

# WELL CRAFTING THE FUTURE.

NEW STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR  
THE ELKHART COUNTY CONVENTION  
AND VISITORS BUREAU AND ITS LOCAL  
TOURISM INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY  
PARTNERS



**ELKHART  
COUNTY  
CVB**

**2023 – 2027**

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Wellfield Botanical Gardens

## PREPARED BY

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**WE  
BELIEVE  
IN HERE.**







*Bonneyville Mill, Bristol*

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# ELKHART COUNTY, INDIANA

ELKHART



BRISTOL



MIDDLEBURY



GOSHEN



WAKARUSA



MILLERSBURG



NAPPANEE



**WE  
BELIEVE  
IN HERE.**



A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a black sleeveless top and black and white striped pants, is painting a portrait on a canvas mounted on a wooden easel. She is holding a paintbrush and a palette. The scene is outdoors on a sidewalk in front of a building with a green door. Other easels with paintings are visible in the background. The text "1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY" is overlaid in the center.

# 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# I.O EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## I.1 CHANGE & OPPORTUNITY

The Elkhart County Convention and Visitors Bureau (ECCVB), along with its tourism industry and community partners, progressed through a multitude of dynamic circumstances moving into 2020 and the new decade. Most significant was the emergence and evolution of COVID realities in early 2020 and the massive implications it had on the hospitality and tourism industry at all levels. Beyond COVID, the ECCVB experienced a change in the executive leadership for the organization brought on by the retirement of its longest tenured CEO in the organization's 35-year history. Additionally, the organization relocated to a new facility for the Visitor Center and administrative offices that elevated the visibility of the ECCVB. Finally, within the destination there have been changes in the ownership of a variety of key, long time, private sector tourism assets, and the emergence of new assets including the development of the Beacon Health and Aquatics Center, which features an Olympic sized pool and can host swimming and diving events at a national scale.

The ECCVB recognized the opportunity to undertake a new strategic planning process to help the organization identify and prioritize future initiatives and navigate through the changing dynamics to maintain its position and reputation as the champion for both the local tourism industry and community placemaking in the County. This planning process was structured in a way that would incorporate insights not only from the ECCVB staff, its Board of Directors, and the Elkhart County Innkeeper Tax Commission, but also from the broader visitor and hospitality industry. Importantly, Elkhart County political leadership and residents themselves would also be considered in the planning process to ensure a wide range of perspectives were incorporated.

### VISION STATEMENT

*Elkhart County, IN is a “Well Crafted”, year-round destination that embodies a diversity of arts and cultural attractions, vibrant downtown communities, sports and outdoor adventures, grounded in craftsmanship and an entrepreneurial spirit, attracting multi-generational audiences.*

### MISSION STATEMENT

*The Elkhart County, IN Convention and Visitors Bureau is the County's champion for sustainable tourism promotion and placemaking initiatives to achieve economic vitality and enhanced quality of place through diverse affiliations and collaborations.*



Elkhart Riverwalk, Elkhart

## 1.2 PLANNING APPROACH

In the development of the strategic plan process, the planning team's approach focused on **two primary study elements**. The focus of the first element was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of both the destination and the ECCVB's organizational initiatives. Informed by the findings and related implications identified through the assessment, planning activities in the second element involved identifying and defining the strategic frameworks to guide future activities and outcomes. A project Steering Committee, chaired by representatives from the ECCVB's Board of Directors and the Elkhart County Innkeeper Tax Commission, and made up of both tourism/hospitality industry and general community partners were tasked to provide guidance and input throughout the process.

### State of the Destination Assessment

Components of the destination assessment included: 1) a review of visitor industry trends and research reports to gather an understanding of the current conditions and market forces influencing the industry and destination, and 2) an examination of the ECCVB's organizational activities, initiatives, structure, capacities and performance. Specific activities undertaken as a part of the assessment included:

- Collection and review of secondary data sources related to destination conditions and performance, including DestinationThink Branding/Research, STR Hotel Performance, CERTEC Economic Impact Performance, and historical innkeeper tax Collection data;
- Individual interviews with all ECCVB staff members, Steering Committee members, ECCVB Board Members, and Elkhart County Innkeeper Tax Commission members;
- Development and implementation of a Visitor Profile Survey utilizing the qualified customer contact database collected through the organization's website and social media marketing activities;
- Development and implementation of a Resident Sentiment Survey to measure community awareness and perceptions of both the industry and the organization leveraging the ECCVB's Vibrant Communities platform and social media partners for survey distribution;
- Collection and review of previous ECCVB organizational business plans and performance reporting; and
- Review and analysis of ECCVB placemaking priority projects, activities and messaging.



The results of these assessment activities were compiled into a "State of the Destination" report and were presented to the Steering Committee, along with the ECCVB leadership, staff, and a combined meeting of the Board of Directors and Elkhart County Innkeeper Tax Commission.



## 2 ECCVB New Strategic Directions

Based on the State of the Destination findings, the next phase of the process involved creating the framework for developing new strategic approaches for the ECCVB to meet the agreed-to destination and organizational challenges and realize its visions. Defined strategy pillars were developed, outlining long-term goals over a 3-5 year horizon set across the organization's core competencies as follows:

- Driving the destination brand awareness & visitor conversion among broader and more diverse target audience segments;
- Enhancing visitor & resident experiences through increased product development activities and a focus on improvements to quality of place;
- Securing and managing the resources to lead an organizational program of work that strives to balance marketing, communications and expanded development activities; and
- Providing the tourism voice and heightened cause engagement to support the organization's role in the visitor industry and placemaking to community decision makers and influencers.

After building consensus on the longer-term strategic pillars, a mix of objectives were crafted that reinforced the Pillars. Additionally, a series of associated strategies and tactics were developed that provided detail on how the strategy would be prioritized and implemented. The planning team engaged the ECCVB leadership and staff in the process of integrating the annual business plan process within the larger strategic framework.



*Downtown Middlebury*



## 1.3 FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The State of the Destination assessment provided a foundation to establish the current industry and market conditions, as well as trends and opportunities facing both the destination and the ECCVB as an organization. Initial findings were organized around their implications to external customers, destination products and services, placemaking activities and objectives, and the ECCVB's organizational programs and structure.



### External Customers

- Results from the Visitor Profile Survey support previous research findings indicating the current demographics of existing visitors are largely dominated by more mature, boomer generation segments. As a result, opportunities for activities to expand and diversify to broader demographic groups should be considered.
- The ECCVB had previously invested in Community DNA research with Destination Think that resulted in the identification of high value, niche leisure market segments. Continued execution of strategies targeting these niche segments should be prioritized.
- Elkhart County communities have made a number of recent investments in new resident amenity facilities, including a competition aquatic center, renovated theater facilities, and trails/outdoor recreation facilities. These new assets represent opportunities to leverage new visitor audiences, including youth sports, music/theater, and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.
- Day-trip visitors currently account for approximately 40% of the total destination visitors, averaging a little over a 5 hour stay. Industry standards suggest that 6-7 hours of activity will influence a visitor to consider an overnight stay. Strategies aimed at incremental increases in activity programming and packages should result in the conversion to more overnight visitors.



### Products & Services

- The density and reputation of the Amish culture products and assets remain a strength as a primary driver for destination visitation. However, some modernization within the Amish culture and turnover of established Amish themed attractions present opportunities for repositioning and reinterpretation of the Amish experience that can relate to a wider demographic audience.
- As the ECCVB considers broadening the targeted customer audiences based on the identified Destination Think niche segments, it will be critical to develop product experiences that support and deepen the authenticity of the “Well Crafted” brand and messaging.
- The RV manufacturing cluster offers opportunities for RV owners/travelers growth, but will require the development of new experiences and linkages to existing and emerging outdoor recreation assets and amenities.
- Growth in the youth sports market and outdoor recreation segments should incorporate new product experiences with relevance to families and children to support the competitive advantages of the local event host facilities.

## KEY FINDINGS



## KEY FINDINGS



- The ECCVB has identified its role as a Champion for placemaking activities within the County to achieve higher quality experiences for both residents and visitors. As demands on funding for placemaking activities increases, the ECCVB should prioritize activities that are in alignment with target visitor audiences and experiences.
- The Vibrant Communities Action Agenda has been a successful initiative in helping communities identify and prioritize placemaking projects and programs. The ECCVB has been a leader and manager of this process and has the opportunity to increase local awareness of the organization's role.
- As awareness within the community regarding the values of improved quality of place has increased, multiple organizations have initiated placemaking messaging and programs. The ECCVB has an opportunity to formulate strategic partnerships that promote efficiency and consistency in placemaking efforts within the County.



- The ECCVB was launching the “Well Crafted” brand messaging in early 2020 just as the COVID pandemic occurred. Initial efforts were related to building connections and awareness with local/internal audiences. Balancing continued internal curating activities, as well as supporting increased external communication activities will be important to ensure the experience delivers on the promises of the messaging.
- Championing the visitor industry, while also driving community placemaking are both identified as core organizational roles. Measuring and tracking the success of these initiatives will be vital to maintain an appropriate balance of resource and staffing investment dedicated to these activities.
- As the ECCVB evolves its role as a destination architect through increased development activities, consideration should be given to securing additional resources to support stimulating new development opportunities in order to minimize the impacts on marketing resources. Options could include enhanced local funding partnerships or potential increase in lodging tax funds.



## I.4 STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

These findings and conclusions carried through into the development of four strategic pillars to guide the ECCVB's approach to optimizing outcomes associated with the identified market opportunities. Specifically, these Pillars include:

- Diversify** - This Pillar is focused on external visitors, with the goal of expanding the target visitor audiences to integrate a broader mix of both generations and interests.
- Curate** - This is a product and experience focus, with the goal of expanding and creating new experiences that support more diverse audiences, while complementing existing assets and audiences.
- Balance** - This is an ECCVB organizational focus, with the goal of aligning staffing and resources to adequately support the Diversify and Curate activities.
- Advocate** - This is a communication focus with the goal of creating awareness of the benefits of the tourism/hospitality industry, as well as the ECCVB in its role as a champion for placemaking within the local community.

A brief outline of the Strategic Pillars, Objectives and Strategies is provided on the following pages. More detail, including proposed tactics for implementation as well as research support, is provided in the remainder of this report.

### THE ECCVB & PLACEMAKING

*The ECCVB has established as part of its mission to be a champion for placemaking in the community. The basic principles of placemaking revolve around creating community vibrancy through investments in aesthetics, amenities and activation of public spaces and gateways. These same factors directly impact the experiences of visitors regardless of the primary driver of their visit.*

*Tying the ECCVB's investments in community placemaking to activities that support the visitor experience and expanded customer audiences will help ensure consistency with its statutory guidelines. Additionally, specific tracking of these investments will assist the organization in promoting the economic value and impacts of these activities.*







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