

The Independence City

INDEPENDENT

Tackling Tourism: Tempting Travel to the Dark Side

By Anne Scheck

Historically, Independence has transformed itself into a tourist town two ways. One is on the Fourth of July. The other is by a tour of local haunts – literally. It’s the city’s ghost walk.

If asked to choose the better draw – a huge influx for the celebration of a patriotic summer holiday or the fanciful tradition of traipsing around to sites where dead spirits are said to dwell – marketing experts can sound downright spooky. Ghost walks constitute “dark tourism,” a durable local asset.

Unlike events that require fireworks and parade planning, such ghostly strolls often can be conducted year-round. And, generally, they don’t need a large monetary investment – they can inspire community visits without a lot of fanfare, and add value to other venues.

This year’s “Tourism and Travel Commons” – an online collection of travel and city-planning research – shows how ghost walks succeed (people love experiencing supernatural intrigue without an actual risk of harm) and why scary

stories put places on the map (Salem in Massachusetts might be just another town without that witch-trial past).

However, as construction of a hotel gets underway this spring at *Independence Landing*, city staff will look at more than the local roster of paranormal apparitions to increase the town’s visibility. Proximity to the Willamette River and local wineries are a current focus, according to Shawn Irvine, the city’s economic development director.

The plan is to extend the opportunities for tourism past the event-filled summer months that already are proving successful – and include the “shoulder season” of September and October, as well as April and May, Mr. Irvine said. Will it work? At a regional meeting of the American Planning Association (APA) last month in Portland, city planners said “shoulder extension” of tourist season can be difficult.

Artificially trying to create a niche that isn’t there never works very well, said Dick Converse, principal

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land-use planner for the Rogue Valley Council of Governments. Instead, concentrate on “what an area already has, versus trying to invent something to attract visitors,” he advised.

Independence is a bit of a byway, so agri-tourism might be a logical bet. Farm visits could help bring families from Salem – and beyond – into the rural Willamette Valley, he suggested.

In fact, this already is an activity that has been identified as a buildable asset, said Ali Salzer, tourism development coordinator for Polk County Tourism Alliance. Corn-maize adventures at Airlie Farm and bird walks with the Luckiamute Watershed Council (LWC) all fall into that category, she said.

Partnering with the city on such LWC nature outings – some of which took place this fall in that “shoulder” time period – seems a good fit, Mr. Irvine agreed. Kristen Larson, coordinator of the LWC, said she’s in favor of it “when it aligns with our mission.”

However, nature hikes and bird-watching only go so far, according to some of those at the APA regional meeting. “It is something that can attract tourists,” affirmed Joe Slaughter, a land-use consultant in Medford. “But it just doesn’t attract in great numbers,” he observed. Instead, big events – like Independence’s Fourth of July, which is known statewide – can create an interest in the town, “and once you get them there, get them to come back,” he said.

In the case of Independence, the river itself may be the town’s more

enduring advantage.

“When you open up a river front, you allow people entry to an amenity,” observed Pete Walter, a city planner from Oregon City.

The park system of trails and pedestrian-friendly downtown district that flank the Willamette River in Independence are “really key,” agreed City Manager David Clyne. Events are magnets for small cities, but it’s vibrant, tourist-welcoming downtowns that draw return visits, he also concurred. “They’re really the marketing tool,” he said. And the city truly has a “center,” where shopping and dining are only a short walk away from nature and recreational spots.

This year, for example, Corvallis-based *Cascadia Expeditions* began guided kayak tours on the river to Independence; RidewithGPS.com, a website for bicyclists, now features the “the best bike rides in Polk County,” which city staff helped design, Mr. Irvine pointed out. Both kayakers and bicyclists made use of the downtown.

And there is a new demographic participating in this kind of tourism that the city hopes to capture, Mr. Clyne said. “They are retirees, healthy and engaged in that kind of tourism,” he said. Unlike those of previous generations, many of the baby-boom cohort are active and adventuresome – anxious to explore appealing areas.

However, low civic support can have the opposite effect on tourism – which is one reason the Hop & Heritage weekend wasn’t held this year. “*Indy Goes Dark*” consumed significant city staff and volunteer

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time – and both are needed to help ensure success for that post-summer festival, Mr. Clyne explained. "I think that (the Hop & Heritage festival) probably needs to be built from the ground up," Mr. Irvine stated.

The cancellation of the Hop & Heritage celebration is an example of what tourism experts call "festival fatigue," in which small cities become so heavily laden with weekend events that the population itself seems to withdraw, even oppose, such efforts.

"We don't want the entire summer to be a production," explained Sue Barker, managing director of the Riverview Farmers' Market. "People here want to be able to go to the park and use it – like play badminton," she said. Some residents -- having experienced the inflow of tourists from both the eclipse-viewing venues for "*Indy Goes Dark*" as well as the packed crowds during the Fourth of July -- seem to want "more community, less city" in summertime, she added.

"The ability to build on what we have is there," said Mr. Irvine. "On the other hand, we don't want to turn this into Disneyland."

In fact, when tourists who attended "*Indy Goes Dark*" were interviewed during that three-day weekend in August, many wanted to feel the typical bustle of small-town living during their time in the city. This special essence goes by the technical name "task-scape," and it can be critically important, though it's also a maddeningly intangible asset.

"It's like feeling the town's

personality," explained Ms. Barker, who also is on the board of the Independence Downtown Association.

For instance, when a group of Airstream owners came to town they brought a lot more than their iconic vehicles. "There was something about that group...they had a good time," she said. They mingled with the town and the town mingled right back.

For one thing, Airstream-trailer enthusiasts brought a brisk business to restaurants without local diners being displaced. For another, they helped contribute to the task-scape -- called "vibe" by city planners – which appears to be the hardest factor to define in achieving tourism success.


In a small town like Independence, that means a *tiny-bit-hokey* downhome atmosphere, which charms visitors. That's where a ghost walk fits in – it's got that vibe, according to some at the regional APA meeting, which drew many attendees from Oregon.

Asked about this observation, perpetual ghost-walk hostess Marilyn Morton, a city councilor, said: "I'd like to build success with that first – just my opinion."


In fact, "successful dark tourism communities" can serve as leadership examples for towns requiring "ghost management," wrote Beth A. Wiede Heidelberg PhD, urban-studies professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, in the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*. Maybe Independence will be such a model.



The CIVICS LESSON: Why Franchise Fees May Be in the Fine Print

Look carefully over any utility bill, from Pacific Gas to MINET, and you're likely to spot a category known as "franchise fee." These charges are part of the agreement between the local government -- in this case the City of Independence -- and the businesses that use the government's municipally-owned property to deliver their services. Utilities and telecommunications companies often are obligated to pay the city what is tantamount to rent for the privilege of using a "right of way." These agreements "ensure that companies receiving special use of rights-of-way are paying fees to reimburse local governments for use of public services," according to the League of Oregon Cities. Franchise fees now constitute a separate source of city revenue. Utilities that provide electric, gas, steam heat, telecommunications, water, or wastewater service often pay this fee as an annual or multi-year contract with the city. However, Oregon carefully defines which providers can be required to enter into such contracts and be charged franchise fees. For example, a telecommunications utility is defined in Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 759.005. A public utility is defined in ORS 757.005. The ORS also have fee limits. -AS

The INDY HOP: Wrangling in Error-Prone Roundabout Users

When is a simple right-hand turn a residential rescue move? When the City of Independence paints directional arrows and plants a sign at the terminus of C Street -- after motorists reportedly and repeatedly mistook the new roundabout for a convenient island on which to turn any direction that seemed to make sense at the time. That's what some downtown employees noticed when the circle first was constructed. Drivers seemed either confused or curious, first driving around one way, then the other. "I'd veer to the right, like I was supposed to do, then I'd see them take a left turn," said Colton Helmer, an employee at *Brew Coffee & Tap House*. He chalked up the near-collisions to inexperience with roundabouts, which are relatively rare in Oregon compared with other parts of the country. Mr. Helmer pointed out that he used to live in Phoenix, where such circular turn-about were common. However, not everyone thinks the problem is solved by signage or pavement paint. "The right-hand arrows on the street ought to be more prominent," grumbled one citizen who recently erred in roundabout use -- and was corrected by others who saw the turn. Is a neon sign needed? Or just better reading glasses? -AS

Guest Editorial

by Gary Van Horn

[The Independent *welcomes editorial content. This editorial follows one written by Shawn Irvine, Independence economic development director, which appeared in this format in the September issue*]

Taking a cue from a recent offering on these pages (9/1/2017) and providing some alternate perspective might stimulate discussion at the coffee tables. That's the point of "editorial remarks" based on perceived history of the practice from this chair.

The article referenced was focused on the recurring theme from City Management that Independence has a "vibrant downtown" as well as recent experience with City "economic development" efforts in other areas.

Describing the "Downtown" as "vibrant" might be viewed subjectively, depending on how the Independence Downtown is to be characterized. From the other side of the coin it may seem otherwise. To this observer, given the turnover in establishments for say the last five years, there is indeed a resonance in place. That turnover issue, however, may suggest more stability could be gained and benefits derived from community input before deciding how to use dollars available for tilling the ground or planting seeds, as the metaphor has been offered.

The "Independent" recently outlined issues and timelines surrounding the "development" of *Independence Landing*. There is value to both residents and their local government if feedback was utilized ahead of decision-making, including during the progress of this urban renewal project. Citizen participation, while time consuming, should be a key element in developing "transparency" for government operations.

Posing situations without potential solutions might be the approach of some, but that's not appropriate here. So, some potential solutions/opportunities for more citizen participation in City Council decision-making and focus for consideration might include:

[Guest Editorial by Gary Van Horn is continued on the other side]

[Guest Editorial by Gary Van Horn *continued*]

* The City Council Agenda should be posted on their website at least a week in advance with descriptive titles instead of simply an item number. That way folks might better understand what an item includes without trolling through attachments. The links to completed staff work for background and justification documents are very helpful.

* Citizen Comment opportunities and time limits on those opportunities should be revised, especially when "new" and unanticipated "actions" are required by Councilors because deadlines are imminent - something which seems to happen far too regularly. Often questions which constituents might have concerns about are not asked because of existing practices.

* With the items above which are do-able in the short run, a longer run approach which provides a feedback loop for any municipality is important where citizen input is concerned:

It may be worth considering by Independence City Government to promote and/or encourage the development of Neighborhood Associations. Many Oregon cities have these organizations and benefit from their existence - including Salem. Those Associations provide locally-focused forums for consideration of neighborhood-relevant issues and their representatives are able to share information, perspectives and suggestions with City Staff and Council Members on both formal and informal levels.

To be a little more specific and possibly get the ball rolling in a leadership role, the Independence City Council might wish to consider instituting a quarterly (or semi-annual) "Neighborhood Forum" in the facilities at its disposal on the first floor of the "Community Center." This could be an approach to share City initiatives and priorities while receiving feedback on such matters as Budget; City Program Priorities; City Projects; Transportation plans; and a wide variety of interests which undoubtedly exist out here in the hinterlands.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. Gary Van Horn