



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

TOURISM CENTER

Tourism Development in Waseca, Minnesota

Tourism Assessment Program findings and recommendations
Study, 2020-2022

Authored by DeeDee LeMier, Jennifer Hawkins, and Xinyi Qian



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March 3, 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nestled in the farm fields of southern Minnesota, Waseca is a community offering a combination of farm, lake, and small-town charm to visitors and residents of the region. Tourism assets such as Clear Lake, a bustling network of boutiques, and agritourism attractions provide visitors with opportunities to experience a slower pace travel experience, with a wide range of activities. The strong presence of agriculture and related businesses in the community has preserved its small-town quaintness, including the slower tempo on Sundays, when many downtown businesses are traditionally closed. On the weekends, amenities such as Clear Lake, the waterpark, and agritourism businesses are top-rated attractions and are valued by visitors and residents.

Agriculture and lake recreation creates a unique dichotomy in navigating around tourism. The agricultural roots and present-day reality impact the visitor experience in significant ways. On the one hand, there are assets like the local pizza farm and Farmamerica to attract tourism. On the other hand, agricultural processing, transportation, and business hours create friction with tourism development. Similarly, the lakes provide significant recreational opportunities while also shaping traffic patterns at other tourism destinations, needing equipment to access the lakes, and requiring the public investment of time and resources to maintain and improve water quality.

Several themes emerged through community surveys, in-person meetings, and expert visits to Waseca. These include elevating Clear Lake as a community asset, building visibility of activities and dining around town, and building relationships within the Waseca community. Each theme has challenges and opportunities for the community to navigate. Additionally, there are opportunities that are best suited for formal leaders in the community to address, some that community members will need to support through time and participation, and others that require ongoing support and collaboration with local, regional, and state agencies and partners.

Theme 1: Elevating Clear Lake as a community asset

A significant theme emerged around Clear Lake. Located on the east side of Waseca, the lake is approximately 650 acres, with a maximum depth of 34 feet. The shoreline has a low sloping elevation, and there are public roadways, two public access ramps, and walking paths around the lake. These features give the lake significant public value and make it vulnerable to environmental and user impacts. Survey data and community input indicate a disconnect between resident perspectives and tourism experiences of the lake. The Kite Festival, part of the Sleigh and Cutter event, held in February 2022 is an excellent example of programming that promotes the lake as an attraction while allowing residents to experience it in a new way.

Theme 2: Building visibility of activities and dining around town

Residents and visitors both identified a desire to better understand what is happening in town. As a volunteer group, Discover Waseca Tourism (DWT) has limited resources to address these concerns, which makes community calendars, signage, and other visual and technical tools key to address this challenge. Community organizations such as the Waseca Public Library and the Arts Center were also highlighted by both community and expert visitors as strong partners to explore further development of visual markers of community vibrancy. Public art, signage, murals, and lighting are improvements that build value for both audiences.



Theme 3: Building relationships within the Waseca community and with neighboring communities

Finally, a theme emerged from the community meeting and survey highlighting the need for welcoming residents of all ages to Waseca. The sentiments expressed by community members showed concern that young people move away from the community, that long-term residents feel like outsiders, and concern about the political climate are meaningful disclosures for community members to share. Expert visitors also noted concern around signage and cultural markers that may be understood differently by visitors from diverse backgrounds. Combined, these insights bring to light the need to build relationships and connections within the community and with visitors. Relationship building is a continuing process and shared community responsibility and commitment to each other. As a community organization, the Discover Waseca Tourism group is well-positioned to help connect residents and extend the invitation to visitors. Other organizations mentioned in the survey process, such as the Waseca Public Library, History Center, Community Foundation, and others will be critical partners in this work.

Near-term Recommendations

1. Develop a restaurant guide for residents by leveraging technology to connect through SMS text, QR codes, and email newsletters.
2. Promote resident engagement with lake activities, especially early in the season. Co-sponsoring fishing opener events, or other early season activities, combined with media campaigns, can help residents connect with the lake at peak times for water quality.
3. Build relationships with lodging facilities to directly support their immediate business needs for the 2022 summer season.
4. Continue providing funding for new event development through Discover Waseca Tourism.
5. Support funding initiatives to renovate the downtown park and restroom facilities.

Mid-term Recommendations

1. Promote restaurant links through QR codes incorporated into event promotion, specialty shop flyers, and other co-sponsored marketing opportunities.
2. Invite youth to engage with event and tourism development opportunities. Provide funding, coaching, and support to encourage youth and young adult leadership of tourism programs. Examples may include waterpark “after hours” events for under-21, music and film festivals, water quality initiatives, etc.
3. Fund downtown art and signage initiatives to add vibrancy and visibility to downtown. Examples include vinyl decals, banners, new awnings, paint, etc. Longer-range projects could include stamped sidewalk poetry, murals, or mosaics in the downtown core.
4. On-going support of the off-gassing project at the local plant to address air-quality issues.
5. Support the development of low-barrier lodging options such as short-term rentals, bed and breakfasts, and alternate lodging options.
6. Local agritourism trail development to connect breweries, the local pizza farm, and Farmamerica facilities.

Long-term Recommendations

1. Festival and event leadership transition planning for legacy events like the Sleigh and Cutter Festival.
2. Work to attract a new hotel facility to the community.
3. Build and maintain relationships with regional attractions and tourism entities.
4. Support community development activities, such as a Blooming Alleys project, that weave together beautification projects with neighborhood-relationship building efforts. These projects support both residents and visitor experiences.

PROJECT TIMELINE

The City of Waseca contracted with the University of Minnesota Tourism Center to guide a Tourism Assessment of assets and opportunities. The 12-month Tourism Assessment Program gathered input from the community, experts, and visitors to provide a 360-degree snapshot of current tourism in Waseca and identify opportunities for the community to enhance and/or expand its tourism offerings. The process, timeline, and activities are summarized below.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Fall 2019 | Discover Waseca Tourism (DWT) Committee identified a need for assistance in identifying opportunities for tourism development. |
| February 2020 | University of Minnesota Extension Tourism Center staff met with the DWT committee to discuss tourism goals, a program timeline, and a process for completing the asset inventories. **The COVID-19 pandemic altered the timeline of the Tourism Assessment.** |
| Summer 2021 | Tourism Assessment Program launched. The DWT Committee coordinated and conducted community and business surveys online, using their social media, email, and local media to raise awareness and gather survey submissions. |
| September 2021 | Expert Team visit and community gathering was held. |
| January 2022 | Select individuals representing current or potential visitor markets made mystery visits to the community to assess tourism from a visitor perspective. |
| February 2022 | Data gathered during the project was coupled with research compiled by the Tourism Center on tourism trends and information provided by the City of Waseca. |
| April 2022 | Assessment findings were shared with the DWT committee via a community presentation. |
| Spring 2022 | Final report published. |



TOURISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR WASECA

U.S. Travel Association defines tourism as “... a trip away from home overnight in paid accommodations or on a day or overnight trip to places 50 miles or more [one-way] away from home.” This most-widely accepted definition of tourism aligns with the goal of destination management organizations (DMOs) to generate overnight stays and provides the specific criteria of measurable distance, time, and the inclusion of paid lodging. It does not, however, specify the trip purpose. Top leisure travel activities for U.S. domestic travel include (1) visiting relatives; (2) shopping; (3) visiting friends; (4) fine dining; and (5) rural sightseeing.

According to independent research by Destination Analysts (Feb 2021), more than half (53.0%) of American travelers are interested in “visiting new places they hadn’t been to before,” and 56.2% said that “enjoying nature would be an essential or high priority to them.” Additionally, family travel topped all other options when asked what trip types they were excited about in 2022. In fact, 76.2% said that family experience would be either an essential or a high priority.

Day-trippers are an essential segment of visitors for many communities, including Waseca. At the crossroads of Highways 13 and 14, and within 90 minutes of the Twin Cities, the geographic location of Waseca positions it well for tourism. Many of the community’s tourism assets currently lend themselves to day-trippers from the Twin Cities. Attractions such as Clear Lake, the waterpark, boutiques, and events like the Sleigh & Cutter Festival draw day-trippers who spend money in the community. While day-trippers are a part of Waseca tourism, it is not the goal to compete for day-trippers’ as a long-term strategy. Exploring ways to convert day-trippers to future overnight stays, while continuing to promote attractions and events, would be a more comprehensive approach.

Minnesota and Regional Tourism

Tourism is a major industry in Minnesota and encompasses many sectors of the economy, including hospitality, recreation, transportation, retail, and second homes. In 2019, tourism generated \$16.6 billion in gross sales, \$6.4 billion in wages, and more than 275,000 full- and part-time jobs, accounting for 11% of private-sector employment (*Explore Minnesota Tourism*, 2021).

Minnesota’s tourism activities occur throughout the year, offering different opportunities for visitors. Close to 40% of travel expenditures took place in summer (June–August), followed by 25% in fall (September–November), 24% in winter (December–February), and 14% in spring (March–May). (*Explore Minnesota Tourism*, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic made physical distancing and low-population density is necessary, driving travelers to consider taking a trip outside of the busy summer season. Therefore, we may observe more active shoulder seasons, which would be positive for the usually slow spring season.

Tourism and the Local Economy

Data regarding tourism activity in Waseca is most reliably available at the county level. As Waseca is the county seat, and the largest city in Waseca County, this level of data is a meaningful indicator of economic activity in the community. According to *Explore Minnesota Tourism*, Waseca County received more than \$18.5 million in gross sales and more than \$1.2 million in state sales from tourism in 2019 (*Explore Minnesota Tourism*, 2020).

Average employment in agriculture, manufacturing and government services in Waseca County is significantly higher than the national average. The county's rural setting supports strong agricultural activity and a long history of innovation and manufacturing. Increased government-sector employment is due to a prison facility located in the City of Waseca.

Tourism-related employment falls below national averages in accommodation, miscellaneous retailers (including gift shops), food and beverage, recreation, and performing arts (EMSI data). The number of jobs is correlated with lower-average wages, likely reflecting some of the seasonal nature of tourism in the area and the part-time nature of many tourism-related jobs.

Two categories are above the national average among the businesses serving the tourism industry. The first is gasoline stations, likely supported by the strong agricultural sector in the county. Mobile data from the Kite Festival event also points to tourists stopping at gas stations before or after visiting a community event. Beyond the apparent fuel purchases, this may also be related to the low volume of dining choices on Sundays, the day of the week the event was held.

The museum, historic sites, and similar institutions were the second category with a higher number of jobs than the national average. As the number of jobs is higher than average, at only ten positions, wage data is not available. Attractions such as museums and historic sites are necessary resources for Waseca to leverage growing tourism. This was echoed by both Expert Visitor's impressions and experiences at local museums in the City of Waseca which was supported by community members' interests and priorities for tourism growth.

Reviewing the economic data around tourism in Waseca County confirms the community's perceptions of tourism in the area. While there are infrastructure and attraction assets, ongoing shortages of lodging, dining, and retail activities limit the economic impact of tourism. As new opportunities are considered, investments in business categories that serve the core needs of travelers, such as food and lodging, will be essential to address.

Tourism Structure in Waseca

Tourism marketing efforts in Waseca are championed by the Discover Waseca Tourism (DWT) board and administered by the Waseca Chamber of Commerce. The DWT Board organizes its work into sector-based teams, including a team to promote tourism. Each of these teams is composed of business owners and volunteers, with at least one member from DWT serving on the board. Chamber staff, including the Executive Director and marketing staff, support tourism marketing activities on behalf of DWT.

Community members specifically highlighted the leadership of the tourism board as an asset for Waseca, which speaks highly of the community's confidence in their work. Community leaders have also identified ongoing tourism development needs in the Vision2030 planning documents and the hotel feasibility study, completed in 2017.

Vision2030 suggested the city "Become a 'Destination Location.'" Tactics included:

- *Develop a parks, recreation, and tourism master plan to identify the development of events, activities, and recreational opportunities to draw visitors from the region.*
- *Create development plans for Maplewood Park and Northwest Nature Park to transform them into regional recreational attractions.*
- *Develop and invest in plans to address water quality issues at Clear Lake and add water-based activities to attract visitors and local investment.*




- *Encourage the development of Waseca’s image as a ‘Destination Location’ in the region, using the results of the Strategic Plan’s new marketing and branding initiative.*

In addition to DWT, community organizations represent vital community tourism assets, including the Waseca Public Library and the Arts Center. These organizations were mentioned in the community meeting, survey, and by the expert visitors. Each of the respective organizations has advisory boards and volunteers who may benefit from cross-pollination efforts and ideas. Given the intimate nature of the community size, a collaboration between networks and boards will likely be needed to build volunteer and attendee engagement.

Due to the pandemic, Waseca tourism leaders have navigated a tumultuous market and require additional community support to rebuild and reimagine tourism in Waseca. While financial support is meaningful, it will be the efforts of community members who contribute their time and talents to help the community find success in this new era of tourism. As a volunteer board, DWT relies on community members to see the importance of tourism to their community and contribute their time and talents. Several factors may restrain volunteers’ availability, including the volume of residents who commute long distances for their work, have young children, or are of retirement age. While not alone in navigating these demographic trends, these constraints need to be considered when deciding how to grow tourism through events and promotion activities.

SCAN OF ONLINE TRAVEL PLANNING RESOURCES

An assessment of the online presence for Waseca tourism was performed in the Spring of 2020 and Fall 2021. The evaluation included accessing search engines, tourism websites, and related social media to mirror the planning behaviors of prospective travelers.



SITES REVIEWED
www.discoverwaseca.com
www.wasecachamber.com
www.ci.waseca.mn.us
www.exploreminnesota.com



SOCIAL MEDIA SITES REVIEWED
 Discover Waseca Facebook
 Discover Waseca Instagram
 City of Waseca Facebook
 Chamber of Commerce Facebook
 Chamber of Commerce Twitter
 Chamber of Commerce Instagram

Observations

- The Discover Waseca Tourism website does not appear on the first page in a Google search of “Waseca.”

- The Discover Waseca Tourism (<https://discoverwaseca.com/>) information on the website is outdated and difficult to navigate. For example, Lau's Market is now Morgan's Meat Market, and a few shops are not listed in the shopping category; for instance, Pippi Lane Boutique. Nothing was listed on the events calendar: <https://discoverwaseca.com/community/calendar/>, An increasing number of travelers are finding destination information online, which makes an accurate web presence critically important to attracting and serving visitors.
- Potential visitors may benefit from additional content related to recreation and attractions. For example, an online/interactive map of locations of trails/parks and the availability of recreational equipment rentals are helpful details to promote.
- Select images presented on the Discover Waseca website could have been more appealing. For example, there is inconsistent sizing of cover images under the "What to Do" tab and low-resolution images under the "Gallery" tab.
- Discover Waseca Tourism has a presence on Instagram ([@wasecatourism](https://www.instagram.com/wasecatourism)) with over 150 followers. However, there have been no posts, and the weblink is invalid. This seems to be a significant missed opportunity to promote Waseca as a tourism destination and to engage community members in promoting and sharing assets.
- Discover Waseca Tourism has a Facebook page ([@discoverwasecatourism](https://www.facebook.com/discoverwasecatourism)) with over 1,000 followers, but posts are sporadic and there has been minimal information about upcoming events.
- The Explore Minnesota webpage has embedded social media posts that Waseca has been tagged in. A search of this website revealed that Waseca appeared in many stories. However, the Sleigh and Cutter festival was not listed on the list of upcoming activities (searched in September 2021). The only event listed for Waseca was the Farmamerica pumpkin patch celebration.

Positive Impressions

- Mobile view of the Discover Waseca site is easy to navigate
- Organic use of #mywaseca is strong on Twitter and Instagram; the hashtag can be more focused and further leveraged
- City page gives concise & helpful updates for residents
- "The Specialty Shops of Waseca" Facebook page promotes local shops
- Positive Chamber of Commerce Facebook reviews

Areas for Improvement

- Discover Waseca Tourism posts sporadically (almost daily, then not for a month)
- Pages don't repost each other's content
- City of Waseca Twitter has not been active since 2015
- Negative Facebook reviews for the City of Waseca

Insights

Discover Waseca Tourism has an online presence. However, opportunities abound to enhance the visibility and usability of the website and social media tools. DWT is utilizing appropriate resources through Explore MN to promote Waseca as a tourism destination. Highlighted attractions align with observed strengths of community tourism assets, as perceived by the community (via the community survey) and observed by the expert visitors. As further investments are made in marketing materials, it will be important to make sure that the online branding feels authentic to the guest experience in town.



Recommendations

Short-term:

- Enhance search engine optimization for the Discover Waseca Tourism website so it appears on the first page of Google search results

Long-term:

- Consider replacing online lists with maps or interactive features so it's easy for a visitor to plan their experience with shopping, food, and recreation.
- Increase and enhance the use of social media including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms focus on visual content which may help Discover Waseca Tourism to reach and appeal to a broader audience.
- Curate day trips for target demographics (e.g., girls' weekend, boys' weekend, family fun, romantic picnic and beach, etc.) and provide information on DWT website.

COMMUNITY SURVEYS

Community Member Survey

An online community survey was available to all residents. The Extension team reviewed and analyzed 75 completed and submitted responses for themes and insights.

Community members indicated the goals they see for tourism development in Waseca as primarily related to encouraging a more vital and active local economy and increased employment. Secondary priorities focused on how tourism would improve the appearance of the town and local quality of life. Tertiary goals revolved around natural resources, increasing or improving parks and recreation, and preserving local natural protected areas.

Waseca has a variety of publicly-owned assets that can be used to draw more tourists to the community. Tourism assets identified by the respondents are summarized in Table 1 below. Other ideas related to tourism development that emerged in the survey included the development of a splash pad and resurrecting a summer festival.

Thirty percent of respondents specifically highlighted lakes as an asset to be developed; further this increased to 40 percent when looking at lakes and park development combined. One respondent summed it up as "The lakes are our biggest asset and should be improved and maintained, Maplewood [Park] is an almost hidden gem and should be used more, especially in winter." Other positive themes emerged around the small-town aesthetic and variety available in retail shops.

Areas for improvement related to tourism included water quality of the lake, welcoming attitude and culture, quality and quantity of visitor accommodations, retail store hours, and an increased variety of food and entertainment options.

| Category | Description | Ownership | Drawing Power | Available |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Cultural or Historic | Waseca history | Public | State or multi-state (101-300 miles) | Year-round |

| | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|------------------|
| | Arts and culture-related events - band festival, concerts in the park, Chautauqua | Public | State or multi-state (101-300 miles) | June-September |
| | The railroad | Private | National or international (more than 301 miles) | Year-round |
| Natural or scenic | The lake [Clear Lake] | Public | Unknown | Year-round |
| | Courthouse Park | Public | Local (within 50 miles) | Year-round |
| Recreational | Maplewood Park | Public | Local (within 50 miles) | Year-round |
| | Canoe and Kayak Rentals | Public | Regional (50-100 miles) | June-September |
| Special event | Waseca County Fair | Public | Regional (50-100 miles) | July |
| | Pond Hockey Tournament | Private | State or multi-state (101-300 miles) | January-February |
| | Huber Hilltop Farm | Private | Regional (50-100 miles) | Year-round |
| | Band Festival | Public | State or multi-state (101-300 miles) | June-October |
| | Fishing tournaments | Public | Regional (50-100 miles) | Year-round |
| Other | County Fairgrounds | Public | Regional (50-100 miles) | April-September |

Business Survey

An online survey was sent to Waseca area businesses through the Chamber of Commerce to gather their insights related to tourism development in the community. Eighteen firms completed the survey. Table 2 illustrates responses by sector.

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----|
| Service | 7 | 32% |
| Professional | 6 | 27% |
| Medical Services | 3 | 14% |
| Other | 3 | 14% |
| Retail Sales | 2 | 9% |
| Attraction and Entertainment | 1 | 5% |

Fifty-eight percent of 18 firms who responded said tourism was somewhat or very important to the success of their business. Half are currently distributing local brochures highlighting local attractions to customers and just under half (45 percent) indicated they would be willing to participate financially in local or regional tourism promotion.

We also inquired about what types of marketing activities firms use to promote their business. One hundred percent are using the internet and about 50 percent are using radio, newspapers, or brochures.

When asked about new business development needs, the top responses were: (1) entertainment and recreation, (2) food and restaurants, and (3) accommodations. Table 3 documents all responses.

Table 3: Recommended New Businesses

| | Number of responses | Percent of total responses |
|--|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Recreation and Entertainment | 12 | 21% |
| Food and restaurant | 11 | 19% |
| Accommodation | 10 | 17% |
| Retail | 9 | 16% |
| Manufacturing | 8 | 14% |
| Other (grocery, health insurance broker, professional office, service, medical services) | 6 | 10% |

When asked about which community attractions should be further developed, recreation and trails, water attractions, and festivals ranked at the top. Table 4 provides a summary of all responses.

| Table 4: Recommended Further Development of Tourist Attractions | | |
|--|---------------------|----------------------------|
| | Number of responses | Percent of total responses |
| Recreation and Trails | 16 | 26% |
| Festivals | 10 | 16% |
| Water Attractions | 10 | 16% |
| Historic Attractions | 8 | 13% |
| Cultural Attractions | 8 | 13% |
| Museums | 3 | 5% |
| Arts | 3 | 5% |
| Convention Center | 2 | 3% |
| Amusement Park | 1 | 2% |

Businesses were asked a series of questions regarding their attitudes toward tourism. Overall, they have a very positive outlook to bring additional tourism to Waseca.

- One hundred percent strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “Tourism encourages investment in our local economy.”
- One hundred percent strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “The overall benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts.”
- Ninety five percent of respondents strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “We should encourage more tourists to come to our area.”
- Eighty three percent strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “Tourism would help our community grow in the ‘right’ direction.”
- Seventy seven percent strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “Tourism increases civic pride.”
- Seventy seven percent strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement “The community should develop a plan to manage tourism growth.” The remaining neither agree nor disagree.

Insights

Among citizens, respondents see value in tourism for the local economy and job creation.

Among businesses, there appears to be support and enthusiasm for growing tourism in Waseca. There is an opportunity to leverage and increase that support with targeted activities. Of particular interest is the willingness of responding firms to invest financially in tourism promotion.

Businesses and citizens expressed the need to preserve, promote, and expand both natural assets and events. These add to the quality of life for residents and attract tourists to the community.

Recommendations

Short-term

- Convene businesses interested in tourism promotion to identify specific opportunities for increased collaboration and coordination (e.g., joint marketing, special events, etc.).

Long-term

- Work with the city and other stakeholders to pursue lake cleanup.
- Explore additional opportunities for special events that leverage Waseca's assets.
- Engage more businesses in funding and execution of tourism promotion.



EXPERT VISITOR FINDINGS

A seven-person expert team visited Waseca for two days in late September 2021 to conduct in-person assessments, participate in the community meeting, and meet with the Community Leadership team. Expert team members were invited based on Waseca's tourism interests and included representation from a range of organizations. In addition to staff from the University of Minnesota Tourism Center and Extension Center for Community Vitality, the expert team included partners from Renewing the Countryside, Rethos, Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, and the Regional Extension Office. The pandemic did limit involvement in the program by several tourism organizations not able to travel due to organization-level travel restrictions.

Expert team visitors represented several different travel patterns, with a blend of overnight and day-trip visitors. During their visit to Waseca, expert visitors dined at restaurants, visited parks and area attractions, and sought out unique features of the community. Observations were shared by the expert visit team about the community's assets, services/infrastructure, and appearance and overall visitor experience.

Observations

Lodging Options a Limiting Factor in Tourism Development

Prior to the visit to Waseca, the tourism leadership had shared that the limited number of lodging facilities in town does impact events held in the community, business travel, and conferences. Overnight accommodations in Waseca are available at a hotel, a motel, two bed and breakfasts, and seasonal camping properties. At the time of this report, there were no known VRBO or Airbnb properties in Waseca.

Beyond their direct experience in Waseca, expert visitors were also surveyed about their typical lodging preferences when traveling. Common responses included Airbnb, unique hotels or properties, and camping, with 55 percent of responses emphasizing a preference for unique experiences in leisure travel.

Expert visitors were able to see some of the available accommodations during their visit, with many staying overnight. While there is a broad range of types of properties available, each category has only one property, except for bed and breakfasts, which Waseca has two. The expert visit team shared their perception that the range of available lodging options was a limitation to growing tourism.

Clear Lake Recreation Opportunities Exceed Expectations

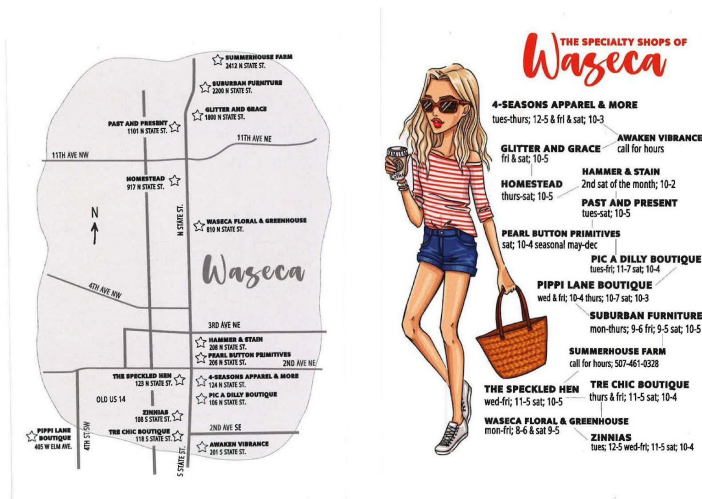
The expert visitors consistently gave Clear Lake high marks for the potential for tourism development. Facilities at the lakefront were surprising, with the trail and parks all standing out in the visitor's comments. Especially noteworthy were the high-quality signs placed on the trails, with thoughtful QR codes directing visitors to the Discover Waseca Tourism website. Dog waste bags were readily available, along with parking to access the trails.

Amenities such as boat rentals, lakeside dining, and hiking trails were not easily identifiable for tourists and warrant more promotion. Visitors were not able to identify ways to rent equipment to access the extensive biking trails and expressed interest in encouraging visitors to bring bicycles or renting bikes, scooters, or related equipment to encourage longer visits.

The Mix of Boutiques and Shopping Notable

The local shopping available in Waseca was a surprising highlight for the expert team, and stood out as a strong asset, especially for the size of the community. The variety of stores appealed to a wide

range of customers, and the shared marketing materials encouraged making several stops in town. Across marketing materials, community comments, and visitor notes, “boutique” was consistently used to describe the mix of shops.



The predominant product mix of housewares and women's clothing received positive feedback from visitors. Strong scents at some locations and lack of coffee or cafe options may limit groups that have mixed interest in shopping. Additionally, the product assortment across the boutiques did not include many local items. Given the strength of agricultural and local art, it was seen as surprising by the expert visitors. One visitor noted that the easiest way to see local goods was to travel to a local community for a maker's event, as advertised at a boutique. It was found to be challenging to purchase any gifts that were made in Waseca or that had Waseca logos, apart from the art center.

Limited Options for Meeting Basic Visitor Needs

Feedback was consistent across the expert team regarding the need to provide for basic visitor needs, including public restrooms, potable water, and food during travel to Waseca. Public restrooms were available at city parks but were not available in downtown Waseca. In the case of the downtown walkway, the public restrooms were locked and looked foreboding. These needs are urgent for the community to address, both by having facilities available for daily visitors and including portable restrooms, water, and food vendors for events where adequate facilities are not currently available.

Unique Cultural Touchstones and Traditions are an Opportunity

Expert visitors noted several traditions, events, and historical moments unique to Waseca. Balancing community history with fresh perspectives and ideas is a delicate balance. Referencing these cultural touchstones in the development of new and renewed events is strongly recommended. Ideas such as hobby horse races, film festivals, or Cool-Whip sculpture events were suggested by the Expert Team and are a small sample of how these unique touchstones can spark exciting, innovative attractions, and events.

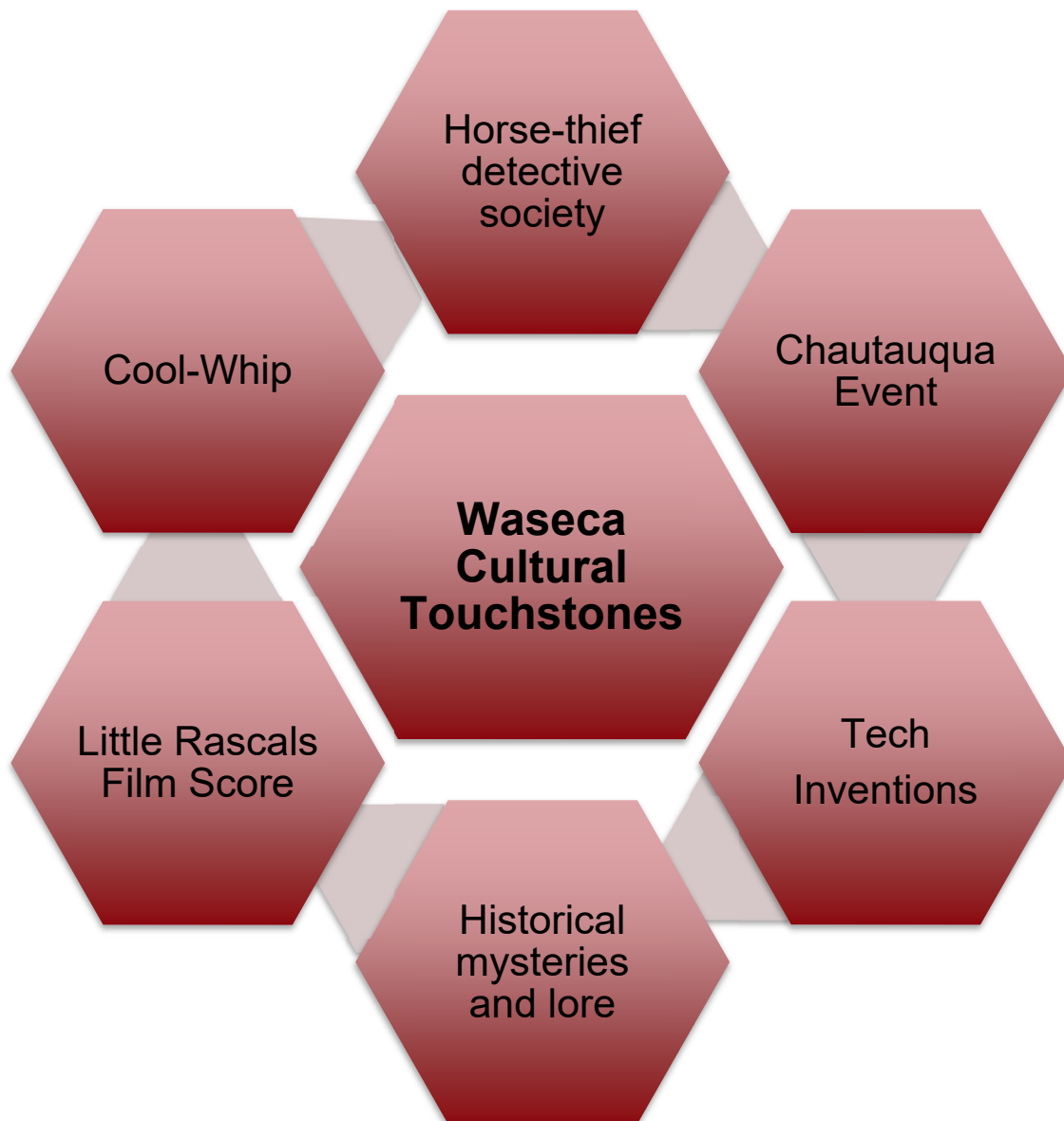


FIG. 3: Waseca Cultural Touchstones

EXPERT VISITOR FINDINGS

In addition to the community visit in September, additional visitors traveled to Waseca in unannounced visits to explore the community and share feedback. Visitors shared very positive impressions of the community overall and strongly aligned with the predominant themes that surfaced throughout the project. The boutiques, coffee shops, and restaurants received positive remarks, with all visitors expressing a welcome surprise at the variety and quality of the options. Visitors had strong customer service experiences and found lots of options of activities in the community.

Positive Impressions

“Waseca has a great main street with a variety of food and shopping options.”

“The Latino community has a presence right on main street as well, making the diversity of Waseca uniquely present.”

“It seems like the perfect size for a day trip or weekend visit.”

“Home-town vibe.”

“It is impressive (and surprising) that Waseca has this level of boutique & specialty shopping.”

“Waseca has exceptional shopping experiences for a town of its size.”

Opportunities

“There is room for better lodging that reflects the uniqueness and size of Waseca.”

“A boutique hotel would be great!”

“We were disappointed that the historical society was closed during the weekend. It was top of our list.”

“An increase in art like murals on walls could help attract more stops [downtown].”

“Empowering Spanish speaking business owners to be a visitors hub for Latino tourists could be a good option.”

“All that is missing is better and accessible lodging!”

“Hotels are the biggest opportunity in my opinion.”

“Public art, hotel improvements or VRBO opportunities, live music at venues every weekend, drink & shop events.”



MOBILE DATA FINDINGS

During the expert team visit, it became clear that the perception that community members have about the lakes in Waseca was very different than the expert team. The expert team saw Clear Lake as a significant strength, while the community members expressed apprehension about the readiness of the lake for tourism promotion. Additionally, comments from the participants in the community meeting suggested a tension between local impressions of people leaving Waseca for recreation and the community not believing the lake is a source to attract tourism activity to Waseca.

To address this tension, the research team sought mobile analytics data to assess who currently utilizes Waseca tourism assets. The source of the mobile data was Vista Insights Reports, a mobile data analytics vendor. Data included in this report is captured from mobile devices with their location service turned on, while located in the study spot.

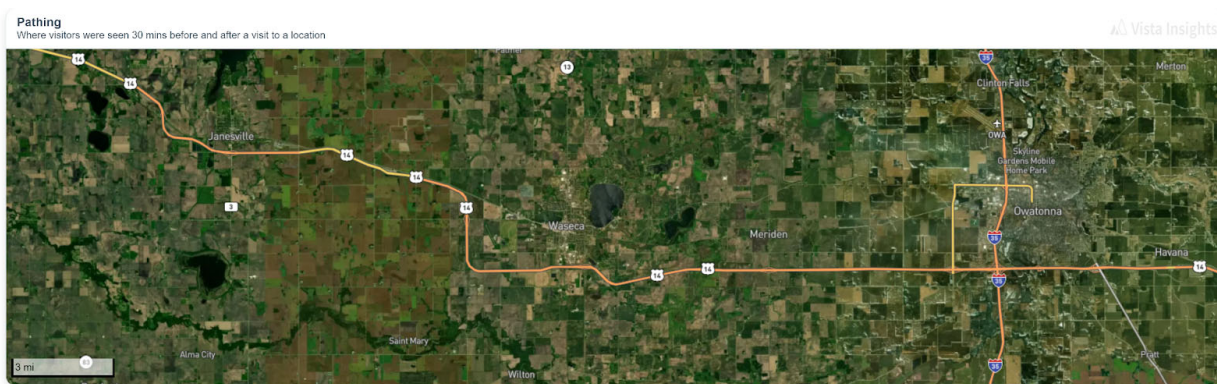
Clear Lake is five times larger than the maximum study location size allowed in the software. Therefore, the reporting focused on the boat ramps and parking lots located on Clear Lake and allows for smaller geographic study areas, while also focusing on geographically isolated areas, allowing for reasonable inferences of user behavior.

Location 1: Maplewood Park Ramp Location

In the Maplewood Park Ramp location, the parking lot, which includes the parking area for boat trailers and for the adjacent hiking area to the ramp, were the target of the analysis. The study area is not near any non-recreational uses of the space and it is reasonable to assume that visitors to the site are intending to access walking, hiking, or boating activities at the location.

Image 8

Waseca Tourism Assessment Mobile Data Pathing Report, Satellite View

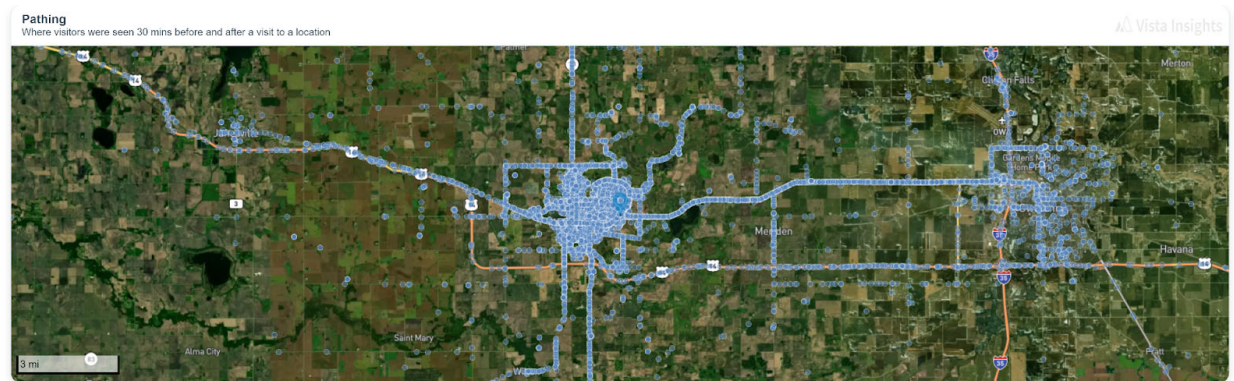


Note: DESCRIPTION OF REPORT SCOPE, STUDY LOCATION, YEAR MONTH, WEEK Report

Note location of Clear Lake (mid-image) and Owatonna is located at the intersection of Highways 14 and 24. Clear Lake is the largest lake in that area, with close access to highways.

Image 8A

Waseca Tourism Assessment Mobile Data Pathing Report, Satellite View



Note: Mobile device pathing report depicts mobile device location 30 minutes before or after visit to Memorial Park Boat Landing, Clear Lake, Waseca, Minnesota.

This image shows paths of visitors 30 minutes before or after a visit to the business, illustrating the connection of lake access use to the downtown core, multiple entrances to Waseca, and dense connections to neighboring cities.

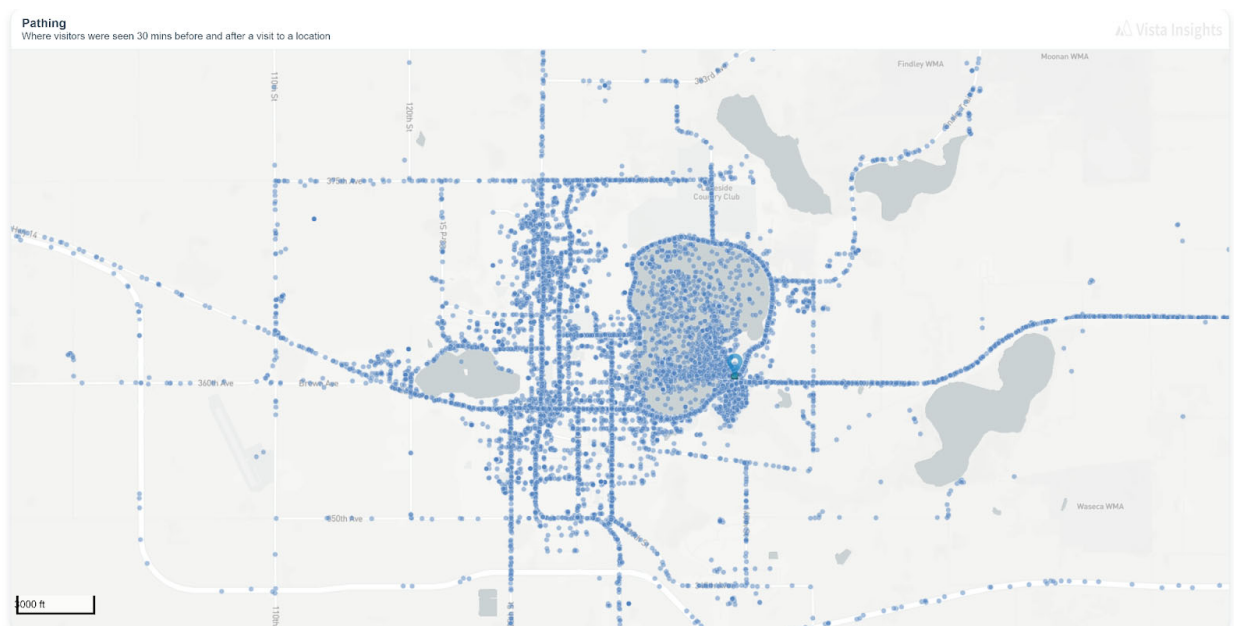


Figure 8B: Pathing with pins

This shows the same pathing as in Figure 8A, with grayscale background and zoomed-in for clarity. Note the high volume of traffic across the lake, with significant traffic within the downtown zone.

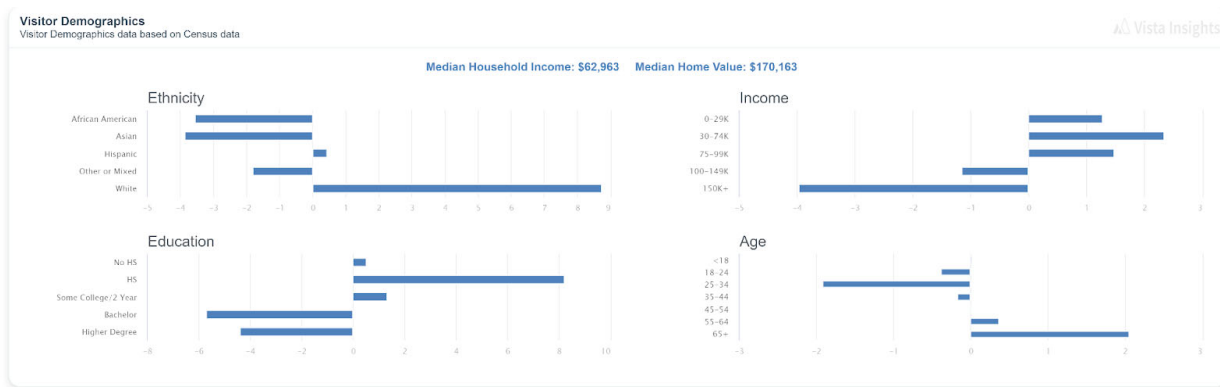


Figure 8C: *Visitor Demographics v. Market Baseline*

Of mobile users with location data turned on, visitor demographics indicated a median household income of \$62,963 and home value of \$170,163. Bars extending to the right indicate overperforming versus market census data and bars extending to the left indicate underperforming versus market census data.

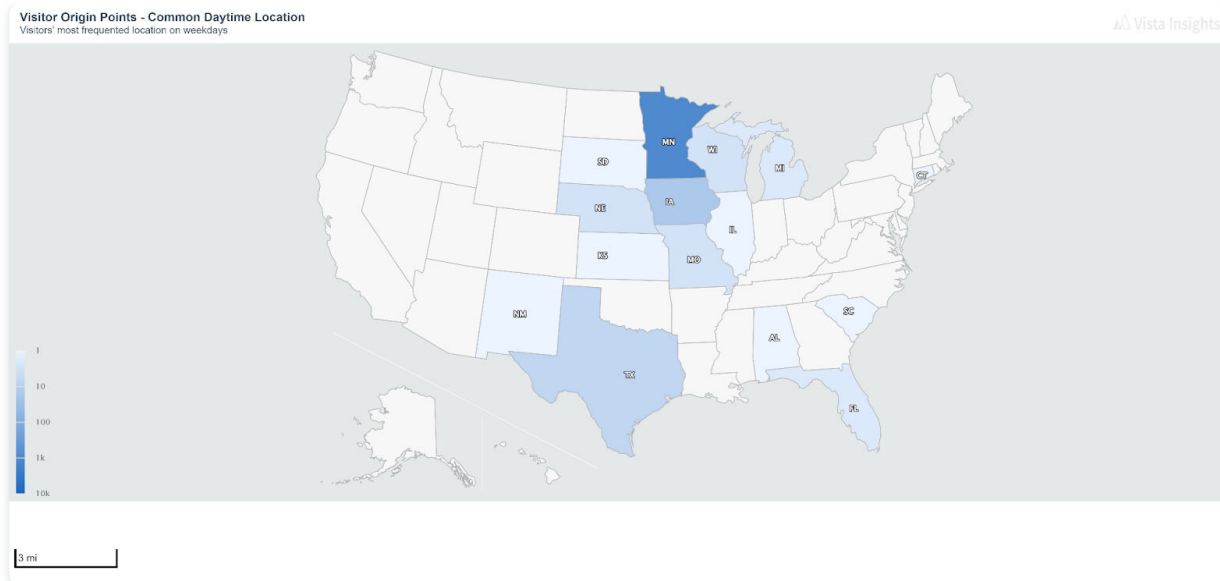


Figure 8D: *Common Evening Location, State View*

This map illustrates the common evening location for mobile devices with activity in Waseca during the study time. This indicates most traffic is from Minnesota, followed by Iowa, Texas, and twelve other states.

Location 2: Sportsman Park Ramp and Parking Lot

Sportsman Park is a small recreational park located at the north end of Clear Lake. It has a small parking area, boat launch, and picnic area. These facilities are adjacent to the paved walking trail around Clear Lake and are across the street from residential properties. Given the isolated location of the launch, it is reasonable to assume visitors to the site are using the launch, accessing the paved trail, or other recreational uses.

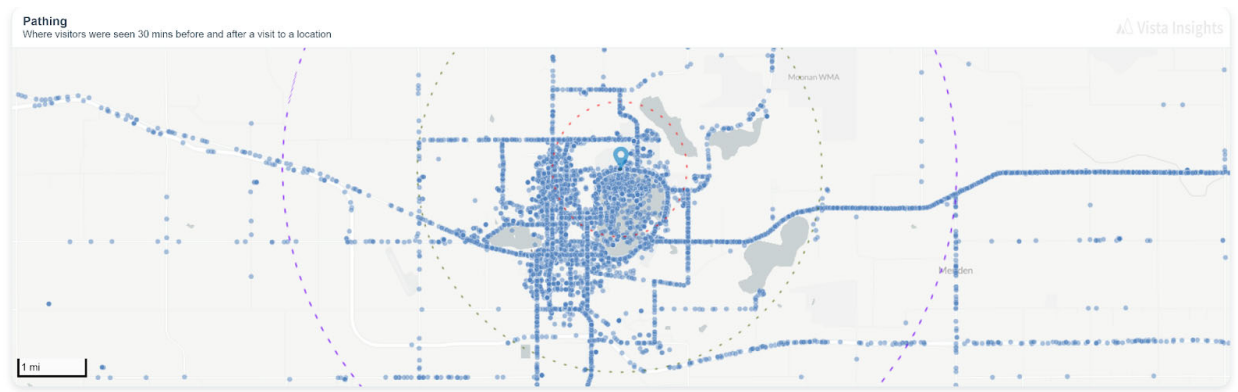


Figure 9: *Pathing*

Pathing indicates user location, 30 minutes before or after presence in the study location. The Sportsman Park landing was correlated with heavier traffic through the downtown area than the Maplewood Park location. Heavy pathing activity is seen in downtown Waseca.



Figure 9A: *Demographics v. Market Baseline*

Of mobile users with location data turned on, visitor demographics indicated a median household income of \$60,206 and home value of \$164,465. Bars extending to the right indicate overperforming versus market census data and bars extending to the left indicate underperforming versus market census data.

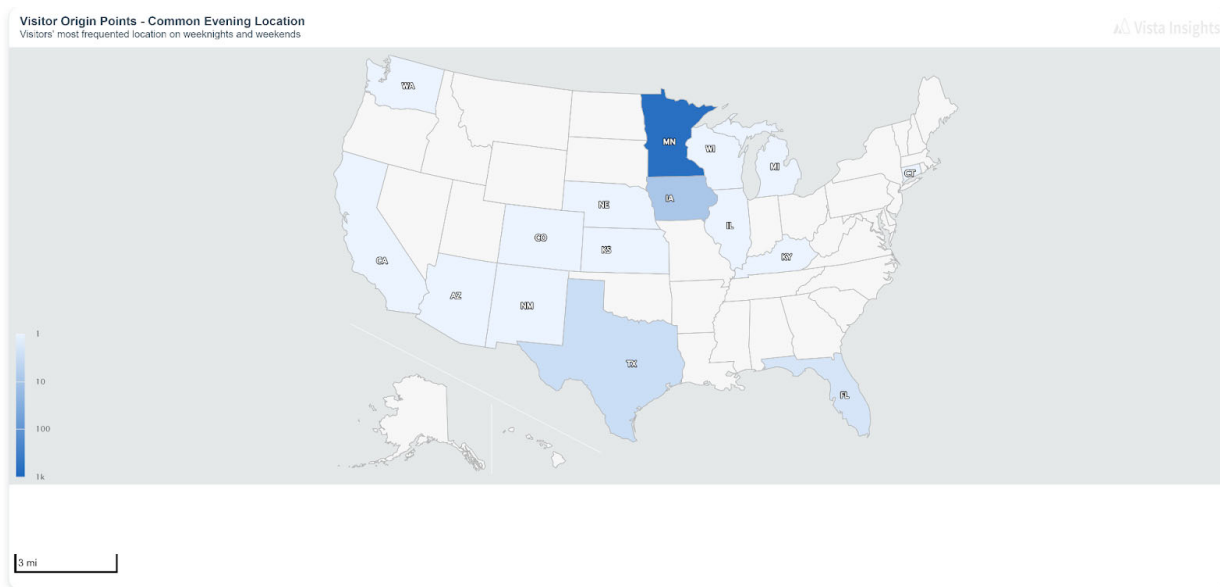


Figure 9B: *Common Evening Locations, State View*

Common evening location is based on where the mobile device is located during evening hours. Like the Maplewood Park location, visitors to this site were primarily from Minnesota, followed by Iowa, Texas and thirteen other states as indicated on the map.

SUMMARY OF THEMES ACROSS TOURISM ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

Analysis of the tourism assessment findings resulted in themes that emerged from residents, tourism leaders, and expert visitors. Each of these themes reflects strengths and opportunities that connect with resident and tourist experiences of the community. The three themes include (1) building inter and inter-community connections, (2) leveraging the assets related to the natural environment, and (3) embracing both traditions and the future.

Theme 1: Elevating Clear Lake as a Community Asset

Recommendations for Discover Waseca Tourism (DWT)

- Balance promotion of the lake with the promotion of water quality improvements
- Embrace what being a farm country/lake town means for Waseca. Could this be a campaign of “tractor to lake commute time”? Lean into activities that support several repeat visits versus the “one-big-trip-a-year tourism” of northern Minnesota lakes country.
- Find ways to use technology to engage with users of boat landings to connect them to the downtown core (e.g., QR codes with restaurant menus, boutique links, etc.).
- Promote resident engagement with lake activities, especially early in the season.
- Co-sponsoring fishing opener events, or other early season activities, combined with media campaigns, can help local residents connect with the lake at peak times for water quality.

Recommendations for Community Members and Businesses

- Support water quality efforts (use of doggie bags, lake clean-up events)

- Use the lake and the related assets such as the Community Education rental program, pontoon rentals, walking trails, etc.
- Get creative! Dock fashion show, dock-side delivery, etc.
- Connect youth with water-related efforts—both tourism and water quality improvement projects—help them feel invested in the wellbeing of their community and empowered to create a future for themselves in Waseca. A program that may be a good starting point is a 4-H Youth Participatory Research Project.
- Deepen knowledge of Waseca as a community, as a tourist destination to align community efforts making Waseca tourism efforts “more Waseca” instead of seeking to be like other communities

Theme 2: Building visibility of activities and restaurants around town

Recommendations for DWT

- Community calendar, email, and SMS list subscriptions—not just as a one-way posting but as part of a communication strategy.
- Develop a restaurant guide for residents by leveraging technology to connect via SMS text, QR codes, and/or email newsletters.
- Changes in social media and website cookie regulation eases use of contact information (phone, email) of visitors and is a highly valuable resource for DWT and local businesses.
- Focus marketing dollars on regional audiences.
- Collaborate with community partners to build a sense of vibrancy through signage, art, and events.
- Invest in social media and marketing support to augment event planning and business development work.
- Continue providing funding for new event development through Discover Waseca Tourism.

Recommendations for Community Members and Businesses

- Publish business hours on Google or other social media. Local shoppers may be more representative of hours than of interest.
- Source more local products.
- Try “pop-up” options to test new concepts
 - Utilize empty storefronts
 - Plan for event hours on Sundays
 - Evening formal dining events
- Invest in overnight accommodations
 - Improve current facilities
 - Develop new offerings (VRBO, Airbnb, Tntr.com, etc.)

- Volunteer and serve on city committees working to develop new lodging offerings (planning commissions, etc.)

Theme 3: Building relationships within the Waseca community and with neighboring communities

Strengths

The process of developing tourism can bring community members together, making developing tourism opportunities a meaningful mechanism for addressing community member's collective hopes and aspirations.

Increase connections and work with neighboring committees in communities to address the perception of competition. Acknowledge and work with a sense of collaboration to boost connections.

Liabilities

Community survey responses indicated that some community members expressed do not feel consistently welcomed. Tourism marketing is impacted by word of mouth, making local resident's experiences highly meaningful in how they talk about the community and invite others to attend events or visit.

Recommendations for DWT

- Embrace regional connections in marketing efforts to drive the narrative around tourism.
- Develop a crisis-management plan for social media and event communications to prepare for the weather, social, or other disruptions to messaging around tourism in Waseca.
- Incorporate techniques such as Strategic Doing into program planning and implementation to integrate relationship building into program development.
- Build relationships with lodging facilities to directly support their immediate business needs for the 2022 summer season.
- Support funding initiatives to renovate downtown park and restroom facilities.

Recommendations for Community Members and Businesses

- Serve on an event committee or volunteer at community events.

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