

# OUTLOOK: Upping the ante in marketing Washington County

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Varosy Studios in Greenwich was part of the 2017 Open Studios Tour of Washington County.

Courtesy photo

Bringing together the world of milk and manure with the world of paint and sculpture is one of the challenges facing the team hired by Washington County to figure out how to market the county to tourists.

Another one is catching up to the competition: From Lake George to the state of Vermont, destination spots in the Northeast have been marketing themselves for decades, while Washington County's leaders have been largely content to rely on farms to power their economy.

"There's no email database," said Andrew Meader, who is leading the marketing team, in an example of how far behind the county's efforts are.

"We hope to create that," he said.

Meader, who runs the firm 8 of Eight Strategies, is a marketing consultant based in Glens Falls. The county hired him to coordinate the efforts of Mannix Marketing and Black Dog Designs, both also of Glens Falls. Mannix will work on digital marketing and online aspects of the effort, Black Dog on brand creation and the look of the county's advertising.

It falls to Meader to strategize, draw the connections between the county's varied assets (from dairy farms to sculpture parks) and decide how to get the word out.

The team has some money to work with — the county is paying them \$73,200 a year for two years, with the possibility of an extension, and they will be able to tap \$50,000 in I Love NY matching funds from the state.

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"We're looking for day-trippers," Meader said.

The hotels and motels of the Glens Falls and Saratoga Springs area are less than an hour away from the apple and berry farms of Granville or the artist studios of Cambridge and Salem.

The county does have some available lodging, in bed and breakfast operations and in private accommodations listed on rental sites such as Airbnb, said Laura Oswald, the county's economic development director.

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But before anyone can talk about attracting a hotel developer to Greenwich or Argyle, promoters have to generate buzz about things to do there, and that, according to some of the county's prominent business owners, involves combining the odd couple of arts and agriculture.

## Tradition plus Airbnb

At Gardenworks in Salem, Meg and Rob Southerland have built on a farming tradition to create a marketplace for locally grown flowers and food and locally made crafts. They host writers for book-signings, and neighborhood children gather to help with farm projects.

Through Airbnb, they rent out an old farmhouse on the property, advertised as an ideal setting for a country wedding.

"There's such a richness in the life of Washington County," Meg Southerland said. "It takes a little more energy and investigation to find the wonderful parts. But it's a rich treasure once you discover what's there."

"Our mantra has always been to work together," said Rob Southerland, bringing up projects Gardenworks has undertaken with Salem Artworks, a nonprofit arts center and sculpture park.

Salem Art Works, established in 2005, attracts artists from around the country for residencies. Anywhere from eight people in the winter to 25 in the summer will be living at the center at one time, said its founder and director, Anthony Cafritz.

He, too, promotes the notion of arts and agriculture being combined to create a unique destination for visitors, a place where the country's waning agricultural heritage is still a cultural and economic force and where art rooted in that culture can be appreciated.

The other great attraction of Washington County is its unspoiled nature, Cafritz said.

"The fact is, as a county, it's still untouched. It hasn't been destroyed by second homes or modular construction of housing units," he said.

## Unspoiled

Washington County's tourism industry can make a lot of progress without any risk of spoiling the authenticity of its villages and farms.

"It's still kind of a best-kept secret," said Serena Kovalosky, an artist and retired tourism professional who has worked in Boston and Montreal but now lives in Cambridge.

She was the co-founder in 2007 of Open Studios of Washington County, a tour of artist studios held every other year. Participating artists — last year, there were 20 — must apply and have their work accepted through a competitive juried process. More than 4,000 visits were paid to local studios during the tour last year, and more than \$100,000 paid for art.

"Food, art and travel, that's a recipe for success," Kovalosky said.

What Kovalosky and others say is that the county has a lot to attract visitors:

breweries, cheesemaking, fiber farms, historical sites, art, scenic canals and rare bird areas. What it lacks are promotions that tie some of the possibilities together into appealing daylong or weekend packages.

"I've had conversations about developing packages. Here's what a day would look like, what an itinerary would look like: You can do a history-oriented one; can do an art-oriented one; we have some fabulous bed-and-breakfast spots."

The county doesn't necessarily need large attractions like amusement parks or famous lakes, she said.

"Maybe it's good we don't get bus tours," she said. "We don't need 30,000 people coming in for the summer. If we can just bump it up a notch, to enhance the life of the people who are here. ... It'll be fun to see."

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