

Loudoun Now

OP-ED “**Value of Tourism Overlooked in Comp Plan Debate**” – May 10, 2019

If you already live here, you may never have looked at the website for Visit Loudoun. Check it out; it’s pertinent. The landing page for www.visitloudoun.org shows an inviting, soft green countryside of pastures, vineyards, and woodlots stretching to distant hills. Notably, it does not show a landscape of townhouses and parking lots stretching along a traffic-packed six-lane highway.

Many folks in rural Loudoun may think of tourists as more a nuisance than a benefit (even though many may have first visited as tourists themselves—including me). Like tourism or not, it has been an unwitting force for rural preservation, helping to build a robust rural economy. That should be a good defense against rapacious development.

Unfortunately, this relationship is not getting the attention it deserves.

According to data from the US Travel Association, Loudoun saw almost \$1.8 billion in visitor spending in 2017 (2018 figures are still to come). Visit Loudoun says that yielded about \$47.2 million in state taxes and \$27.9 million locally, which knocked \$600 off the tax bill for the average Loudoun County household. Plus, tourism supports enterprises that local Loudouners also use. Your favorite restaurant could well need a measure of tourist revenue just to stay in business. And if its menu is “farm-to-table,” then that helps local farmers stay in business, too.

But if that soft green countryside disappears under bulldozers, all that goes away.

In theory, responsible, sustainable tourism should create an economic incentive to protect what tourists are coming to enjoy. Yet somehow, that incentive seems not to be reaching Loudoun’s government. Instead, developers are.

The green that they see in that countryside is the kind that fits in a fat wallet. All those unbuilt acres are a gold mine, and when miners contemplate a new-found lode, their intent is to exploit it until the mine is played out. Uncontrolled landscape development is just as terminally extractive; it’s called “build out”—every possible parcel developed.

Tourism by contrast, if carefully managed, can be sustainable, and when well managed, it can even renew and enhance. A rundown little house in our neighborhood, for instance, has gone from eyesore to a spiffy little vacation rental. A new winery has become a community asset.

My work around the world focuses on the interaction between tourism and the places people visit. I can attest that destinations everywhere are under pressure—from climate and biodiversity changes, from extractive industries, and from

overdevelopment, sometimes by tourism itself. Loudoun has handled tourism pretty well so far. Suburban sprawl is the threat, and protecting the tourism economy should be the obvious response.

But there's a disconnect. The tourism industry is too easily seen in isolation, as if businesses that cater to tourists—inns, some restaurants, event venues, antique shops—have nothing to do with their settings or communities. The appealing rural scene outside the windshield? Hey, that comes for free. In blinkered vision of economics, it doesn't exist. Not on the spreadsheet.

In fact, tourism depends heavily on its setting—in our case, charming countryside. Visitors from afar think of Loudoun as part of “Virginia Horse Country” or, as Visit Loudoun would have it, “DC’s Wine Country.” Either way, these images work. But the connection to rural protection will not be made if 1) residents perceive fewer tourism benefits than annoyances, and 2) tourism people don’t speak up in a loud, forceful chorus using their \$1.8 billion megaphone.

It can be done. In Florida, environmentalists and tourism interests have together managed to stall offshore-drilling plans that would put the state’s valuable beaches at risk. In a different Florida battle, citizens of hurricane-ravaged Mexico Beach are working to preserve their community and block developer attempts to buy up family-owned lots.

Whether you own a posh resort or the smallest guest room on Airbnb, a high-end restaurant or a roadside cider stand, if you’re involved even peripherally in tourism, write the Supervisors (BOS@loudoun.gov). Urge them to protect this *sustainable* part of Loudoun’s economy by protecting the place it depends on.

We nontourists should act, too. We benefit, not only by 600 bucks in annual tax savings, but in the pleasure of living in or near such a place. We can enjoy fresh produce at a farmer’s market or an occasional glass at a winery. A drive in the country. A walk in the woods. A deer hunt. A bike ride on a gravel road. Which would you prefer to see on that former piece of farmland up the road—a vineyard, or 75 new housing units? The impending decision on the comprehensive plan will shape the western Loudoun of the next generation.

The impending decision on the comprehensive plan will shape the western Loudoun of the next generation. A poor choice by the Supervisors could ultimately pave over our soft green hills, leaving only soulless expanses of tract housing akin to Shakespeare’s “bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”

Jonathan B. Tourtellot
Destination Stewardship Center

#

CUTS

. has handled tourism pretty well so far. But avoiding pitfalls may not be enough to save the countryside tourism depends on.

Based on my work around the world on the interaction between tourism and the destinations people visit, . But avoiding pitfalls may not be enough to save the countryside tourism depends on. ~~I've seen places where tourism practitioners helped thwart damaging development plans, and places where they didn't.~~

~~I've seen places where tourism practitioners helped thwart damaging development plans, and places where they didn't.~~

[Affordable housing does need to be addressed, but it can be done in numerous ways without throwing the door open to sprawling subdivisions with more than 50,000 houses.]

So it behooves everyone who benefits from tourism to work together and use their combined clout to protect rural Loudoun.

You'll see there a nice array of all the things that make Loudoun—especially western Loudoun—an appealing place to live as well as visit.

Tourism is too easily dismissed.

what economists dismiss as “externalities”

In 2018, Loudoun County's agritourism businesses hosted 1.2 million people, which generated a total economic impact of \$413.6 million. 40% of those who visited agritourism businesses are defined as those traveling more than 50 miles one way. Source: “Economic Impact: Loudoun County Agritourism 2018” by Dr. Vincent Magnini, Executive Director of the Institute for Service Research.