



2022 Business Plan Hamilton County Tourism, Inc.

Organization Overview:

Hamilton County Tourism, Inc. ended 2021 in a healthier financial position than previously anticipated, thanks to steady and even record gains in hotel room demand and tremendous support from the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners and Hamilton County Council, which allocated generous American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to provide for recovery of significant lodging tax losses in 2020 and early 2021.

Action taken by tourism leadership during the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020, along with planned spending reductions and tax revenue recovery, will allow for a more aggressive leisure, group, and sports marketing program in 2022. As the COVID-19 omicron variant creates concerns for the first quarter of the year, ARPA recovery funds provides for some reassurance about an additional safety net. In addition, Indianapolis' hard work on attracting the College Football Playoffs in January is welcome, as is hosting the national convention for a major local company.

A better financial position also supports careful staff recovery. Included is the return of an important part-time content manager position and the addition of a new coordinator to support sports, sales and marketing. Only one of two 2021 staff departures will be replaced -- an experienced communications position will be added to cover earned and social media. The second position will be covered through investment in an artificial intelligence software system, and contract work as needed. A senior level financial officer position will be the only other new hire in 2022. By mid-year 2022, HCT will have 14 staff members in addition to two long-term contract positions. Compare this to its peak of 23 staff positions in 2019. To remain "right-sized," HCT leadership will thoughtfully plan for staffing and prioritize the addition of staff.

Operationally, accounting will enter a new level of work in 2022 with a new budgeting software system that will greatly improve the ability to provide for spending analytics. And HCT will once again re-invest in growing and educating staff to help the organization grow and adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Also, HCT will adopt and implement a new set of values to guide the way forward.

Finally, Hamilton County Tourism will work with the Hamilton County Visitor and Convention Commission, the Hamilton County Auditor's Office, and the Hamilton County Council to retire its 2011 Tourism Bond as soon as is viable in 2022, if funds permit. This will add an additional \$262,000 annually to the tourism budget and allow for expansion of sales and marketing initiatives, as well as destination development investments.

2022 Meeting Sales Initiatives

Years of relationship development and strategic communications have paid off for Hamilton County Tourism -- especially for the smaller meetings market, which is recovering at a faster pace than the larger meeting market. Activities for the year will include:

- Increased meetings media buys to significantly grow the brand awareness in Indiana.
- Increased involvement in lead generation programs along with scrutiny of leads-to-conversions data to make more informed decisions for sales investments.
- Return to full trade show calendar in 2022, even with reduced staff, as face-to-face selling provides the best return on investment.
- Use recovery funds to target Indy-based companies to consider suburbs for their smaller meetings and events.

2022 Sports Sales Initiatives

Hamilton County is now one of America's premiere destinations for competitive youth sports. The introduction of the Grand Park Sports Campus in Westfield in 2014 accelerated what was already a healthy environment for this market segment. A comprehensive Business of Entertainment, Sports and Tourism (BEST) study during the year will provide a roadmap for the future and will engage organizations from all corners of the county in its efforts. It will be led by Vice President/CSO Karen Radcliff. Other activities for the year include:

- Work toward a mutually agreeable resolution regarding the rebate structure at Grand Park.
- Continue to seek funding strategies to provide additional support to these markets (included in EDA grant study scope of work).
- Determine Hamilton County Sports & Entertainment Authority structure and begin implementation of plan.

2022 Visitor Experience Initiatives

Hamilton County's group business returned to its 2019 levels in 2021, with half the visitor experience staff. This inspired new ways of thinking and innovations in delivery of welcome services. Visitor Experience also took on shaping the organization's educational calendar for partners during the pandemic. These efforts will continue in 2022 with refinements. Goals for the year include:

- Serving 100 groups/events, continuing to innovate and continue to determine how to best tier and provide support to the many locally hosted meetings and events.
- Continue the popular information education summit series and explore ways to innovate delivery of content.
- Improve on partner engagement events to stay connected with the community.
- Monitor print guide distribution carefully to only print what we need and reduce waste.

2022 Marketing & Promotions

The leisure market demonstrated the fastest levels of recovery in 2022, in addition the sports group market. Many visitors, weary of staying home, chose Hamilton County and central Indiana as a place to visit friends and relatives, or for a safe and convenient getaway. Efforts in this important market segment will expand in 2022 thanks to the county's ARPA recovery grant. Activities for 2022 include:

- Return to Chicago market with layered advertising program.
- Use social media to test emerging markets like Detroit.
- Develop new creative to reflect post-pandemic travel.
- Transition coupon application Bandwango to focus on outdoors and the arts and look to test new promotions.
- More closely study the customer journey and how it might impact web site conversions and adjust accordingly.
- Conduct a CRM/CMS web site audit.

2022 Destination Development

Significant partnership opportunities in 2021 inspire much of 2022's destination development initiatives, especially for White River Vision Plan implementation. HCT also brings back in full force its creative economies initiative, exploring ways to lift up and support the arts in all areas of the county. Destination research now resides in this area of the organization, and a new artificial intelligence software system will provide 24/7 access to local community leaders on visitor and resident spending, visitor activities and volume. Finally, one of the ongoing concerns of the pandemic is a significantly reduced hospitality workforce. Working with HCT's partner Hamilton County Economic Development Corporation, an Innovation Lab will focus on workforce recovery support by creating pipelines.

Initiatives for destination development include:

- Grow White River Vision Plan brand initiative and support creation of the new non-profit governance structure.
- Support implementation of the IEDC's READI grant award to the White River Regional Opportunity Initiative.
- Continue Tourism Innovation Lab: Workforce and implement programs recommended by Task Force with partners.
- Revive Hamilton County Arts (creative economies) with programs and grants and a Fall 2022 countywide promotion.
- Streamline data intelligence reporting to communities and use new data sets (spending and forecasting) to provide insights.
- Ready for the upcoming 2023 Hamilton County bicentennial celebration.

