

Gondolas over Grafton? It could be a reality as soon as 2019

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
March 22 2018 3:44 PM



GRAFTON – Gondolas over Grafton may sound like a pie in the sky, but they could be a reality as early as this time next year.

J.D. Lorton, the director of operations at Aerie's Winery Resort and Grafton Ziplines, said his father, Jeff Lorton, worked with New Hampshire-based Sky Trans since 2013 with the hopes of one day creating a sort of skyway tour of Grafton. J.D. Lorton said such a thing would provide tourists with “the best view in the Midwest” once it was created. He said the ambitious \$2 million project could easily place Grafton on the map

for tourists – not just in the region, but the entire Midwest. J.D. Lorton said the next closest location of such an experience is in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

“It's going to be called 'Grafton Sky Tour,’” J.D. Lorton said. “It's going to be a Chandola-style design, which means we will have a number of gondolas and open-air lift chairs.”

The project was taken to the Grafton Village Board on March 20, and J.D. Lorton said town officials wanted to move the process along, adding they were excited to see what it could be. He said he made the mayor and alderpeople aware of his goal of having it done by April 2019, and they were on board.

“We presented it to the village board with the aldermen, officials and village residents,” J.D. Lorton said. “We told them about our wish to make this a reality in the village. They were very positive about it. We hope to make this a two-fold project.”

By “two-fold project,” J.D. Lorton said he wanted to work with Sky Trans to not only build a Grafton Sky Tour from downtown to the top of the rolling vineyards around the winery, but also institute a weekend public transportation system across the village.

“We want people to stop in Grafton,” he said. “According to IDOT, Grafton gets 1.5 million cars through it a year, and the state park up the road gets two million. We don't want people coming here on weekends when it's busy, not finding a place to park, and driving past.”

Another issue is a lack of connectivity between the east and west sides of the village, J. D. Lorton said. If implemented, an open-air vehicle not dissimilar to the trains at Disney World and Six Flags, would take people from small lots to be created near front street to areas across town.

“It would essentially make anywhere in town two blocks from each other,” J.D. Lorton said of the proposed transportation system. “We would run it Friday through Sunday and any Mondays that fall on a holiday.”

As of now, he said he is unsure what that transport system would cost – if it would cost anything at all. He said he was in discussion with Grafton businesses to keep the cost low or optimally free. He said shuttles taking people to the winery resort and back are free to customers.

The proposed Grafton Sky Tour, on the other hand, would not be free. J.D. Lorton said he is working with Sky Trans to keep the cost between \$6-\$10, however. He said the

low price would not be at all possible without the help Sky Trans is offering to his family and the Village of Grafton. Jeff Lorton worked with the late founder of Sky Trans, Jerry Pendelton.

“They shared a vision of Grafton having a world-class attraction,” J.D. Lorton said. “Jerry came out and met with my father and looked at locations at least four times since 2014.”

Besides Sky Trans, J.D. Lorton said future development would also be done through operators SkyFair, Inc. Because of the assistance from those companies, he said the cost would be around \$2 million, instead of much more.

He met with representatives of Sky Trans, SkyFair, Inc. and their safety divisions during an international amusement convention in Orlando, Florida in November to discuss how this system could be implemented in the near future within the village.

J.D. Lorton said he would like to begin soil testing and possibly start pouring concrete for the 15 towers, which will stand 28-30 feet from the ground, required for the system in the near future.

Once completed, J.D. Lorton said the tour would hold eight gondolas and as many as 15 three-seat, open-air chairs between those gondolas. He said as many as 500 people an hour could take the tours at maximum capacity, adding each trip would take about seven minutes up and around the same amount of time down. He also said the project could create as many as 35 new jobs in Grafton.

“The whole Riverbend area is moving toward the tourism industry, and we want to be a part of that,” he said. “Grafton is a big player in our region, and we are fortunate enough to have property with the best view in the entire Midwest.”