



June 24, 2026

Dear Prospective Partner,

We're glad you're here. The Finger Lakes is a genuinely special place, and we're looking for a partner who feels that, not just a firm that can describe it.

Visit Finger Lakes is the official destination management organization for Ontario County, one of the most storied corners of the Finger Lakes region of New York State. We promote a four-season destination anchored by glacial lakes, world-class wineries, vibrant downtowns, and a culinary scene that keeps earning national attention. In 2025, Wine Enthusiast named the Finger Lakes its American Wine Region of the Year. We're ready to build on that momentum.

This Request for Proposal invites qualified public relations agencies to tell us how they would help us do that, how they would amplify Ontario County's story, cultivate genuine relationships with national travel, lifestyle, and culinary media, and generate the kind of earned coverage that moves travelers from awareness to action.

Our FY27 PR budget is \$70,000, inclusive of media hosting and familiarization tours, with agency fees not to exceed \$60,000. We're a lean, mission-driven team, and we need a partner who can work smart within those parameters and tell us honestly when the numbers need to shift.

We value vision over conformity to a brief. If you see a gap, name it. If you'd approach something differently than we've outlined, say so. We're not looking for a vendor, we're looking for a collaborator who genuinely wants to help this destination thrive.

Proposals are due July 24, 2026 by 5:00 p.m. EST. Questions may be submitted through July 1, 2026. We look forward to reading what you bring to the table.

With appreciation,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alicia M. Richie".

Alicia M. Richie
President & CEO

Executive Summary

Who We Are

Visit Finger Lakes is the official destination management organization (DMO) for Ontario County, New York, one of 14 counties that make up the broader Finger Lakes region. A nonprofit funded through a county-wide occupancy tax, our mission is to curate, distinguish, and develop Ontario County's destination brand in ways that inspire travel, drive economic vitality, and benefit the communities we serve.

Ontario County is home to five of the 11 glacially carved Finger Lakes, more than any other county in the region. Our destination encompasses award-winning wine trails, acclaimed culinary experiences, outdoor recreation across four seasons, vibrant arts and culture, and a calendar of beloved community festivals. Tourism here drives over \$377.7 million in annual visitor spending.

The Opportunity

The Finger Lakes is having a moment. Wine Enthusiast's 2025 Wine Star Award named the Finger Lakes its American Wine Region of the Year. National interest in agritourism, culinary travel, and accessible outdoor recreation is at an all-time high. Ontario County sits at the center of all of it, positioned within a day's drive of over 30 million people across the Northeast and Eastern Canada.

At the same time, we recognize there is work to do. The "Finger Lakes" name is shared across a 14-county region, which creates brand clarity challenges. Our goal is to establish Ontario County as the region's most compelling home base for overnight visitors, the place where a Finger Lakes trip begins and ends.

What We're Looking For

We are inviting qualified public relations agencies to propose a strategic communications partnership focused on earned media impact and reputation building. The selected agency will work hand-in-hand with our in-house team to:

- Develop and execute proactive media outreach campaigns targeting national and regional travel, lifestyle, food and beverage, and outdoor publications.
- Build and maintain meaningful relationships with journalists, editors, and content creators across our key target markets.
- Secure high-quality feature placements, listings, and editorial coverage that drive awareness and overnight visitation.
- Organize and lead media familiarization tours and press trip coordination.
- Create an annual PR plan, editorial calendar, and measurement framework aligned with our strategic priorities.
- Collaborate with our marketing and advertising partners and support influencer strategy.
- Provide transparent monthly reporting and proactive communication throughout.

Strategic Priorities

The selected agency will align with four core organizational priorities:

- **Plan-Driven Prioritization.** Work will be grounded in Visit Finger Lakes' forthcoming strategic plan, currently in development. The agency will be expected to align programming and recommendations as that plan is finalized and adopted.
- **Brand Definition & Digital Presence.** Help define and defend Ontario County's distinct position within the broader Finger Lakes landscape, reducing audience confusion and strengthening our digital profile.

- **Ontario County as Regional Home Base.** Establish Ontario County as the smart, central choice for overnight travelers exploring the Finger Lakes – a destination worthy of a full itinerary, not just a day trip.
- **Authentic Storytelling.** Drive the narrative toward what makes this place genuinely remarkable: outdoor adventure, award-winning wine country, farm-fresh food, historic downtowns, and a cultural scene rooted in deep community pride.

Budget Overview

The total FY27 public relations budget is \$70,000, structured as follows:

- **Agency fees (retainer):** Not to exceed \$60,000
- **Media FAMs and hosting:** \$10,000
- **Visual asset development (coordinated with Marketing & Advertising Agency):** \$35,000 (separate allocation)

Budgets will be reviewed annually in alignment with the county funding contract. We welcome scalable service models and transparent pricing that can flex as our organization evolves.

Key Dates

- **RFP Released:** June 24, 2026
- **Proposer Questions Due:** July 1, 2026 by 5:00 p.m. EST
- **Responses to Questions:** July 7, 2026
- **Proposals Due:** July 24, 2026 by 5:00 p.m. EST
- **Interviews / Presentations:** August 4-6, 2026 (if applicable)
- **Selection Notification:** August 18, 2026
- **Contract Start:** September 1, 2026

How to Submit

Proposals must be submitted electronically in searchable PDF format no later than **July 24, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. EST** to:

To: Alicia M. Richie - alicia@visitfingerlakes.com

CC: accounting@visitfingerlakes.com

Subject: RESPONSE TO RFP: Marketing & Advertising Services

Questions regarding this RFP must be submitted via email by July 1, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. EST. Visit Finger Lakes reserves the right to reject any or all proposals and to amend the schedule at its sole discretion.



REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Public Relations Services

Visit Finger Lakes is the official destination marketing organization for Ontario County of the Finger Lakes region of New York State, one of the most celebrated travel destinations in the Northeast, renowned for its world-class wine trails, stunning glacial lakes, outdoor recreation, and vibrant culinary scene. As stewards of this remarkable region, we are committed to elevating its national and international profile and ensuring that the Finger Lakes story is told with depth, authenticity, and reach.

To advance that mission, Visit Finger Lakes is inviting qualified public relations agencies to submit proposals for a strategic communications partnership focused on reputation building and earned media impact. We are seeking an experienced agency partner that can amplify our brand voice, cultivate meaningful relationships with travel, lifestyle, food and beverage, and outdoor media, and secure high-quality coverage that drives visitation and positions the Finger Lakes as a must-visit destination for a broad and diverse audience. Visit Finger Lakes encourages agencies with demonstrated expertise in destination or travel PR, strong media relationships, and a creative, data-informed approach to storytelling to submit a proposal.

This document constitutes a Request for Proposal ("RFP"), in a competitive format, from qualified firms. This request is an offer by Visit Finger Lakes to underwrite, in accordance with the terms and conditions of this RFP, the services proposed by the successful firm(s), by contract.

The respondents ("Proposers") to this RFP shall provide a proposal, in accordance with the terms and conditions set forth herein, to provide all or part of services to Visit Finger Lakes as described in the Scope of Work. Proposers are encouraged to go beyond what is outlined here. Propose alternatives, identify gaps, and challenge our assumptions where your expertise warrants it. Visit Finger Lakes values vision over conformity to a brief.

About Visit Finger Lakes

Visit Finger Lakes is the official destination management organization (DMO) for Ontario County, one of 14-counties making up the Finger Lakes region of New York State. It's an internationally recognized wine destination featuring glacially carved lakes, outdoor recreation, farm-fresh culinary experiences, rich heritage, arts & cultural vibrancy, festivals, and seasonal highlights.

The organization works in partnership with local hospitality businesses, community leaders, municipal partners, attractions, and state and federal agencies to promote the Finger Lakes as a four-season travel destination and drive economic impact while enhancing quality of life for residents and supporting sustainable destination development. Visit Finger Lakes supports travel trade, media, and consumer audiences through destination marketing, itinerary development, press trip coordination, and travel trade education programs.

Visit Finger Lakes is a non-profit DMO funded through a portion of a 3% county-wide occupancy tax for dwellings with three or more rentable rooms.

- **Total annual budget for FY27:** \$1,495,209 with roughly \$70,000 allocated to public relations services, inclusive of media hosting, familiarization tours, media events, etc.
- **Mission:** To curate, distinguish, and develop Ontario County's destination brand to inspire travel that creates economic vitality for our stakeholders and communities, and provides quality of life benefits for our residents.

The Destination

Ontario County is one of the 14 counties that make up the comprehensive Finger Lakes region as designated by the State of New York and promoted as such. Encompassing five of the 11 glacially carved lakes (Canandaigua, Seneca, Honeoye, Canadice, and Hemlock; more than any other county), rolling vineyards and farmland, cascading waterfalls, miles of outdoor recreation, and vibrant small cities and towns, Ontario County's tourism industry drives over \$377.7 million in visitor spending, according to Tourism Economics 2024 Economic Impact Report.

While a four-season destination, summer and fall drive the most demand and revenue for the near 1,700 rooms county-wide. Anchored by its prime location and accessibility by car and air service, Ontario County sits to the south of Rochester, east of Buffalo and west of Syracuse.

- Boston, M.A., or Detroit, M.I.: 7 hours
- New York City, N.Y., Philadelphia, P.A., or Washington, D.C.: 6 hours
- Montreal and Hartford, C.T., or Newark, N.J.: 5 hours
- Harrisburg, P.A., or Cleveland, O.H.: 4 hours
- Toronto, O.N., or Albany, N.Y.: 3.5 hours
- Hamilton, O.N., or Cooperstown, N.Y.: 3 hours
- Buffalo, N.Y., or Niagara Falls, N.Y.: 1.5 hours
- Corning, N.Y., or Syracuse, N.Y.: 1.25 hours

Key Destination Assets

- Waterfront & Outdoor Recreation
 - **Canandaigua Lake:** One of the crown jewels of the region, offering boating, swimming, and lakeside dining.
 - **Seneca Lake:** Geneva's prime location on Seneca Lake makes it a hub for trophy-fishing, including the annual National Lake Trout Derby, and recreational boating.
 - **Bristol Mountain:** A major year-round destination featuring downhill & nordic skiing in the winter and aerial adventure courses and hiking during the warmer months.
 - **Community Parks & Preserves:** Expansive natural areas like Onanda Park, Harriet Hollister Recreation Area, Seneca Lake State Park, Kashong Conversation Area, High Tor Wildlife Management Area, and the Canandaigua Vista Nature Preserve provide excellent hiking, kayaking, and camping opportunities.
- Arts & Culture
 - **CMAC (Constellation Brands-Marvin Sands Performing Arts Center):** A premier outdoor amphitheater on the grounds of Finger Lakes Community College that hosts major musical acts and cultural events.
 - **Historic Sites:** Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion State Historic Park features stunning Victorian-era architecture and themed gardens, while the Ganondagan State Historic Site honors centuries of Seneca and Haudenosaunee history.
 - **Local Performing Arts:** Venues like the historic Smith Opera House in Geneva, Fort Hill in Canandaigua, and the Bristol Valley Theater offer robust seasonal entertainment.
- Culinary & Craft Beverage
 - **Wine Enthusiast's 2025 Wine Star Award American Wine Region of the Year:** Awarded to the Finger Lakes, honoring two centuries of innovation, sustainability, and cool-climate excellence. Plus, a collection of advanced and master sommeliers in downtown Geneva.
 - **Canandaigua Lake Wine Trail:** A collection of premier wineries and vineyards offering tastings and stunning scenic views.
 - **New York Kitchen:** Located in Canandaigua, this facility provides culinary education, hands-on cooking classes, and a tasting room highlighting regional foods and wines.

- **Craft Beverage Scene:** A thriving ecosystem of local breweries, hard cideries, and distilleries spanning the county.
- Premier Accommodations & Attractions
 - **Luxury Resorts:** Properties like The Lake House on Canandaigua, Hotel Canandaigua, and Geneva on the Lake drive significant high-end lodging and dining.
 - **Family Fun:** Attractions like Roseland Waterpark, Roseland Mini Golf, and Roseland Wake Park in Canandaigua serve as popular summer hotspots.
- Highly Regarded Festivals
 - **Naples Grape Festival:** held last weekend in September during the peak harvest season, this beloved festival celebrates the "Grape Pie Capital of the World." Visitors flock to the village for the famous World's Greatest Grape Pie Contest, live regional music, regional artisans, and the Brahm Moore Beverage Garden featuring dozens of Finger Lakes wineries and cideries.
 - **Tap & Craft Festival:** Taking place in November at Hotel Canandaigua, this autumn event lets attendees sample dozens of pours from craft breweries, cideries, and distilleries across the Finger Lakes while enjoying local artisan vendors and live music.
 - **Christkindl Market:** Held in mid-November at the Granger Homestead and Carriage Museum in Canandaigua, featuring over 150 regional artisans selling unique holiday gifts inside decorated, heated tents, plus authentic German food, "Gideon's Grog," local wine and beer, visit with Santa, and walk through the traditional Festival of Trees.
 - **Clifton Springs Festival of Lights:** An iconic early-December event that illuminates downtown Clifton Springs. The family-friendly festival features dazzling light displays, horse-drawn wagon rides, live entertainment, and visits from Santa Claus.
 - **The Fire & Ice Festival in Canandaigua:** a highly popular, award-winning annual winter festival held in the historic downtown district during mid-February. The two-day event draws crowds to the Finger Lakes region by bringing together the contrasting elements of freezing ice and sizzling fire.
 - **Maple Weekends:** these family-friendly festivals take place during the last two weekends of March, featuring sugarhouse tours, tree-tapping demos, and maple product samplings.
 - **Geneva Music Festival:** Spans mid-May to mid-June, blends world-class classical, jazz, and chamber music with regional Finger Lakes wineries and local food markets.
 - **National Lake Trout Derby:** Held Memorial Day weekend on Seneca Lake in Geneva, this multi-day fishing tournament and community festival awards major cash prizes.
 - **Freedom Festival at Bristol Hills:** Taking place in mid-June at the Bristol Hills Historical Society, this event features Revolutionary War reenactments, pioneer crafts, vintage games, and lectures honoring the nation's earliest days.
 - **Downtown Canandaigua Art & Music Festival:** This annual July event features a juried fine arts and crafts show with over 150 vendors. Set along South Main Street, it draws huge crowds with diverse live musical performances across multiple stages, alongside food trucks and outdoor dining.
 - **Indigenous Music & Arts Festival:** Hosted at the Ganondagan State Historic Site, this July event celebrates Haudenosaunee and Indigenous culture. It offers traditional music, dance performances, storytelling, an Indigenous art market, and authentic food.
 - **Geneva's Glorious Garlic Festival:** Held at the Geneva Lakefront, this recurring weekend event celebrates all things garlic. Attendees can enjoy cooking demonstrations by local chefs, wine and beer tastings, and various food stalls.
 - **Phelps Sauerkraut Weekend:** Held in late July, this community tradition features carnival rides, road races, live entertainment, and food vendors.
 - **Pageant of Steam:** hosted by the New York Steam Engine Association, this early August festival celebrates historic Americana with antique tractors, daily equipment parades, steam traction engines, plowing demonstrations, and live music.

Strategic Priorities

The agency partner will be expected to support the following core positioning objectives:

1. **Plan-Driven Prioritization.** The completion of Visit Finger Lakes' forthcoming strategic plan (separate RFP) will serve as the foundation for this priority area. Upon adoption, organizational resources, partnerships, and programming will be realigned to reflect the plan's defined goals, ensuring every initiative is tied to a clear, agreed-upon direction.
2. **Brand Definition, Clarity & Digital Presence.** Define and defend Visit Finger Lakes' distinct position in a crowded regional landscape reducing confusion from competing "Finger Lakes" entities, while improving digital performance to more effectively reach, inspire, and convert travelers.
3. **Ontario County as Regional Home Base.** Establish Ontario County as the smart, innovative choice for overnight travelers exploring the Finger Lakes Region and western New York.
4. **Authentic Experiences.** Drive the narrative toward Ontario County's authentic assets: outdoor recreation, award-winning wineries, gardens, historic downtowns and main streets, craft beverage trails, arts and culture, festivals, and agriculture.

Scope of Work

The selected agency, in coordination with Visit Finger Lakes' in-house team, will lead the following:

- Execute targeted public relations campaigns to generate feature articles, listings, and related publicity.
- Conduct media outreach to target markets.
- Write, format, and distribute press releases, fact sheets, and talking points to media.
- Coordinate promotion and publicity for local events.
- Organize and develop media assets in conjunction with Marketing & Advertising Agency.
- Create story pitches and ideas.
- Develop media familiarization tours and identify travel writer opportunities.
- Assist with state-level public relations efforts and media visit coordination.
- Support paid media campaigns through public relations.
- Participate in regularly scheduled status meetings.
- Create annual public relations plan, strategy, and editorial calendar.
- Identify paid placements through earned media contacts.
- Track and measure earned media delivering comprehensive reports.
- Provide PR education to partners as a strategy to un-earth better stories.
- Use of Visit Finger Lakes' existing asset library (Bynder); additional funds are allocated to capture limited new content.
- Collaboration with other marketing related partners, i.e. media buying, content creators.
- Invoices must be generated early in the month, generally by the 7-9th day.
- Assistance in strategy of photo and video shoots, if needed.
- Additional support for Annual Report, County presentations.
- Work with and recommend influencers.
- Be aware of industry trends we may leverage.

Core Goals, Objectives, & Tactics

The overarching goal of this contract is to generate and maintain Visit Finger Lakes' as a premier, year-round overnight travel destination through coverage in top-tier regional and national media outlets through a multifaceted media relations campaign primarily targeting national and international journalists throughout the U.S. Specific goals to be established, including the number and quality of secured media placements, number and quality of secured desk side appointments, and the quality of attendees at media events, as well as coverage/circulation results.

Expectations & Desired Qualifications

The selected agency is expected to:

- Provide a dedicated account lead with strong communication skills and DMO fluency.
- Bring genuine tourism expertise-ideally including experience with small-market DMOs.
- Ground all recommendations in data, traveler insights, and regional market knowledge.
- Collaborate closely with Visit Finger Lakes staff and coordinate effectively with external partners.
- Deliver clear, timely reporting and fully transparent monthly billing.
- Negotiate aggressively on Visit Finger Lakes' behalf with media vendors and partners.
- Monitor regional events, travel trends, and I Love New York opportunities proactively.
- Maintain flexibility as organizational priorities evolve.
- Minimum five years of demonstrated experience in areas relevant to Visit Finger Lakes' mission and strategic priorities. Strong familiarity with Western New York and the Finger Lakes markets preferred.

Budget

Visit Finger Lakes budget for this contract to cover agency fees is not to exceed \$60,000; an additional \$10,000 is available for media FAMs and hosting, while a separate allocation of \$35,000 is planned in coordination with Marketing & Advertising Agency for visual asset development.

The county budget contract will be reviewed annually, informed by the formula and findings of the strategic plan currently in development. Visit Finger Lakes reserves the right to adjust budget allocations in advance and in collaboration with the selected agency, and prospective partners should expect that final figures may shift prior to contract execution.

Respondents are encouraged to propose scalable service models that can flex with these parameters.

Proposal Requirements

Submissions should include company portfolio samples or links to relevant work. To be considered responsive, proposals must include the following:

- Executive Summary
- Firm profile and ownership structure; New York State strongly supports women owned businesses
- Tourism and DMO experience (minimum 5 years)
- Case studies with measurable outcomes
- Strategic and creative approach for Visit Finger Lakes
- Media philosophy
- Measurement terms
- Team Structure and named account lead
- Pricing model (retainer, media, and any variable fees)
 - Cost by project phase or task
 - Estimated hours for each task
 - Personnel job titles and billing rates beyond contracted hours
 - Any subcontractor costs and associated billing rates
 - Any anticipated travel or administrative expenses
- Suggested meeting format; inclusive of travel fees/time management
- Client references (minimum three)
- Conflict of interest disclosure

Schedule

Event	Date	EST
RFP Released to Proposers	June 24, 2026	5:00 P.M.
Proposer Inquiry Period Ends	July 1, 2026	5:00 P.M.

Final Responses to Proposer Inquiries	July 7, 2026	5:00 P.M.
Proposals Due	July 24, 2026	5:00 P.M.
Interviews/Presentations (if applicable)	August 4-6, 2026	TBD
Estimated Notification of Selection	August 18, 2026	EOD
Contract Start Date	September 1, 2026	

Visit Finger Lakes reserves the right to amend this schedule at its sole discretion through a published addendum. The selected Proposer(s) will enter into a contract for services with Visit Finger Lakes. The anticipated duration of the project is approximately through December 2027, by which time contract could be renewed/extended to coincide with the county funding contract, if granted.

Instructions to Proposers

Proposers are advised to review all sections of this RFP carefully and follow the instructions completely.

1. Alternative methodologies are welcome; however, proposals that materially alter the intent of the RFP may be deemed non-responsive.
2. All costs associated with proposal preparation are the responsibility of the Proposer.
3. Proposals shall remain valid for a minimum of 120 days following submission.
4. Pricing submitted shall be considered firm and fixed unless otherwise noted.
5. Visit Finger Lakes reserves the right to reject any or all proposals.
6. All materials submitted in response to this RFP become the property of Visit Finger Lakes.
7. The selected firm may be required to provide proof of insurance and execute a formal contract agreement.

Evaluation Criteria

Responsive proposals will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

	Points
OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF COMPANY & DEMONSTRATED RESULTS An assessment of the history of your company, your experience as it relates to the requirements within this RFP, evidence of past performance, quality and relevance of past work, references, and related items.	35
SCOPE OF WORK Proposal demonstrates understanding of the project and articulates a well thought out and creative process with a workplan, timeline, and additional considerations to achieve the desired results.	25
QUALIFICATIONS OF PERSONNEL An assessment of the qualifications and experience of your managerial team, staff, subcontractors, and related items.	25
BUDGET APPROACH/COST EFFECTIVENESS Effective and efficient delivery of quality services is demonstrated in relation to the budget allocation. The allocation is reasonable and appropriate.	15
TOTAL	100

NOTE: Designated Visit Finger Lakes staff or selected advisors will evaluate the written proposals. Visit Finger Lakes may at any time during the evaluation process seek clarification from Proposers regarding any information contained within their proposal. Final scores for each respondent will reflect a consensus of the evaluations. Any attempt by a Proposer to contact a member of Visit Finger Lakes's staff or selected advisors outside the RFP process, in an attempt to gain knowledge or an advantage, may result in disqualification of Proposer.

Proposal Submission

Responses to this RFP must be submitted electronically no later than July 24, 2026; 5 p.m. est. Electronic proposals should be sent to:

TO: Alicia M. Richie, alicia@visitfingerlakes.com

CC: accounting@visitfingerlakes.com

SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO RFP: Strategic Planning Services

Submission requirements:

- Searchable PDF format
- One complete proposal
- One redacted proposal, if applicable

Questions regarding this RFP should be submitted via email no later than July 1, 2026; 5 p.m. Visit Finger Lakes reserves the right to terminate this solicitation at any time prior to entering into an agreement and reserves the right to reject any or all proposals that do not comply with the terms of this RFP.