

# Storm Lake's Awaysis makes \$200K turnaround

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STORM LAKE, Iowa -- It was something you didn't see in Storm Lake until a few years ago. A group of six pulled up in a boat, docked and walked up to the Regatta Grille for Sunday brunch.

Eating places have always been scarce on these shores. The Lakeshore Café, in fact, is a bit of a misnomer. It's not on the lakeshore; it's on the northern side of the Buena Vista county seat, two to three miles from the lake.

Much has changed on the northeast shore of Storm Lake since 2007. That's when a water park opened, followed by a 100-room hotel, restaurant and conference center. It's called King's Pointe, the resort that carries the banner for Project Awaysis, the biggest thing here since Harold Walter Siebens presented Buena Vista University with an \$18-million gift.

Project Awaysis began with barely a ripple in the early 1990s. A few local lake enthusiasts fretted about water quality in this shallow lake. They raised some funds and resurrected the Lake Preservation Association.

The group met with Jeff Vonk, then director of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Vonk challenged the contingent. In so many words, he told Storm Lakers to show faith in their community. While seeking state help, he said, demonstrate your stake in cleaning the lake.

He implored them to think big. To create a destination.

That was nine years and \$40 million dollars ago.

My, how Storm Lake's shore changed. An estimated 65,000 visitors are on track to use the indoor and outdoor water parks this summer. Attendance in July alone came to 27,000. It may have taken years for 27,000 swimmers to use the old Storm Lake Municipal Pool, which this park replaced.

Eighty-eight percent of the hotel's 100 rooms were occupied last month. In June, it was 80 percent.

July revenue at Regatta Grille grew \$10,000 over last July. Of a possible 124 guest nights available in four new Sunrise Pointe Cabins last month, the facility sold 116 of them. Interest is growing for longterm stays in those cabins, nestled near the lake and located between renovated Sunrise Point Municipal Golf Course and Sunrise Pointe Campground.

Those who aren't golfing, fishing, boating or making a splash at the water park might be cycling, walking or running on the 21-year-old LakeTrail that surrounds Storm Lake.

Is it making money?

Mike Wilson, Storm Lake's community development director, said King's Pointe showed a \$50,000 profit for the fiscal year ending June 30.

While that may not exceed projections, it represents a turnaround.

"That's about a \$200,000 improvement over a year ago," said Wilson, who attributed the sea change to new managers from Kinseth Hospitality of North Liberty, Iowa.

The numbers might be greater were it not for a dreadful start to the 2011 summer season.

"The water park was closed nine days in June because of the weather," said Nick Edwards, director of water parks for King's Pointe. "Last summer the weather was ideal and we had our best summer. We had a poor June 2011 and we're still about dead even with last summer."

July's heat wave pushed people to King's Pointe in record numbers. The daily census on more than one occasion approached 2,000.

Fun-seekers from all 50 states have stayed at King's Pointe. The bulk of users come from places around Sioux City, Sioux Falls, Omaha and Des Moines. A hotel/motel tax that generated \$250,000 this year will be used, in part, for marketing programs directed to those regional hubs.

And part of the tax helps fund Storm Lake's dredging effort, which has boosted water quality since it began less than a decade ago.

Prior to King's Pointe, the city's hotel/motel tax collection came to \$120,000 annually.

For years, people didn't head to Storm Lake as there was a perception there wasn't much to do. Lake traffic was scarce when compared to the tourism mecca that is the Iowa Great Lakes.

"I understand from boating enthusiasts that there's a lot more boat traffic on the lake, maybe from people who could not get on the Missouri River this summer," Wilson said. "Once they're here, people are amazed at how nice the lake is. The perception was that it was a mud hole. People are telling us the fishing has never been better."

Wilson said it gives him -- and many longtime Storm Lakers -- a shot in the arm to view license plates in the parking lot at King's Pointe, or all along Lake Avenue in the city's central business district.

"People didn't think there was anything to do in Storm Lake," he said. "That was the point: We gave them something to do."

A Minneapolis developer met with Wilson recently to discuss housing potential. The developer was impressed with the activity he witnessed in downtown Storm Lake.

"We didn't have the boom like a West Des Moines did," said Wilson. "We didn't have a bust, either. We've had no major layoffs here. We rode it through (the recession) really well."

Unemployment topped out at 6 percent locally.

All the while, enrollment continued to climb in the Storm Lake Community School District. A new elementary was built. Buena Vista University expanded, as did Buena Vista Regional Medical Center.

Wilson returned to the fact that 65,000 visitors will use the water parks this summer. This summer alone.

The other numbers he likes to cite: Thirty-eight percent of Storm Lake's eligible voters voted on a \$3.5 million property tax bond issue, a portion of the funding mechanism to build this resort.

"It passed with a 73 percent majority," Wilson said.

The state then stepped up with an \$8 million Vision Iowa gift to lift spirits -- and shovels -- as the project broke ground.

"This breathed some life in the community and made us feel differently about ourselves" he added. "There is so much more excitement here."

Excitement that shows quietly on a calm Sunday morning as six boaters dock for brunch.

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