

What is 'Westopolis?'

Destination marketing organization talks Golden Valley and St. Louis Park's new brand

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Becky Bakken and Trish Foster make up two thirds of the Westopolis team. Karen McManamon (not pictured) is the third person on staff. (Sun photo by Anja Wuolu)

Westopolis is the new name for Discover St. Louis Park, an entity that promotes and markets tourism in St. Louis Park and Golden Valley.

Westopolis is, simply, the area closest to downtown Minneapolis without being in Minneapolis. But in addition to urban proximity, the tourism group promotes that the suburbs are full of things to do.

"Our goal is to stand out above the clutter," said Becky Bakken, president and CEO of Westopolis. "To try and stand out and have people say 'tell me more about your area.' And to do that, we think this name will give us a bit of an edge."

Westopolis is a tool to bring visitors to the suburbs. Bakken said the name is meant to have a vibe similar to "wine country" or "the bay area."

Who visits Westopolis?

About two millions guests stay in Westopolis each year and spend about \$188 million. According to Bakken, there are a lot of corporate tourists and athletes.

"We get a lot of conferences and meetings and groups coming from the corporate world," Bakken said. "But we also have a very strong presence in the sports world. And when I talk about that for our market, it's most specifically youth sports and amateur sports."

Bakken said amateur sports can be really fun because she gets to learn about things like Spikeball. Youth sports include events for hockey or baseball.

There are also the leisure travelers, the wedding parties and the folks coming to visit family. Most of the people visiting Westopolis come from greater Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin and other places in the Midwest.

Sun Newspapers asked why people would visit west of Minneapolis instead of just going to Minneapolis.

Bakken said some folks want an urban experience but are more comfortable in smaller cities.

"You don't really have one-way streets here, you don't have quite the congestion here," Bakken said. "We have a lot of ample, free parking. Our hotels have a lot of surface parking. You don't have to deal with kind-of-intimidating ramps."

If a visitor is in St. Louis Park or Golden Valley, they can easily drive to Minneapolis for a baseball game or an art museum. Then they can go back to their hotel without stressing out about parking.

Also, there are plenty of things to do in Westopolis without needing to get to the big city. There are walkable neighborhoods, parks, sports, concerts, bars, breweries, places to shop and many different kinds of restaurants. It's a "small-scale" urban experience.

Bakken says this is what makes Westopolis "Minnesota's sweet spot."

Though the organization is focused on attracting outsiders and their dollars, their website can be helpful for locals too.

"We take really seriously that we provide information to visitors and tourists, but we think the same information is super helpful and valuable for residents," Bakken said.

The Westopolis website has all the cool stuff laid out: bakeries, breweries, parks etc. New restaurants are added to the website as they pop up and a calendar shows events like the Twin Cities Film Fest and even meat raffles.

Sonic the Hedgehog

Some may recognize the name Westopolis as the fictional location where video game character Sonic the Hedgehog fights off the Black Arms.

"We certainly knew about Sonic the Hedgehog," Bakken said. "But for us, [Sonic] had nothing to do with the name. It is a true mashup of 'West of Minneapolis.'"

So there is no cartoon connection, just a shared name. There also exists an Australian young adult book series called "Warriors of Westopolis," which is unrelated as well.

Bakken said she hopes denizens of St. Louis Park and Golden Valley will use the name, but they do not have to.

"While we hope even residents embrace the concept of this area being Westopolis, it doesn't change the fact that they're from St. Louis Park or they're from Golden Valley," she said.

Funding

There are nine hotels in the two cities: TownePlace Suites by Marriott Minneapolis West, SpringHill Suites by Marriott Minneapolis West, Ramada by Wyndham Minneapolis Golden Valley, Minneapolis Marriott West, Homewood Suites by Hilton St. Louis Park at West End, Holiday Inn Express & Suites Minneapolis (Golden Valley), DoubleTree by Hilton Minneapolis-Park Place, Courtyard by Marriott Minneapolis West and AC Hotel by Marriott Minneapolis West End.

Whenever guests stay in these hotels, they pay a 3% lodging tax. This tourism money goes to fund the Westopolis organization, where there are currently three employees.

Bakken likes that she can promote the small businesses, the hotels and the area as a whole instead of having to sell a specific product or service. People will call asking about where they can have a conference or which hotel has a section they could rent for their wedding. Bakken gets to go over options and connect tourists to the right people.

Residents, businesses and the hotels do not have to pay anything to Westopolis. Additionally, Westopolis services are free for travelers who want help booking or information on what exists in the area. Hotel staff know to direct guests to the Westopolis website when they're looking for things to do.

To sign up for the bimonthly newsletter or view lists of interesting things to do in the area, go to westopolis.org.