



## Rebuilding For Resiliency

A PATH FORWARD FOR  
VISIT FORT COLLINS

*Draft for Review - May  
2021*



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Visit Fort Collins plays an active role in helping the community navigate its way through recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. The strategic recommendations for action fall into four areas, each with ties to the Destination Master Plan.

## **Secure Competitive Funding**

Without competitive funding, recovery actions to build market will be severely compromised.

## **Differentiate Basecamp Fort Collins**

Leisure markets and youth sports will be the first facet of tourism rebuilding. Fort Collins will attract more leisure travel by marketing its unique character and leveraging its proximity to regional attractions.

## **Develop Community Connections**

Meetings and conferences will come back more slowly than youth sports and leisure, but destinations that rebuild group business from within will prosper more rapidly and be more resilient in the long-term.

## **Leverage Brand Promise**

Building on the brand promise of Fort Collins establishes an emotional bond between residents and guests.

# Executive Summary



The businesses that make up Fort Collins' tourism and hospitality sector continue to suffer from the negative impacts of the closures and changed travel behavior sparked by COVID-19. Despite a brief boost in overnight business resulting from resident displacement during wildfires in the summer of 2020, as the city enters the Summer 2021 travel season, overnight stays and visitor spending in the city continues to be at only a fraction of previous years' levels given the lack of events, challenges to in-person classes and activities at Colorado State University and substantial decreases in business travel.

To capitalize on pent-up demand for travel and to rebuild the city's tourism and hospitality programming, Visit Fort Collins engaged with Clarity of Place to identify ways to begin the recovery and identify ways to make the sector more resilient and increase the ability to weather external shocks and global changes to travel behavior.

The results of those efforts are summarized in this strategic recovery report. ***Rebuilding for Resiliency*** identifies areas where Visit Fort Collins should quickly reposition efforts to advance existing programming to capture greater shares of leisure and business travel as COVID-19 induced regulations around gathering lessen and confidence in travel grows. It also looks at ways to re-start implementation of the city's Destination Master Plan and evolve those recommendations to address changes in travel behavior.

Just as addressing the impacts of COVID-19 required collaboration among all within the city, supporting the recovery and rebuilding of Fort Collins as a destination will be a team effort. Along with identifying key initiatives where Visit Fort Collins must act to encourage and assist the comeback of visitors, Rebuilding for Resiliency recommends areas in which the organization should lend support to others to nurture the recovery of the community and its quality of place as a whole.



## BUILDING ON A STRONG BASE

In 2019, The City of Fort Collins and Visit Fort Collins partnered to develop a Destination Master Plan which identified ways Visit Fort Collins could encourage greater levels of visitation and increase visitor spending. The Plan sought to leverage the activity and draw of Colorado State University, the city's dynamic corporate base, and its proximity to Rocky Mountains National Park, as well as signature events and the city's burgeoning entertainment scene. The Plan examined how Fort Collins compares to other destinations and uncovered that funding levels for Visit Fort Collins were at a comparative disadvantage to competitor communities across Colorado. The implications of its lack of robust funding was that Visit Fort Collins' marketing and programming efforts could not be as targeted as those of competitor destinations and that there were few resources for programming to engage and connect the city's tourism and hospitality infrastructure.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and forced closures in March of 2020, Visit Fort Collins was forced to place implementation of the Destination Master Plan on hold and stepped in to help the community of Fort Collins proactively build support for local restaurants, retailers, and other businesses devastated by the effects of significant declines in resident and visitor demand.

## 2020 DESTINATION MASTER PLAN: KEY FINDINGS

- > Visit Fort Collins funding level is not competitive
- > Fort Collins can leverage the brand promise of its collaborative, sharing nature
- > Community connections facilitate an avenue for group business growth
- > Maintaining quality venues & park assets provides a gateway for new opportunities
- > Talent retention and attraction provides connective fiber across multiple strategies





## Re-examining the Destination

To understand what Visit Fort Collins must do to help the city's economy recover, Clarity of Place reexamined Fort Collins' competitiveness as a destination in three different areas - Input/Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities. This will allow Visit Fort Collins to build its recovery efforts given changes in the local market, as well as leveraging changes externally—either in competitive markets or in travel behavior.

### Input/Trends

To understand the effect of the COVID closures and changes to travel behavior as a result on Fort Collins, Clarity of Place examined:

- Traveler Sentiment - Monitoring traveler sentiment allows Visit Fort Collins to understand when travelers are ready to return and when residents are ready to welcome them.
- Leisure growth - Pent-up demand is driving interest in leisure and youth sports. Competition is intense for these market segments, as it now includes destinations that would normally focus on meetings and conventions. Service challenges arise as businesses seek to refill front-line positions.

- Hotel performance - Inventory growth across the region creates a more competitive marketplace. Hotels are seeing variances in the pace of recovery as rate competition creates different value points for the consumer.

In addition to the above trends, the advantages Fort Collins possessed as being a top university city became a challenge during COVID as a large source of demand for the city's visitor facing businesses were sent home. Likewise, as businesses transitioned to work-from-home policies, and eliminated non-essential business travel, lodging and other visitor-facing businesses felt the impact.

### Challenges

As Visit Fort Collins begins to refocus its marketing and programing to prompt the destination's recovery, the organization must address and mitigate a number of challenges specific to Fort Collins as a destination:

- **Funding:** The Destination Master Plan

identified that Visit Fort Collins is on the lower end of the spectrum in terms of organizational funding. The lack of funds to fine-tune marketing campaigns and take advantage of the market segments that are returning first is even more pronounced in the recovery.

- **Competition for overnight stays:** With the return of leisure travel before group or business travel re-starts, Visit Fort Collins must compete with a larger group of destinations to attract visitors to the city.
- **Increased lodging inventory in the region:** Fort Collins has a strong mix of lodging properties that appeal to a broad mix of visitor audiences. The refocused visitor marketing campaigns needs to be positioned to drive overnight stays to all types of lodging properties.
- **Community involvement:** Prior to the pandemic, one of Fort Collins' strongest assets was the deep sense of community pride held by its residents and visitor-facing businesses. As Visit

Fort Collins works to rebuild sustainable visitor business, it needs to be aware of the local tolerance for "opening" too soon and aware of resident sentiment towards tourism in the post-pandemic environment.

### Opportunities

The Destination Master Plan identified some significant strengths in the Fort Collins visitor experience. As it looks to help the city recovery, Visit Fort Collins can leverage these strengths to drive re-ignited visitor interest and encourage sustainable levels of visitors during the recovery period and as travel confidence (and resident acceptance of visitors) stabilizes. Recovery will require interaction with demand drivers in innovative and non-traditional ways to differentiate Fort Collins as a destination.

The social unrest that occurred across the country during the summer of 2020 highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in all community aspects. Visit Fort Collins can leverage the community's love of place and welcoming nature to demonstrate the destination and community's commitment to DEI principles.

## KEY RECOVERY OPPORTUNITIES



### LEVERAGE EVENTS AND LOVE OF PLACE

Use the Fort Collins' distinct personality and visitor offerings to encourage leisure visits



### QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

In efforts to rebuild revenue/activity lost because of the pandemic, keep the city's long-term sustainability in mind



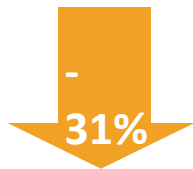
### ADD STRATEGIC TARGETING

As funds allow, add strategic, targeted marketing to leisure visitor audiences that are most likely to be converted into visitors and that will not overly tax the city's hospitality infrastructure as the travel market rebuilds.

## COVID-19 IMPACT AND RESPONSE

COVID-19 caused shifts in operations such as virtual classes at Colorado State University, gathering limitations for fall football games and other events. The overall decline in traveler demand dramatically impacted the Fort Collins hospitality industry. Despite seeing an up-tick in leisure travel as restrictions eased in the Summer of 2020 and as travelers looked for outdoor activities like those the city has to offer, lodging properties in the city suffered a severe decline in performance. The inability to host and organize events not only negatively impacted overnight stays to Fort Collins, but also caused the city's primary event development organization, the Downtown Business Association, to pause and alter its operations.

In addition to turning its marketing efforts inward to encourage residents to support local businesses as much as possible given the closures, Visit Fort Collins seized the moment and created an online "marketplace" to allow shoppers to access and buy locally-made products. The organization received national publicity for the innovation and ease of the Fort Collins Marketplace. Nevertheless, Visit Fort Collins' marketing impact will remain limited until travel confidence returns.



### Hotel Demand

According to STR (a data provider for global hospitality sectors) over the course of 2020 hotel demand in Fort Collins dropped by 31% compared to 2019. This drop erased the progressive growth in demand established over the previous six years.



### Festivals and Events

Fort Collins is known for its signature events, such as Tour de Fat and Colorado State University Rams football games. All signature events were canceled in 2020. Historically, participants and spectators at these activities spend in the city during their stay. In the absence of such events, net taxable sales in the entire downtown area were down 9% in 2020.



### Downtown College Corridor

CSU was forced to transition to virtual classes for a substantial period during the pandemic. In large part due to the absence of student activity/demand, net taxable sales within the downtown College Corridor were down 21% according to the City of Fort Collins.



## ENSURING SAFETY FOR ALL

As a community partner, Visit Fort Collins immediately pivoted to facilitating critical communication to our residents, businesses and visitors. Daily updates were provided from state, county, and city resources, recognizing health and safety was the first priority.

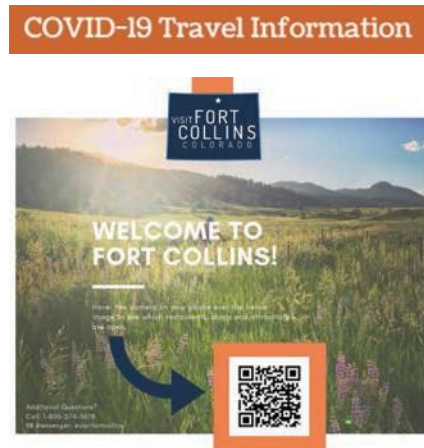
In April 2020 Visit Fort Collins created a safety pledge. This information was hosted on our website and in conjunction with our hotel teams to instill a common goal and knowledge base for how to navigate our community safely. Additional components were added to enhance safety as guidelines changed in a near constant manner.

QR Codes were added to our visitor guides to link users immediately to local health guidelines and business capabilities. It included information on hours, curbside or pick up options, recreation and retail operations. QR Codes were also distributed for display to all hotel partners to assist front desk personnel with contactless information, again keeping working residents and visitors safe. FoCo ToGo was added to the list highlighting business who were operating and how to best access their services.

Ensuring our residents and hospitality sector employees are safe will continue to be front

and center in all strategic actions and as an integral component of the Destination Recovery Plan. Health officers and medical professionals throughout the state, county, and city are addressing and updating safety programs and support on an ongoing

basis. Visit Fort Collins will continue to stay informed with these measures and act as a resource for disseminating those messages, to both visitors, hospitality partners, and the community.





# Strategies and Tactics

This Destination Recovery Plan is meant to provide a clear direction for Fort Collins to rapidly regain lost ground across the tourism-related economy and emerge as a more strategic and sustainable destination.

The primary goal of the recovery plan is to give Visit Fort Collins immediate and short-term actions that will continue to support the destination and community in its **recovery** from the impact of the pandemic and return to its growth trajectory. .

Additionally, the destination strategic recovery plan identifies ways that Visit Fort Collins can adjust implementation tactics of its longer-range Destination Master Plan to position the city to be more competitive and **resilient** given the changes in travel behavior and the even greater competition to attract visitors of all types.

The plan is built around three guiding principles to ensure that Fort Collins as a travel destination will emerge stronger from the COVID crisis and continue to contribute to the city's overall recovery.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES



Hone marketing and programs to **encourage the return of visitors** by placing destination partners and service providers at the heart of destination recovery;



Communicate Fort Collins' **commitment to safety** for residents, community members, and visitors as the city reopens and recovers;



Build a **foundation for resiliency**—adjust strategic initiatives to make Fort Collins less vulnerable to external shocks.



## Strategy 1: SECURE COMPETITIVE FUNDING

*Without competitive funding, recovery actions will reflect pandemic impacted revenues and take longer to positively influence recovery.*

The competitive funding disparity became more pronounced during COVID-related closures when Visit Fort Collins needed the resources to nimbly adapt to the rapid changes in competitive market dynamics."

The Destination Master Plan recommended that Visit Fort Collins explore the creation of a Fort Collins Tourism Improvement District (FCTID) to add a tourism benefit assessment to hotels and overnight accommodations. The funds raised from the assessment will be spent to provide marketing and sales support for hotels within the district.

**Recovery Challenge:** The changes in travel behaviors due to COVID-19 highlighted the need for a nimble response to stay focused on targets that fill market needs.

During 2020, other Colorado destinations in resort locales maintained their business volume levels during the pandemic and in some cases grew business volume by targeting specific audiences with a proclivity towards leisure travel during the pandemic.

To ensure that Visit Fort Collins has ample marketing resources to create targeted and customized campaigns to take advantage of increased leisure travel demand going forward, acceptance of the FCTID is even more critical.

**Response Action:** To ensure it has adequate budget to deliver targeted marketing to leisure travel in the short term and to expand and prepare for group and business travel when those markets return, Visit Fort Collins should continue to advocate for passage of the FCTID and solidify hotel support. Specifically, the organization should:

- Describe projected benefit of increased investments in tourism marketing and programming to hotel and lodging partners
- Act with sense of urgency for rebuilding sustainable destination business.



- Continue the visitor marketing plan for leisure and group sales that will benefit the participating properties and encourage greater levels of overnight visits.
- Continue to advocate for FCTID approval by hoteliers.

## How the FCTID Will Work

1. City of Fort Collins authorized the legislation to create a FCTID (completed)
2. Hotel leaders are in the process of creating a governing board for the FCTID
3. Hotels in the city must agree to place their properties in the FCTID and be assessed the fee. As of the publication of this report (May 2021), several have done so.
4. Fort Collins is developing a plan for using the additional funds; the plan will show how the hotels/ businesses that are assessed the fee will benefit
5. The governing board approves the plan and contracts Visit Fort Collins to carry it out.





## Strategy 2:

### DIFFERENTIATE BASECAMP FORT COLLINS

*Leisure travelers will be the first to return. Visit Fort Collins should continue to market its unique character and proximity to regional attractions to prompt travel decisions.*

Prior to the pandemic, the existing "Basecamp: Fort Collins" concept helped position the area as a hub for recreational activities, craft beverages, and leisure outings. Itinerary-based marketing helped to encourage visitor interaction and spending throughout the city.

**Recovery Challenge:** As leisure travel ramps up with openings post-COVID-19 and travel confidence increases, more destinations will be marketing themselves as the ideal vacation location. Visit Fort Collins can better its chances of creating interest and capturing a greater share of the leisure visitors by coupling the convenience of the city's proximity to regional attractions with signature events and a broad range of visitor offerings within the city.

The combination of great location coupled with a variety of authentic visitor experiences experience will set Fort Collins apart as a basecamp where the visitor can have it "all." The basecamp concept allows

Visit Fort Collins to build around regional outdoor recreation assets and layer in other experiences. Additionally, the concept can be redeployed weekly to include updates on activities and options. This "hook" allows Visit Fort Collins to position Basecamp as an active, evolving experience versus a more static hub and spoke itinerary.

**Response Action:** Creating and enlisting the help of destination partners to make the Fort Collins visitor experience appeal more deeply to various leisure travelers will require a more resource-intensive campaign than merely itinerary-based marketing.

To implement the elevated basecamp strategy and differentiate "Basecamp: Fort Collins," Visit Fort Collins should:

- Develop an implementation plan around weekly offerings scheduled for the remainder of calendar year 2021 and in 2022. The implementation plan should include ways to connect the event-based



itineraries to the key drive markets. It should also include methods to reach the targeted leisure audiences.

- Expand the role of the visitor center and Visit Fort Collins staff to include enhanced visitor interaction to support lodging and other hospitality service providers.
- Assemble and enlist destination partners to create and deliver experiences that allow the visitor to participate in an authentic aspect of the city while not over-taxing resources/staff.

- Encourage sports planners to utilize the Basecamp concept as they plan and host youth sporting events within the Fort Collins area

#### Timing

- Visit Fort Collins will work with the producers of signature, visitor-facing events to optimize with community needs and opportunities.
- Visit Fort Collins will continue to reach out to destination partners to introduce the marketing plan and identify ways the individual destination partner can contribute to the visitor experience.

- Visit Fort Collins will identify additional roles and responsibilities for team members to help execute/enhance visitor experiences once in the destination.

#### Needed Partners

- Destination partners to build immersive experiences
- Event producers to host events following new gathering protocols
- City of Fort Collins Event Services to help enhance the event optimization.



### Strategy 3: DEVELOP COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

*Meetings and conferences will come back more slowly than leisure, but destinations that rebuild group business from within will prosper more rapidly and be more resilient in the long-term*

Preparation for the return of group gatherings needs to begin during recovery as sports bookings will continue to grow while meetings and conferences slowly re-emerge.

**Recovery Challenge:** Local contacts and connections are essential for facilitating conference, sporting event, and corporate and academic meeting bookings in Fort Collins. The Destination Master Plan recommended leveraging connections in the community to better Visit Fort Collins chances of recruiting such events.

With competition for pursuing these activities heightened as destinations attempt to recover from the effects of 2020 and adapt to new meeting requirements, active prospecting and relationship building must be the priority of Visit Fort Collins and hotel partners.



**Response Action:** To proactively engage meeting and sports planners as they consider scheduling events in the post pandemic travel environment, Visit Fort Collins should:

- Develop a contact referral program to build local connections to boards of directors and organizations, identify meetings or events in which the contact is engaged, and solicit the contact's help in making the case for Fort Collins as an ideal location for the event;
- Utilize an in-progress Pilot Program with a dedicated, third-party call center to consistently reach targeted and qualified meeting and sports planners and invite them to consider Fort Collins.
- Follow-up with vetted leads identified by the third-party call center firm.

- Develop a partner integration plan to encourage hotel involvement around leads related to the business transient market.

#### **Needed Partners**

- Corporate representatives who are responsible and have interest in supporting business travel to Fort Collins.
- Community leaders, corporate citizens, and Colorado State University faculty and staff to identify potential meeting or event leads.
- Greater Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce and local business leaders to facilitate business connections, introductions, and networks.



## Strategy 4: LEVERAGE BRAND PROMISE

*Building on the brand promise of Fort Collins establishes an emotional bond between residents and guests*

Fort Collins residents and businesses possess a natural and easy-going disposition for sharing their love for Fort Collins. This trait was apparent during the creation of the Destination Master Plan and was manifested more as the community came together to support visitor service providers when travel demand dropped.

Encouraging residents to exude the character and culture of the destination in the minds of potential visitors are effective motivators when considering a visit.

**Recovery Challenge:** Authentic branding helps elevate destination awareness and interest. Similar to augmenting the Basecamp concept with events and experiences that allow visitors to experience an authentic Fort Collins experience, the deep love of place of the city's residents and businesses can serve as a way to set visits to Fort Collins apart. Connecting to the city's love of place has the associated benefit of including all hospitality and service businesses in the recovery efforts.



**Response Action:** To further differentiate a visit to Fort Collins and harness the passion of residents and businesses around the strong quality of place the city exudes, Visit Fort Collins should:

- Translate the city's brand promise into an evocative look and feel by engaging a marketing agency to interpret Fort Collins' brand promise.
- Assemble brand icons or individual local ambassadors who are engaged in various aspects of the community to personify the Fort Collins' "sharing the love" passion.
- Integrate the developed brand promise into all messaging, marketing, & operations.
- Encourage businesses and destination partners to adopt the brand promise and assimilate it into their marketing where appropriate.

### Timing

- Visit Fort Collins should contract with a marketing agency to translate the community's identified brand promise into messaging and collateral that describe it.
- Visit Fort Collins should develop a new marketing campaign that includes the messaging and identified imagery
- Visit Fort Collins should share the messaging and developed brand promise concept with destination partners and encourage them to adopt and utilize wherever possible.

### Needed Partners

- Destination partners to adopt and integrate the brand promise concept (and messaging and imagery where appropriate) into their marketing and messaging.

# Actions that Contribute to the Community's Recovery

Visit Fort Collins is the official destination marketing organization for Fort Collins and is responsible for marketing Fort Collins to travelers from around the world. In addition to the focused strategies and tactics outlined above to encourage increased visitation and help the city's tourism and hospitality sector recover, Visit Fort Collins should also support activities in the medium- and long-term that help other areas of the community rebuild. Rebuilding the entire Fort Collins community is important as it will strengthen the city's quality of place and ensure that Fort Collins remains a competitive destination for visitors, talent, and residents.



## Creative Community

The negative impact to creative providers requires many organizations to help with recovery. Visit Fort Collins will serve as a resource to this group and will support initiatives that contribute to the recovery of the creative community



## Visitor-facing Business Segments

Recovery looks different for each business segment based on their needs. Visit Fort Collins will remain attuned to challenges faced by each segment and lend support where appropriate.



## Configuring Events

Events will continue to be important activities for the city. Visit Fort Collins will work with destination partners to reposition events to better support community needs, seasonality, and sustainability.



# Stakeholder Participation

During the course of this engagement, Clarity of Place benefited from the insights and input from a diverse group of Visit Fort Collins's stakeholders. The individuals listed below gave of their time and energies to provide feedback on the contents of this plan.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gary Ozzello, Board Chair, Director of<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• University Relations, Canvas Credit Union</li></ul></li><li>• Molly Skold, Executive Board, Vice President Marketing and Communications, Campus Realty</li><li>• Kate Cooper, Executive Board, Director of Events and Community Involvement, Ginger &amp; Baker</li><li>• Daylan Figgs, Director Larimer County Natural Resources, Larimer County</li><li>• Jennifer Wright, Manager of Special Projects and Executive Support, Colorado State University</li><li>• Sandra Fredrickson, General Manager, Marriott Fort Collins</li><li>• George Pine, General Manager, The Armstrong</li><li>• Chris Ashby, Director, The Ranch, Larimer County</li><li>• Abbie Stout, Owner, The Edwards House</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Bethany Cloud, Tap Room Manager, Odell<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brewing Company</li></ul></li><li>• Daniel Benton, General Manager, Hilton</li><li>• Lauren Gleason, Director of Events and Conference Services, Colorado State University</li><li>• Sean Godbey, Owner, Old Town Spice Shop</li><li>• Amanda King, Communications and Public Involvement, City of Fort Collins</li><li>• Matt Robenalt, Executive Director, Downtown Development Office</li><li>• Katy Schneider, Director of Marketing, Visit Fort Collins</li><li>• Erik Barstow, Director of Sales, Visit Fort Collins</li><li>• Justin Koroneos, Partnership Manager, Visit Fort Collins</li><li>• Drew Southers, Colorado Welcome Center Lead, Visit Fort Collins</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Melissa Draxler, Executive Assistant and Office Manager, Visit Fort Collins</li><li>Taylor Grummert, Downtown Visitor Information Center Lead, Visit Fort Collins</li><li>• SeonAh Kendall, City Recovery Manager, City of Fort Collins</li><li>• Ginger Graham, Owner, Ginger &amp; Baker</li><li>• John Williams, SVP Industrial &amp; Medical &amp; Global Services, Advanced Energy</li><li>• Cheryl Zimlich, Executive Director, Bohemian Foundation</li><li>• Jim McDonald, Director, Cultural Services, City of Fort Collins</li><li>• Ann Hutchinson, President &amp; CEO, Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce</li><li>• Mike Hooker, Director, Media Relations &amp; Denver Outreach</li></ul> |
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