

New tourism manager keen to promote region

By Valerie Hill, Record staff

August 7, 2011

KITCHENER — Tracey Desjardins' King Street office is a little on the sparse side with a few desks and cabinets trying, without luck, to fill up a too-large office space.

Desjardins is unapologetic and views these new digs as an idea incubator of sorts — a place where she and her two-person staff can grow while realizing their vision for tourism in Waterloo Region.

Desjardins was hired last fall as the new general manager for Waterloo Regional Tourism Marketing Corporation, replacing Susan Cudahy. Though she has only been in the region a few months, she has already fully invested herself in the area.

"When I applied for the job, I hadn't been here in 10 years," said the St. Catharines native, admitting that Oktoberfest first sprang to mind when she thought of the region. "I was so pleasantly surprised," she said. "This has always been such an interesting community, with different sectors."

Desjardins was particularly keen on the changes she witnessed in downtown Kitchener stating, "Kitchener is just beautiful."

She also noted that each of the cities has such a different feel and, best of all, "two minutes and you're out in the serene countryside." This immediately led her to consider promoting cycling for tourists.

"We have a real opportunity here," she said. She was also impressed with the heritage of the place, the two universities and college, the festivals, museums, multiculturalism and culinary offerings, particularly diverse ethnic restaurants.

Desjardins admittedly has a big job on her hands, pulling together the various facets of one of the country's largest regions. It is an area comprised of three cities as well as the townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich, each distinct in character and culture. This is not an area that should only be known for horse and buggy Mennonites and beer festivals. But how to bring it all together with a cohesive and compelling marketing strategy?

"First you have to talk to your members," she said of the tourism corporation. It is a municipal-private partnership and lists 214 members, each with a stake in attracting tourists. She said her first question was "where is your target market? What are your best strategies to get them here?"



Tourism. Tracey Desjardins outside the Lang Tannery building at Victoria and Charles. Tracey is the recently appointed general manager of Waterloo Regional Tourism and has some big plans for the region. One area she said is in demand is for tech tourism: people want to come here to see the tech triangle companies. The tannery building behind her is where a few of the tech companies are locating, such as Google. Peter Lee/Record staff Source: Record staff

Learning about the region's many facets has given Desjardins plenty of ammunition to create a full picture of the area. She sees her role as two fold: attracting tourists and attracting people who will want to live and invest in the region.

"You have to profile what's authentic and unique: the School of Pharmacy, the Tannery, even though these are not tourist destinations," she said, adding that young people are most interested in green spaces in a community.

"I think we need to be very innovative," she said. Fortunately, she has a lot of research at her fingertips.

Statistically, every hour a tourist must drive to get to the region, they will expect to have access to at least four hours of activity. The average day tripper in Ontario will spend \$60 to \$91. That amount jumps to \$160 for overnight visitors. Desjardins added that Americans tend to spend more and visitors from overseas spend double. An average stay in Waterloo Region is less than three full days for overnight guests. Eighty per cent of tourists are from within Ontario. Most tourists choose Niagara Falls. While Niagara might have a trickle of water drawing the cargo shorts and camera crowd, Waterloo Region has world class technology. It is a real draw for a new type of visitor looking to tour places like RIM and the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics. It's a resource Desjardins said needs to be tapped.

After years of stop-and-start planning, Waterloo Region Council finally approved formation of the marketing corporation in 2007. It was a time when the Canadian dollar had gained strength and American tourists were staying away in droves. Financially, Waterloo Region couldn't afford to dilly dally.

According to stats from 2004, the region attracted almost 2.4 million visitors who dished out \$390 million and created 3,200 tourism-related jobs. Tourism was too important to let slip and would require a concerted effort. Up to then, Cambridge had relied on its own tourism board and Kitchener and Waterloo worked in partnership with each other. The new entity's mandate would be to promote the entire region, partly through the website Explore Waterloo Region (www.explorewaterlooregion.com).

Desjardins plans to upgrade the website and make it more interactive for prospective tourists. She is also working to increase membership and be more inclusive by creating new categories for small operations. Membership fees are now based on size, ranging from \$100 to \$300 a year. The fees this year will add just over \$200,000 to her total budget of \$829,000. Sixty per cent of the budget comes from the municipalities and region and 40 per cent from the members.

Desjardins is also focusing efforts on staff at the region's eight visitor's centres. The staff members are being trained in the new standards of tourism. Seventy of those staff attended a recent regional familiarization bus trip, which toured them around to galleries, museums and other regional highlights.

"They need to understand everything across Waterloo Region and cross sell," she said. "We're the front line ambassadors."

vhill@therecord.com