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St. John makes season predictions

by Lisa Loomis

Professor August St. John held over 100 people in rapt attention last Thursday, October 11, when he detailed his economic predictions for ski areas and Vermont.

St. John, a professor of marketing and future studies at Long Island University, and a part-time resident of and planning consultant for the town of Manchester, spoke at the second of a series of forums on planning, development, and growth issues.

St. John didn't just lecture,

he roamed the crowd, asking questions, demanding answers, using analogies, recounted personal tales, and often strayed off on tangents. He drove his points home, however, stressing such things as customer service, worsening economic times, and the expected increase in cutthroat competition.

THE WAY DOWN

"Things have been easy for a long time, we've been on the way up. Now we're on the way down. This month will be crucial and the Christmas season this year will make or break most ski areas. Nurturing the customers you already have will be critical to survival. The time to nurture customers is when the inn is full, not when it starts to empty," he admonished.

As the economy worsens in New England, Vermont will be particularly hard hit, according to St. John, and although many won't be able to afford it, they will do what he refers to as "dissave."

"People will hold on to their highest standard of living with their fingernails. People are "dissaving" because they don't want their economic level to slip. So, they may still come for a vacation they can't afford. And you'd better make it good for them," St. John warned.

BUILD AN ARK

"Ski areas have to make up their minds, either you go for the top bucks, or you go for the low bucks. You've got to make up your minds because if you're in-between, you're dead. More and more

businesses get caught in-between, like Sears, and are in trouble. I'm forecasting rain and telling you to start building an ark," he stated.

Things won't just get ugly at resort areas, all of Vermont will suffer, according to "Dr. Doom and Gloom," as St. John also is known. In 1991, he said, Burlington's white collar jobless rate will increase and that city will see unprecedented civil confrontations.

"The funds for social programs won't be coming into Burlington, and the people in those funded programs are going to start marching. When they do, it's going to get ugly," he predicted.

FINAL WARNING

With a final warning to ski areas that they should "expect no help from outside sources, remember that no one's wallet is safe (competition will be fierce), beware of the traffic trap, (number of visitors versus number of spenders), stroke the customer, don't get caught in the middle or in-between and remember that Christmas is the make or break time, St. John offered a five year prediction for the state economy.

"In 1990, we'll muddle through. In 1991, we'll be in full recession changing to a depression from time to time. In 1992, we'll remain in recession, but I foresee a significant easing of Act 250. The turnaround years will be 1993-94 and in 1995 things will start to go up again. It's going to be a fizz and sizzle economy for the next five years," he concluded.



August St. John Photo: LAL