



Life in the Valley

A look back: Deerfield Valley economy in '08

By **JAIME CONE, Reformer Staff**

Wednesday, December 31 BRATTLEBORO -- The Hermitage was built in 1842 in West Dover, and over the years its ownership has exchanged hands numerous times. In 2008, new owners undertook a major renovation, installing new hardwood floors, a new roof and new "everything you could imagine," according to General Manager Steven O'Hern.

The Hermitage is just one example of the little changes being made in the Deerfield Valley to transform the area into an economically prosperous community.

O'Hern said construction took 10 months with the inn reopened in time for Columbus Day weekend. Since it opened, innkeepers have seen their clientele return and business has been increasing steadily.

"We've shown a tremendous amount of growth with the amount of people who have come in," said O'Hern. "Now that the rooms are all set, we're finding the room sales are picking up as well. We're almost sold out for the New Year, all 11 rooms."

"The local community has been very supportive. We've seen both local clientele and second home owners from Connecticut, New York and New Jersey coming in as well to enjoy the restaurant."

O'Hern said he thinks it's an attribute for the Hermitage that it dates back to 1842; people remember the name from when it was open in the '80's and '90's. In a marriage of old and new, it also features the luxuries that visitors would have at home, including wireless Internet and flat screen

televisions in each room.

He said the potential for growth in the Deerfield Valley is substantial, especially with Mount Snow in the area.

"It's a great resort community; people see an opportunity here. In this part of Vermont, to grow is key. It's nice to be a part of the community as things are being purchased and nice to be part of that expansion and bringing more dollars into the valley."

Laura Sibilica, executive director of the Mount Snow Valley Chamber of Commerce, said it is the quality of life that draws people to southern Vermont and that it is a national trend that people are moving permanently to rural areas as well as purchasing second homes there.

"It's the beauty and ease of living," she said. "People are going to small towns and becoming part to the community. I think the community does embrace those people. They really have integrated into our community."

Other businesses that have changed hands recently are the Maple Leaf Brewery in Wilmington and the White House, a hotel in Wilmington.

"One of the most interesting additions to the area is the Paw House on Route 100 in Dover," said Lisa Sullivan, president of the board of directors for the Mount Snow Valley Chamber Commerce. "They have an indoor dog park for people who don't want to travel without their dogs."

The Deerfield Valley is also holding various events to engage the community and draw in visitors during the summer.

The 2008 Vermont Life Wine and Harvest Festival



brought in 1,500 people despite a rainy couple of days, and the Deerfield Valley Blueberry Festival was hailed as a success as well. Both were named in Vermont Life's list of top 10 Vermont events for 2008.

In Wilmington, the Beautification Committee is hard at work on the new park, which was put in the empty lot created when a bank burned down in 2007.

The Tri-Town Economic Committee continued to bring together officials from Wilmington, Dover and Whitingham in its 2008 meetings.

"There has been a lot of rising above adversity and enthusiasm in addition to investment," said Sibilila. "I like to believe these things go forward to have a little bit of a domino effect."

The mountain remains the biggest and most lucrative attraction; Mount Snow's season pass sales are up 12 percent from this time last year, according to Luke Stafford, communications manager for Mount Snow.

He believes the reason for this is that people aren't traveling as far to ski and ride this season.

"I know Vail and Aspen are really hurting, and I think it's because people are not flying out west," Stafford said. "Airline prices are up, and checking bags is expensive ... people just would rather stay home."

"Mount Snow is the closest mountain in Vermont for many people," he said. "They would rather drive here than fly out West or something like that."

Stafford also credits the increase in season pass sales to improvements made in the hands of new ownership.

"The new owners bought us in April 2007, and they are continuing to invest in the mountain," he said. "They have spent millions of dollars on snowmaking and the new terrain park Carinthia ... you have to spend money to make money."

"Peak Resorts has invested in the largest fan guns in America," added Sibilila, "and it's the only East Coast stop of the Dew Tour in January. We will have top freestyle and snow board athletes coming here."

"I think the new owners of the mountain have been really inspiring positive change and renewed enthusiasm in Valley itself in terms of community events," she said.

Stafford said the nature of the sport is also a factor.

"It may seem like a luxury, but people are dedicated to the sport and are always going to still going to come up and go skiing and riding (regardless of the economy,)" he said.

Stafford also pointed out that even though Mount Snow makes a huge amount of its own snow, business is still highly affected by the weather. Sibilila agreed that people are more likely to go skiing when there is snow in their back yards.

"We've been very busy here this week," said Laura Sibilila. "This is the first official big kick-off. We've been fielding a lot of phone calls and greeting a lot of visitors."

Overall, 2008 was a successful year for the Deerfield Valley despite the general downturn of the economy.

"We're definitely experiencing an impact by the national economy, which is the biggest thing coming against everyone," said Sibilila.



"I think things are tough all over," she said. "I think that the Valley is fortunate to be positioned next to one of the world's largest markets, New York City ... I'm very grateful that we're here."

"Unique challenges can be turned into unique opportunities as well," Sibia said. "For example, the hard winter we had two years ago caused us to form the Tri-Town Economic Group that has been a very positive signal to those outside here that we are serious in managing our destiny and becoming what we want to be."

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