



**Hamilton County Tourism, Inc.  
2022 Business Plan  
YEAR-END REPORT**

**Summary of Key Accomplishments**

**Planning**

- Conducted a series of **internal and external planning sessions** to shape a 2023-2025 Vision 2025 Plan post-pandemic refresh. Added a seventh column called “Community Connections” to expand our role to better support community’s ecosystem.
- Received a grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to conduct a comprehensive study of the **Business of Entertainment and Sport Tourism (BEST)** in Hamilton County and determine how to best support these key tourism drivers in the future.

**Marketing/Sales/Visitor Experience**

- Used generous grant of \$3 million from the county’s American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) recovery funding to relaunch an **aggressive multi-platform marketing campaign** “Why Wait,” which put County Tourism back into the Chicago marketplace, as well as throughout Indiana via digital and social media with great success.
- Conducted spring through early **summer, fall and holiday travel campaigns** in addition to repeating The **Great Dine-Out** in January and **Tenderloin Tuesday** in June/July.
- Introduced a **Grand Park digital pass** program to promote discounts and deals to attendees at the park.
- Continued to **refresh imagery** and videos to remain relevant and reflect diversity.
- Resumed **trade show attendance** for group sales and expanded the number of shows to ignite interest in Hamilton County as a small meetings and groups and sports destination.
- Greatly **expanded sales advertising** to promote Hamilton County as a place for small meetings and events.
- Provided **comprehensive hospitality services** to 110 events.
- Led two **local organizing committees** for inbound events.

**Operations & Resources**

- Conducted an **exhaustive internal study** to determine how to take the existing HCT offices and create a vibrant, engaging workplace for a new hybrid environment.
- **Developed staff connection programs** to keep the team in touch despite the hybrid work environment.
- Continued to support financial operations with the addition of a **vice president of finance** and launched a **review of all financial policies** to be completed in 2023.

**Destination Development**

- Re-launched the community **micro-grant program**.
- Launched the new **Discover White River brand and digital platform**.
- Obtained a grant from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable to seek public affairs solutions to management of the **White River Vision Plan**.
- Successfully hosted a fall arts collaborative featuring **The Great Squirrel Stampede**.
- Supported final preparations for the **2023 Hamilton County Bicentennial**.

- Collaborated with Invest Hamilton County on two **workforce development programs** for hotels.

## **Hamilton County Tourism, Inc. 2022 Business Plan YEAR-END REPORT**

### **2022 Year-End Metrics**

Hamilton County closed 2022 with growing hotel occupancy and a significantly healthier outlook, despite some unstable economic forecasts for 2023. The year featured strong growth in the leisure travel market, while the business transient market began to show signs of growth by the end of the year.

While the year’s hotel occupancy of 61.2% was still 3% below 2019 levels, occupancy was up 12.8% when compared to 2021 and RevPAR increased a healthy 27% for the same period. An additional 14.6% in hotel room supply in the county since 2019 contributed to much of this perceived occupancy lag, making overall room demand in 2022 actually up 18.7% since 2019 and 13.8% between 2021-2022.

Very conservative financial forecasting for the 2022 year, along with continued controlled spending by Hamilton County Tourism since 2020, enabled the Hamilton County Visitor and Convention Commission to retire the county-obligated Hamilton County 2011 Tourism Bond, freeing up more than \$260,000 in debt service payments annually. Despite this pay-off, HCT ended the year with an estimated \$2 million in operating reserves, marching toward a financial goal of 30%.

Year-end 2021, the Hamilton County American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Committee, comprised of members of the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners and Hamilton County Council, pledged a generous \$3 million in recovery funds to allow for 75% of revenue recovery from the years 2020-2021.

HCT allocated some of those funds to wage recovery and staff retention, but the bulk of the grant focuses on support for additional marketing and sales for 2022-2024 and to create a workforce development program with Innovation Lab partners at Hamilton County Economic Development Corporation.

**2022 METRICS**

**Hotel Demand** +13.8%

**Hotel Occupancy** 61.2%

**Hotel Revenue** +28.2%

**Vacation Rentals** 52%

**Overnight Visitors**  
(2%)

Hamilton County had more overnight visitors in 2022 but as a percent of all visitors, day trips grew faster than overnights.

### **2022 Organizational Accomplishments: Planning as a Priority**

With 2020 and the ongoing uncertainty of 2021 thankfully in the rear-view mirror, staff and leadership used 2022 to future through several planning exercises.

**Vision 2025 Update** – HCT had refreshed its Vision 2025 plan prior to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak but needed another check-in. To gain new insights, HCT contracted with MMGY NextFactor to conduct a Destinations International DNEXT study to gauge partner and leadership sentiment. A partnership with the consulting firm ADVISA included staff and governance input sessions. Community conversations also took place with various constituent and city partners. The refresh kept the six key components of the Vision 2025 Plan:

1. Strategic Alliances & Advocacy
2. Wise Investments & Fiscal Responsibility
3. Digital Marketing & Connectivity
4. Groups & the Visitor Experience
5. Community & Product Development
6. Marketing Intelligence

But it added a seventh strategy based on input from the planning exercises. This was *Community Commitment*. The pandemic showed just how much HCT could use its skills in communications and business intelligence to support its community in the area of equity and inclusion, environmental initiatives, and education using neutral data sources to inform difficult decisions. The Vision 2025 refresh will be used to inform the 2023-2025 Hamilton County Tourism Business Plans.

**BEST Plan** – A study in 2021 by Tourism Economics showed just how critical the entertainment and sport industries are to Hamilton County’s visitor economy, generating more than 20% of business combined. HCT applied for an Economic Development Administration (EDA) federal recovery grant and received \$208,000 to begin the process of envisioning a future where additional capital funding could be generated to support these critical industries. That study launched in the final quarter of 2022 with focus group sessions led by Hunden Strategic Partners with support from MMGY NextFactor, the firms chosen to lead this important plan for the future. Outcomes from this plan will dramatically inform the next vision plan.

**Facilities Plan** – Pre-pandemic, HCT had considered building new office space for its growing operation. Post-pandemic, staff and governance leadership teams thought it prudent to remain in place and remodel existing facilities to support a revitalized tourism agency now working in a more hybrid environment. A study was conducted by DORIS as to what would make a good office environment for staff retention and productivity, and Relocation Strategies was retained to create the plan that would enable bids to be let and a final decision to be made in 2023.

**Following is an update on 2022 Hamilton County Business Plan Objectives:**

#### **2022 Meeting Sales Initiatives**

- **Increase meetings media buys to significantly grow the brand awareness in Indiana.**  
**Results:** Increased partnership with ISAE and the Indiana Chapter of MPI, adding sponsorship advertising. Increased 2022 media buy from \$35,000 to \$96,000, adding Indiana Business Journal, lifestyle magazines in Indianapolis, Chicago & Cincinnati and Small Market Meetings Magazine.
- **Increase involvement in lead generation programs along with scrutiny of leads-to-conversions data to make more informed decisions for sales investments.**  
**Results:** Increased CVENT spend from \$30,000 to \$50,000, resulting in a 31% increase in RFP’s sourced and an 87% increase in room night value achieved. Increased banner and competitive ads on website. Attended CVENT annual convention to maximize investment.
- **Return to full trade show calendar in 2022, even with reduced staff, as face-to-face selling provides the best return on investment.**  
**Results:** Added three additional industry shows in 2022 over 2021.
- **Use recovery funds to target Indy-based companies to consider suburbs for their smaller meetings and events.**  
**Results:** Recovery funds provided additional advertising dollars and incentives to close group business, such as renting chairs, providing transportation, etc.

#### **2022 Sports Sales Initiatives**

- **Implement the BEST Study if Funded by the EDA**  
**Results:** Issued RFP and contracted with Hunden Strategic Partners with support from MMGY Next Factor to lead this initiative. Kicked off the study in fourth quarter 2022 with stakeholder input sessions.
- **Work toward a mutually agreeable resolution regarding the rebate structure at Grand Park.**

**Results:** A resolution was agreed upon and is being implemented for 2023.

- **Continue to seek funding strategies to provide additional support to these markets (included in EDA grant study scope of work).**

**Results:** Researched Tourism Improvement District options and connected with elected officials, influencers and stakeholders for feedback on options.

- **Determine Hamilton County Sports & Entertainment Authority structure and begin implementation of plan.**

**Results:** Decided to align existing staff to cover needed responsibilities. [Vice President](#)/CSO developed sports strategy and Director of Sales absorbed sports market business development. Director of Visitor Experience managed local events. Plans are to hire a new Director of Sports in 2023.

## 2022 Visitor Experience Initiatives

- **Serve 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.**

**Results:** Visitor Experience serviced 110 groups overall. HCT led local organizing committees for two events. The first was Alliance Fast Pitch Softball, a first-time event at Grand Park and worked in conjunction with Kokomo CVB. This included on-site activation. The opening night was streamed on an ESPN channel. The second event was NCAA DII Men's Golf Regionals at Purgatory in May.

HCT began incorporating QR codes linking to HCT's website on digital and printed materials and welcome signage. Also produced re-usable hotel lobby welcome signs which are not only better for the environment but will cut down on costs. With Grand Park events, HCT shared the Grand Park Savings Pass information.

- **Continue the popular information education summit series and explore ways to innovate delivery of content.**

**Results:** Hosted the Environment Summit Feb. 8 with speakers, Julia Spangler of EcoSystem Events, and Leslie Taljaard of Hamilton County Solid Waste Management. The conversation led Laura Johns to organize a staff tour of Hamilton County Solid Waste and possibly partnering with them in an event capacity in 2023. Instead of an in-person or online hotel meeting, we opted for a 2023 Hotel Data Forecast packet sent to hoteliers via email. We will be in-person in 2023.

After conversation with local sports contacts and based on engagement throughout the second half of 2022 through the BEST study, an in-person Sports Summit was put on hold and an idea for "Tourism Talk" videos in 2023 emerged. Instead, the VP/CSO sent a short video and white paper report via email.

- **Improve on partner engagement events to stay connected with the community.**

**Results:** HCT did not host any partner engagement events in 2022 due to low participation levels in the past, although in [December](#) it hosted two hotel partner conversations about the BEST Fund, which garnered good turnout. In addition, more than 30 partners are participating on the BEST Study Steering Committee.

- **Monitor print guide distribution carefully to only print what we need and reduce waste.**

**Results:** All Golf Guides were distributed before the golf season was over. Ordered just enough for shows, purchased golf routes and consumers. Since the Visitor Information Guide is not dated, to cut down on waste and costs, enough were ordered to last a couple of years. These are the smaller brochures that go to rest stops, other visitor centers in Indiana, VisX groups (when Travel Guides are out), etc. At the end of 2022, only 450 guides remained, which is intentional to serve needs until the 2023 Travel Guide is available. A list of 9,000 consumers was purchased at the end of the summer to distribute the remaining guides, but the need was much reduced over previous years. An order of 5,000 maps and were used up quickly, so 5,000 more were ordered. In 2023, 10,000 maps will be ordered.

## 2022 Marketing & Promotions

- **Return to Chicago market with layered advertising program.**

**Results:** Research insights revealed that the campaign influenced 134,000 Hamilton County trips, \$139 million in visitor spending and an ROI of \$259 for each \$1 invested. The layered strategy in Chicago had a strong response.

- **Use social media to test emerging markets.**

**Results:** After monitoring geolocation data from Zartico, HCT tested Cincinnati as an emerging market. After monitoring DMA's throughout the year, HCT launched the 2022 Holiday campaign in Cincinnati after seeing strong engagement and visitation from the Cincinnati Market. HCT will continue to analyze website traffic, in-market data and visualization tools to make decisions on campaign placements moving forward.

- **Develop new creative to reflect post-pandemic travel.**

**Results:** Hamilton County Tourism (HCT) launched a leisure marketing campaign to position the destination as a weekday getaway for spring/summer and Fall getaways. Flexible consumer schedules, pent-up demand for travel, COVID numbers decreasing and sentiment allowed HCT to launch a campaign that will entice consumers to experience Hamilton County any day of the week.

Why Wait for the Weekend sends a message that Hamilton County is open, relaxing and offers so many things to do during a getaway, any day of the week. relish in elevated cuisine and find repose in Midwestern hospitality. Imagery is appealing with outdoor adventure, diversity and elevated cuisine.

- **Transition coupon application Bandwango to focus on outdoors and the arts and look to test new promotions.**

**Results:** HCT will launch an Arts Pass in 2023 in tandem with a yearlong regional campaign to drive awareness of Hamilton County's bustling arts scene.

- **More closely study the customer journey and how it might impact website conversions and adjust accordingly.**

**Results:** In 2022, HCT partnered with Simpleview to monitor the customer journey including direct, organic and search visits to VisitHamiltonCounty.com. Once online, the team studied site performance and implemented several CRO tests to optimize page performance which resulted in improved metrics for the year. Further analysis resulted in moving social media strategy and buys to Simpleview for a tri-digital strategy (SEO, PPC, Social). This approach will allow HCT to adjust and "feed" or make adjustments to buys based on the medium that is performing strongest.

- **Conduct a CRM/CMS website audit.**

**Results:** HCT focused on updating CVB partner accounts, listings and images in 2022. This not only improves the partners digital footprint but also improves VisitHamiltonCounty.com and site performance. VHC.com saw a 14.84% increase in partner referrals in 2022, that's over 16,000 more referrals to partner sites from previous years (128,425 in 2022 | 111,831 in 2021).

## 2022 Destination Development

- **Grow White River Vision Plan brand initiative and support creation of the new nonprofit governance structure.**

**Results:** Discover White River launched in late spring 2022 and by year-end had generated almost 80,000 website visits, more than 3,500 Facebook followers and more than 1,500 Instagram followers. The campaign, funded in part by a grant from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, generated almost 5 million impressions with a conversion rate of almost 38%. A study will be conducted in 2023 to compare with a 2021 study to determine if impressions about the White River have been changed in any way.

- **Support implementation of the IEDC's READI grant award to the White River Regional Opportunity Initiative.**

**Results:** The READI grant project slowed in 2022 as logistics were worked out with the Indiana Economic Development Corporation and ARPA requirements. Instead, HCT worked with Visit Indy to continue creation of a plan toward governance of the White River Vision Plan. A contract with Bose Public Affairs Group was

funded in part with a Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust grant and work began for the 2023 legislative session to seek solutions.

- **Continue Tourism Innovation Lab: Workforce and implement programs recommended by Task Force with partners.**

*Results:* In late 2022, the first cohort of an innovative program was launched by Hamilton County Economic Development Corporation (Invest Hamilton County) to utilize incarcerated individuals at the Hamilton County Correctional Facility for possible lodging employment through an innovative training program. Most of the participants are serving short-term time with non-violent non-financial offenses. The program successfully graduated six members of its first cohort, which included customer service certification by the American Hostel Lodging Association. Work is being done as inmates finish serving their time to provide job placement and supportive services to help ensure success.

A second innovative program launched with Janus Developmental Services to introduce vocational rehabilitation clients to hotel housekeeping work for possible employment. The first cohort of that discovery class looks to place several individuals in jobs, again with supportive services. This is a unique partnership between community and tourism to not only solve a critical workforce problem, but also provide a career path to success for individuals.

- **Revive Hamilton County Arts (creative economies) with programs and grants and a Fall 2022 countywide promotion.**

*Results:* A grant program was renewed in 2022 after a pandemic hiatus, providing small grants to the many arts-focused organizations in the community. In Fall 2022, HCT launched a pre-bicentennial celebration of “The Great Squirrel Stampede,” with QR codes and squirrel characters placed on the doors of participating businesses throughout the county and included a micro-grant program. Every community participated in some way in this very fun and very engaged program that included social media advertising and connected residents with arts programs and related themed products.

- **Streamline data intelligence reporting to communities and use new data sets (spending and forecasting) to provide insights.**

*Results:* The business intelligence dashboard Zartico was launched in the early Summer of 2022 and immediately began providing insights into visitor flow, and eventually into the “view to visit” window, or the visitor journey. Improvements in the Zartico system throughout 2022 created some challenges, but 2023 should provide an opportunity to truly report out to community partners information that can help them understand the impact of tourism on their areas of focus. HCT also contracted with talent to better maximize the data within the dashboard during the final quarter of 2022 which will continue in 2023.

- **Ready for the upcoming 2023 Hamilton County bicentennial celebration.**

*Results:* The year 2022 was spent raising awareness about the 2023 bicentennial through in-person booths at community events and markets, paid and organic social and earned media, publication of a commemorative book and final plans put into place for the upcoming year. The coordinator hired with the help of HCT and the county has gone above and beyond in engaging people to plan and strategize an amazing year of celebration ahead.