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ONTC party hoped to lead to bigger things (09/05)

By IAN ROSS

The launch of an inaugural Ontario Northland Railway passenger excursion in northeastern Ontario has City of North Bay development officials excited about developing more shoulder season products.



Train goers will get a healthy dose of Northern Ontario colour on the way up to Temagami.

The Ontario Northland Transportation Commission (ONTC) is introducing a new passenger rail excursion tour in late September to take advantage of the spectacular fall colours between North Bay and Temagami.

To celebrate 100 years of rail service, the Crown-owned railway is introducing its Dream Catcher Express in late September for a nine-day run.

Shoulder season (fall and spring) product development is a particular area of focus for city tourism officials.

Last year, Ontario Northland made an \$800,000 investment in passenger rail by purchasing and refurbishing 10 mothballed passenger coaches, including three dome cars, from B.C. Rail's Pacific Starlight train.

Beginning Sept. 22, the two-hour train trip will deposit travellers in Temagami where they'll have a choice of day package activities ranging from guided tours of the area's old growth forests, a Native tipi village, or a scenic bushplane flight.

The City of North Bay is partnering with Ontario Northland, the Town of Temagami, the North Bay Chamber of Commerce and various tourism operators to launch the excursion run, which ends Oct. 2.

Marla Storie, a City of North Bay economic development officer, says the primary market for the launch of this pilot program is within a 100-kilometre radius of North Bay, with a secondary emphasis on promoting it in southern Ontario and the GTA.

Rick Evans, manager of the Mayor's Office of Economic Development, says North Bay and the Blue Sky Region have a good mix of outdoor and trail activities, festivals and cultural events, but tourism operators have to make better use of natural icons and brand names like Temagami and Algonquin Park.

"These are phenomenal under-used assets" that can be maintained and promoted for relatively little cost, he says.

French and the future

Another underutilized niche area is the francophone market.

North Bay is hopping on board a provincial tourism initiative known as the Circuit Champlain to tap into francophone tourism to attract visitors from Quebec and Europe. The initiative coincides with the 400th anniversary in 2015 of Samuel de Champlain's arrival in Canada.

Destination Nord, a Quebec-based tourism association, is meeting with northeastern Ontario tourism groups to propose activities for tourists. The group is

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looking to form loop tours among the places Champlain visited while exploring the region.

Evans and Storie say the North Bay area's one great asset is its existing French culture as evidenced by the cultural summer festivals throughout the region.

"We have French capacity but we don't advertise it," says Evans, who adds work can still be done to be more welcoming to francophones and there is program funding dollars might be available toward product development.

Storie, a Sturgeon Falls native who is fluently bilingual, is the project lead in charge of local product development.

Among the ideas suggested include working on plans to co-ordinate North Bay's Heritage Festival, Mattawa's Voyageur Days and Sturgeon Falls' Fiddle Festival on successive summer weekends.

According to the new tourism figures, North Bay leads the North in filling hotel room space. Quarterly statistics by PKF Consulting posts North Bay first in Northern Ontario on the accommodations front.

North Bay's hotel occupancy at 61.1 percent through the first six months, was up 5.1 percent compared to the same period in 2004. It beat the national average of 60 percent.

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