Michigan State University Planning Practicum—Spring 2013
TOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR IDLEWILD, MICHIGAN
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BACKGROUND

History of Idlewild

Founded in 1912, Idlewild is the largest African American resort in America. It was created as a refuge for African Americans seeking to escape Jim Crow laws that were prevalent in the South. Idlewild provided a safe and serene oasis in the wilderness and a playground for the black community to gather and discuss issues of vital collective interest. In addition, Idlewild hosted some of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century.

Idlewild received its official recognition on the National Register of Historic Places in 1964. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 put Idlewild in direct competition with other resorts that were becoming more upscale and mainstream. At a time when segregation laws prevented African Americans from visiting other resorts, Idlewild, with its beautiful beaches and luxurious amenities, became a popular destination. Founded in 1912, Idlewild is the largest African American resort in America.

In recent years, Idlewild has enjoyed a resurgence of interest and recognition for its historical significance as well as its enduring scenic beauty. This resurgence has led to renewed investment in planning and development initiatives as well as an ongoing partnership with the State of Michigan. This project was designed to complement these important efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the practicum team’s research, Idlewild appears to be very well suited for a tourism initiative. It boasts the same natural beauty that attracted buyers from across the county a century ago, and that beauty is now overlaid with a long and rich history. Idlewild’s socio-economic condition is in need of improvement but does not appear to be a crisis. Idlewild sits at the center of an important regional tourism economy and appears to have strong potential for contributing to—and benefiting from—that economy.

However, more attractions are needed to make this happen. In the midst of a region overflowing with tourist attractions and natural beauty, Idlewild has few attractions to draw the volumes of tourist traffic that would ensure long-term growth.

The research for this project includes a summary of recent planning reports for Idlewild (not pictured in this paper), with a wide array of well-informed recommendations for developing Idlewild as a tourism destination while ensuring the stewardship of the cultural resources that make Idlewild unique and attractive. However, these plans aren’t always affordable, expensive, small-scale strategies for initiating a community-driven effort to sell the tourism.

To that end, the practicum team proposes that Idlewild begin with an array of small-scale, low-cost, grassroots approaches that set the stage for the important but costly bids and major investments that will help sustain Idlewild’s tourism economy in the long run. In addition to being affordable for a cash-strapped community, these approaches are devised to generate maximum participation, collaboration, and buy-in from all versions of the community, including the often-voiceless, Yates Township and Lake County officials, nonprofit, and business owners. This will be important for ensuring that the full community takes ownership in Idlewild’s identity as a 21st-century historical tourist attraction.

This set of recommendations covers several of the recommendations from the previous plans, but attempts to provide a more realistic time frame for implementation. Most of the original recommendations by the practicum team are concentrated toward low-cost or no-cost, grassroots strategies. In addition to achieving modest gains in capacity building, community beautification, and other areas, the hope is that these strategies will help generate community engagement and support for the work so that the residents of Idlewild are involved in Idlewild’s development.

ANALYSIS

The chart above shows retail surplus (negative numbers) and leakage (positive numbers) for tourism-related retailers in a 20-mile radius around Idlewild. The chart shows significant leakage in several categories—that is, Idlewild residents go outside the 20-mile radius to meet most of these retail needs. This suggests that several retail types could find success in Idlewild if they offered added value to compete with surrounding retailers. Categories with market leakage include: book and music stores, sporting goods and hobby stores, clothing stores, and more.