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CENTERPIECE

'It's Time For Us To Capitalize'

Marketing Campaign Promotes Valley Strengths

By VIC BRADSHAW Daily News-Record 9 hrs ago



Nikki Fox / DN-R

Chris Canfield, vice president of Virginia Tourism Partnership Marketing, speaks during the Shenandoah Valley Tourism Partnership's announcement of a new marketing strategy at Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport on Wednesday.

WEYERS CAVE — The Shenandoah Valley, David Mikula said Wednesday, is known nationally and internationally, and it probably has greater name recognition than any other region in Virginia.

"It's time," he said, "for us to capitalize on that."

Mikula, president and co-founder of the Vinton tourism branding and marketing firm Mikula/Harris, helped roll out a new initiative for 13 Valley communities working together as the Shenandoah Valley Tourism Partnership.

The partnership involves localities stretching from Frederick and Clarke counties in the north to Rockbridge County in the south.

The collaborative effort and its accompanying branding and marketing campaigns were unveiled during a gathering at the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport. The event drew representatives from state and local governments, local elected officials, and tourism leaders from throughout the region.

Mikula heralded the initiative as the first “comprehensive and integrated approach to marketing the region as a whole.”

While the Valley is known for its history and scenic beauty, Jenna French said the new campaign allows other tourism strengths to be marketed to attract different types of visitors.

“What people used to think of as the Shenandoah Valley is still there, but there’s so much more than that,” said French, Shenandoah County’s tourism director. “We really needed a platform to educate people on what the Shenandoah Valley has become.”

The effort should reach new markets and tap into travelers who might not have connected the Valley to their interests before. That’s expected to benefit all the communities involved.

“Visitors and even locals don’t care so much about boundary lines,” Michele Bridges, Rockingham County’s economic development and tourism manager, said after the announcement. “We realize if we’re pooling our monies together, we’re able to do bigger things on a larger scale than we could with individual efforts.”

Target Audiences

Mikula said the Shenandoah Valley is well-known as a desirable weekend getaway by people in markets within a day’s drive. However, he thinks the region can attract more people to spend a week by effectively promoting its pooled assets.

Ad campaigns have been developed around three regional experiences shown by research as being most attractive to visitors: culinary tourism, highlighting farm-to-table dining, farming heritage, agritourism, and craft beverage operations; the charming cities and towns that run the Valley’s length; and outdoor recreation.

Backing those efforts is a new website, VirginiasShenandoahValley.com, that highlights the region’s assets and provides easy ways for visitors to get information and connect to individual community tourism websites. Print and online advertisements have been developed to run in multiple media outlets.

Jean Clark, director of Lexington-Rockbridge Area Tourism, said the partnership is planning an “aggressive” marketing campaign in the Orlando, Fla., market to take advantage of ViaAir’s new one-stop regional jet service from Orlando Sanford International Airport to Shenandoah Valley Regional.

The group also has joined Capital Region USA, a travel marketing partnership involving communities in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. That outlet is viewed as a gateway to more international tourism, with an emphasis on China, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Brazil.

Justin Kerns, executive director of the Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said research by the local organization and for the SVTP shows that many visitors stay only one or two nights in a Valley community before moving on to another to extend their trip.

The region is the primary attraction for those travelers, he said, and they should be targeted as a group. By pooling money — this year, \$5,000 for each tourism organization involved — and leveraging grant funds, the Valley’s breweries and wineries, agritourism hot spots, hotels, restaurants and other assets can be highlighted.

“It made sense financially for us to join in because there’s all those leisure travelers,” Kerns said. “They aren’t just stopping off overnight as they pass through. Leisure travelers are looking for something to do.”

Funding for Winchester and Frederick County’s involvement is coming from a boost in funding the department received this year from the lodging tax dollars the localities collect.

Anticipated Returns

The partnership, French said, is the result of a three-year grass-roots effort that grew out of multijurisdictional efforts to establish tourism trails. Tourism officials realized a larger-scale collaboration could pay dividends.

What once was a full page of quarter-page ads for four Valley localities in a magazine now can be a strong, full-page ad for the region with “a really powerful presence,” she said.

Brenda Black, Harrisonburg’s tourism and visitor services manager, said the increased exposure for the city should boost the exposure for its tourism assets.

“This should provide our businesses with additional exposure that they normally wouldn’t get because

we needed more funding,” she said.

That, Black said, should increase their revenues and the city’s tax collections from visitors.

The partnership also was viewed as a boon by Gina Hilliard, president of the Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce, a county with an economy that’s been buoyed by its burgeoning tourism industry.

“I think there will be a huge impact due to the fact that it’s another avenue for us to advertise in and get our name out there,” she said. “Our marketing campaign is pretty broad, but this broadens it even more.”

Chris Canfield, vice president of partnership marketing for the Virginia Tourism Corp., said during the presentation that the marketing effort’s impact can extend beyond the money visitors spend.

Because quality of life is a major factor in business startups and relocations, and millennials want to live in vibrant, creative areas, he hailed tourism as “the strongest economic development tool” in Virginia.



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