

Williamsport is the place to be – really, it is

Williamsport and the central region of Pennsylvania have been great punching bags. Too often, I hear local people knocking the virtues of the city. Recently, while searching the Internet, I found a website that complained about “The Influx” of ex-felons, recovering substance abusers and the poor coming into Williamsport. Ironically, the website asks the viewer to “help save Williamsport”. But, in reality, airing such dirty laundry in public is counterproductive. I mean, if you were a manufacturer looking for a new location for a factory would you choose Williamsport after reading such a website?

I am not denying that Williamsport doesn't have its problems, but what city doesn't have problems? Furthermore, the perceived deterioration of the downtown area is not solely the product of The Influx. Other factors have also influenced the economic well being of the city and the region. Such myopic characterizations are unfair and possibly racist.

But enough of the negative,



Richard James

I have good news! The month of August 2009 was... seminal. While some were complaining that it was a cool rainy summer, let me point out that in other parts of the country, temperatures were in the triple digits for several weeks. Other cities were experiencing drought and water shortages. California had huge wildfires due, in part, to hot dry conditions. By comparison, we had pleasant days of moderate weather.

Williamsport becomes a small town-international city every August when the Little League™ teams begin the LLB World Series. But we also have visitors that stay overnight as they travel the Susquehanna Trail to and from Niagara Falls. In the Genetti Hotel I hear people speaking Russian, German and who knows what else! These travelers walk the downtown area in groups of 3

or 4 searching for gift shops and restaurants. Wegman's Café has hundreds of bus tourists pass through its porticos every week. Williamsport is poised to be a major tourist destination.

The downtown merchants are ready for a massive influx of tourist dollars and new shops have opened recently. The Williamsport Downtown Business Association has formed to take advantage of the city's strengths. Under the leadership of its president, Mae Thaljih, the WDBA is on the move.

During August 2009, we also had a fantastic Kids' First Friday, sponsored by the Kiwanis Club. (Every first Friday of the month, we highlight our area artists. Parking lots and side streets are converted into music venues. Vendors display their artwork and crafts.) And, of course, we had the annual Grand Slam Parade that salutes the Little Leaguers, and their families.

Williamsport also hosted Japanese/American filmmakers in August. Sotokoto Pictures, Inc. of Los Angeles came to

town to film a baseball story starring Japanese actor, Eisaku Yoshida.

Finally, there was the Bon-Taj Roulet Concert at the Community Arts Center on August 6th. Music legends Bonnie Raitt and Taj Mahal appeared onstage together for the first time – in our town! It was a blast! I asked Rob Steele, Director of the CAC how the incredible event came to be, here's what he said, "Being chosen as the location for Bonnie Raitt and Taj Mahal to "tech-in" their North American tour was undoubtedly a coup for the CAC and the greater Williamsport community. Bonnie Raitt was looking for a quiet east coast location for the intensive week of rehearsals and Williamsport was on a short list of possibilities. We were on the short list primarily because we have a beautiful venue and our "back of house", staff under the leadership of Dave Whitnack, have earned a national reputation for being professional, efficient, and friendly. The final decision came down to a choice between a venue in Vermont and the

CAC. The venue in Vermont was subject to a 5% Amusement tax, and one of Bonnie's roadies made the statement "Williamsport...great hall, great people, great town" and the die was cast. It is our great hope that the Bon Taj Roulet concert will be the first of many major shows that will choose Billtown as a preferred place to "stir-up" a show." Steele said that he was flooded with emails of appreciation from those that watched history being made on the CAC stage that night. "And Bonnie loves Williamsport, too," he said.

August was a great month despite what the naysayers say. Williamsport is a great place to live. We got great weather, friendly citizens and plenty of entertainment and activities for everybody. Let the world know. Williamsport is the place to be. Let's be positive.

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