

Case Study: Great Smoky Mountain Gateway Communities

Can a community enjoy the benefits of tourism without sacrificing its character?

Located on the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee, the towns of Townsend and Pittman Center have found that uniting residents behind a vision for the future enables them to reap the benefits of tourism without losing what they love about their towns. That approach contrasts sharply with nearby Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, where high-powered, high-volume tourism has transformed those two communities into amusement parks.

Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge

As portals to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge are perhaps the country's best examples of gateway communities that have been completely transformed by tourism. There are factory outlet stores, wax museums, and T-shirt shops. Go-cart racing is the latest rage; at least 11 ovals are currently available. More adventurous types can visit a vertical wind tunnel that simulates indoor skydiving, play laser tag in a 9,000-square-foot arcade, or jump off a five-story bungee tower. Country music halls and theme parks are very popular.

Gatlinburg (pop. 3,382) and Pigeon Forge (pop. 5,083) exhibit a problem faced by many gateway communities: As the local economy grows increasingly dependent on mass marketing, entertainment, and tourism, the traditional industries and long-time residents are forced out by rising property values and the higher taxes that accompany them. Only a few major landowners have managed to reap big profits from the phenomenal increases in property values. In fact, Gatlinburg no longer has any residential neighborhoods—virtually all housing in the town has been converted to rental property or second homes. Even though both towns now generate an amazing amount of tax revenue, their economies



consist almost entirely of seasonal, low-paying service jobs, not the permanent positions needed to support a family.

Haphazard development of private land in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park also takes its toll on the region's magnificent scenery and natural resources. The roads into the Smoky Mountains are lined with bumper-to-bumper traffic and hundreds of billboards. In Gatlinburg, views of the Smokies have been marred by an observation tower, scores of high-rise condominium developments, an aerial tramway, and a 15-story hotel, which, while boasting of its "spectacular views," spoils the view for everyone else.

Worse are the impacts that development has on the park's wildlife—the original attraction for visitors. Every autumn, black bears migrate out of the park in their quest for food to build fat reserves for the long winter. But the rush to find building sites near the park has sealed off important migration corridors that are necessary for the bears to reach feeding grounds, according to Dr. Mike Pelton, a bear biologist at the University of Tennessee. "In the fall, a primary food source for the bears is oak acorns found at lower elevations outside the park," Pelton says. "In real crunch years of scarce food, bears migrating out of the park are getting killed on highways or shot in backyards."

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Can a community bring about change? The Gatlinburg Gateway Foundation was formed in 1998 and developed a vision statement that states, “We are a vibrant community that honors our mountain heritage and embraces our responsibility as the gateway to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.” Over several years of community meetings and open dialogue, positive changes have been influenced and the community has crafted a future vision which has helped shape its character and develop a sense of place.

Change has started. Gatlinburg is now erasing its mistakes and changing its character. They are under grounding power lines to have a better view of the mountains, developing architectural guidelines for businesses to blend better with the mountainscape, and giving aesthetic facelifts to old buildings. They are also working to bring the arts and crafts community downtown, and building on heritage tourism opportunities. They have created the Gatlinburg Partnership Council that brings together key community groups and citizens to find solutions to problems and to better plan for the future. Although Pigeon Forge does not have the organized energy of Gatlinburg, they too are trying to develop events that are more in keeping with their gateway responsibility. For further information on these changes visit www.gatlinburggateway.com

Townsend

Fifteen miles south of Gatlinburg is Townsend (pop. 244), another town bordering on the park. Positioning itself as an alternative to the glitter of its neighbors, Townsend has adopted the slogan “The peaceful side of the Smokies.” The town’s appeal lies not in bungee jumping, go-cart racing, or factory outlets, but in its natural amenities: cool, clear rivers for fishing and floating; family-owned and operated lodges; a colorful history; scenic trails and country roads for hiking, biking, and horseback riding; and a chance to see a black bear or a white-tailed deer in the wild.

“Most of the people here don’t want Townsend to become like Gatlinburg,” says City Councilwoman Sandy Headrick. “We don’t want to live in a town with traffic jams and Dollywoods and water slides.”

Pittman Center

Just north of Gatlinburg is the small town of Pittman Center (pop. 477), which also has successfully preserved its character. In 1989, Pittman Center residents convened a series of public meetings designed to produce a shared vision for their future. They decided to prohibit billboards and garish signs, limit commercial development to the town’s core, and protect the flow and quality of the Little Pigeon River, which runs through town.

To realize this vision, Pittman Center enacted several widely supported ordinances. One limits development of hillsides and steep slopes. “We’ve tried to recognize that real estate which is hard to develop shouldn’t be developed,” says Jim Coykendall, an architect who has lived in Pittman Center since 1969.

Another ordinance places size limits on signs and prohibits billboards so that the community’s streets and highways remain uncluttered. Leading by example, Pittman Center’s street

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signs are made of wood rather than metal. And the first thing visitors see is an attractive wooden sign that reads “Pittman Center—A Community Dedicated to Preserving Our Mountain Heritage.”

Coykendall attributes Pittman Center’s success not only to the public’s involvement in the visioning process, but also to the local people who have made sure the community follows up on its ideas. “If you can get just four or five people to commit the time and the effort, they can bring the rest of the community along,” he says. “You can always get outside assistance, but the process has got to be driven from inside the community.”

Can places such as Townsend and Pittman Center preserve their unique qualities and still enjoy a healthy economy? According to Townsend’s Sandy Headrick, the answer is a resounding “yes.” “There’s a lot of room for controlled growth,” she says. “We think we can have a good business sector and still maintain the peace and quiet that we have here now.”

Source:

J. Howe, E. McMahon, and L. Propst; *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities*, Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997, 32–36. Adapted and reprinted with permission from Island Press.

