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Web site promotes 3 counties to the world

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Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, and Allegany counties are grist for a tourist's fantasy and developer's dream: picture-book scenery, natural resources, abundant wildlife, reasonable prices and an eager work force.

This corner of the state, which has long languished in the shadows of attractions like Niagara Falls and the Statue of Liberty, is now getting big exposure on a new virtual billboard.

The Web portal – DiscoverSouthwestNY.com – boasts more than a half-million hits in little more than a month.

The Web site's parent is the three-county Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Board, an agency that assists economic development and planning activities for municipalities of the three counties.

The portal features 6,500 richly colored digital images of scenery snapped around the area last summer by a student intern. The tour is enhanced by new PixEarth technology that gives cybervisitors mobility to explore each community with a mouse click on a special symbol embedded in a streetscape or landscape. The viewer can navigate a 360-degree panorama of village centers, as well as scenic views of wildflower-adorned hilltop farms.

DiscoverSouthwestNY.com also contains links to local government, tourism Web sites and other standard Internet fare.

Visitors can learn about maple syrup, muskellunge fishing on Chautauqua Lake, hunting, skiing, wineries, and other highlights. They can also visit cultural attractions, such as the Amish communities and the Seneca Nation of Indians.

DiscoverSouthwestNY.com contains useful facts, planning documents and demographics churned out by the organization on a regular basis – information needed for those looking to return to the area or for companies thinking about moving here.

Southern Tier West's staff members say the site is turning heads – judging by the portal's 150,000 hits-per-week average.

"This region is a great place to live and work and the world should know it," said Don Rychnowski, Southern Tier West's executive director, who has been contacted by distant Web surfers.

"They saw people (in the photos) that they haven't seen in years. It's also letting kids of the people who have stayed behind know that something is going on here and a lot of them want to return. We hope they come home," Rychnowski said.

Brian Schrantz, one of the portal's key designers and its Web master, said creating the site took about a year and cost \$150,000, money obtained through the Appalachian Regional Commission, Southern Tier West Development Foundation, and Niagara Mohawk.

"This is the most complete site that you can find in the region," Schrantz said. "A marketing plan is in place to boost visitors and promote the region... while establishing links with key businesses and organizations in a partnership program."

The first partner to announce a commitment last week was Holiday Valley Resort.
“The idea is to market Southwestern New York to ourselves and to the world,”
Schantz said.