

Climbing could be our new industry

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Cumberland is in search of new industry to replace its lost industrial base. That new industry utilizes its natural resources. The Gap trail was the first step in developing ecotourism for the City. Counters indicate roughly 50,000 visitors each year in Cumberland. It infuses \$2.5 million dollars into the community or an average of \$50 per person per day. As much as 60% of its total use is local use, a key benefit.

The whitewater park is moving forward. A request for proposal to develop the concept will be forthcoming July 1st. The whitewater park will provide a major attraction downtown. Like the GAP trail it will benefit the local population and infuse outside dollars into the community as well.

The third outdoor venue is the Narrows and the focus of this commentary. In the rock climbing world, there are two world class climbing areas in the mid-Atlantic region. These are Seneca Rocks in West Virginia and the Gunks, in New Paltz, NY. The Narrows in Cumberland is a couple of notches below these two areas, but it is still a premier area. The Narrows is Tuscarora Sandstone, the same rock found in Seneca. The only difference is that its rock strata lie horizontally rather than vertically.

Seneca Rocks is located roughly a half-a-day travel from Washington, Pittsburgh and Charleston, WV. An economic impact study for a proposed national park that would include Seneca Rocks estimated 1.2 visitors per year with total direct spending by non-local visitors at \$52 million per year. This is most likely an overly optimistic comparative for the Narrows.

The Gunks is located 90 miles from New York City and five miles from New Paltz, New York. The economic impact of the Gunks includes three areas and includes other activities than just climbing. An economic impact study indicated that the Gunks has 392,659 visitors each year. These visitors spend \$13,051,000 or an average \$33.24 per person.

Cumberland is an hour closer than Seneca Rocks to three major metropolitan areas, Baltimore, Washington, and Pittsburgh. And as one climber noted, you have to drive around New York City to reach the Gunks. Not fun. The Narrows would easily service these three market areas with a premier climbing area.

The Narrows is undeveloped mainly because access is difficult. Currently, there is the land-locked Wills Mountain State Park on top of the mountain along with several parcels including the now defunct Artmore Plastics plant. The State is in negotiations to purchase these parcels. Although the purchase of these properties can be a lengthy and laborious process, public support is an important element needed to facilitate the process.

Using the GAP trail as a low ball estimate of economic impact, the Narrows could easily infuse 50,000 visitors into the Wills Mountain State Park and \$2.5 million dollars into the local economy. This would include climbers, birders and people seeking a spectacular view of Cumberland and the valley below.

The “smoke stack” industries have come and gone. Most likely they are gone. Cumberland’s new industry is outdoor recreation. Cumberland is sitting on at least three major outdoor recreation venues. This is phenomenal. The first leg is the GAP trail. Its success and economic impact is more than proven. The second leg is the whitewater park. The third leg is the Narrows as a climbing area. This too is a phenomenal opportunity.

The bottom line is that Cumberland is positioned to become the outdoor recreation Mecca of the mid-Atlantic region. You can hold your breath and hope that the old “smoke stack” industries will return. But for now, outdoor recreation is the new industry for Cumberland. Embrace it and support it.

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