

Go, go Grafton Gondolas: An exclusive sneak peak at Grafton's next big thing

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
January 14 2019 12:03 PM





GRAFTON – Grafton's 2019 is already set to look completely different than previous years with possibly one of the biggest changes to the city since the Great Flood of '93.

Jeff Lorton, who owns Aeries Winery as well as the complex of cottages and some of the condos around it, has been working for at least four years to capitalize more on what many call “the best view in the Midwest” from the scenic outlook of the winery. From the back deck, one can see into the heart of St. Charles County, toward the monolithic Ameristar Casino, as well as the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. Usually, people wanting to enjoy the drive would have to drive their car upwards over snaky hills and park. However, as of May 1, the winery may be more accessible to the foot traffic that is the heart and soul of Grafton's tourism and nightlife.

This will be thanks to a gondola system often seen at animal safari zones, zoos, amusement parks and ski slopes. Called “The Grafton Sky Tour,” the gondola ride is a partnership between Lorton and the companies, SkyTrans Manufacturing and SkyFair Incorporated from New Hampshire. Those companies were previously instrumental in the construction of a similar gondola system in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

When completed this May, the Sky Tour will likely bring about 35 jobs to Grafton. Lorton's son, J.D. Lorton, who is also instrumental in the development, said as many as 1.5 million cars pass through Grafton, adding the main industry has become tourism. When the 2,500 feet of cables and stations are completed, people will be able to ride the gondolas to the top of the hill, where Aeries is located.

Once they get there, they may be treated to some new developments around the winery as well. J.D. Lorton said the area will include a festival area (where Schlafly will be hosting their summer festival for the first time in Illinois) as well as small shops – possibly selling old time candy and other fun retail items. A possible collection of dog-walking trails is also in the works.

The Lortons said tickets for the gondola rides will be around \$10 with special packages possibly being offered for families and people who would like season tickets. The ride starts near Grove Park and will be accessible to all customers. They said the system will undergo routine maintenance every morning, and will shut down for around two weeks every year for complete annual maintenance. When asked if that will be the winter months, Jeff Lorton said he was not sure when it would be, saying he had to talk to the people from SkyTrans and SkyFair. He did say, however, he expected the gondolas to be running in winter as well.

“Winters out here are beautiful,” he said. “Getting this kind of view when all the snow is on the trees is just incredible. It's rare, but it is incredible.”

Eagles are also Grafton's top draw in the winter time, and eagle-watching at Aeries is some of the best in the area. The place is, after all, named after the pathways eagles fly.



The Shuttle System

While the Sky Tour will bring people from the streets of Grafton to the top of one of its highest bluffs, an accompanying shuttle system will help them get everywhere else. J.D. Lorton said they have purchased three shuttle buses with a combined capacity of around 100 people. All three of them may be running on weekends, and one with the capacity for around 15 people will operate on weekdays.

These shuttles will take people from parking lots outside the main drag of Route 100 through the city to anywhere else they would like to visit. J.D. Lorton said the shuttles would dramatically help the congestion problems the city seems to incur at peak travel times.

Tickets for the said shuttle will be under \$5 for an all-day pass, J.D. Lorton said, and they will travel from the fudge shop to the fish restaurants.

“People don't like having to get into their cars and drive down the road and find a new place to park when it gets crowded and congested here,” he said. “This shuttle system will take them where they want to go and they won't have to worry about the hassle.”

Originally, the shuttle system was going to utilize side streets and the bike trail with a fun, open-air electric cart transporter, but state and federal regulations would not allow such a thing.

Business District

The City of Grafton has allocated around \$400,000 in TIF funding for the new developments being put together by the Lortons. In a surprising twist, the Lortons have decided to pay back that funding as if it were a loan from the city. To do that, the city is looking to create a new business district for that area. Businesses within that district, including the winery and any possible cottage shops on its premises, will be subject to an additional one percent sales tax.

There is a public hearing regarding that business district set to take place on Jan. 15 during the Grafton City Council meeting.

Both Jeff and J.D. admitted there were “naysayers” to the plan, but said they hoped the overall initiative would be good for the people of Grafton, hopefully attracting new businesses and making more profits for the ones already established in the quiet river town of less than 1,000 permanent residents. Though that number is multiplied several times during peak tourism, the Lortons said they are working to make Grafton a better place for everyone.

In the future, J.D. Lorton said there would be the potential for more developments, including a possible mountain bike trail. The Lortons also operate the Grafton Zipline, which was the first of its kind in Illinois. The gondolas will make it easier for people to get there as well.

[Steven Spencer also contributed to this story.](#)