

*Pennsylvania Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus
Case Study: Effective Use of Matching Grant Program*

Lawrence County Tourism Promotion Agency:
Tiny town becomes magnet for fairs, festivals and film crews

Sometimes, a common name can be a real asset. Consider New Castle, PA, in Lawrence County. The town is one of 35 municipalities named New Castle in the United States alone, and that doesn't count its sister boroughs throughout the British Isles. Two years ago, New Castle, PA hosted community leaders from sister cities from around the world as part of a tour that included North Carolina and Indiana.

"We're located about 45 minutes north of Pittsburgh, up against the Ohio state line," explained JoAnn McBride, executive director of the Lawrence County Tourism Promotion Agency. "When I started in tourism 14 years ago, we had about 30 members and a total budget of \$30,000 – but we saw great opportunities."

The Lawrence County hotel tax has been a mixed blessing. "We only have 200 rooms in the entire County, so the room tax only provides about \$40,000 per year. But, in the past two years, the County Commissioners have cut their contribution from \$30,000 to \$4,500," she sighed. "Thankfully, we receive \$36,000 in Matching Grants from the state, which we use to support promotion of our local assets."

Despite the limited lodging available in the county, the TPA has attracted dozens of groups over the years. For example, Lawrence County is home to two fireworks manufacturing facilities, so the TPA attracted the Pyrotechnics Guild of America to conduct their 1994 annual meeting in New Castle, the "Fireworks Capital of the World." Although McBride's trip to pitch the location was underwritten by bake sales and other hometown fundraisers, it was money well spent, as the event added more than \$10 million to the local economy.

"Relationship building has yielded some great business deals for us," she noted. Due to her ongoing work with the Pittsburgh Film Office, McBride successfully landed a 2002 episode of "West Wing." Josiah Bartlett (played by Martin Sheen) was campaigning in rural America, against the backdrop of a picturesque home surrounded by soybeans – just like the home of one of the TPA's members. "Martin Sheen and his grandson stayed at one of our bed and breakfasts, and we closed down the office for two days so we could all be extras in that episode."

This was not Lawrence County's first encounter with the movie industry. In 192____, Warner Brothers showed its very first movie, "The Great Train Robbery," in an old industrial building in New Castle. Records show that the film company rented chairs from a local funeral home and invited all of the residents to come see the now-classic film. Based on that history, New Castle was selected to host an international film festival in April 2005.

“We could never – in a million years – have paid for the publicity that we have received from being the location for these events,” she noted. “Some people claim that the Matching Grants money to small TPAs is a waste. They need to come to Lawrence County to see what we do with our dollars.”

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