

# Blackstone Valley

## Tourism Strategic Plan

March, 2001

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This report was prepared for the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, and Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tourism has great potential in the Blackstone Valley to be a leading source of economic development. The region is the “birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution,” has excellent outdoor recreation, beautiful scenery, and the “official” designation of a National Heritage Corridor - all significant attractions for visitors.

With this base of tourism assets, the Blackstone Valley is in a position to increase its levels of visitation, which today stand at an estimated 3 million annual visitors and \$275 million in economic impact. However, to realize the full potential of tourism in the Blackstone Valley, several things need to happen:

- 1.) The region’s tourism “product” must be improved to attract a wider audience and maximize the economic impact of visitors.
- 2.) There needs to be better coordination of attractions: more consistent hours of operation, visitor policies, and visitor services.
- 3.) There needs to be more and better promotion of the Blackstone Valley, and a coordinated marketing effort between the regional Massachusetts and Rhode Island tourism promotion organizations.

In order to attract greater numbers of tourists in the long run, the region needs to develop more attractions throughout the region. In order to gain more economic impact from tourism, the Valley needs to develop more tourism support services throughout the region, including accommodations, restaurants, and visitor-related retail.

We suggest the creation of “tourism development zones” to help identify and develop areas with the highest tourism potential. A series of developed tourism development zones throughout the Valley will help form a “critical mass” of attractions and services to attract additional visitors and move them from one area of the region to another. To attract tourism entrepreneurs, we suggest developing a “Tourism Development Program” which uses incentives like rent

subsidy, tax breaks, marketing assistance, and access to capital through loans and grants.

The Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, and the Corridor Commission should work to create a more unified vision of the Blackstone Valley, and a more unified tourism promotion program. As a result of this report, a special Bi-State Tourism Task Force has been formed to produce a marketing campaign with the following components:

- market research
- advertising, including tourism magazines and newspapers
- a variety of brochures
- a central tourism web site
- participation in trade shows
- direct marketing (including electronic marketing)
- partnerships with other regions and promotional entities
- public relations

Marketing efforts should be addressed toward the following audiences:

- Blackstone Valley residents
- Leisure vacationers, including day-trip visitors from the metro-Boston, Worcester, Providence, and Hartford areas
- Affinity travelers, including history lovers, arts/crafts collectors, recreational enthusiasts
- Travel Trade, including group tour operators, travel agents, travel writers, meeting planners, receptive operators, area hotel concierges, and state information center personnel
- International Visitors, targeted through the Mass. Office of Travel & Tourism, RI Tourism Department, Massport, and Discover New England
- Meetings/Retreats (if the region develops conference/retreat facilities)

Funding for the tourism program should include state/federal funding, private funding, and local/regional public funding.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this strategic plan is to recommend ways in which the Blackstone Valley region in Massachusetts and Rhode Island might derive meaningful economic benefits and improve the Valley's quality of life by becoming a more significant tourism destination.

The project was initiated and supported by the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, and Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce.

Tourism can be an excellent stimulant to an area's economic development initiatives. It fosters growth of small and medium-sized businesses created to serve visitors. It provides employment to local citizens with a wide range of jobs, from entry-level to white-collar management.

Because tourists are defined as those visiting from outside the region, tourism is literally an export industry, with new dollars arriving in the region from "foreign" ports (even if that port is as close as Worcester or Providence). And tourism dollars affect a wide variety of local businesses, from the hotels, restaurants, attractions, historic sites, parks, and shops that benefit from direct visitor activity, to the enterprises that supply and serve tourism businesses and thereby benefit indirectly from visitor spending. Tourism communities benefit from increased tax revenues generated by visitors in the form of room tax revenues (if a hotel is present) and property tax revenues gained from tourism-related businesses.

Sometimes, though, the most important benefit of tourism has nothing to do with money. It comes from the new-found, tangible pride of place residents take as their community becomes more vibrant,

aesthetically appealing, a place other people want to visit. We invite all the communities and residents of the Blackstone Valley to share our vision of what the region might become.

The authors would like to acknowledge prior tourism planning studies completed for the Blackstone Valley: the Blackstone River Valley Regional Comprehensive Tourism Plan, produced in 1992 by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, and the Action Plan for the Tourism Committee, produced in 1997 by the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce.

## I. A TOURISM VISION

It is a June Saturday morning in a year not too distant, and the Blackstone Valley is awaking to another busy day of tourism. From Worcester to Providence, the sun is sneaking over the hilltops, casting a glimmering light on the Blackstone River and, indeed, the entire region. White steeples stab the sky. The air is fresh, filled with the promise of excitement, adventure, discovery, and fun.

The first of the day's float groups, an outing club from Boston, arrive at Blackstone River Outfitters in Uxbridge. After they make their arrangements in the office, the paddlers browse the Outfitter's gift shop, buying river guides and wildlife books. It looks like the sun will be intense today, so several of the visitors stock up on sunscreen and bottled water too. They climb aboard a shuttle bus, which delivers them several miles upriver. Canoes and kayaks are already in the water. The group loads their gear and pushes off, eager to begin their journey on the scenic and historic Blackstone River.

A few miles downstream, the paddlers wave to two couples from New York who are cycling the magnificent Blackstone River Bikeway. They are taking a long weekend getaway, with a goal of pedaling all 45 miles of the Bikeway from Providence to Worcester. This morning they rose early at their B&B in Millville to get a good jump on the day. They are a little behind schedule because they keep stopping at the many interpretive markers and interesting attractions along the Bikeway.

One definite stop on their journey is the Stanley Woolen Mill, coming up in Uxbridge. A few years ago this grand structure was shuttered and crumbling. Today it is a vibrant visitor attraction. Several floors are devoted to area artists and craftspeople, who create their works in attractive studios, exhibit in several on-site galleries, and sell their work to visitors right in the facility. The New York cyclists plan to have lunch in the quaint Café Stanley, then see the artists at work. Perhaps they'll arrange to have a painting or some famous Blackstone pottery shipped home.

River Bend Farm is already bustling. Outside the visitor center a costumed interpreter, a canal boat worker named Silas Atkinson, greets a family from Hartford. They walk over to the *Rebecca Sweeney*, a wooden barge docked along the Blackstone Canal. With the help of Sukie and Buttercup, his devoted horses, Silas will take the family on a canal ride and share his lore of the past. But before they begin, Silas gives the kids sugar cubes to share with the horses.

Overhead, a colorful hot-air balloon drifts lazily on the breeze. In the gondola, a retired couple from New Jersey view the beautiful scenery on a one-hour aerial tour of the Blackstone Valley. From the air they can see the entire length of the river.

In the distance the moan of a steam whistle rends the air. It is the first trip of the day for the *Blackstone Valley Flyer*, an historic excursion train that takes visitors on daily scenic rail trips along the Blackstone River. Today is special because a group of local actors is staging a 19th-century drama aboard the *Flyer*. Extra cars have been added for the performance, which is a popular bonus with the passengers.

Over at Waters Farm in Sutton, a horse-drawn trolley pulls to a stop and a group of seniors from Providence disembark. They have just toured the sites in Sutton Village (one of the men, in fact, is still in the blacksmith shop chatting with the smithy), and now they're ready to see one of the area's most intriguing attractions. A man and woman in period costume greet them, then escort them through the farm's fascinating displays.

A crowd has gathered at Soldiers Field in Douglas. There, two teams are preparing for a baseball game. The players, however, look different than what the crowd might expect. They wear heavy woolen uniforms and use odd, historic equipment. Many sport handlebar mustaches. The game is between Manchaug Mills and the team from Slatersville, both part of the Blackstone Valley Vintage Baseball League. The league's games have become a major attraction during the summer months, and act as an entertaining way of understanding the history of the region on a "field of dreams."

At the Blackstone Valley X-Sports Complex in Woonsocket, hundreds of people are gathered for the third-annual New England Indoor Extreme Sports Challenge, an event that draws spectators and participants from around the U.S. Built to capitalize on the popularity of the Gravity Games in nearby Providence, the X-Sports Complex occupies a former textile mill with the world's largest indoor rock climbing gym, an indoor mountain bike trail, in-line skating course, skateboard park, indoor kayaking pool (with simulated Class IV rapids), and indoor alpine ski run. The X-Sports Complex has gotten a reputation as one of New England's most unique facilities, and today's special event is one of the area's annual highlights.

Twelve antique cars park outside the Blackstone Valley visitor center in Pawtucket. Their drivers, members of the Providence Antique Car Club, go inside to pick up copies of the Blackstone Valley Scenic Byway brochure and map, to follow as they meander along the region's back roads. They plan to enjoy the early summer scenery, take a few photos of their classic vehicles in a rural setting, perhaps turn a few heads with their mini-parade along the way. Before their return to Providence, they'll stop at one of the region's famous family-style chicken dinner restaurants.

As the antique autos leave the parking lot, a motorcoach arrives carrying a group exploring the history of the American Industrial Revolution. They plan to spend two days in the Blackstone Valley, then trace the Revolution northward to Waltham and Lowell. Their first stop, of course, is the visitor center's orientation film, then Slater Mill, then a motorcoach tour of the entire region with a costumed National Park



Ranger aboard as guide. The high point of their visit, though, will be tomorrow's conference on the Industrial Revolution, an annual event sponsored by the Blackstone Valley Institute and attended by history scholars, preservationists, and enthusiasts like themselves.

A family from Cleveland arrives at The Toy Factory, a new interactive museum operated by Hasbro near the company's world headquarters in Pawtucket. The family's New England trip has included Boston, the Maine coast, the White Mountains, and Plymouth. But they promised the kids a visit to The Toy Factory before returning home, so here they are. Inside, they view imaginative exhibits of Hasbro's products, tour a re-created production room to learn how their favorite toys are created, and even get the chance to make an original toy souvenir of their own. The kids love it and, much to their surprise, the parents do too.

It's getting late. A couple from Great Britain makes plans for the evening on the porch of their gracious inn, one of many small lodgings dotting the region. The couple pours over the tourism literature they've collected today while antiquing and shopping in the valley's distinctive boutiques. Although a short drive to Providence for dinner and nightlife is tempting, they instead decide to try the new gourmet restaurant at Central Falls Landing, overlooking the Blackstone River, then take in the performance at the renowned Blackstone River Theatre. However, before they give back their rental car and return to England, they promise to visit one of the valley's drive-in movie theaters for a dose of old-fashioned Americana.

Tourism in the Blackstone Valley has certainly come a long way. After years of planning and hard work, the region is finally seeing its tourism efforts pay off. Unique attractions in unique facilities. An incredible blend of history, scenery, and culture. New businesses, new jobs, millions of dollars of visitor spending and taxes, visitors coming from all over the world to experience the region's offerings -- all create a palpable excitement and pride among Blackstone Valley residents.

An article in a recent *USA Today* proclaimed the Blackstone Valley one of America's top "Hidden Tourism Gems." Most folks inside

the Valley agree it won't be long before they'll have to leave off the "hidden."

## II. SITUATION ANALYSIS

The foregoing vision could become a reality. The Blackstone Valley, spanning 24 communities in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, currently possesses the raw materials to become one of the most significant visitor destinations in the Northeast with a distinctive blend of heritage tourism, ecotourism, and agritourism.

The region has a rich history. It is the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. Pawtucket's Slater Mill in 1793 was the country's first factory, which inspired dozens of subsequent manufacturing enterprises along the Blackstone River. The Blackstone Canal was one of the nation's first man-made commercial waterways, replaced by one of the country's earliest railway systems.

Today, artifacts from the Blackstone's industrial past allow visitors a first-hand experience of that important era: museums, historic sites, canal remnants, even the mill ruins scattered throughout the Valley, all provide tourists an exciting sense of discovery. Significantly, visitation of historical sites ranks consistently high as a tourist activity<sup>1</sup>. Rather than being confined to a single museum or destination point, the Blackstone Valley's interpretation of the Industrial Revolution, encompassing the move from farm to factory to market, comprises the entire 700 square-mile region. It is a fascinating experience.

The region also has a wonderful base of outdoor recreation. The Blackstone River, once called "America's hardest working river" and polluted with industrial waste, is now a clean waterway perfect for recreational paddling, fishing, and wildlife spotting. The Blackstone River Bikeway, due to be completed in 2004, will parallel the river for 46 miles and offer an unparalleled scenic cycling or hiking experience. State

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<sup>1</sup> 40% of Massachusetts travelers visit historical sites, according to the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism; Rhode Island reports similarly strong numbers of history-lovers

parks and forests throughout the region (including Purgatory Chasm, one of New England's most unique geological formations) offer a variety of hiking, camping, picnicking, equestrian trails, and other outdoor activities.

Much of the region is rural countryside, with beautiful, rolling hills and striking scenery. There is a "step back in time" appeal to many areas of the Blackstone Valley: classic small towns, country stores, farms and farm stands, interesting shopping, an exotic zoo and other attractions, plus winding back roads with historic relics like old filling stations and drive-in movie theaters. The experience of simply driving through the Blackstone Valley is a pleasure, giving a sense of relaxation, nostalgia, and exploration. This is an important tourism asset given the region's location near the major metropolitan areas of the Northeast. More than 85 million people live within a day's drive of the Valley, a majority of them urbanites or suburbanites longing for a relaxing day-trip or vacation escape.

One of the region's most pertinent tourism assets is its "official" designation as the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and its affiliation with the National Park Service. In addition to the direct financial and technical assistance the area receives through this affiliation, it also benefits from the prestige and credibility that comes from a federal designation. It signals to the potential visitor that the Blackstone Valley is of national significance, that it warrants serious consideration as your next vacation destination. Money can't buy that type of awareness.

With this base of tourism assets, the Blackstone Valley is in a position to increase its levels of visitation. Currently tourism accounts for an estimated \$275 million in economic impact to the region, with an estimated 3 million visitors annually<sup>2</sup>. We believe tourism can be substantially more important to the region than that. However, to realize

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<sup>2</sup> The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council estimates visitors to the Rhode Island section of the Valley account for \$136 million in annual economic impact, according to a 1987 University of Rhode Island study. The Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce estimates 2.6 million visitors to the Massachusetts portion of the region, with \$139 million in economic impact, according to a 1999 economic impact analysis.

the full potential of tourism in the Blackstone Valley, several things need to happen:

- 1.) The region's tourism "product" must be improved to attract a wider audience and maximize the economic impact of visitors. More attractions need to be located in several strategic locations throughout the Valley to interest tourists and move them from one corner of the region to another. More tourism support services (i.e., hotels, visitor-appealing restaurants, shops, etc.) must be located near the attractions to maximize the economic potential from visitors.
- 2.) There needs to be better coordination of attractions: more consistent hours of operation, visitor policies, and visitor services. Blackstone Valley visitors need to be assured that they can visit a wide variety of attractions, and have a quality tourism experience, on any given day.
- 3.) There needs to be more and better promotion of the Blackstone Valley. Since the inception of the Heritage Corridor in 1986, the region has gained steadily in recognition. However, the agencies involved with promoting the Valley, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council in Rhode Island and the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce in Massachusetts, have been somewhat hamstrung with limited resources. Most important, the two entities by nature tend to promote the portions of the Valley that lie within their respective states. This mentality must change. Greater cooperation between the two states is needed if the Blackstone Valley is ever to realize its full potential as a destination.

### III. INFRASTRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A tourism infrastructure or "product" consists of two principal categories: attractions and support services. Attractions are the things that lure visitors to a destination, the places they can visit, activities they can do, things they can see, including historic sites, museums, parks, and

monuments. Attractions are the things that capitalize on a destination's assets and make it unique.

Tourism support businesses usually consist of accommodations, restaurants, shopping (though unique shopping can be an attraction too), transportation, and the like. There are several levels of tourism support. There are the businesses and organizations that have direct contact with visitors (accommodations being the best example), and then there are the organizations which have little or no direct contact with the visitor, but supply and service the businesses that do (food and retail wholesalers, accountants, contractors, and office supply are examples of secondary tourism-related businesses). A case can be made, in fact, that virtually *every* businesses in a tourism destination is a tourism business. They are all impacted by visitors.

Except in rare instances, no one visits a destination to stay at a particular hotel or eat in a particular restaurant; travel plans are usually made with the destination's attractions in mind. However, when it comes to generating *economic benefits* from tourism, attractions typically represent only a small fraction of the total impact. Most of a visitor's spending in the local economy comes from the hotel, restaurant, and retail purchases made during a visit.

#### A. Tourism Development Zones

To facilitate the development of the Blackstone Valley's tourism product, we encourage the identification and development of tourism development zones throughout the region<sup>3</sup>. Tourism development zones are distinct areas targeted for tourism development because of their geographic proximity to an existing attraction or their potential to become a significant tourism attraction in their own right. Tourism zones may be as small as a single building or as large as an entire downtown, but their common characteristic is their potential as attractions and support of attractions.

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<sup>3</sup> In this we echo the concept of "tourism nodes" mentioned in the 1992 Blackstone River Valley Regional Comprehensive Tourism Plan, produced in 1992 by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.

By stringing together several tourism development zones, all linked by appropriate roadway signage, the Valley will have a manageable way of encouraging tourism infrastructure development, and will present the visitor with a cohesive, enjoyable way of touring the entire region.

We recommend the following areas be considered as tourism development zones; more may be added after further discussion:

- downtown Pawtucket, in the area proximate to Slater Mill, the visitor center, and the Blackstone River
- River Bend Farm, creating additional interpretive exhibits, visitor services, and activities
- Sutton Village, creating a cohesive visitor experience with multiple historic sites and regular hours of operation
- Waters Farm, creating a more permanent facility with a cohesive visitor experience, including living history interpreters
- downtown Uxbridge
- Chepachet Village
- Slatersville, America's first planned mill village
- Hopedale, Utopian manufacturing town
- Whitinsville, encouraging more tourism-related businesses and attractions, and supporting Purgatory Chasm visitation
- Grafton town common area, encouraging more tourism-related businesses (especially antiques and unique shopping) with cohesive hours of operation
- Quinsigamond Village, as northern "gateway" to the Blackstone Valley
- Ashton/Quinnville, developing the Kelly House into a working farm interpretation and event venue, and developing the Ashton mill into a multi-use facility including shops and river-view restaurants
- Blackstone River Bikeway (in its entirety), developing a cohesive visitor experience with interpretive signage, points of interest, and recreational services
- Central Falls, developing tourism-related dining and shopping to support Heritage Park, Blackstone Valley Explorer and Spirit of the Blackstone Valley river boat rides, and Blackstone River Theatre

A brief, focused strategic plan should be developed for each of the designated tourism development zones. Plans should examine the unique characteristics of each zone, assess the condition and desirability of available structures, assess zoning restrictions, develop guidelines for aesthetics and signage, and strategize the type of businesses and organizations that should be targeted for the zone.

The strategic plans should then be used as a “prospectus” for potential developers and/or individual entrepreneurs. Working with the community in which they are located, each zone should offer entrepreneurs incentives to locate a tourism-related business there. Tax incentives, access to capital, rent subsidy, build-out assistance, and technical assistance such as self-help marketing programs are all appropriate catalysts to tourism development zone development.

The Corridor Commission, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Tourism Council should be the leading forces behind the tourism development zones. Combined, the three organizations have the expertise to work with each of the towns in the region in identifying and incentivizing the zones. We suggest the groups create a targeted “Tourism Development Program” to support a loan pool and grant funding from outside agencies. Likewise, the Chamber and Tourism Council can lend the technical assistance and incubation necessary to help small tourism businesses survive and keep the tourism development zones thriving.

## B. Attractions

Additional attractions, located in or near tourism development zones, should attempt to compliment the character, scenic beauty, and existing attractions of the Valley. They should be designed to be of sufficient interest to visitors to cause them to plan a trip to the region and, hopefully, stay overnight. The following suggestions are meant to provide ideas for the type of attraction we feel is appropriate:

- River Bend Farm: this facility, located almost at the mid-point of the Blackstone Valley, has the potential to become one of the Valley’s most important attractions. Improve and expand the historic

exhibits, perhaps with artifacts in addition to graphics. A towed canal boat ride would be an exciting and evocative interpretation of the area's canal era. Living history interpreters would make the attraction more entertaining and educational.

- Blackstone River Bikeway: as this important trail develops, we recommend interpretive signage and identification of points of interest along the way. We also encourage siting of cafes/restaurants, cycle shops, and other visitor-related businesses along the Bikeway to serve riders/hikers and to generate economic benefit.
- Scenic rail excursions: the Providence & Worcester Railroad tracks following the Blackstone River make a perfect scenic rail trip, as attested by the success of the Tourism Council's periodic rail excursions. We recommend creation of a regular, 2-hour round-trip, scenic tourist train service which would provide a solid family-oriented attraction.
- Hasbro Toy Factory/Museum, Pawtucket: would be an exceptional attraction for families; the region would benefit from a visible partnership with Hasbro, one of the world's largest toy makers. The Crayola Factory, Hershey's Chocolate World (both in Pennsylvania), and Ben & Jerry's Factory Tour in Vermont are similar attractions with significant visitation. This concept has been in discussion for some time; in 1996, in fact, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and Pawtucket Rotary filed non-profit corporate papers for a toy museum. We encourage development of this facility.
- Expansion of Slater Mill experience: Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket is one of the Valley's most important attractions. We recommend the facility expand its hours of operation to accommodate more visitors, and expand its interpretation to include more interactive exhibits and living history guides.
- Expansion of factory tours at Vaillancourt Folk Art: visitors love to see the intricate "chalkware" being created, but current facilities



allow only limited touring; we encourage expansion of the facilities to allow regular and larger factory tours.

- Vintage baseball league: create a Blackstone Valley league of teams wearing vintage uniforms and playing by 19th-century rules. These teams are popular attractions around the country, and would reflect the Valley's history of fielding mill town teams in the 19th and 20th century. Partnerships could be created with the Pawtucket Red Sox minor league team.
- Arts complex: create a complex of art/craft studios and galleries where visitors can view the creative process and purchase art. Among the most popular type of shopping experiences for visitors is that of the "interactive" variety - meeting the artist or artisan who created the product for sale. An unused mill facility would be an excellent site for a cluster of working galleries producing and selling things like jewelry, pottery, paintings, sculpture, apparel, decorative items, and the like. The Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, Virginia, is a good example of this type of facility. Occupying an old factory complex since 1974, the Torpedo Factory is the largest visual arts center in the U.S., with more than 80 artist studios, galleries, and function rooms. The facility attracts more than 800,000 visitors annually, 680,000 of whom are from out of town.
- Indoor "Extreme Sports" facility: create a unique indoor facility that offers "extreme" recreational sports to visitors. Facilities could include an indoor rock climbing gym, indoor mountain bike trail, inline skating course, skateboard park, indoor skiing, and whitewater canoe/kayak pool. One of the Valley's unused mill complexes would be a perfect venue. This attraction would capitalize on adventure travel trends and would likely be of interest to college students in Worcester, Providence, and Boston. It would capitalize on the popular Gravity Games in Providence, and would also be a good venue for unique special events year-round.
- Drive-in theaters: the Blackstone Valley is home to several vintage drive-in theaters, which are on the "endangered species" list in most parts of the country. We recommend that one or more of these

facilities be targeted for preservation and be run as a unique visitor attraction.

- Hotels/inns/B&Bs: developing additional overnight accommodations in the Valley should be a top priority. Without them, tourism will never realize its full economic potential in the region. Currently the Rhode Island portion of the Valley has about 400 rooms, while the Massachusetts portion has about 100 rooms. Additional accommodations are important to the region's promotion efforts, since the Tourism Council receives 47% of the room taxes collected in its area; the Chamber of Commerce will hopefully receive that type of funding in the future too. Although larger, "brand-name" hotels would have a heavy economic impact on the region, smaller inns and "character properties" would also fit in well with the region's flavor and would be well-suited for tourism development zone development.
- Meeting/retreat facility: we believe there is potential for corporate meetings and retreats in the Blackstone Valley, given the region's proximity to the major corporate centers of Boston, Providence, and MetroWest Massachusetts. We suggest development of a professional conference/retreat facility, preferably in a historic structure, that takes advantage of the Valley's unique character.
- Restaurants: We recommend siting of unique and quality restaurants (not necessarily expensive!) in tourism development zones throughout the region, with special attention to siting in historic structures and along the Blackstone River. A gourmet sandwich shop or an old-fashioned soda fountain located within a general store, for example, would fit the character of the region well. We also recommend further promotion of the region's unique restaurants, such as family-style chicken dinner and hot wiener establishments.
- Visitor information centers: there are currently visitor centers in Pawtucket, at River Bend Farm in Uxbridge, at Purgatory Chasm in Sutton, at Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence, at the

Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, and at Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary in the Worcester area. The Corridor Commission is planning a permanent “gateway” visitor center at Quinsigamond Village in Worcester. We also recommend using town libraries throughout the region as “mini-centers” for visitor information: they have public access, they have fairly regular hours of operation, they can display brochures and maps, and most would have access to a centralized visitor information Web site.

- Unified signage: the Corridor Commission’s signage for each of the region’s communities is excellent; it creates a sense of continuity of the visitor experience, and helps interpret the region’s story. We recommend those signage principals be extended to individual attractions, which would benefit from greater identity with the region, and with easy identification in promotional brochures and maps. We also encourage consistent roadway signage connecting the communities and development zones, which would aid promotion of driving/cycling loop tours throughout the region.
- Special events: special events can have a remarkable impact on a region like the Blackstone Valley, attracting visitors and generating positive awareness that outlasts the event itself. If they are good enough, events can act as an “attraction” in their own right. The Lowell Folk Festival, for example, is an annual celebration of diverse music and ethnic food held throughout the downtown area. The weekend event attracts more than 60,000 people from throughout the U.S., and has helped shape Lowell’s distinct identity as a visitor destination. We recommend the Valley organize and promote at least one unique, “signature” event each year, preferably using the river and canal, plus the region’s strong ethnic heritage, as the theme.
- Outdoor outfitters: as interest in the region’s recreational attractions builds, we recommend maintaining a strong presence of canoe/kayak outfitters, cycle shops, fishing/hunting outfitters, and general outdoor sports retailers.

- Boutiques, antiques, and unique retail: According to the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, 46% of the state's visitors go shopping on their trips, the leading visitor activity. Many of the Blackstone Valley's historic downtown storefronts are especially well-suited for small shops of interest to visitors: gifts, antiques, new/used books, unique apparel, art/crafts, upscale home furnishings, and the like. Unique shopping (including factory outlets) can form the basis for a tourism development zone while at the same time interacting well with existing businesses that cater mainly to local customers.

#### IV. ORGANIZATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Three organizations have a stake in Blackstone Valley tourism development and promotion, each bringing different strengths to the table.

The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission is an affiliate of the National Park Service with overall responsibility for the Valley's preservation, interpretation, and economic revitalization. Created in 1986, the Commission has laid the groundwork for a successful tourism program with federal grants (which have assisted the building of visitor attractions such as the Museum of Work and Culture, tour boats, River Bend Farm, and the Pawtucket Visitor Center), technical assistance to communities, tourism programming, and visitor services (i.e., creating and maintaining a region-wide brochure distribution system).

The Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce in Massachusetts operates a tourism program with one professional staffperson and a volunteer steering committee comprised of tourism-related businesses and non-profit organizations. The Chamber's tourism program creates promotional literature, assists with tourism events, and helps coordinate tourism programming throughout the Massachusetts portion of the region. The program, however, has suffered from limited budgets (most of its funding comes from an annual grant from the Massachusetts

Turnpike Authority), so the Chamber has had to limit the scope of its activities.

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council in Rhode Island is a not-for-profit organization that is one of the state's "official" regional tourist councils. The group has a professional staff of 10 and a volunteer board of directors. Funding comes from 47% of the hotel taxes collected in the region, grants from the Corridor Commission and other entities, plus earned income from a variety of entrepreneurial ventures that include operation of tour boats, seasonal railway tours, and sales of Blackstone Valley merchandise. Like its Massachusetts counterpart, the Tourism Council produces promotional literature, assists with tourism events, and coordinates tourism programming. The group's entrepreneurial ventures also help create a tourism product: the tour boats and rail tours especially hold potential as significant attractions if they can be better promoted.

Unfortunately, promotional efforts in Massachusetts and Rhode Island have not always operated with synchronization. Although the Corridor Commission encourages cooperation between the two states and has produced several brochures that include both states (a visitor map, a river guide, a Bikeway brochure, and event calendars), the tourism efforts of the Chamber and the Tourism Council usually promote their own respective portions of the region and not the region as a whole. Each organization, for example, produces a visitor guide, both similar in appearance and both distributed in a similar manner to visitors and Valley residents. However, neither brochure mentions the other state in any meaningful way; potential visitors are not given a true picture of the entire region.

For the Blackstone Valley to be promoted successfully, it must be promoted in its entirety. Neither the Massachusetts nor the Rhode Island portions of the region have a critical mass of attractions and visitor services to generate the maximum number of visitors possible. Moreover, the Blackstone Valley story - the essence of its potential appeal to tourists - can only be interpreted fully when the entire length of the Blackstone Valley is included. Tourists don't pay any attention to state boundaries, and neither should the organizations promoting tourism.

We strongly recommend, therefore, that the Chamber, the Tourism Council, and the Corridor Commission work to create a more unified vision of the Blackstone Valley, and a more unified tourism promotion program. A special Bi-State Tourism Task Force should be formed to produce region-wide brochures and tour guides, region-wide public relations and travel trade promotions, region-wide event planning, tourism research, and policy coordination. Doing so would eliminate duplication of effort and would save money through cost-effectiveness, produce a greater and more efficient promotion program for an area with limited resources, and would result in a more effective program that reaches a wider target audience. The state tourism directors of Massachusetts and Rhode Island support the concept of cross-regional promotion in the Blackstone Valley, and agree it is the key to the region's future success as a visitor destination.

## V.     MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend the Bi-State Tourism Task Force concentrate on developing a marketing campaign that is motivated by strategic planning, exhibits high quality and professionalism, and strives for visitor impact throughout the region. Our suggestions for that campaign follow.

### A.     Market Research

In order for a marketing program to be truly effective, market research is of vital importance. Marketing costs money, and in order for that money to be well-spent a destination must know the answers to a few basic questions about its market: Who are our visitors? From where are they coming? How much are they spending here? What do they like to do? How did they hear about us? What are we doing right? What can we be doing better?

We recommend the Task Force commit itself to making research a cornerstone of its marketing program, using research to inform its marketing plans (before those plans are executed) and to monitor the

results of its marketing efforts on a regular basis. We recommend a regular visitor survey, an economic impact study, and focus group sessions with target audiences. Ideally, a relationship could be developed with one or more college tourism programs to administer the research free of charge; we recommend exploring contacts with the University of Rhode Island and Johnson & Wales for this purpose.

## B. Audiences

We recommend the Task Force orient its marketing efforts toward the following audiences:

- Blackstone Valley residents: at the outset of the Valley's combined tourism promotion efforts, the primary audience should be its own residents. This audience is crucial for two reasons. First, public support of the tourism program is important to secure the support and participation of all the region's communities. Second, 28% of all Massachusetts visitors spend some time visiting friends and relatives, according to the Mass. Office of Travel & Tourism. That means residents are an important "referral" market for tourism: whenever a friend or relative visits a Blackstone Valley resident, they should take them to visit Blackstone Valley attractions before visiting Boston, the Cape, Newport, and the like.
- Leisure vacationers: the Task Force should target day-trip visitors from the metro-Boston, Worcester, Providence, and Hartford areas (both residents and visitors to those destinations). Likewise, the Task Force should attempt to "borrow" visitors to existing attractions such as Old Sturbridge Village and Plimoth Plantation.

Whenever possible, marketing communication to leisure travelers should be segmented. Recreational enthusiasts, hikers, paddlers, fishermen, hunters, antiquers, history lovers (especially industrial history), families, and driving enthusiasts are all affinity audiences to whom the Blackstone Valley might have appeal.

- Geographic target for leisure vacationers: the primary geographic area of the state tourism marketing programs for Massachusetts and Rhode Island falls within a 500-mile

radius; approximately 85 million people reside in this “universe,” roughly a day’s drive away.

- Demographic target leisure vacationers: Massachusetts leisure visitors reflect the following demographic profile: 50% have household incomes of \$50,000 or more, 54% have a college degree, their average age is 44, and they generally travel as couples (2 people per trip; only 18% reported bringing children). Rhode Island demographic data is similar.
- Travel Trade: the travel trade can be a critical audience for the long-term growth of the Blackstone Valley’s visitor industry in that they represent a prime referral market, influencing the travel decisions of potentially thousands of individual consumers. Trade markets which the Task Force should consider include: group tour operators, travel agents, travel writers, meeting planners, receptive operators (companies making local tour arrangements for large U.S. and international group tour companies), area hotel concierges, and state information center personnel.
- International Visitors: Massachusetts attracts about 1.8 million international visitors each year. The international market is a lucrative one, with foreign visitors spending on average 2.5 times that of their domestic counterparts (\$704 per trip for international visitors vs. \$259 for domestic, according to the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration). International travelers account for about 15% of total visitor spending in Massachusetts. Canada is the top international market for Massachusetts, followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and France. The Mass. Office of Travel & Tourism, Massport and Discover New England have an aggressive international marketing program with which the Blackstone Valley should become involved to capitalize on this market.
- Meetings/Retreats: if the region develops conference/retreat facilities, target audiences will include corporations within the region, the corporate belt in MetroWest Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and non-profit organizations.



## C. Positioning

A positioning statement is an important facet of a marketing strategy in that it encapsulates what the Blackstone Valley should attempt to stand for, as a destination, in the minds of potential visitors. It is important to convey to the potential visitor a clear and consistent image which can readily identify the region in his or her mind, “top of mind awareness” being vital to any travel planning decision.

The Valley currently has three principal features (and corresponding visitor benefits) which stand out as its visitor product:

- unique history as the “Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution,” and the interpretation of the “farm to factory” story represented at sites throughout the Valley (visitor benefits: offers visitors thrill of discovering other times, education, family fun)
- exceptional outdoor recreation in a variety of settings, especially on the Blackstone River and Bikeway, Purgatory Chasm and other state parks (visitor benefits: offers visitors exhilarating experience in nature, revitalization for the body, refreshment for the soul, beauty for the eye)
- beautiful rural countryside scenery and back roads (visitor benefits: offers visitors relaxation, feeling of escape from urban living, feeling of “going back in time”)

These features allow us to position the Blackstone Valley with regard to each of its target audiences:

- Blackstone Valley residents: the Valley has great places to visit “in your own back yard” for your own recreation and enjoyment, and provides interesting places to take visiting friends and relatives.
- Leisure travelers: the Blackstone Valley is an exciting place for exploring an important era of history; take a country drive, with surprises around every back road turn; relax in our country villages,

and bring the family to explore our history and enjoy our recreational opportunities.

- Travel Trade: the Blackstone Valley offers your customers an exciting and unusual place to vacation or take a group tour; when you recommend the Valley to your customers, you will be rewarded with customer satisfaction and profits.
- International travelers: same positioning as leisure vacationers.
- Meetings/retreats: the Blackstone Valley offers your group a scenic, relaxed environment in which to conduct your meeting, enhancing your group's learning and productivity.

#### D. Creative Platform, Logo Development, and Themeline

Marketing materials such as brochures and advertising should strive for a professional look, and maintain a creative consistency from one brochure or ad to another. We recommend use of an identifiable logo in all materials; consistent use of the Corridor Commission waterwheel logo would work well, perhaps with minor changes (i.e., using the simple name "The Blackstone Valley") to distinguish Tourism Task Force initiatives from those of the Corridor Commission proper.

We recommend continuing to use the name "The Blackstone Valley" to identify the region in tourism materials because the region has already built awareness both in and outside the Valley using that name. However, a concise themeline would assist with communicating the Valley's appeal to a wide variety of potential visitors. Potential themelines, coupled with "The Blackstone Valley" name, might include:

History in the Making  
Make Some History  
Find Your Place in History  
Get Into It!  
Bring Film.  
Treasure at Every Turn  
It's a Blast from the Past!  
Turn Right for Excitement

Farms, Fields, and Factories  
Revolutionary!  
The Great American Story  
The Great American Experience  
Yankee Ingenuity at Work  
Water Powered!  
America's Industry Born Here

## E. Marketing Tactics

We believe strongly in the concept of integrated marketing — all components of a marketing program working together harmoniously to achieve the greatest possible results. Accordingly, while some specific tactics might require a greater budgetary investment (i.e., advertising), all facets of the program should seek a balance and be governed by the positioning points, seeking to benefit the campaign as a whole. The budget allocated to each of these items depends to some extent on the total budget available for the entire marketing program.

With that in mind, we now examine the individual building blocks for a comprehensive destination marketing campaign for the Blackstone Valley.

### Advertising

Advertising often forms the central emphasis of a destination marketing program, normally providing the greatest immediate exposure to a target audience. Through advertising a destination can achieve “top of mind” awareness within its target audience, use words and visuals to convey a sense of what the visitor's experience will be like, and motivate the consumer to act, that is, to make plans to visit. However, depending on the advertising medium, advertising can be an expensive proposition; advertising plans, therefore, should be thought through carefully and should be supplemented wherever possible by less-costly marketing tools.

We recommend the following media for the Blackstone Valley:

- Newspapers: awareness ads and/or cooperative ads (with individual Blackstone Valley attractions) in the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, The Providence Journal, MetroWest Daily News, plus regional newspapers. Consider larger-market papers like Boston Globe, Boston Herald and Hartford Courant if budget permits.
- Magazine/Tourist Guidebooks: awareness ads in Massachusetts Getaway Guide (published by the Mass. Office of Travel & Tourism and used in fulfillment of the state's multimillion dollar advertising campaign), Rhode Island state guide, Yankee Magazine's Travel Guide to New England, New England Travel & Life (published by Boston Magazine), and AAA Horizons (the AAA member publication for southern New England).
- Radio: use radio spots to advertise regional special events (i.e., Chain of Lights, Canal Fest, Autumn Festival, scenic train rides) or to launch a new attraction (i.e., beginning of new season of tour boats, opening of a new section of the Bikeway). Use radio stations targeting key audiences (i.e., recreationists to announce opening of the Bikeway)
- Television: consider cost-effective cable TV ads within the Blackstone Valley to promote special events and "internal" marketing of tourism awareness campaign
- Outdoor/Transit: consider highway billboards for awareness advertising and to promote special events; billboards can be expensive, so look to establish trade relationships with the local outdoor advertising company.

### Brochures and Collateral

Printed promotional materials are the traditional mainstay of a destination's marketing program. Distributed at attractions and information centers, sent through the mail to prospective visitors, brochures play a valuable role in providing information and publicity. Brochures offer a destination the opportunity to tell its whole story and present itself in full-color splendor (if budget allows), and tourists are accustomed to using brochures to assist with their travel decisions.

As with any aspect of the Blackstone Valley's marketing campaign, the printed pieces should exhibit the highest quality possible, and all materials should follow a common "campaign" theme and graphic look.

We recommend the Task Force create the following promotional collateral:

- General "Lure" Brochure: the Blackstone Valley should have an attractive general brochure used to lure potential visitors to the region. Copy and graphics should be crisp, compelling and informative; a directional map is always a good idea. The "lure" brochure should begin with copy that describes the region in appealing terms (following the positioning statement above), and should include colorful photos, listings and brief descriptions of the region's attractions (organized by theme, i.e., historical attractions, arts/performing arts, shopping, recreation, accommodations, etc.), and suggested itinerary ideas linking the Valley with other areas (i.e., Waltham and Lowell, Newport, Boston, Worcester). The tabloid newspaper-style visitor guides currently published by the Chamber and the Tourism Council do not serve the purpose of a lure brochure, and do not in our opinion reflect the level of quality needed to generate higher levels of tourism.
- Reprint of *Yankee* magazine article on Blackstone Valley, appearing April, 2001 issue: this article contains an excellent account of the Valley's history and current tourism offerings. The article gives the region credibility and an incredible promotional push. We recommend exploring a reprint to use as one of the Valley's promotional pieces, perhaps in lieu of the "lure" brochure described above.
- Magazine-style Visitor Guide: many destinations publish visitor guides that have the format of a magazine: they measure approximately 9" x 12", are generally printed in four-color process, use lots of photos and feature articles, and usually offset production costs with advertising. This type of publication could benefit the

Blackstone Valley tourism program with colorful graphics, a nice presentation of visitor information, and possibly advertising revenue.

- Rack Card: information centers, especially those on the state's highways, are renowned for "eating up" a destination's brochures; information center patrons can be indiscriminate in helping themselves. To keep costs down, destinations frequently distribute at information centers a less-expensive rack card instead of their lure brochure. On a rack card the graphics and copy can be beautiful, there's just less of them. Include basic information and, of course, directions. Information center patrons are often vacationers making their plans on the fly. Rack cards are also appropriate for heavy volume consumer travel shows such as the "Big E."
- Scenic Driving Tour and Map: driving the Valley's scenic byways is one of the region's most important assets; we recommend creating a brochure featuring four or five itineraries for touring the Valley. If possible, use the existing Corridor Commission map, with overlays for attractions that cannot be included in a National Park Service product (such as Southwick's Zoo, Mendon Country Gift Barn, Blackstone River Theatre, and so on).
- Driving Tour Audiotapes: create audiotape driving tours to accompany the driving tour brochure and map above; can be sold in information centers, gift shops, and attractions.
- Event Calendars: the Corridor Commission prints seasonal event calendars, and we recommend continuing this important marketing tool; we suggest the calendars reflect consistency with the region's other tourism materials; we also recommend arranging the event information by theme (i.e. "history events," "cultural events," and so on), and eliminate redundant events by including them at the beginning of the brochure only (i.e., river boat tours).
- Comprehensive interpretive guidebook: the Corridor Commission has published small walking tour brochures of each community in the Valley; we recommend compiling each of these into a single

publication (perhaps for sale) that would provide a complete interpretation of the Valley's story.

- Lodging/Dining Guide: create a concise brochure listing accommodations and visitor-appealing restaurants; include lodging packages and dining discounts as appropriate
- Coupon Book: coupon books or "visitor passports" work well to package a destination and provide an incentive for visitors to patronize area businesses and attractions.
- Travel trade information kit: develop an information kit targeted at the travel trade (meeting/convention planners, group tour operators). The kit should include a specific travel trade brochure listing the Blackstone Valley's hotels and meeting spaces, plus maps, general information, dining information, and photos on request.
- Electronic Media: the Valley has at least four web sites of relevance to visitors (the Corridor Commission's [nps.gov/blac](http://nps.gov/blac), the Tourism Council's [tourblackstone.com](http://tourblackstone.com), the Chamber's [blackstonevalley.org](http://blackstonevalley.org) and a related privately-developed site [tourblackstonevalley.com](http://tourblackstonevalley.com)). We recommend creating one central site with outstanding design, graphics, user interactivity, and links to the other regional web sites. Promote the site through search engine links, reciprocal links with travel-related sites, and explore the possibility of on-line advertising. Investigate the feasibility of providing web visitors the opportunity to book Blackstone Valley hotel reservations online.

### Travel Shows

We recommend the Task Force initiate a joint sales force to attend prominent travel trade shows such as the National Tour Association, the American Bus Association, and TIA Pow-Wow. The Task Force should consider staffing a booth at the Eastern States Exposition ("Big E") in West Springfield each September. The event, which attracts more than a million people, could provide the Blackstone Valley great exposure to many potential customers. We recommend "borrowing" staff from area attractions to cover the full run of the show,

and we suggest printing a high quantity of low-cost flyers for distribution. A Blackstone Valley booth exhibit should be produced for consumer and trade shows.

### Direct Marketing

Direct marketing is the most targeted marketing tool, in that the destination pinpoints the consumers it wishes to influence and communicates cost-effectively with them one-on-one. We recommend the Task Force employ direct marketing techniques in its marketing mix. The region's mailing list should be gleaned from as many sources as appropriate: past visitor inquiries to the Chamber, Tourism Council, and Corridor Commission, visitor/customer lists from attractions such as Vaillancourt Folk Art and Slater Mill, and perhaps rented lists of affinity groups such as seniors, museum-goers, or history enthusiasts.

Direct mail is an especially effective way to reach trade audiences. By sending regular information about the Blackstone Valley (special events, packages, promotions and the like), the Task Force will help develop important trade relationships.

With the advent of the Internet, another extremely effective form of direct marketing has emerged through the use of e-mail. One version of the technique is called "opt-in" e-mail, and the process is similar to direct mail except potential customers actually request to be sent information on a regular basis. Typically, customers visit a destination's web site and request to be added to an e-mail list. The destination then sends regular e-mail "newsletters" or "e-zines" to the list -- without the expense of paper, ink, and postage.

Another form of e-marketing is "opt-out" e-mail. The destination compiles its e-mail list from outside sources (usually other web sites, which rent their list like a traditional mailing list). E-mail communications provide the recipient with the option of removing him or herself from the list at any time.

The Blackstone Valley should take full advantage of this electronic revolution in marketing.



## Partnerships and Packaging

Marketing “partnerships,” in our experience, can be a powerful aspect of a marketing campaign. We define the act of “partnering” to mean the process of working with one or more businesses and organizations to market and promote each others’ product or service in a manner which supports and extends one’s own marketing campaign.

Developing a successful marketing partnership satisfies everyone’s self-interest: in the case of the Blackstone Valley, the region’s partners benefit by having the Task Force support their product or cause, and the Blackstone Valley benefits by gaining additional promotional exposure for the destination. Partnerships can be very cost-effective, often tapping new markets for little or no financial expenditure, and they can be newsworthy as well, leading to increased visibility in consumer and travel trade media.

Ideas for the Blackstone Valley partnerships include:

- Regional package partnerships with Central Massachusetts Tourist Council, Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau, Waltham Tourism Council, Merrimack Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau, and other tourism organizations throughout New England. The Task Force should also work closely with the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism and Rhode Island Tourism Office , encouraging greater inclusion of the Blackstone Valley in the agencies’ domestic and international marketing efforts. The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority is another agency which can benefit the Task Force, especially by distributing the region’s tourism promotion materials in its highway information centers.
- Package partnerships with Yankee Magazine Vacations and other package wholesalers.
- Partnership with the Quinebaug-Shetucket National Heritage Corridor, which neighbors the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. This region shares many of the same characteristics, interests and obstacles. Combining forces on certain

projects, such as packaging for long-haul domestic or international visitors, would make eminent sense.

- Corporate partnering with one or more businesses, involving special event sponsorship, underwriting of advertising and promotional material, cooperative promotions targeting the corporations' customers and employees.

### Public Relations

We recommend the Task Force develop a comprehensive, year-round public relations effort as part of its general marketing program, focusing on the following areas:

- Media Kit Development: producing and continuously updating press releases, fact sheets and backgrounders on the Blackstone Valley's visitor industry product.
- Media Outreach: keeping in regular contact with members of the media, including local print and broadcast media, domestic and international travel writers for consumer media, and travel trade media representatives.
- Coordination of a comprehensive and updated media list.
- Hosting media familiarization trips, perhaps through MOTT, Providence Warwick CVB, or Central Mass. Tourist Council.
- Managing an image bank of high-quality photos, stored on the region's web site for use by media.

## VI. FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS

An effective tourism program is seated on a "three-legged funding stool" consisting of state/federal funding, private funding, and local/regional public funding. Destinations should seek a balance of all

three sources; if one leg is absent, the destination's effectiveness could be limited or could collapse altogether.

The first leg of the stool is public funding through state and/or federal sources. The Massachusetts Turnpike grant program, which funds the Chamber's tourism program, is one example. Another is the Advertising and Promotion Grant Program administered by the Mass. Office of Travel & Tourism. These grants, typically in the \$25 - 50,000 range, are awarded to tourism destinations and attractions for specific marketing-related projects such as web sites, brochures, advertising, and the like. We encourage the Task Force to also seek state funding through the Central Mass. Tourist Council, an "official" regional tourist council which receives MOTT grant funding according to a formula (this year Central Mass. received \$456,886). All MOTT grants must be matched one-to-one with privately-generated funds.

Rhode Island has no dedicated tourism grant funding, but funds are available through transportation grants and other mechanisms to assist with tourism-related projects (it is our understanding that a portion of the Tourism Council's tour boats were supported by a transportation grant).

This year Massachusetts instituted a new "Tourism Facilities Fund," which provides capital assistance to communities wishing to construct or improve tourism-related structures; the Task Force should investigate this funding source as it identifies its tourism development zones in Massachusetts.

The Corridor Commission plays a vital role in its ability to bring federal funding to the Valley's tourism projects. This has been instrumental in creating many of the tourism facilities and programs the region enjoys today, and we trust the Corridor Commission will continue its financial commitment in the evolution of the Valley's tourism development zones.

Private funding is the second leg of the funding stool, necessary to attract matching grant funding and provide a balance to the region's

tourism programming. We recommend the Task Force focus on attracting support from Valley corporations, tourism-related businesses, and organizations to offset marketing costs. We recommend the Tourism Council continue its unique entrepreneurial merchandising efforts (as long as they don't distract from managing the marketing program), and we encourage the Chamber to pursue merchandising programs to generate private-sector funding. Both groups should agree on a financial contribution towards a common Task Force marketing fund.

The third leg of the stool is local/regional public funding. Granting agencies frequently look to see whether a destination receives money from local governments, which illustrates local political support for the tourism program. Some communities appropriate funding for tourism out of their annual budget, but increasingly cities and towns are earmarking a portion of their hotel/motel tax collections for tourism programs. As mentioned above, the Tourism Council receives 47% of the hotel taxes collected in the Rhode Island portion of the Valley. In Massachusetts, a community can impose up to a 4% local option tax on hotel/motel rooms for use as the community sees fit. Currently only Sutton takes advantage of the local option, though it collects only a minimal amount. In anticipation of future hotel development in the region, we recommend each Blackstone Valley community in Massachusetts to adopt the local option tax with the provision that a fixed portion of the proceeds (we suggest a minimum of 50%) is earmarked to the Task Force for regional tourism efforts.

## VII. ACTION PLAN FOR BLACKSTONE VALLEY TOURISM PROGRAM

### YEAR ONE

#### Organization:

- Organize Bi-State Tourism Task Force
- Tourism Task Force create formal sub-committees and task-specific small groups
- Develop partnerships with Mass. Office of Travel and Tourism, RI Tourism Office, Central Massachusetts CVB, Providence Warwick CVB, Quinebaug-Shetucket National Heritage Corridor
- Develop private-sector funding sources

- Develop public-sector funding sources, including Mass. Turnpike Authority grant and MOTT grant funding; develop funding plan with Corridor Commission
- Develop regional public funding sources; encourage adoption of 4% local option room tax in each Massachusetts community

Infrastructure:

- Identify “Tourism Development Zones” and create brief strategic/vision plan for each
- Corridor Commission, Tourism Council, and Chamber create “Tourism Development Program” with loan assistance and technical assistance
- Create tourism-related “signature event” for region
- Continue development of Bikeway

Program:

- Produce regional campaign logo and themeline
- Produce “lure” brochure and rack card
- Create RFP for magazine-style visitor guide
- Produce driving tour brochure and regional map
- Produce audio tours
- Produce seasonal event calendars
- Produce “Passport to the Valley” coupon book
- Upgrade regional web site; begin e-marketing
- Produce advertising campaign
- Produce consistent public relations campaign
- Develop tourism education initiative for residents & civic leaders

YEAR TWO

Organization:

- Assess year one results against goals
- Broaden private-sector financial support; secure steady funding stream from MOTT tourism grants, private sector, and local government
- Assess ability of Task Force to meet demands of the regional tourism program

Infrastructure:

- Implement Tourism Development Zones
- Produce “signature event,” with region-wide assistance
- Develop strategy for attraction and roadway signage to enhance tours of region
- Continue development of Bikeway
- Build Quinsigamond Village visitor center

Program:

- Produce year-two collateral and advertising program
- Produce magazine-style visitor guide
- Produce lodging/dining guide (perhaps as part of visitor guide)
- Produce travel trade information kit
- Begin travel trade marketing
- Joint presence travel trade events (NTA, ABA, etc.)
- Continue regional tourism education initiative
- Assess visitor service program

YEAR THREE

Organization:

- Assess year two results against goals
- Broaden private and public sector financial support
- Assess effectiveness of Task Force to handle regional program

Infrastructure:

- Continue implementation of Tourism Development Zones
- Continue development of visitor-oriented events

Program:

- Produce year-three collateral and advertising program targeting both internal and external markets
- Reposition ads and collateral if significant infrastructural improvements have taken place
- Assess visitor services
- Continue to build cooperative partnerships and strategic alliances