

Putting out the welcome leaf

Lake George opens its arms to Canada in effort to draw tourists

By MELISSA GUAY

mguay@poststar.com

Friday, May 23, 2008 2:26 AM EDT



Lake George officials want to attract as many Canadian tourists as Plattsburgh and they're willing to use a giant maple leaf, a magician and a lake monster to do it.

The Lake George Regional Chamber of Commerce is using, for the second year, The Bienvenue Card -- a free card given to Canadian tourists that offers discounts from participating area businesses. Businesses pay \$25 to be part of the campaign, which includes signs, pins, printed cards and other ads, said Luisa Sherman, executive director of the chamber.

And the village declared this week Canadian Friendship Week, with appearances from Georgie the lake monster, jugglers, magicians, and a new mascot dressed as a giant maple leaf. Mayor Robert Blais said the week was scheduled around Victoria Day -- a Canadian national holiday.

"This week was more geared toward Canadian couples rather than families. It's another method to boost off-season tourism, similar to the many fall events planned locally. And there were a noticeable amount of Canadian license plates in the area," he said.

Years ago, Blais said, at least a quarter of the Lake George tourists came from Canada. That dropped off, he said, but now that the Canadian dollar is strong against the U.S. dollar, tourism from Canada has been increasing.

Sherman said the expanded marketing includes ad campaigns, running through October, in three metro-Montreal newspapers highlighting area attractions.

The chamber sent vacation guides to a Canadian road travel company and has done consumer travel shows in Canada, she said.

The chamber also sent 1,300 Bienvenue Cards to people who had cards last year.

The county occupancy tax funded \$16,000 of the campaign, with additional support from the town, Sherman said.

"We're already starting to see a return on that investment," she said.

Somewhere in Time Cafe & Gifts owner Carmela Mastrantoni said the marketing effort is a "wonderful idea" that has already produced results.

Mastrantoni has owned the Canada Street business for nine years.

"I've absolutely noticed an increase in Canadian tourists already this year, and it's early yet," she said.

Lakeside Subs, Deli & More co-owner Gail Terceno estimated a 35 percent increase in Canadian tourism from this time last year. Terceno is in her third season with the business.

"It's shaping up to be a great beginning to the season," she said.

Sherman said she has heard estimates from local business owners of a 35 percent increase in Canadian tourism from the 2006 to the 2007 season.

"It's a hard thing to track and get hard numbers for ... but the proof is in what businesses are reporting back to us, and they're saying this is working," she said.

Michelle Powers, vice president of marketing for the Plattsburgh North Country Chamber of Commerce, said she's heard reports of a 15 to 20 percent increase in Canadian border crossings, but "it's impossible to guess now how the season will fare."

Powers said Plattsburgh, less than an hour from the border, has always actively sought Canadian tourists.

"We have our Web site accessible in French or English; we attend consumer trade-shows -- do whatever we can put the welcome mat out there," she said.

A local airport opened last year in Plattsburgh.

"We market it as Montreal's U.S. airport," Powers said, "and 85 percent of the traffic is from Canada."

A report issued by the Quebec-New York Connection estimated the economic impact of Canadian tourism on the Clinton County area, which includes Plattsburgh, at \$1.53 billion in 2004 and it has gone up since then, Powers said.

"Because of the favorable exchange rate we saw a huge spike in 2007, but really the industry has been on the rise for the last three years," Powers said.

Sherman said several shops are new to Lake George this year, including The Adirondack Winery, Queen of the American Cakes bakery, The Magic Shop; and Shady Business, which expanded to the north end of the village.

Blais said he's happy to see the new businesses, including jewelry boutiques and gift shops, and a Thai and sushi restaurant.