburg Tn"). Similarly, the town of Granville has revitalized its local economy by promoting its historic charm, including attractions like the Sutton General Store, which hosts regular bluegrass performances and other events. Agritourism has become a

growing sector within Tennessee’s rural tourism strategy. Farms and vineyards across the state have opened their doors to visitors, offering experiences like farm stays, pick-your-own produce, and wine tastings. The Tennessee Agritourism Association has supported these efforts by providing resources and marketing opportunities for farms interested in diversifying their income streams through tourism. The success of agritourism is evident in places like the Apple Barn in Sevierville and the Rocky Top Wine Trail, which have become popular destinations. The state's emphasis on tourism development has helped rural communities create sustainable, long-term tourism strategies that not only attract visitors but also improve the quality of life for residents. By preserving cultural heritage, promoting natural attractions, and supporting local businesses, rural Tennessee has become a model for successful tourism development.

Economic Impact Results

The impact of rural tourism on Tennessee’s economy is substantial. According to the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, tourism spending in rural areas has seen consistent growth, contributing to job creation and increased tax revenues. For instance, in 2019, Tennessee’s rural counties generated over \$1.8 billion in travel-related spending. This economic boost has helped diversify local economies that may have traditionally relied on agriculture or manufacturing (Tennessee Tourist Development). Rural tourism has directly led to the creation of numerous jobs in West Tennessee. The tourism industry encompasses a wide range of sectors, including hospitality, retail, food services, and transportation. Small businesses, such as bed-and-breakfasts, local restaurants, and specialty shops, have thrived due to the influx of tourists, providing employment opportunities for residents. Seasonal festivals and events, which draw significant crowds, also generate temporary jobs, further boosting local employment. The influx of tourists to West Tennessee has resulted in increased revenue for local businesses. Tourists

spend money on lodging, dining, shopping, and entertainment, directly benefiting the local economy. The multiplier effect of tourism spending means that every dollar spent by tourists circulates through the local economy, supporting not only tourism-related businesses but through occupancy “hotel/motel” and sales tax. These taxes provide vital funding for public services, infrastructure development, and community projects. These revenues help maintain and improve local amenities, making the area more attractive to both residents and visitors. The financial benefits of tourism extend beyond the immediate businesses, supporting the broader community through enhanced public services and facilities.

Conclusion

Rural tourism in Tennessee has flourished due to the state’s rich cultural and natural resources, strategic use of marketing and funding, and the active involvement of local communities. By focusing on what makes each rural area unique, Tennessee has successfully attracted visitors while preserving the character and heritage of its communities. The continued growth of rural tourism not only provides economic benefits but also fosters a deeper appreciation of Tennessee’s diverse landscapes and traditions. As Chester County continues to develop its tourism sector, the focus on sustainable practices and community involvement will be key to ensuring long-term success. By preserving its cultural assets, enhancing visitor experiences, and promoting the county's natural landscapes, Chester County is not only boosting its local economy but also enriching the lives of its residents. The county’s journey in rural tourism reflects other communities in rural West Tennessee and hopefully an eventual mentor for rural areas looking to harness the potential of tourism to create a brighter future.

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