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# Resource commitment in destination management: The case of Abingdon, Virginia

## Abstract

*In this paper, the concepts of economic cycles and tourism area life cycle (Butler, 1980, 2004) are combined to study the impact of institutional support for a destination management, development and rejuvenation strategy. Using case-based qualitative methodology and focus group interviews with key informants like town development officials, tourism directors and other salient supply side stakeholders, like recreation products providers and local theater representatives, the effect of cooperation among local institutions is examined for Abingdon, a small historic town located in the southwestern part of the state of Virginia, USA. In addition, secondary sources like documents related to comprehensive planning are studied to understand demand and supply side systems and future competitive advantage investment and resource commitment for town and tourism development. Findings indicate that collaborative and concerted efforts among local institutions can mitigate some of the effects of economic downturn cycles. Implications of cooperation and coordination efforts by development agencies are discussed and suggestions for tourism development in small towns are offered.*

## Keywords:

*institutional support; destination management; economic cycle; small area destinations; collaboration strategies; comprehensive planning; USA*

## Introduction

Effective planning, management and marketing of places as destinations involve the prediction and understanding of a number of development factors and consideration of the tourism area life cycle (TALC). As destinations go through structural changes over time, the extent to which these changes occur may be a function of the types of tourism and non-tourism related development that occurs at the location. Attitudes of both planners and visitors about tourism development, the size of the community and its degree of dependency on tourism as part of the local livelihood likely add further

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complexity to the nature of both structural and attitudinal changes in the destination community. It may be easier to understand the different phases of tourism development and their impacts in tourism-dependent smaller destinations, especially those that sustain growth. The role of destination management agencies, local authorities and supply side stakeholders, as individual institutions and as collaborative partners assumes importance when tourism is salient to the stakeholders of the small community.

The presence of tourism activities in smaller places often drives the local economy but may also cause a high degree of volatility as a result of recession and the downturn of the economy. The concept of destination life cycle implies that places like products follow a relatively consistent process of development and recognizable cycle of evolution (Butler, 1980, 2004; Meyer-Arendt, 1985). The idea that tourism destinations evolve and go through a life-cycle process has been well-established in the tourism literature (Choy, 1992; Da Conceicao Goncalvas, & Aguas, 1997; Martin, & Uysal, 1990; Weaver, 1990). Research has examined the stages of tourism destinations, the operationalization of these stages, the applicability / non-applicability of these stages, and the impact of the stage of life-cycle on various strategies for tourism promotion and development (Agarwal, 2002; Cooper, & Jackson, 1989; Crompton, Reid, & Uysal, 1987; Debbage, 1990; Haywood, 1986, 2004; Formica, & Uysal, 1996; Lundtrop, & Wanhill, 2001). At the same time, the concept that tourism is a significant contributor to economic development is well-known (Sinclair, 1998), and with the downturn in the global economy even popular destinations face a challenge in attracting tourists resulting in economic challenges to various stakeholders at these destinations. When business cycles interact with the tourism life-cycle to affect market dynamics that concurrently demand planning, innovation and adaptability, destination management assumes great importance (Haywood, 1998).

The extant literature generally provides a historical analysis of specific destinations and differentiates the various stages via measurement of factors like number of visitors, overnight stays, growth in tourism revenues etc. and links the stages of the life cycle to the concepts of carrying capacity and environmental sustainability (Cole, 2007; Da Conceicao Goncalvas, & Aguas, 1997; Pulina, & Biagi, 2006). In addition, Toh, Kahn, and Koh, (2001) used tourist arrivals, travel export and import figures as indicators to examine an augmented version of the TALC for the country of Singapore, and Cole (2007) studied a number of both demand and supply indicators such as the number of hotels, rooms, arrivals, expenditures, and investment proxies and measures in order to implement a model of TALC for Aruba and Barbados. However, not all destinations follow the inevitable evolutionary pattern of birth, growth and decline, as suggested by the TALC (Tooman, 1997); some may indeed, due to the proactive role of local destination management and promotion agencies, continue to sustain themselves, reorienting their strategies to attract tourists while also planning for the long-term management of land-use and development of the residents at the destination.

Accordingly in this paper, within the TALC framework and the context of the current economic downturn, we seek to explore the impact of institutional support for a desti-

nation rejuvenation strategy in the historic tourist town of Abingdon in rural Virginia. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine how destination management and promotion agencies collaborate and cooperate to sustain the interest of tourists with changing needs, as well as plan for the needs of the local population. Using a case-study based qualitative approach and available secondary data, we investigate how both demand and supply side systems are affected via competitive advantage investment and resource commitment. The study concludes with destination management suggestions for similar historic towns and small area tourist destinations.

## Conceptual development

### DEMAND AND SUPPLY FACTORS

It is suggested that understanding the life cycle requires an understanding of when an area moves from one state of development to another (Haywood, 1998, 2004). On the demand side of tourism, the desire and ability of travelers can also be thought of as cyclical and is a variable to be considered separate and apart from characteristics of the tourism area itself. While several studies to understand the demand for tourism have been conducted, it is widely accepted that there are three main drivers of demand for tourism at a particular destination: 1) economic determinants – like tourism prices, transportation cost, relative prices among competing destinations, physical distance, marketing effectiveness, along with general indicators like disposable income and cost of living index; 2) Social-psychological determinants– like cultural similarities and affiliations, images of destinations, demographic factors, attitude toward and perception of destination and past experience; and 3) exogenous determinants – like availability of supply resources, economic growth and stability, accessibility, degree of urbanization, technological advancements etc. (Crouch, 1994; Uysal, 1998).

Similarly, the supply resources that are instrumental in attracting tourists are heterogeneous not only in terms of number but also in terms of development, distribution and their accessibility in the tourist market (Pearce, 1995). Thus major attractions, events like festivals and fairs, restaurants, lodging, entertainment and factors mentioned under exogenous demand determinants form the supply side of the tourism equation. Jafari (1982, 1983) divided supply side tourism elements into three categories: tourism-oriented products that include travel-trade services, resident-oriented products like hospitals, barbershops etc. that may be used by tourists who stay for a longer period of time, and background tourism products like natural or man-made attractions. Together the demand and supply factors determine the flow of tourists to a destination and the interaction between these factors makes the tourist experience possible (Uysal, 1998).

Depending on the tourism life cycle of the place, the destination area would appeal to and attract different types of visitors. This idea is reflected to a degree in the suggestion that the purchasing population is made up of innovators and imitators (Haywood, 1986), and is likely to have greater relevance for areas that stand-alone and are not part of a tourism region. An example of this might be an individual resort such as Greenbrier in West Virginia vs. a place like Washington DC or Orlando, Florida that

has multiple attractions. Travelers may at different points in time fall into one or the other category. The ability to segment markets by the criteria mentioned above might contribute considerably to identifying an appropriate unit of analysis to be used in forecasting exercises or toward the development of marketing and management strategies appropriate for a given phase of tourism development. This may especially be true in attempting to communicate a new image for an existing small town destination or attraction.

## **INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT**

Crouch, and Ritchie (1999, 2003) contend that given the importance of tourism destinations in contributing towards economic development of regions, the primary concern of a destination should be to provide a high standard of living and quality of life for its residents. The sustainability and long term success of tourism would depend not only on the protection and preservation of tourism resources and amenities but also on the degree which the tourism area makes institutional commitment to tourism development and managing the destination. The institutional support for tourism activities certainly necessitates the formation of collaborations and alliances with the different stakeholders of the community that may have complementary or opposing goals and objectives. These stakeholders may also have direct or indirect relevance to the fully functioning tourism system in the destination community. The degree to which the destination creates and builds consensus among different stakeholders and follows inclusion in decision making and policy formulations can become an effective barometer to measure tourism development and show the expected benefits that may accrue as a result of support from the community and its institutional elements. Such institutional support may be of great importance to developing and managing small town tourism. How well small towns like Abingdon create sustained and positive institutional support may be an indication of its ability to mitigate and manage crises that are likely to affect demand for tourism.

In the following sections we outline the rationale for studying Abingdon, our methodology and sources of information, and describe the current demand and supply factors as well as the institutional efforts for promoting tourism and related economic development of the town. We conclude with some general observations and suggestions for practice.

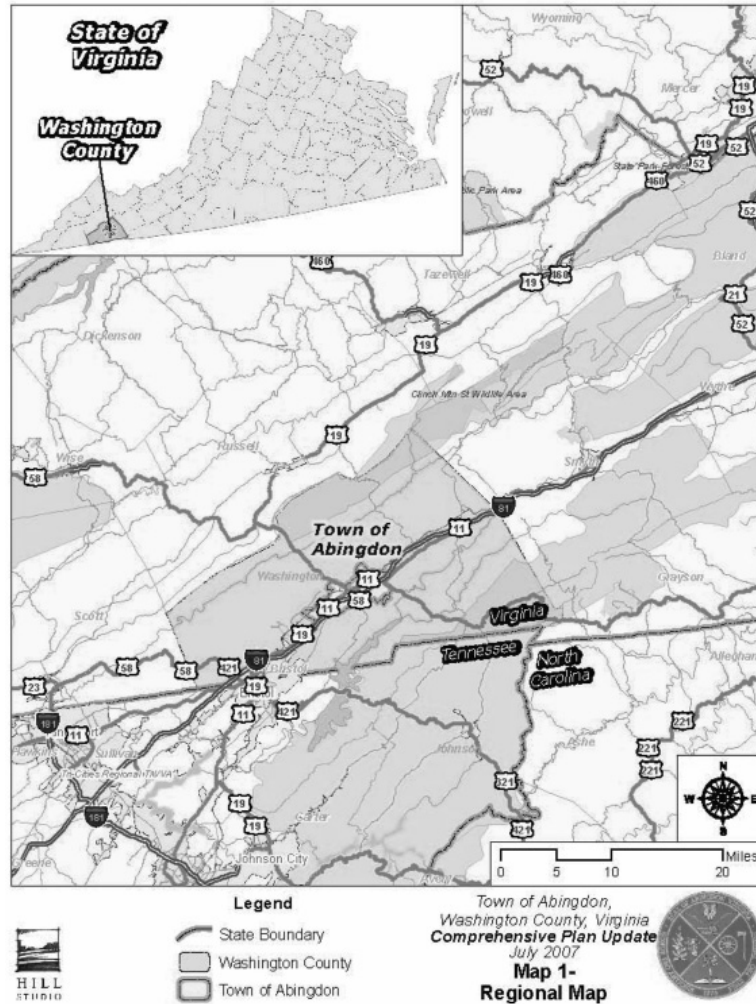
### **Rationale and description of site**

We chose the town of Abingdon, Virginia to research its destination management and revival strategies for several reasons: 1) we wanted to study a destination that relies primarily on tourist income for its sustainability; 2) Abingdon is known for its innovative and proactive approach to tourism development; 3) it is a historic town and a mature destination responsible for its own strategies, and 4) Abingdon is willing to provide access and data to the authors.

Abingdon is a historic town located in Washington County in the state of Virginia, USA and lies west of the Blue Ridge Mountains at an elevation of 2,200 feet above sea

level secured in a valley formed by the Holston River. Although a small town with a population of about 8000 residents, it is connected to major highways like Interstate 81 and Interstate 77 such that it remains within a day's drive to more than half the U.S. population. A map depicting the location of Abingdon is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
THE LOCATION OF ABINGDON



## Methodology

In order to study the impact of destination management strategies and institutional support in conjunction with concept of TALC and in the context of the economic downturn on Abingdon, Virginia, we employed a triangulation method of data generation that included both qualitative and quantitative research. We first made contact in February 2009 with the director of tourism, Abingdon, and outlined the purpose of our project. After some initial correspondence, we requested and obtained tourism marketing brochures and documents relating to visitation records, average hotel occupancy reports, meal and lodging reports and gross taxes from the office of the director of tourism. We studied the secondary data available from these documents and also studied data for generic indicators for tourism in the state of Virginia like current

trends, travel data, and economic impact, available from the Virginia State Tourism Corporation (<http://www.vatc.org/research/index.asp>). In the second step, in March 2009, we set up in person in depth interviews in a focus group setting in the town of Abingdon. The members of this focus group comprised of several stakeholders of the town: the suppliers of tourism like the local theatre (Associate Director of Marketing, Barter Theater), the regional arts center (Director of William King Regional Art Center), the town recreation facility (Director of the Coomes Recreation Center) and representatives of the institutions providing support like tourism officials (Director of Tourism; Director of Visitor Center; and Sales Manager for Visitor Center) and the town planner (Director, Planning Department). The primary objective of the focus group interview setting was to understand the motivation and operation of the collaborative development and rejuvenation strategies of each entity. A sample of questions and discussion topics is provided in Appendix 1. In the third and final step, we studied the long-range comprehensive master plan for the town developed by the town planning commission which was frequently mentioned in the focus group interviews as the basis of several developmental initiatives. This strategic planning document is readily available to all residents of the town and is also posted on the town's website ([www.abingdon.com](http://www.abingdon.com)).

## **Description, findings, and discussion**

In this section we describe the salient features of the town of Abingdon in terms of its visitor profile, history, and economic development. We then trace the trajectory of growth over the last few years and describe the exogenous tourism demand and supply factors. Finally, we discuss the strategies adopted for long-term development and sustainable growth.

Most visitors to Virginia cite history, arts, and culture as the primary reason for their visit (Virginia Tourism Corporation). In line with this interest, Abingdon describes itself foremost as a historic town with a thriving art and culture scene, for example, its foremost document The Comprehensive Plan 2027, which also serves as one of the primary information sources for this study, the tag line is "Building on Arts and Culture for a Creative Sustainable Future".

### **VISITOR PROFILE**

According to the profile of leisure travel in VA 2007-8 (VA State Tourism Corporation) persons aged 45 and above accounted for 45% of visitors to VA, with 80% of household heads having had college education, and more than half of the visitors coming from Virginia and neighboring states of North Carolina and Maryland. In line with this pattern, Abingdon town officials described their typical visitors as "cultural tourists" (defined by Bachleitner, & Zins 1999, as movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place).

*"These tourists are retired or nearly retired, affluent (average annual income of US\$100,000), typically white, and generally from Virginia and the surrounding states like North Carolina, Maryland, DC, and Tennessee. Several of these visitors are pass-*

*ing through town on their way to other destinations and often plan to stay overnight to see a play at the State theatre. While the mature boomer (born before 1945) was most interested in the historic sites and the heritage of Abingdon "seeing sites", the baby boomers (those born between 1945-65) are more interested in activities that involve not only going to the theatre but also to learn art or craft, tour a winery, indulge in shopping and eating at different restaurants "doing things". Many of these boomers are also physically active and like to explore parks and go hiking, biking etc."*

(Focus group interview: representatives of visitor center and recreation center)

## **THE TOWN, HISTORY, AND LOCATION**

Abingdon is recognized as the oldest English speaking settlement west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was earlier known as Wolf Hills (1760s) and later, around 1770s, became known as Black's Fort and was incorporated as a town in Washington County in 1778.

While there was some damage to the town during the Civil war (1861-65), at present Abingdon is noted for its 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century dwellings, churches and commercial buildings which include several architectural styles as Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Bungalow and Tudor Revival. In addition to historic districts in town, there are several individually significant properties, including Sinking Spring Cemetery (1776), General Francis Preston Home/Martha Washington Inn (1832), William King School (1913) and Washington County Courthouse (1869).

It is the largest and most urbanized town within the county and is strategically located along Interstate 81 close to the Virginia-Tennessee-North Carolina state lines. It experienced considerable growth rates between 1900 and 1950 but after 1950, growth of the town slowed and decreased in the following decades. Currently the town has a population of about 8000 residents, with a median age of 42 years with 20% of the population over the age of 65. Abingdon thus attracts and retains retirees; people interested in history, art and culture<sup>1</sup>.

## **TOURISM, INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Most of the largest employers of the county are headquartered in Abingdon and Abingdon's existing business and economic development efforts focus on promoting tourism and revitalizing the town's commercial corridors and historic downtown because tourism and the arts and entertainment industries provide significant employment to the local community.

In 1989, to foster tourism, the town established the Abingdon Convention and Visitors Bureau and charged it with the mission to encourage and expand travel and tourism. The Center is headed by a full-time director, is adequately staffed and has seen more than a doubling of growth since its inception. The Bureau markets Abingdon as a visitor destination through advertising and tradeshow, and prepares brochures, promotional items and activities, to provide information to the public. The bureau

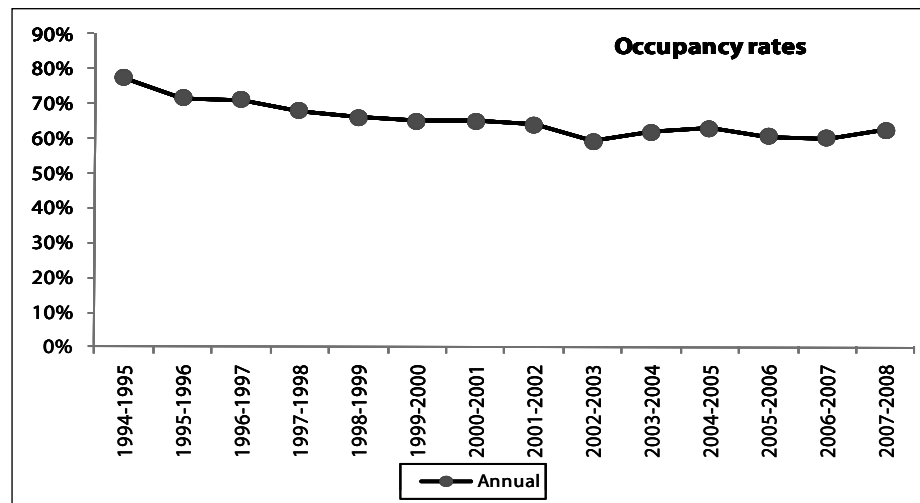
also promotes the town to tour operators interested in bringing groups to Abingdon, as well as to meeting planners interested in holding conventions and meetings in the town. In 2007, tourism generated over \$46.6 million in gross receivables revenue to businesses in town which resulted in over \$2.25 million in meals and lodging tax receipts to the town, of which a substantial portion was reinvested into the Abingdon Convention and Visitors Bureau emphasizing the importance of tourism to the town and the proactive stance of the town planners.

*"Town officials recognize the important role of tourism in the economy and they have deliberately committed resources to the Convention and Visitors Bureau in spite of difficult times due to the recession and budget cuts. The residents are also supportive of tourism because they end up paying lower property taxes due to income from tourism-related receipts".*

(Focus group interview: representatives of town planning commission and visitor center)

In addition to tax receipts, travel-generated payroll and jobs added substantially to the local economy. The Abingdon area currently offers numerous lodging establishments ranging from grand historic hotels to bed and breakfasts making available over 500 rooms at these facilities. While there has been growth in the number of rooms available, occupancy rates have fallen since the mid-1990s. Destination area life cycle is not a universal phenomenon, yet historic sites are facing a decline nationally due to reluctance to travel by an aging population which is a key visitor group interested in such sites. Abingdon has thus faced a steady decline in the growth in occupancy rates at its lodging facilities. Figure 2 depicts this trend as a function of changes in occupancy from 1994 to 2008.

Figure 2  
**CHANGES IN LODGING OCCUPANCY FROM 1994 TO 2008**



Source: Abingdon Visitor Bureau (February 2009).

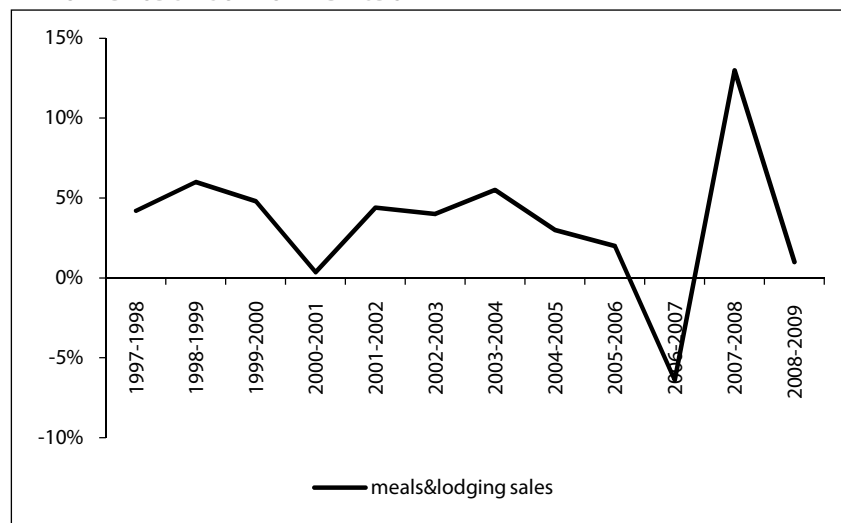


*"We are trying to make the town more accessible to visitors and rather than trying to attract Generation X'ers (those born between 1965 and 1980), who may not be very interested in historic places, we are trying to target the younger baby-boomers with activities that they can combine with visiting sites. We are definitely seeing fewer mature baby boomer visitors traveling now due to their increasing age and resultant decreasing mobility. Since our occupancy rates are down, we have seen our lodging facilities offer promotions---for the first time there are rooms available during NASCAR<sup>2</sup> weekend and hotels are relaxing the minimum two night stay rule".*

(Focus group interview: representatives of recreation center, visitors center, regional arts center))

Further analysis of the archival data on tourism related activities in the southwest area of Virginia, where Abingdon is located, reveals that although room supply increased by 2.7%, room demand declined almost 4% from 2007 to 2008, suggesting that there is a gap between the supply of lodging and the demand for it. However, during the same time period, the average room rates (ARR) of the region changed from \$76.98 to \$79.99 and the occupancy for the same time period declined by 6.6%. Average room rates (prices per room rented) for the state as a whole have increased from \$100.04 to \$102.69 per room, up 2.6% from the same 12-month period in 2007 (Smith Travel Research Lodging Report, 2008). The occupancy rate for the region was around 55.9% for 2007 and 52.3% for 2008, yet Abingdon achieved an occupancy rate of 62% for the time period of 2007-2008. This figure is still much lower than what it was in the mid 1990s. The average occupancy for lodging was slightly over 71.0% in the late 1990s and started showing decline in the early 2000. Because of increase in prices of meals and lodging, the gross receivables from meals and lodging in Abingdon showed an increase of 13% from 2007 to 2008. However, there was a visible and significant decline in gross receivables from 2006 to 2007 (Figure 3).

Figure 3  
**PERCENTAGE CHANGES IN GROSS RECEIVABLES FROM 1997 TO 2008:  
 MEALS AND LODGING SALES IN ABINGDON**



Source: STR (2008); www. vati. org (May2009).

This descriptive analysis of lodging figures and associated revenues suggests that a town like Abingdon, where there is strong and proactive stewardship and a variety of tourism product offerings (mostly culture, arts, heritage, nature based activities) and its being situated near two major interstates (77 and 81) which creates ease of access for transit visitors, mitigated the effect of the recent recession that bigger towns or cities may have not avoided. Even within the state and regional comparisons, Abingdon appeared to have been less severely affected by recession and the downturn of the economy.

## **EXOGENOUS DEMAND / SUPPLY SIDE FACTORS**

The Abingdon area offers more than 40 restaurants and over 100 retailers and shops which cater to tourists and locals. Among the major attractions are well- renowned facilities such as the Barter Theatre (so named because of barter system used to pay for entertainment; actors performed in exchange for fruit, vegetables, livestock, and other agricultural products) which serves as the State theater of Virginia, and is the primary tourist attraction; and Martha Washington Inn, which opened in 1835 and is today a luxury hotel. Other attractions include the Creeper Trail, Abingdon Train Depot, the Arts Depot, William King Regional Arts Center and many historic properties. A new Southwest Virginia Artisan Center is planned in Abingdon, intended to display arts and crafts from the area and act as a regional visitor center, representing Southwest Virginia.

In terms of events, Abingdon hosts several major festivals throughout the year. The largest of these is the Virginia Highlands Festival, which marked its 50th anniversary in 1998 and currently attracts more than 200,000 people during its 16-day celebration in early August. The festival is now billed as one of the top 100 tourist events in North America with an economic impact to Abingdon and the region estimated at \$75 million. Other popular festivals held in and around Abingdon include Over Mountain Victory Trail Celebration, Garden Tour of Homes, Downtown Christmas Celebration, Summer Concert Series, Plumb Alley Day, the Washington County Fair & Burley Tobacco Festival and numerous other holiday and seasonal celebrations.

Abingdon boasts of having one of the highest per capita funding for recreational facilities and programming of most communities its size. Residents and tourists have access to neighborhood and community parks, regional recreation areas including: the Virginia Creeper trail, South Holston Lake, the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Hidden Valley Wildlife Management Area, Clinch Mountain Wildlife Recreation Area among others. In 2007, the town also expanded the 48,000 square foot Coomes Recreation Center to include a multi-purpose gym, track, fitness areas, regulation-size pool, kitchen, meeting rooms, and specialized rooms for games, computers, etc. Outdoors, the facility also includes an Olympic-size outdoor pool, indoor pool, picnic areas, a skate park, tennis courts, amphitheatre, volleyball courts, walking trail and an outdoor play station, modeled after the one in Central Park, New York, NY.

In addition Abingdon is pursuing the goal of supporting a diverse mix of music and an access to farm fresh produce not only for town residents but also for the locally owned restaurants to provide an opportunity to offer local grown ingredients for chic dining and attract more visitors.

Of all the attractions and developments, the arts, culture and history of Abingdon have been the traditional foundation for the growth and development of the community and continue to contribute greatly to the town's quality of life and to its social and economic fabric. Most residents and tourists rate this identity as one of Abingdon's most important assets to be protected and enhanced for the future well-being of the town and the region. Town officials therefore plan and focus on building on the arts and culture of Abingdon in order to achieve a creative and sustainable future.

### **STRATEGIES AND LONG-TERM PLANNING FOR SUSTAINED DEVELOPMENT**

Due to the nature of the destination characteristics of Abingdon, its tourist profile and its location, Abingdon has not had the volatile drop in tourist numbers faced by other destinations as stated above. More importantly, Abingdon has a long-term plan and a strategy for its sustainable development as embodied in its comprehensive plan that focuses on its niche promotion as arts, culture and history destination. The vision of the Town of Abingdon, Virginia, Comprehensive Plan 2027 (2007, pp. 1-2) states

*"By 2027, Abingdon will be a charming, active, friendly, and healthy community with a rich history and vibrant future. Abingdon will be known as the Southwest Virginia capital for arts, culture and tourism. The arts, culture, and historic significance of the town will provide an exceptional foundation for a high quality of life that offers a wide diversity of economic, social and recreational opportunities. Abingdon will serve as the regional center for health, professional, government, and business operations. Abingdon will be a community where residents want to stay and visitors want to return. Abingdon's downtown will reflect the hospitality and energy of the town; it will display attractive and interesting architecture, a business-friendly atmosphere and offer unique living opportunities with pedestrian-friendly streets and a secure environment. Vibrant neighborhoods will provide residents with attractive and affordable housing that is convenient to services, and abundant with friendly neighbors."*

This proactive approach and stewardship orientation has paid dividends. Abingdon was named first place national winner of the "American Dream Town" competition in 2006 — a prestigious recognition that is bestowed on the town that dedicates itself to inspire Americans to celebrate their heritage, take pride in neighborhoods and promote tourism.

*"We are very proactive in our approach to tourism and often serve as a model to other small towns. While we do not benchmark our performance with other similar towns we learn from other small area destinations like Blowing Rock, North Carolina. We attend training sessions given by other states also to tourism officials, draw up alliances and advertise in city guides in neighboring states. We want to retain our unique historic identity*

*and have expanded our product portfolio while still capitalizing on our signature attraction of the Barter Theatre...*

*Moreover, we tend to work together and promote several attractions to the tourists at the same time".*

(Focus group interview: representatives of visitor center and Barter theater)

Not only is the town institutional infrastructure cognizant of the need for sustainable development of attractions but plans are in place for supporting infrastructure like telecommunications and wireless access, air, road and rail connectivity, pedestrian accessibility, green initiatives and provision of libraries, health and human services that form the resident-oriented products which may be consumed by tourists who stay for an extended time period.

While strategic planning by the town of Abingdon has been recently undertaken, it should be followed with flexibility and a market-orientation. Plans do not anticipate economic volatility, nor do they always anticipate non-economic rationales. For e.g. the owners of the boutique antique shops that are the mainstay of Main Street and an important attraction often do not keep regular open hours. Tourism officials stated that several of these retail establishments were operated as "life-style businesses" and were not operated as a means of income generation or as a means of livelihood for the owners, and hence these shops opened and closed at will, often times disappointing visitors to Barter Theater who like to browse through these shops before the show commenced.

Stokes (2008) advocates a stakeholder approach to tourism planning and it bears mention that Abingdon's tourism advisory board consists of several community stakeholders that represent not only various suppliers of tourism related amenities but also town council and economic development officials. Likewise tourism officials are tied to the town governing body resulting in two way flow of information and ideas necessary for innovative solutions to emerging trends.

## Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to demonstrate that destination management strategies can be successful in sustaining growth and countering the inevitable decline phase of the TALC. There is a need for compatibility between the destination offerings and the demand of a tourism enterprise and Abingdon appears to have accomplished this over the years.

It is well understood that for tourism to be successfully supported and sustained in an area that is heavily tourism dependent on its economic viability and existence, proper planning and development must occur. Proper planning and development would also include involving all necessary stakeholders and entities that will have an impact on the production and consumption of tourism goods and services. Necessary stakeholders and entities with institutional support capabilities include local law/policy mak-

ers, the local community – residents and government, regional planners, and, suppliers of tourism goods and services, tourism advisory board, and any other body that will be affected by the tourism business activities. Although a community cooperation strategy may be an effective avenue of promoting tourism, it is a complex and difficult process (Wang, 2008; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & van Es, 2001). If collaboration and alliances are forged correctly i.e., all entities are in accordance, then the area would have the synergy and leverage to sustain its tourism activities in a way that would generate positive benefits for all. This seems to be the case in Abingdon where destination management organizations work in tandem to promote the town. However if appropriate institutional support and planning are not provided, tourism will probably not positively continue to evolve and sustain itself.

A small town like Abingdon goes through different phases of development and planning, the nature of its carrying capacity - social or physical - can greatly affect the degree to which tourism is successful and can continue to generate much anticipated economic and social benefits to the members of the community while protecting and preserving the local identity and a strong sense of place. Social carrying capacity refers to the "limits of local tolerance" of tourism. Local residents want to see "desirable" outcomes from the tourism traffic. Certain areas will only be able to withstand so much tourism and its associated traffic. Once this limit is reached, tourism begins to have negative effects on an area. Other areas will be able to handle large amounts of tourists, such as Orlando, FL, for example. Orlando can withstand great amounts of tourism, and it continues to do so; no negative impact on the area has been observed to date. For small town destinations like Abingdon to be successful in tourism and yet to maintain a community cohesion, they need to monitor structural changes in their communities and gauge use levels of tourist activities on a regular basis.

While economic development is generally the responsibility of a local jurisdiction, involvement in tourism development by local constituents serves to maintain focus on not exceeding social carrying capacity. While the guidelines set forth for *socially sensitive tourism development* assure observance of this issue, this idea calls into question the impact and/or acceleration of a destination life cycle when these objectives are prioritized. They are probably very effective when in place to preserve natural resources and attractions, especially to the extent that local residents are positioned to benefit collectively as well as individually from the positive economic impact. To the extent that constraints pose a limitation on the tourist experience, it could impose a diminishing return on the development of tourism as a revenue producing industry. In many areas an inverse relationship exists between what a local population can and will tolerate and what tourists perceive as a worthwhile experience. The "irritation index" as described by Doxey (1976) would be a way to measure or quantify this. In general tourism is looked upon favorably when compared to other industries. It is important for local residents to fully understand how a tourism sector is of benefit in order to develop an appropriate and realistic tolerance for its social impact. So far from what is observed, Abingdon does not seem to have reached this stage of "irritation". Rather, destination management organizations in Abingdon market tourist products specifically to

local residents itself; in fact there is a regular system of email postings to the residents keeping them informed of all happenings around town. This kind of close community communication not only draws local residents to participate in tourist events, but also fosters a pride in residents of the attractiveness of their town.

It is clear that different destinations will be in different stages of TALC at different times. The framework of the TALC notes that consumers are heterogeneous; most persons want something different from the next person. And yet, the length and duration of stages is not determined by the TALC framework, and varies not only by tastes of tourists but the characteristics of leaders, strategies followed by governments, and unforeseen events (Da Conceicao Goncalvas, & Aguas, 1997). At the same time, tourist locations are not stagnant in nature. Their "life" can be extended through management and marketing strategies that introduce new uses or reasons to visit a location: new uses, more satisfying opportunities for the visitor and looking for ways to diversify users. Direct and indirect competition plays a role in marketing as locations seek to beat out each other. This process helps keep the locations remain competitive and from getting stagnant.

Tourism area planners thus need to keep an open-mind and stay focused on the task at hand to remaining competitive. Attention to comprehensive land use, planning for development, offering a portfolio of tourist attractions, close community engagement and communication, collaboration among destination management organizations and, most importantly, resource commitment and support from local authorities, are strategies that have helped Abingdon face the economic downturn and the mature stage of its life cycle. These strategies are transferrable to other small towns which must differentiate and compete with established and larger destinations than themselves. Comprehensive future planning will require everyone to broaden his or her thinking to include new and innovative ways to maintain competitiveness.

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#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Information gathered from marketing brochures and Abingdon & Washington County Community Profile.

<sup>2</sup> NASCAR stands for National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing. It is the largest sanctioning body of stock car racing in the United States and is claimed to be the number one spectator sport in the U.S. For more information see [www.nascar.com](http://www.nascar.com)

## Appendix 1

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### OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION

How has the tourism profile of Abingdon changed over the last 10 years? What do you see in the changed customer profile, amount of expenditures, length of stay, and occupancy rates?

How have your definable products and services changed over the years?

What strategies are you pursuing to develop Abingdon to retain and attract visitors?

Do you benchmark your performance against other similar tourist attractions? If so which town is your model?

What are the obstacles in destination development that you are facing currently?

What role do the different agencies play in tourism development?

How far have you reached in terms of your implementation of the 2027: Comprehensive Plan?

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