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Master plan being developed to highlight tourism opportunities

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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The Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) is in the process of creating its first master plan to identify the best ways to bring more tourists to the Northern Shenandoah Valley.

"We've been doing a strategic plan every three years for a number of years," said Justin Kerns, executive director of the CVB on South Pleasant Valley Road in Winchester. "We have an agency that we've worked with for a while now and every three years, they come in and talk to stakeholders, they talk to staff, they do a tour of the community, they look at trends that are going on in the industry, all of those things."

The resulting three-year strategic plans, Kerns said, are valuable because they identify "very specific goals for us to hit" in the short term.

A master plan, Kerns said, "is a larger vision, a longer vision of what your community is going to work towards 10, 15, 20 years from now. It's not going to give us any specific goals to work towards but is going to say, generally, this is where we want to end up. Then our strategic plans can kind of help us get there."

A master plan factors in things like a region's quality of life, economic growth estimates and what localities hope to look like two decades from now, Kerns said, then points out how tourism can fit into the local governments' comprehensive plans for future growth and development.

"We want to increase our tourist numbers, but we also want to make sure that we have the capacity for the tourists that are coming," Kerns said.

Creating an outlook for future tourism is not the only benefit from having a master plan.

"There are also projects and funding at the state level that become available when a community has a master plan in place," Kerns said. "Working with our community partners, we found that there are opportunities that we're missing right now by not having a tourism master plan."

Kerns said the CVB used money from its reserve fund to hire Clarity of Place, a company based in Ohio that puts together master tourism plans for municipalities across the country.

"They're a division of Longwoods [International], and Longwoods is kind of the industry leader for tourism, research, statistics and data," he said. "They came very, very highly recommended from all over the place."

For the next 30 days or so, Clarity of Place will be sending surveys to local tourism stakeholders, conducting in-person interviews and hosting focus groups to get a better understanding of the community and where it hopes to be 20 years down the road.

"We're on schedule to have this finished about the first of the year," Kerns said.

While he won't know the research findings until a few months from now, Kerns said he anticipates that agritourism with an aim toward land preservation will be a significant component of the tourism master plan.

"A lot of people are talking about that and how it's actually going to work," he said. "How can agritourism help preserve farms? How can it help preserve land?"

Another big topic Kerns expects to be highlighted in the forthcoming master plan is sports tourism and how the Northern Shenandoah Valley could host significant sporting events that bring visitors and their tourist dollars to the area.

"That's been a topic in the community for years now," Kerns said, noting that promoting sports tourism has been a component of the CVB's strategic plans for several years. "Sports tourism is one of those things that just keeps ramping up. Exactly what that's going to look like, I don't know. The community could say we just need to use the assets that we have (i.e. facilities and locations that can host sporting events) and enhance those to bring in tournaments, or that we need to build more assets."

Whatever the community says, the CVB and the Winchester-Frederick County Tourism Board is ready to listen.

"We'll work with what the community is saying," Kerns said. "The master plan will give us direction, but it also gives the city and county governments some direction as well because it provides them with data and information that they don't get through their normal processes because they don't ask the same questions that Clarity of Place will ask."

Whatever guidance the master plan provides, Kerns said it will be an important document because it will help the CVB and the local governments hone their focus to hopefully generate more tourism revenues through hotel stays, restaurant reservations, retail purchases, admission to local attractions and so on.

"The tourists are what keep these local businesses open," he said, "because the locals can only go to that sandwich shop so many times."

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