# **ANNUA**



2020-21 Highlights & Financial Review



# CONTENTS

## **4 MESSAGE FROM THE CEO**

Learn more about how the Visitors Bureau adapted to the COVID crisis and continued to execute a revised marketing plan and stepped up internal communication.

## **6 VISITOR SPENDING 2020**

Visit NC, a division of the Economic Development Partnership of NC releases the county-bycounty visitor spending impact numbers for 2020 in Johnston County.

## 8 MARKETING IN THE NEW NORMAL

From our partners at Simpleview, U.S. Travel, Destination International and other national travel organizations on the outlook for marketing organizations in the next 12-24 months.

## **12 HIGHLIGHTS IN A DIFFICULT YEAR**

Leisure, group, meeting sales activities, and public relations highlights continued by the staff while working remotely, and via Zoom.

## **19 JOCO GROWS INITIATIVE**

How this countywide group has advanced the start-up initiatives for the JoCo Grows Agriculture Marketing committee.

## **20 FINANCIAL REVIEW**

Revenues collected from the 3% Room Tax as well as the Towns of Benson, Kenly, Selma, and Smithfield, and how those funds were expended in 2020.

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Our partners, like Jenny's Sweet Creations in Benson pictured here, very quickly adapted to keep the doors open and serve their customers. The resilience of the tourism industry was tested, and in some cases they thrived, expanded, and found new online customers.

# THOUGHTS From the ceo

Donna Bailey-Taylor

With nearly 40 years working in the hospitality industry, I have weathered natural disasters, major recessions, and high unemployment, but nothing like the COVID 19 pandemic. As I write this message, I had hope that we were on the other side of this health crisis. Alas, we are not.

With the Delta variant on the rise, we remain in tune with the national research on travel sentiment and the desires of travelers for outdoor spaces, information on safety measures, and destinations within a drive market.

#### What can I say about 2020?

Like everyone else -- we were glad when 2020 was over, but turning the corner to 2021 was not a bed of roses. I find myself referring to last year, but I am really looking back to 2019. It's like we just lost a whole year of our lives...professionally and personally.

Businesses closed, many lost their jobs, and some that we know lost their lives. The tourism industry more than any other, saw devastating business losses, and today struggles with workforce shortages, and supply chain disruptions.

#### The impact on room tax collection.

Over the last eighteen months, the Visitor Bureau's budget was greatly affected, and room tax collection dropped by \$405,499 since January 2020. With our efforts to quickly reduce marketing contracts, secure several grants, support from the county, and the Payroll Protection Plan Ioan program, we did survive.

The impact on our budget also had an impact on our tourism partners that have traditionally been supported by our Marketing Grants and Capital Tourism Development grants. As the bureau restores reserves, if may be another year before these grants return to support the local community. Our bureau, like many around the world, are rebuilding, reorganizing, and reassessing our marketing strategies.

At this time revenues are gaining in strength with the addition of the Hampton Inn Smithfield which opened in 2020, AirBnB revenues and third party booking platforms like Expedia which were not previously submitted to the county.

As we move forward, we will continue with our mission to market Johnston County with our partners in mind...always.

Donna

## SAYING GOODBYE

With the office rotation schedule and our staff working from home, we did not have the opportunity to recognize Sarah Elizabeth Lagasse following her resignation from the bureau last October.

We can't say enough about Sarah and the contribution she made here at the bureau during the five years she worked with us. Her attention to detail, positive attitude, and her willingness to help others in the office and in the community are just a few things to note!

Thank you Sarah, you are missed. We wish you well and much love from the whole staff! PS: we are not sure who is counting all our brochures these days!



Sarah earned her Tourism Marketing Professional certificate from the Travel South Tourism College in 2018.



#### Right: Sarah represented the Visitors Bureau with a smile wherever she traveled, and she sure could talk up visiting JoCo!!

## **REMEMBERING JAMAAL PORTER**



On October 10, 2021 Jamaal Porter passed away and the bureau and all of the county lost a great friend.

Jamaal was the bureau's photographer for more than four years. He loved exploring the county's attractions, attending festivals and capturing wonderful photos for our use in advertising and on bureau website.

He leaves behind his wife of 15 years Kristen, and two kids Mara, 13 and Quinn, 9. We will always remember Jamaal and will miss him dearly.

# SUMMARY OF 2020

Visitor Spending Numbers

In 2020 domestic and international visitors to Johnston County spent **\$181.9 million**, which was a decrease of **33.1% from 2019** spending. These findings are prepared by the US Travel Association and commissioned by Visit North Carolina, a unit of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina.

The tourism industry in the county lost \$89.77m in visitor spending in 2020, or another way to look at the data is the county lost \$245,845 a day in local businesses such as retail and outlet shopping, hotels, attractions, dining, and travel services.

Tourism spending generated **\$9.4m** in state tax and **\$7.6m** in local tax receipts to the county's general fund. Taxes saved per Johnston County resident are **\$80.32**.

Growth of tourism jobs in Johnston was **1%** with a payroll of **\$60.8m** 

## This year's report provides spending by market segment:

Lodging - **\$36.8m** Food & Beverage - **\$70.4m** Recreation - **\$20.7m** Retail - **\$17.5m** (excludes outlet spending) Transportation - **\$36.5m** 



Down 33.1% from 2019 Spending

\*\*The VisitNC report excludes retail outlet spending, sales tax, and jobs at Carolina Premium Outlets as the research is not customized for Johnston County.

Visitors discovered the new lake at Howell Woods Environmental Learning Center as a safe outdoor spot for the family.

# MARKETING IN THE New Normal

How do DMOs adapt going forward

Change is a key fact of life in business today, especially when it comes to travel. Destination marketers with the ability to adapt and handle that change, even master it, are going to be the ones in high demand.

Travel accounts for \$2.6 Trillion in annual economic impact in the U.S.

In fact, \$35,700 is spent every second in the U.S. by residents and international travelers. Travel also creates jobs, with more than 15.8\* million jobs across the U.S. supported by travel expenditures last year.

Travel plays a huge role on-line as well, as 1 out of every 10 searches on Google is related to travel. Travel is ingrained in everything we do, and everything we are. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the travel industry in a big way.

Since the beginning of March, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in \$320 billion in losses for the U.S. travel economy...leading to huge declines in DMO web traffic.

#### **Destination Regions and Visitor Segments**

Visitor Segments defined:

Overnight Fly/Drive: > 200 Miles Drive day trip and overnight: 50-200 Miles Local residents and visiting friends/family: < 50 Miles

But DMOs are resilient and quickly shifted their marketing to find ways to better serve their communities and build lasting value...until the time came to shift focus away from crisis and begin to think about recovery and a return to travel.

That time is now.

#### **Consumer Sentiment is shifting**

Economic indicators, easing of government restrictions, and recent increases in DMO web



traffic are starting to show signs of moving out of the current phase of crisis and into a new phase of recovery. But this won't happen overnight. Based on industry data from Simpleview, US Travel, and Destination International sources, recovery in marketing will play out in four phases over the course of the next 2-3 years.

#### Phase 1:

Destination Maintenance

Objective: Connect and engage with your community

The primary focus for destination marketers in this phase is to provide value for their communities and local businesses. Attention should be given to developing three types of new content: informational, utility and entertainment.

KEY FOCUS:

- Creating locally focused content
- SEO to optimize for new queries
- A/B Testing to optimize for a more seamless user journey
- Thoughtful email marketing to increase engagement
- Social Media to tell local stories

TIME: Now. We build resiliency and engagement with our communities.

#### Phase 2:

Destination Rebound

Objective: Rethink marketing for the new normal

Economic indicators and recent increases in DMO web traffic are starting to show signs of moving to recovery. Implement the learnings from the crisis phase into your marketing

strategy to build toward sustained growth. Engineer thoughtful VFR, drive market and regional campaigns to leverage pent-up demand, and use paid media to amplify messaging tailored to safety.

KEY FOCUS:

- Paid Media (PPC, video, social) to boost traffic
- SEO to optimize for new content opportunities
- Email Marketing to amplify messages to new audiences
- Social Media to connect with existing audiences

TIME: approx. next 12 months

#### Phase 3:

Destination Growth

Objective: Re-establish brand authority

After you've adjusted your strategy to account for new behaviors and traveler needs, the shift to growth should occur. Leverage the learnings from Phase 2 to increase budget in effective channels, build an A/B testing road map for continuous optimization, and engineer new marketing automation funnels to begin fine-tuning your efforts.

KEY FOCUS:

- A/B Testing to balance website intentions with new user behaviors
- Re-marketing to leverage new conversion insights
- Marketing Automation to streamline new processes
- App Promotion to provide better personalization

TIME: approx. next 12-24 months

#### Phase 4:

Destination Thrive

Objective: Create omni-channel synergy

This is the time to fully leverage your hard work and thrive. During this phase, attention should be given to creating omni-channel synergy, syncing your messaging and channels from top to bottom. Scale high performing channels and fully harvest the demand your top of funnel awareness campaigns have been creating. Use insights gained from your contact lists, data, and web analytics to do prospecting and build look-a-like audiences for incremental growth.

KEY FOCUS:

- Harvesting the demand created by your content marketing efforts
- Scale paid media and social efforts
- Leverage your new audiences
- Omni-channel synergy

TIME: approx. next 24 months and beyond

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

#### Marketing in the new normal is an opportunity for DMOs

It may seem overwhelming now, but with the right tools, the right planning, and the right messaging, destination marketers can use these recent changes to deliver more meaningful experiences for travelers.

#### Focus on value and needs

Things have shifted and consumers feel vulnerable and nervous about travel. Your target audience will evolve and change in these new times, and DMOs will need to adapt. Focus on the factors that motivate them to inspire new marketing strategies that create a more loyal audience.

#### Let new travel behaviors guide your strategy

Savvy destination marketers should consider all interactions with their travelers and let that guide their strategy. It's not only about booking and arrivals, but more importantly about re-engaging in meaningful ways that build relationships and trust over time.

#### Make data-informed decisions

Data brings both opportunity and complexity to destination marketing. In travel, people often take weeks and even months to plan their vacations, often with dozens of digital touch-points along the way. Simplify your marketing metrics to focus more on KPIs that drive overall growth.

#### Rebuild relationships early in recovery with search

Research shows that web traffic is beginning to return and paid search is going to lead the way in getting traffic back to your website as quickly as possible. With new keyword opportunities and pent-up demand, look for paid search to be a top channel early in recovery.

## FEELINGS ON COVID-19 BEING WITH US FOR THE LONGER-TERM Creation: What ONE WORD best describes how you feel about the possibility that the COVID-19 issue will be with us for the longer-term? Other Word 2 date. All responses 1.200 controls of the longer term? Right: Word cloud The ongoing pandemic also remains a barrier to finding fulfillment in travel.

Right: Word cloud graphic on how people feel about COVID being with us for a long time. The ongoing pandemic also remains a barrier to finding fulfillment in travel. More than 40 percent of Americans say that COVID-19 is seriously impacting their ability to have meaningful travel experiences. A quarter of travelers who have recently taken an overnight trip also say they experienced a high degree of anxiety about COVID-19 during their trip.

#### Marketing through COVID



Above: Jonathan Levin, local Clayton photographer captured several stunning images around the county for our use.

## **MARKETING & PR**

Pivoting to respond to the on-going COVID-19 crisis, the bureau moved away from traditional PR pitching to instead connect writers with digital experiences and virtual events offered by our tourism partners. The JCVB website was edited to promote virtual events and a JoCo Strong page was pushed via homepage banner/spotlights, social, and emails which detailed up to date information on how our partners were working to safely continue serving visitors and residents.

**Top Media Placement:** multiple Smithsonian Magazine on-line articles, Nathan Sheppard, a local musician, appeared on the Kelly Clarkson Show, Miss Debbie's Apples was in *Our State Magazine*, and Broadslab Distillery, was featured on a Canadian morning television show.



Below: The Hampton Inn Smithfield was under construction during the COVID crisis, and opened in October, 2020.

## COMMUNICATION TO TOURISM PARTNERS INCREASED

The bureau focused this year on transitioning internal communications towards connecting our partners with up-to-date, relevant crisis communication from the bureau's local, state, and national resources including the local and state Health Department, the NC Restaurant & Lodging Association, Destinations International, US Travel, and the Small Business Administration. These emails were accompanied by a Coronavirus partner resource page filled with the same content and links being provided via email.

In addition, working with local chambers, Johnston County Economic Development, and town Public Information Officers, the bureau created and posted a video titled "We Are Open for Business in JoCo" which covered multiple industries and geographical areas across the county.

## PARTNER REACH

Partner Emails Sent- **38** Partner Resource Page Views - **2,563** JoCo Strong Page Views - **435** Open for Business Video Views - **7k**+



We appreciate the work that the Johnston County Visitors Bureau has done in creating exciting packages and itineraries that help create economic opportunities for the communities in Johnston County. The website shows amazing creativity and is extremely well organized.

#### ~ Liz Parham, Director, NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center











Above: Recreation, activities for children, and the 301 Endless Yard Sale are examples of popular activities in JoCo during 2020-21. Donna Bailey-Taylor and her staff at the Johnston County CVB exhibits the highest level of professionalism. They are passionate about their community and providing the best possible experience for visitors.

~ Russ Haddad, Core Development, Chapel Hill, NC



The bureau also worked to promote the state's Count on Me NC campaign and associated classes to partners, visitors, and residents. Partners who completed Count on Me NC were featured on the bureau's website and were sent JoCo branded face masks. Thanks to a grant through the state tourism department, VisitNC, the bureau was able to execute a marketing campaign through VisitNC's agency Luquire in the Fall; a mixed medium effort that promoted safe outdoor activities and Count on Me NC certified businesses.

Tried and true avenues of promotion that were safe to undertake and promote were also a part of this year's efforts. The bureau assisted the Ava Gardner Museum in organizing and hosting a private media event for their grand reopening post remodel. Director of Marketing & PR, Ashby Brame, guested on an episode of the NC F&B Podcast to promote local JoCo products that people across the state could purchase during the holidays to either make or to gift.



Visit North Carolina @VisitNC · 28 Nov 2020 11:48 AM Have you ever explored the Mountains-to-Sea Trail? I miles of it are waiting for you along the Neuse River in @JoCoTourism, as are more safe adventures.

Discover them all.



60-00-05



In the Spring, the bureau had an intern who worked virtually with us and tackled several projects including a social media audit and a creative assets audit. Rebekah Gregg was a graduating senior with NCSU's Tourism Department interested in learning more about DMOs; Rebekah shadowed each member of the staff and worked on tasks that included sales, social media, and partnership development.



#### Other yearly highlights: photo and video shoots

with Jonathan Levin to increase creative assets, sending a second email every month to the bureau's 14k+ mailing list call **JoCo Insider**, going live on the bureau's website with new font changes.

Samples of Jonathan photos from The Gilded Pear, Broadslab, Howell Woods, and he also shot DeWayne's, Ava Gardner museum, Bentonville Battlefield, Tobacco Farm Life Museum, Simple Twist, Howell Theater and more.



#### Social

With many people staying at home this year, social media was our main form of communication to link visitors and residents to our partners. Many of our channels saw an increase in followers and engagements as people turned to JCVB as a county-wide resource on how the county's food & beverage and hospitality-related businesses were operating through COVID hours, specials, safety measures, etc. In addition to sharing partners' posts the bureau placed Facebook carousel ads, Instagram Reels video posts, and the Instagram Guides posts.

#### The Numbers:

Website Referrals from Social - **55,019** Instagram Follower Increase - **600+** Instagram Profile Reach - **69.8% up** Facebook Page Reach - **48.5% up** 



## SALES, SPORTS, & GROUPS

In an effort to provide better resources to planners and organizers in a year where physical trade shows and association meetings were canceled, the bureau completely redesigned both the **Meeting Venues Guide** and the **Sports Venues Guide** to be offered exclusively in a digital medium. Both guides were made to be interactive, with clickable urls, and better organized for the end user (meeting venues were organized by type and sports venues by field use instead of by town).

Through these efforts the bureau managed to book and service several groups: DeWayne's hosted a motor coach group and welcome bags were provided, the staff booked a motor coach group for the 301Endless Yard Sale, the county re-booked the CycleNC event in Smithfield as organizers moved from 2020 date to 2021, and various other sports and small groups leads came in including the NC Boer Goat Association and the Clayton Rugby Club's Cottontown 7s Tournament re-booked for July 2021.

Although both the bureau and our partners were unable to travel to the NC Welcome Centers for **National Travel & Tourism Week**, the bureau staff stuffed 1,000 goodie bags filled with JoCo swag and partner donated items for the Welcome Center staff of both I-95 North & South to hand out safely to visitors.

## **DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT**

#### Benson Arts Advisory Board Projects

The new arts advisory board unveiled the **Greetings from Benson** vintage postcard mural in November 2020 as the first project by the committee. Additional work proceeded on a sculpture project and alley renovation project.

#### Capital Grants Paid out

Due to work in securing funding to maintain operations for the bureau, three capital grants were paid out in 2020-21 so local nonprofit organizations could continue work on their projects. The **Smithfield Boat Ramp Shelter** was completed - \$15,000, the renovations at the **Paul A. Johnston Auditorium** -\$50,000 and funds for the **Freedman's School** renovations for architectural plans - \$9,500 were paid.

#### Ava Gardner Museum Remodel

If being closed for months due to COVID was not devastating enough, the Ava Gardner Museum experienced a water leak that flooded the museum in February, 2021. The staff of the Visitors Bureau donated design time to completely remodel the museum and install new exhibits. The bureau hosted a media day to assist in the public relations efforts in the reopening in May.





## **GOOGLE ANALYTICS**

TOP FEEDER STATE: NORTH CAROLINA - 63.59% TOP CITY IN NC: CHARLOTTE - 15.3% 59.95% FEMALE - 40.05% MALE **DEMOGRAPHICS:** AGE BREAKDOWN: 18-24 8.34% 25-34 18.07% 35-44 16.39% 45-54 20.20% 55-64 20.67% 65+ 16.33% **USERS** 317,838 - 33.45% **SESSIONS PAGE VIEWS PAGE/SESSIONS** 387,721 - 22.66% 703,486 - 25.69% 🕇 1.81 - 2.47% 🕇

#### SOURCES

Organic - 174,303 (54.27%) Direct - 60,114 (18.72%) Social - 47,472 (14.78%) Referral - 28,111 (8.75%) Paid Search - 9,101 (2.83%) Display - 1,175 (.37%) Email - 756 (.24%) Other - 150 (.05%)

#### **TOP 10 PAGE HITS**

301 Endless Yard Sale - 132,207 Ava Gardner Museum - 26,989 Things to Do/BWST - 12,723 Things to Do/Recreation - 9,232 Shopping/Carolina Premium Outlets - 9,169 Listing/New Jumbo China - 8,511 Events/ - 6,387 Smithfield/ - 6,402 Downtown VG - 5,445 Clayton/ - 5,424



Left: Jenna Andreasen, JCVB Content Manager and Cassidy , began community outreach events like attending the Clayton Farm & Community Market.





JOCOGRAWS or

The new JoCo Grows Agriculture Marketing Committee started their second year of start-up projects. The logo was successfully trademarked, and the committee proceeded to print promotional materials, begin outreach programs, and raising membership funds and writing grants to support marketing efforts.

The staff of the Visitors Bureau launched a new website under the JCVB umbrella, increased the number of farms on the NC Farms app to 80, designed and printed popup banners, and worked closely with the NC Cooperative Extension Office of Johnston County to executive the mission of the committee.

In addition, the bureau's social promotion of both JoCo Grows and our assets on the Visit NC Farms app helped to push people looking to get outside towards the county's agritourism opportunities.

The JoCo Grows Facebook page reach increased by **52.4%** over the last year and the county's farm assets in the app saw a total of **3,209** views.

At this writing, the committee has two major grants pending for the next 2-3 years of projects outlined in the marketing plan.

JoCo Grows Agriculture Pop-Up Banners

The banners are rotated around the county to reach the public, in locations such as the Johnston County Land Use Building, the Library or the Johnston County Courthouse.





## **FINANCIAL SUMMARY**

The following is a comprehensive review of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau financial data for the year 2020-21.

#### NET INCOME

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau is funded by a 3% Room Tax paid by visitors staying in accommodations in the county, which generated **\$1,052,304.93** in net revenues for FY 2018-19 and by FY 2020-21 collections were down to **\$783,602.78**.

Month-by-month Johnston County 3% gross collections for Comparison FY 2019 to 2021:

	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20	FY 2020-21
July	\$84,407.80	\$95,891.37	\$59,446.47
August	\$81,467.98	\$90,392.71	\$59,624.08
September	\$110,798.78	\$84,917.39	\$52,954.70
October	\$109,866.73	\$85,663.26	\$60,262.55
November	\$88,976.50	\$79,913.11	\$59,937.52
December	\$73,053.80	\$70,584.71	\$49,468.60
January	\$66,924.40	\$61,938.56	\$50,251.91
February	\$66,040.66	\$61,262.98	\$52,995.15
March	\$97,464.59	\$65,425.36	\$80,289.83
April	\$81,854.18	\$31,615.63	\$77,827.48
May	\$97,165.22	\$41,952.76	\$97,434.79
June	<u>\$88,703.01</u>	\$61,115.12	<u>\$83,109.70</u>
	\$1,055,429.09	\$830,672.96	\$783,602.78

JCVB 2021 financials are audited by the Johnston County Finance Department under a 3-party contract and a completed audit will be available in December.

The Towns of Smithfield, Selma, Kenly, and Benson also have a 2% Room Tax which is dedicated to each town's individual marketing campaigns. The following collections represents the gross dollar amounts reported by the towns to the Tourism Authority in FY 2018-19, here showing the reductions in FY20 and FY21:

	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20	FY2020-21
Smithfield	\$ 287,587.55	\$225,777.99	\$235,251.98
Selma	\$ 133,162.70	\$87,195.52	\$56,276.72
Kenly	\$ 35,460.96	\$27,440.85	\$26,980.08
Benson	\$ 63,175.31	\$54,565.30	\$57,928.00

Revenues not spent on marketing programs on behalf of each town are held in Fund Balance Reserves for future marketing or tourism-related projects approved by each town's tourism committee.

	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	Var. 21 vs 20
INCOME	2020-21	2013-20	2010-15	
Johnston 3% Tax	748,522.51	910,717.82	1,052,304.93	-162,195.31
Town of Benson	57,796.17	63,884.69	61,283.08	-6,088.52
	•	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		
Town of Kenly	27,780.62	30,541.07	35,460.96	-2,760.45
Town of Selma	55,976.47	105,516.39	129,437.82	-49,539.92
Town of Smithfield	200,850.34	267,898.05	278,959.91	-67,047.71
Misc. Revenue	6,565.00	5,104.43	2,931.11	1,460.57
Reimbursements	2082.02	2,269.29	3,284.72	-187,27
Investment Income	356.48	821.63	968.42	-465.15
Grants	121,750.00	-0-	7,000.00	121,750.00
Total Revenues	1,226,879.61	1,386,753.20	1,571,630.95	-159,873.59
EXPENSES				
Salaries & Wages	363,005.82	389,294.44	313,600.83	-26,288.62
Longevity Pay	5,300.00	4,500.00	3,360.00	800.00
Travel Per Diem	6,000.00	6000.00	6,000.00	-0-
Fringe Benefits	137,676.42	138,302.69	104,688.30	-626.27
Total HR Expenses	511,982.24	538,097.13	427,649.13	-26,114.89
• • • • • •	,	,	,	
OPERATING				
EXPENSES				
Professional fees	3,500.00	2,500.00	2,000.00	1,000.00
Telephone	7,969.47	7,521.49	6,802.51	447.98
Postage	8,189.37	8,776.17	9,178.62	-586.90
Printing	13,188.24	37,042.96	31,846.54	-23,854.72
Utilities	4,188.08	5,144.57	5,097.51	-956.49
Travel & Trade	4,460.15	35,332.88	44,953.30	-30,872.73
Equip/Building	44,058.58	44,159.93	46,707.83	-101.35
JoCo/Coop Adv.	130,654.87	228,686.85	251,835.49	-98,031.98
Office Supplies	4,162.75	12,015.78	15,774.71	-7,853.28
Software Expense	8,638.16	10,552.69	6,754.26	-1,914.53
Benson Marketing	33,160.35	24,930.71	44,879.93	8,220.64
Kenly Marketing	30,842.84	17,186.51	20,847.01	13,656.33
Selma Marketing	60,769.75	101,480.66	67,530.54	-40,711.16
Smithfield Marketing	136,552.96	114,219.09	246,356.76	22,338.87
Professional Dues	12,619.96	13,750.00	22,341.46	-1,130.04
Marketing Grant	-0-	13,750.00	17,500.00	-13,750
Insurance	647.00	647.00	672.00	-0-
5% County Fee	-0-	-0-	52,615.27	-0-
Research	2,200.00	5,700.00	10,000.00	-3,500
State Grants	20,873.18	-0-	7,000.00	
Capital Grants				20,873.18
· ·	74,097.79	115,242.75	186,563.91	-41,114.85
Total Operating	602,183.86	848,656.07	1,090,257.65	-246,472.21
Total HR + Oper.	1,114,166.10	1,339,431.67	1,517,906.78	-225,265.57
Net +/-	112,713.51	47,321.53	53,724.17	65,391.98



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