

2022 Western U.P. Tourism Issues & Strategies

At the conclusion of development of the Western U.P. Pandemic Response Plan in March 2021, WUPPDR undertook three projects based on prioritization by planning stakeholders. As tourism had been heavily impacted by the pandemic, presenting both needs and opportunities, a regional Tourism Strategy and Study was one of the highest-ranking priorities.

WUPPDR originally intended to develop a new comprehensive strategy document. However, over the course of the project, several tourism-related issues arose or became exacerbated, primarily, but not exclusively, in the Keweenaw Peninsula. WUPPDR was, and continues to be, involved in helping to address many of these. The response actions generally needed to occur quickly and thus diverted efforts away from a new strategy. However, need from the strategy was reduced somewhat by action items being implemented in real time. In other words, it made little sense to develop a future-looking plan when items the plan would have probably contained were already happening.

This document provides a review and status update of tourism-related issues, resolution, and future opportunities to explore.

Introduction

The immediate effect of the pandemic on the tourism – more specifically hospitality – industry in spring 2020 was ominous. A “stay at home” order, followed by waves of business restrictions, resulted in closure of restaurants and drinking establishments. Most closures were temporary, but some became permanent. Motels and hotel accommodations were for a time restricted to “essential” travelers.

The initial, and longest, stay at home order came with restrictions to essential travel, limiting leisure trips, but as it occurred during a tourism “shoulder season” it was a relatively minor impediment. Nearing Memorial Day, it became evident that travel to tourism destinations was not stopping due to state-imposed rules. Residents of more populated areas south of the Upper Peninsula surged north to seasonal homes and less-regulated short-term rental accommodations. Images of long backups of travelers at the Mackinac Bridge received widespread news coverage, initially much to the chagrin of U.P. residents.

As travel and business restrictions eased, visitation accelerated and eventually reached peak levels that had not been seen in recent years, if ever. Most observers and industry stakeholders, supported by periodic survey evidence (particularly conducted by Michigan State University Extension), believe that this occurred and continues to occur because travelers gravitated toward destinations perceived as “safer” from pandemic impacts – that is, outdoor-focused and traditionally with fewer people. Furthermore, restrictions on air travel, especially to international destinations, lasted longer than in most other industries, leading travelers to visit “new” destinations.

Reactions to this historically large number of visitors, many of them “nontraditional” (coming from uncommon geographic origins), were mixed. The influx produced immediate business revenues and growth opportunities for the region but also strained business owners and workers, attractions, the natural environment, community infrastructure, and the region’s residents.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges that have occurred amid increased and diversified visitation range from physical to societal. Some challenges, such as pressures on existing physical infrastructure, have a direct correlation with changes in visitation; other challenges, such as workforce shortages, are external effects that limit the region's ability to respond to increased visitation.

Below, one or more paragraphs describe each issue (heading) and bullets outline potential strategies. The intent of these strategies is not to outline specific implementing parties and timelines for action items. That level of detail should be addressed, to the extent stakeholders wish to, in more localized (such as county-based) strategies.

Physical infrastructure

The sudden spike in visitation has exceeded parts of the region's road and pedestrian infrastructure network's ability to function safely and efficiently. There are also future transportation needs, such as EV charger network buildout, that the region is lagging in meeting. And the region is not adequately meeting the accessibility needs of an aging population. Logistics and funding streams make it difficult to timely and adequately satisfy these needs.

Traffic Safety in Keweenaw County

In Copper Harbor, the business district has a large presence of cyclists and pedestrians, and its main street is a federal highway that lacks dedicated nonmotorized infrastructure, creating traffic conflicts and safety risks. Efforts by community leaders have been underway for years to obtain and implement funding for such infrastructure, but these were impeded by the pandemic.

- It is more important than ever to move the Copper Harbor Bicycle and Pedestrian Access project to fruition.

In Eagle Harbor, and likely in other communities that were not involved in this planning process, permitted automobile traffic speeds on the state trunkline are considered excessive by local residents and officials but cannot be directly controlled by local governments.

- Methods and standards used by state agencies in studying speed limits should be reevaluated to determine whether they adequately take local needs and stakeholder input into account, rather than relying strictly on engineering standards.

Improvement of Road Quality

Michigan is known for having relatively low-quality roads, and this is true for some key routes in the region. This has been most prominent and problematic for local access roads to points of interest (used by both residents and visitors) that are not eligible for federal aid and are not necessarily prioritized for maintenance and reconstruction with other funds based on historic practices of local agencies. A notable example is Brockway Mountain Drive in Keweenaw County. But the need for ongoing road improvements applies to the entire network, as illustrated by one road commission manager who commented that roads are what tourists most remember about their visits. Additional federal funds available from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act may make road improvements possible that are not within the traditional framework.

- Nontraditional funding sources, specifically those associated with pandemic recovery programs, should be explored.
- Local agency prioritization factors for road projects should be reevaluated.
- County road commissions and Ottawa National Forest (ONF) should explore public-public cooperative partnership proposal for road/motorized trail network-scale improvement grants from new U.S. Department of Transportation community infrastructure programs.
- ONF and road agencies can also enter into joint funding and road authority agreements to allow more flexibility in management and maintenance.

Accommodations for Electric Vehicles (EVs)

The automobile industry is quickly transitioning from vehicles powered by fossil fuels to electricity. The recreation vehicle industry (ORVs, UTVs, ATVs, snowmobiles, and even watercraft) is also beginning such a transition. The Western U.P. frequently lags national trends in technology, so it is little surprise that the EV charger network buildout has been relatively slow. This causes “range anxiety” which may dissuade EV users from visiting the region. Where chargers do exist, most of them are of older technologies that charge vehicles much more slowly than the new standards referred to as rapid, fast, or level three chargers. The charging speed of new technologies is fast enough to be competitive with fueling a gasoline or diesel vehicle en route.

- Communities and businesses should engage with the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy and WUPPDR to explore potential funding sources for EV chargers. The EGLE Charge Up Michigan program to subsidize chargers has narrow geographic eligibility, but some eligible locations in the region have no chargers either in place or in the planning stage, so these should be prioritized: Bruce Crossing, Covington, and Porcupine Mountains (Silver City or potentially as far away as Ontonagon).
- A forum should be provided for businesses and communities that have already installed, or are near installing, EV chargers to serve as examples for other parties that are interested in doing so. Expansion of and gap-filling in the EV charger network benefit all involved, regardless of the host sites.
- There is a burgeoning state agency-led effort to increase charger access for recreational EVs (ATVs, ORVs, UTVs, snowmobiles, and watercraft). This is a rapid growth area. Many stakeholders are engaged, but progress is slow due to technical and logistical complexities. Private and public entities that have indicated interest in a small pilot program for chargers serving a trail loop(s) should continue to collaborate and pursue viable funding sources to make it/them happen.

Air Service

The pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on the airline industry. In short, actions taken by air carriers in response to the pandemic have led to pilot shortages for regional airlines, in turn leading to elimination of routes and services at many small airports across the country. Currently most of the Upper Peninsula’s airports are at risk of significant reductions in service levels.

Elements of air service at Houghton County Airport had already been a concern of many community and business leaders prior to the pandemic, and in early 2022, SkyWest Airlines (operating for United), the airport’s sole carrier, announced it was planning for early (July) termination of its contract for Essential

Air Service (EAS). Service is currently still being provided, due to lack of a suitable replacement carrier, but the situation is tenuous, with discussions earnestly underway about continuation of service.

SkyWest operates for Delta Airlines as the sole carrier at three other Upper Peninsula EAS airports. SkyWest announced in August 2022 that it was planning to modify its services to these airports, eliminating direct flights to hubs (Minneapolis and Detroit) in favor of flights that include interim stops at multiple airports. After community backlash it remains to be seen whether this will transpire.

The Western U.P.'s second airport with commercial passenger service, Gogebic-Iron County Airport, offers direct EAS flights to two hubs via Denver Air Connection, a smaller regional carrier. No changes have been announced to date.

Physical mobility/accessibility

As the population ages and as an increasing number and diversity of people visit the region, a lack of accessible facilities for persons with mobility limitations has become conspicuous. There is also a shortage of mere information about what facilities and attractions are accessible. WUPPDR, in partnership with other organizations, is pursuing an "Accessible Keweenaw Initiative" to make infrastructure improvements to public recreation facilities that have demonstrable deficiencies. Accessibility assessments may be useful to help target infrastructure investments to where they are most needed or impactful.

- WUPPDR hopes to partner with the ONF to have accessibility assessments conducted on several of its sites and facilities to help prioritize infrastructure investments.
- WUPPDR is attempting to secure funding for infrastructure improvements to several sites in the northern part of the region. The intended funding source is geographically limited; however, a future objective is to identify and pursue funding for improvements in the southern part of the region.

Visitor and resident etiquette and education

Some visitors are not familiar with how to behave in harmony with communities they visit, and in some cases lack of adequate preparation by visitors burdens communities and services. These issues impact outdoor recreation destinations nationwide, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, and communities, businesses, and other visitor industry stakeholders can learn from approaches that have been taken elsewhere to ease pressure on destination communities.

- One proactive solution is the "Recreate Responsibly" campaign, which educates recreationalists in a variety of ways to help avoid problems before they happen. The region should consider implementing this campaign collectively in local areas, as well as through individual memberships.
- Residents also have a role in being educated on the best way to constructively react and respond to visitor bad behaviors, whether those behaviors are intentional or not.

Land access

Ownership and public access permissions for recreational land have been simmering issues of concern for years, and related challenges have greatly increased since the start of the pandemic. Challenges vary throughout the region based on visitor numbers, locations of residents, and availability of public land.

Keweenaw Peninsula

Although the Keweenaw Peninsula has a large amount of conservancy-owned and commercial forest reserve (CFR) land – both of which are publicly accessible for certain purposes – there is very little state- or federally owned land that is open to the full range of recreational uses. And much of what CFR land does exist is at risk of falling into fragmented private ownership. This is especially problematic due to the high density of visitors who are literally “funneled” onto the peninsula, with its many destinations in a relatively small area.

- The extensive holdings of The Rohatyn Group on the northern Keweenaw Peninsula are for sale on the private market. Several partner organizations, businesses, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and the general public are being engaged in a planning process coordinated by The Nature Conservancy. The conservancy is exploring a means of acquiring large tracts of land, which would then be strategically resold to third parties in part for publicly beneficial purposes (potentially including workforce housing, a need identified by the regional Housing Strategy) and managed through some collective mechanism. Stakeholders including WUPPDR should continue to actively engage in preservation of the region’s public interests, including advocacy for proactive involvement of state government as appropriate.

Gogebic and Ontonagon counties

The major issue identified in other areas of the region is the limited amount of public land and facilities on the Lake Superior shoreline in Gogebic County (and to a lesser extent in Ontonagon County), impeding access and growth opportunities for water-based recreation – particularly swimming beaches. (In comparison, the Keweenaw Peninsula and Keweenaw Bay already have an abundance of such access, whereas Iron County relies on inland lakes.)

- ONF is interested in improving public access to recreation land and amenities for a variety of activities, as well as in supporting economic development. The Black River Harbor Recreation Area is one of the forest’s most popular and heavily visited recreation assets and is in the midst of a planning process. Both ONF and other public entities should consider pursuing additional Lake Superior shoreline development for this purpose near populated areas in Gogebic and Ontonagon counties.
- The counties can collaborate with state and federal agencies to identify high-priority land acquisitions and explore partnerships with conservancy groups to assist in securing access to shoreline, rivers and lakes, trails, and other resources.

Baraga, Houghton, and Ontonagon counties

The Environmental Law and Policy Center has proposed designation of four new wilderness areas within ONF. This would require Congressional action. There are diverse views among stakeholders within and outside of the region about the pros and cons of such a move. Potential benefits include increased recreation opportunities, tourism, and environmental conservation. Threats include limitations on fire management, reduction of motorized road and trail access, and removal of natural resources, primarily forest products, from industrial use. The Ottawa has thus far not been approached about the proposal and has taken no position on it.

- Local governments and other stakeholder entities should monitor new developments, consider officially expressing their positions, and become involved in public involvement processes as they become available.

Regionwide

During development of this strategy, a popular waterfall in the Keweenaw Peninsula was cut off from most visitors due to closure of a private road that had customarily been used as its main access route. This was seen as a possible harbinger of things to come amid increasing visitor impacts to private property and roads, and it warranted an assessment of the security/reliability of access to key recreation destinations (the sites themselves and typical roads or trails used for access).

- WUPPDR has begun a property and road accessibility assessment, which is slated to be completed later in 2022 and will include a map of sites at risk of losing access.

Trail access and preservation

Related to landownership is the availability of recreation trails. These are among the greatest tourism draws and enhance quality of life for residents, but developing and keeping many trails in existence is more complex than commonly understood.

Public Access and Reliability

Trails of various types are distributed unevenly in the region, and trail easement and land ownership vary throughout. In some areas where trails do exist, they are threatened by temporary and unreliable easements through private land, along with sporadic trail closures resulting from timber harvesting on commercial forestland.

- This is an issue throughout the region but is most prominent on the Keweenaw Peninsula. The risk of trail closures due to timber harvesting will be decreased if current commercial forestlands are acquired by other entities for general public access, as described above.
- Risk of trail closures can be mitigated through education pertaining to etiquette, as occasionally private landowners cut off easement access due to abuse by trail users.
- State funding mechanisms for trail repairs and maintenance should be evaluated for user-friendliness, and needs for hazard mitigation improvements should be assessed regionwide.
- DNR and the Forest Service are working together to inventory structures such as culverts and bridges on motorized trails and align funding to replace critical structures that threaten access. Local governments should be engaged to coordinate project planning with these agencies to ensure full connectivity.
- During development of this strategy, the Houghton County Recreation Authority began planning efforts for a nonmotorized accessible recreation trail from Hancock to Lake Linden. A phased extension of the Western Gateway / Iron Belle Trail in Gogebic County also continues, with the City of Bessemer pursuing establishment of a new trailhead. Finally, options are being explored for additional expansion of the Iron County Heritage Trail network.
- A U.P.-wide recreation trails strategy could be beneficial in alignment of systems with different uses and ownerships.

Landowner Liability

Another issue is liability for user injuries. In Keweenaw County, the County Board expressed concern about its potential liability for injuries to users of mountain bike trails located on County-owned land. When the County was not satisfied with the level of insurance coverage that the club managing the trails was able to obtain, the land in question was sold to a private entity to allow for continued use. The removal of this land from public ownership may produce unintended consequences in the long term. In addition, the high degree of media coverage of this issue led some observers from outside of the region to believe that all of the area's trails were closed, making those people less likely to visit the area.

- Similar scenarios may arise for trail networks in other areas of the region. All parties involved in any such cases should be informed of what transpired in Keweenaw County in order to learn from the experience and avoid pitfalls to the extent possible.
- It is important for appropriate organizations and communities to make trail status information available to visiting trail users to avoid misconceptions and possible canceled trips.

Emergency services

Due to the popularity of sometimes dangerous "adventure" recreation, such as mountain biking and skiing, along with the isolation of many recreation destinations, emergency service providers (first responders and search and rescue) in the region have been strained to provide adequate services. Incidents at isolated locations can divert the services and equipment of emergency responders for extended periods from the communities they primarily serve. There have been anecdotes of people in populated areas being put in medical jeopardy due to ambulances being located in distant areas.

Revenue streams for emergency responders, which are derived primarily from property taxes and medical billing, are inadequate in many instances, irrespective of recreation-related incidents. The recreational element exacerbates an otherwise widespread problem and a generally "broken" system. And this problem is not limited to operational and basic equipment costs; facilities are also inadequate, and there has been a longstanding need for a dedicated search and rescue storage facility and base of operations in Keweenaw County, without any viable funding source. Finally, fire, first responder, and search and rescue services depend heavily upon volunteers, addressed in the next section.

- Though there are many attestations from service providers that service calls originating from recreation-related incidents are increasing, supporting data on volumes and trends are not widely available. And most concern seems to be directed toward nonmotorized incidents as opposed to motorized incidents that have been more common in the past. Data will be important to obtain and analyze if a detailed impact analysis is to be made and accompanied by advocacy for new revenue streams.
- For emergency response on all public lands, jurisdiction lies primarily with local responders, but agencies can have a role in improving access through both information and infrastructure improvements. The Ottawa has suggested this could help improve efficiency and speed of response to minimize time responders are kept away in the field. One possibility that has been considered is improvement of river access for responders at the Black River waterfalls.
- State legislation has been proposed that would impose an excise tax on short-term rental accommodations, which could be used for local services including emergency services. New developments should continue to be monitored as to their impacts on the region.

- New federal and state revenue streams should be monitored and pursued as appropriate.

Reliance on volunteers

During a listening session in Keweenaw County co-sponsored by WUPPDR and facilitated by Michigan State University Extension, attendees commented on the importance of volunteers in making some visitor services possible. They perceived a lack of awareness of the public and visitors as to the role of volunteers and declining interest in volunteerism. An alternative view is that younger generations are more interested in untraditional opportunities to volunteer or volunteerism that is aligned with their own interests and causes. Perhaps most critically, volunteers are becoming harder to find for emergency services including search and rescue. A paradigm shift may be occurring and will warrant a reexamination of who services are provided by at tourism attractions and other public facilities.

- Opportunities should be identified for younger residents to volunteer that match their own interests or can be modified to do so, in ways that can continue to fill needs for tourism services.
- In order to raise awareness, at tourism attractions, agencies and organizations can indicate clearly who are strictly volunteers and who are staff members.
- Feasibility and funding mechanisms should be studied to convert volunteer positions to employee positions.
- Emergency response agencies can develop programs to engage and mentor younger members to continue services through a new generation.
- A collaborative effort could be explored among organizations to explore an areawide volunteer hub(s), including pooling resources to support dedicated recruiters and volunteer matchmakers.

Workforce shortages

One of the most widespread and well-known implications of the pandemic, both directly and indirectly, has been reductions in availability of workers for some industries – particularly low-paying service industries such as hospitality. This has led to decreased standards of service; reduced hours and days of operations, particularly of restaurants; and sporadic closures – at a time when visitors are most numerous and interested in patronizing the region’s hospitality businesses. The situation is complex and far behind the scope of this document, but some strategies have become clear through WUPPDR’s pandemic recovery and resiliency planning.

- Employers should be encouraged to better recognize employees’ personal needs and to explore conversion of part-time to full-time (benefited) positions.
- Foreign worker programs are critical and should be supported and advocated for by business and economic development leaders.
- Agencies, organizations, and employers facing workforce housing issues should be engaged to collaboratively explore feasibility of public-private partnerships based on successful models from other areas. Individual employers can also be educated about solutions they can independently pursue.

Negative views of the tourism industry

There is a longstanding view that service industry jobs pay relatively low-wage and mostly part-time jobs. There is some truth to this. However, there is a lack of recognition or acceptance that these jobs remain a critical component of the economy and are an addition to, rather than a replacement for, jobs

in other industries. (To coin a cliché, it is not a “zero sum game.”) Furthermore, the industry creates secondary benefits that residents have become accustomed to and has a role in enticing visitors to become permanent residents.

- Residents may not recognize the importance of the industry to support businesses and community assets they value and use, such as eating and drinking establishments; employment of young people, including students; and parks and recreation facilities.. Dialogue surrounding this should be fostered in appropriate venues.
- For tourism to thrive and residents to remain welcoming to visitors, it will be important for elected officials, as community leaders, to recognize and vocalize support for the industry.
- Statistically evaluate the economic impacts of the industry through the regional EDA-funded analysis beginning in fall 2022.

Customer service improvements

For many years the region has had a reputation for substandard service compared to many other destinations. During the pandemic this has been exacerbated by workforce shortages, which has led to (again, anecdotally) decreased standards and public expectations of services throughout the country. At the same time, due to such pressures, customers themselves anecdotally have become more difficult to deal with. Ironically the pandemic-related decline in customer service capacity may have reduced the competitive disadvantage of the Western U.P. But this is not a reason to ignore longstanding needs in the region, and in time, nationwide standards will probably rebound to pre-pandemic levels.

- Customer service trainings can be conducted to educate front-line service workers, down to the level of visitors’ first interactions with staff in the region, such as at gas stations. A key objective has been to prevent such employees from saying, in response to visitor inquiries, things like “there’s nothing to do here” and instead provide useful information that can maximize visitors’ enjoyment. Employers also need to be shown the value they could realize by sending their employees who would most benefit from the trainings.
- Social media trainings should regularly be offered to educate businesses on how to present a positive image and respond effectively to both positive and negative user comments.

Short-term rental properties

In recent years, short-term rental units (STRs) have gotten a bad name due to negative impacts on surrounding neighborhoods, removal of housing stock from the market for permanent residents, and lack of support for tourism promotion or other services through a room assessment (lodging tax) that traditional lodging guests pay. It is important to note that STRs have enhanced the overnight visitor economy and encouraged rehabilitation of older substandard and vacant residences that otherwise could not be cost-effectively improved. Still, there seems to be a consensus among most stakeholders that additional regulatory provisions are warranted.

- In lieu of state-level preemption, local governments can undertake regulation and monitoring of quantity, location, etc. at the local government level, through zoning and nuisance ordinances and other mechanisms. Local governments should continue to advocate to legislators not to preempt local regulatory authority.

- Multiple, sometimes conflicting state legislative proposals for STR regulation and taxation have delayed any action, positive or negative; stakeholders in the region should do their best to form a united front in advocating for any particular legislation.
- Pursue application to STRs of lodging assessments (for destination marketing) and/or excise taxes (for public services).
- As needed for taxation and regulatory purposes, establish legal status for STRs as commercial enterprises rather than residential uses/entities.

Liquor licensing

A seemingly perpetual problem voiced by communities and industry, and acknowledged to some degree by legislators, is the difficulty of new businesses, or those that have changed ownership, in timely obtaining state liquor licenses.

- Bureaucratic complications have made this issue very difficult to solve; there are no new strategies offered here other than to continue advocacy for regulatory change and continue efforts by legislators to expedite licensing on a case by case basis.

Benefits

The following outline may be referenced for communication of the benefits of tourism and the hospitality industry to stakeholders and the general public. It is intended merely as a list to build on for a future project(s) or campaign(s).

- Revenue
 - Private business profits (and multipliers)
 - Sales/fuel taxes
 - Property taxes on hospitality businesses
 - Lodging assessment and hospitality business monetary contributions for outdoor recreation groups, including trail maintenance providers
- Community special events and attractions that could probably not be supported only by local-originating dollars
- Community information provided to residents by visitor-focused organizations
- Increased viability of air service (more enplanements)
- Increased awareness of the region
 - National media coverage of what we have to offer
 - Consideration by outside companies to locate here
 - Conversion of visitors to permanent residents through demonstration of quality of life
- Community development/improvements
 - A symbiotic relationship: community development helps to foster tourism and vice versa
 - Blight reduction through conversion of older properties into STRs
 - Enhanced basis for placemaking projects
 - Historic preservation of assets frequented by visitors
- Public land access
 - Improvement of prospects for public land access – preservation and increase, e.g. Houghton Douglass Falls, Keweenaw Heartlands, Copper Peak environs?]
- Basis for *new types* of outdoor recreation service and retail businesses
 - Better basis for business prospects
 - Demand from visitors accustomed to services not traditionally available here
 - Accommodation and demonstration of new recreation activity trends sparked outside of the U.P.
- More attention from state level for funding, etc.
 - State Government less likely to ignore or forget about us
 - Desire to support and capitalize on the broader economic benefits of our increased “visitorship”
 - Support for Travel Michigan

“Entirely New” Opportunities

Discussions with the Tourism Committee did not focus exclusively on current issues and strategies to address them; new ideas and developing trends were also discussed as opportunities for tourism in the region.

Accommodation of new recreation types in Ottawa National Forest

ONF is renewing its community and stakeholder outreach efforts and assessing its recreation priorities for alignment with current and developing needs. Active efforts include membership establishment for Recreation Advisory Committees (RACs) for Gogebic and Ontonagon counties, ongoing Visitor Use Reports (with field collection of visitor feedback on a five-year cycle), and planned collaboration with WUPPDR regarding public/stakeholder engagement forums and physical mobility improvements to recreation facilities.

- One committee suggestion was for ONF to consider enhancing and promoting recreation activities that currently occur informally on the forest, such as gravel road mountain biking.

Pursuit and promotion of new tourism trends and activities generally

Other activities and tourism formats that were mentioned as opportunities for growth throughout the region included:

- “Intentional ecotourism” such as Lake Superior cruises – Houghton became a regular port of call in summer 2022. (There have been some issues with weather-related cancelations, the implications of which will need to be evaluated for future planning.)
- “Agritourism” with promotion of locally grown and produced cuisine
- Ice and rock climbing to draw new visitor types while capitalizing on the region’s unique resources
- Winter events and festivals in general
- Recreation vehicle electrification, as described in the physical infrastructure section – put the U.P. on the cutting edge! (The U.P. regional planning agencies are being leveraged to help “drive” this effort.)
- Growth of collaborative, larger-scale events that align recreation assets from different areas, such as from cities to distant recreation sites, or that expand traditionally local events to a regional audience and market

Bringing it All Together

Organizations and agencies like WUPPDR often look at tourism primarily as economic development – “another industry.” From a broader perspective, though, tourism is not just about importing dollars but about the quality of life that tourism helps to support for everyone.

Much of what is available in Western U.P. communities is directly attributable, at least in part, to the large and increasing number of visitors who are drawn by our developed amenities and natural environment. Some of our assets would not exist without the hospitality service sector and tourism economy. Though there are some negative impacts from increased visitor numbers, especially when visitors are not in harmony with resident expectations and past experiences, the impacts can be mitigated to result in a net positive of the visitor economy. Residents may benefit further as new activity trends from other areas catch on and diversify what is available to residents.

Tourism is both economic development and community development. An adjustment to the U.P.’s tourism landscape seems to be underway, but it will not change the inherent character of the region. With collaborative strategizing and follow-through, the region can realize as many of the positives and avoid as many of the negatives as possible.

This document is intended to be current as of September 1, 2022.

