

Insider

For January 7, 2009

By Kim Burger

With the beginning of a new year comes also, reflections on the passing year and the resolve for improvement. Many are thinking back on 2008 with a “good riddance, glad to have THAT behind us” attitude, and in many respects I’ll agree. The results of flooding and tornado damage will be with us for a long time to come, but the human connections that occurred during the summer will never be forgotten. I’ve always been taught that bad situations bring opportunities for good and, although many are still living the hell of displacement and the loss of loved ones and personal possessions, I am still in awe of the calls we received from our usual local good Samaritans, but also from all over the country, reaching out to offer help. From individuals traveling the country on an extended RV vacation, to organized church groups representing every conceivable denomination, to teenagers with extra clothing on hand or the time and muscle to help with the dirty, disgusting job of removing heavy, soaked sandbags. To my good fortune, the tone of most incoming calls to the office are cheerful and fun – tourism, after all, is generally a pleasant business – but this was quite different. This was very special, and I shall never forget the care and concern we received. I also feel a responsibility to share this with you since we took those calls on your behalf.

The displacement and incoming help also brought the opportunity to witness the genuine care and hospitality of our local hoteliers *and* record hotel/motel tax collections. Revenues from the quarter covering the summer months of 2008 came in over 40% higher than those of 2007. This is a huge increase, even as hotel managers serving these guest offered discounts and extra services whenever possible, and readily accepted and even suggested forfeiture of Sturgis Falls Celebration and Cedar Basin Jazz Festival revenue so as not to further displace these people.

We received over 3,700 hours of volunteer help during the year. Wow! This work was performed as assistance with mailings and other office projects; staffing the Visitor Center on weekdays, weekends and holidays; and serving on committees and our advisory board. Bureau board members invested over \$150,000 dollars to 21 projects in hopes to further the impact of tourism in our community. I am particularly proud that these volunteers all seem to be comfortable to express opposing views and engage in thoughtful conversation when making these decisions.

We celebrated our 20th Anniversary as an organization and that, too, was a rewarding experience. It was humbling to look over that past twenty years to appreciate from where we’ve come and the steady flow of accomplishments begun by predecessors. It was also interesting to note the exciting mix of newcomers and old-timers who choose to remain involved, not to mention the fun of looking at old photos in the files!

Looking forward to the coming year, we have some kicking new publications to share and I am excited to enhance our on-line presence through an improved calendar of events and social networking services. I also plan to strive harder to see everything we do

through the eyes of our “customers”. Our most important customers are visitors, but this audience also includes volunteers, local business leaders and governing officials.

We anticipate challenges in the year ahead, to be sure, but we look forward to facing them with the skill and creativity our community developed a reputation for.