



*Johnston
County*
VISITORS BUREAU

2023 - 2024



STRATEGIC



MARKETING

PLAN

MESSAGE *From the* CEO



With 42 years of experience in hospitality sales, service and destination marketing, the one thing that has remained the same, is change.

The spirit of the hospitality industry was challenged - fighting for its actual survival during the COVID pandemic. Today, as many believe we are back to “normal”, I would say, no, we have that smile on our face for our customers, but life is not normal for many small businesses in our industry.

Air travel is not fun and many passengers are behaving badly, some hotels have reduced guest room inventory and/or services to every three days, many restaurants have changed days of operation and have had to raise prices, attractions need funding to operate and struggle with attendance, and issues like sustainability and over tourism for recreation became new issues as demand for outdoor venues remains high.

Asking visitors to be nice to hospitality service employees seems backwards to us, as in our industry we have been training our employees to be courteous to the guest. Now we are hoping our employees don't experience rude behavior.

How has the Johnston County Visitors Bureau

adapted to the changes in our world? We have continued to operate with one less staff person, by distributing the sales and services duties among staff, and combining CRM database responsibilities with sales. In the FY 2025, it would be ideal to return to a full staff of seven.

There has also been a tremendous investment in marketing research and monitoring trends DMOs are facing during the last 3 years of recovery. There will be several key points for each target market in this marketing plan from the US Travel Association. Also, after one year of using Near.com first party data to narrow our marketing to very specific zipcodes and DMAs, we are being very precise in how we spend marketing dollars for the promotion of the county. This follows our bureau mantra, to *Work Smart, Work Hard, and Work Together* (to paraphrase the legendary UNC coach, Dean Smith).

And lastly, we look ahead like all marketing professionals to the role of AI in our marketing campaigns, and might you even wonder *if* I wrote this message all my myself?

Donna Bailey-Taylor, CDME

Contents

Message from CEO	02
US Travel Forecast	05
2022 Strategic Plan Update	08
Marketing & Leisure Travel	13
PR & Communications	24
Destination Development	29
Budget Planning	32
Staff Contact Info	33



Travel Research Data

US TRAVEL *Forecast*

Domestic Leisure Travel Forecast

Driven by Tourism Economics' travel forecasting model, the latest U.S. Travel Forecast projects the following:

Domestic leisure travel is “normalizing” in 2023 with a general return to pre-pandemic trends expected in 2024 and beyond.

Domestic business travel is expected to continue its recovery, but at a more tempered rate than previously forecasted, largely due to economic conditions.

Business volume is not expected to recover until 2025 and inflation-adjusted spending is not expected to recover within the range of the forecast.

International inbound travel's recovery will strengthen, exceeding our previous expectations, thanks to very strong growth out of Canada as well as stronger recovery expectations from key overseas markets such as Brazil and China.

Nevertheless, international inbound travel is not expected to fully recover until 2025.

Domestic leisure travel's growth remains imperative for the industry's full recovery.

Domestic leisure travel is normalizing, yet, continues to experience growth—serving as a lifeline for the industry.

Why it matters: In 2022, domestic leisure travelers

took nearly two million trips, generating \$837 billion in travel spending.

In fact, spend by domestic leisure travelers represented 78% of total domestic travel expenditures and is expected to increase 5% in 2023.

Zoom in: So far, air travel is on track to surpass pre-pandemic levels this summer, but as a result of labor shortages, aircraft delays and outdated technology, air travel capacity has not been able to keep up with demand—revealing the inadequacies of our antiquated air travel infrastructure.

By the numbers: Since the beginning of May, TSA has experienced more than 100 straight days screening two million or more passengers. TSA recorded its busiest day in history on the Friday ahead of the 4th of July weekend—screening nearly 3 million travelers on one day.

What else: Our latest consumer insights data reveals that, while the majority of recent air travelers say they are at least somewhat satisfied with their overall travel experience (80%), less than one-third are very satisfied (32%), citing airport crowding and congestion and flight delays or cancellations as primary reasons.

And, over half of Americans (52%) say they would travel more for leisure in the next six months if the travel experience was not as much of a hassle.

Demand for leisure travel cannot be guaranteed—

and that's why it's imperative that the traveler experience at every stage be improved.

State of the Workforce

Resources and data to rebuild a stronger, more diverse travel workforce

The overall economy is suffering from a workforce crisis with 10.7 million job openings and just 5.9 million unemployed Americans.

The problem: Within leisure and hospitality, job openings far exceed the number of unemployed Americans who previously worked within the industry (and remain within the labor force). Even if every unemployed American took a job today, there would still be nearly 4.8 million job openings in the U.S. For every 100 jobs open, there are only 48 unemployed people actively looking for a job.

Why it matters: Travel organizations are not able to hire the workers they need to properly serve their clients. Lack of access to additional temporary workers as a result of visa processing delays, backlogs, availability of H-2B visas and other travel restrictions make matters worse.

In addition, addressing the perceptions of jobs in our industry and diversifying talent must also be core to addressing our workforce challenges.

Employment motivators continue to change nationwide... and perceptions of careers in travel do not align.

What they're saying: Highly valued employment considerations such as stability, work/life balance and attractive wages fall to the bottom of perceptions associated with travel and tourism.

Sustainability

Creating a better future for travel—and our planet.

The travel industry is defining strategies for enduring growth and a sustainable future.

All sectors of the travel industry are making strides to lower carbon emissions, reduce waste, protect the environment and safeguard our

country's destinations and natural attractions.

Our industry faces a sustainability imperative, and its long-term competitiveness and viability depend on developing strategies and practices that deliver impacts beyond the bottom line.

Ensuring the many natural resources and beautiful destinations across our country are preserved for generations to come is fundamental to travel's future.

U.S. Travel is championing industry actions and uniting industry leaders to advance strategies that enable more sustainable travel.

Why it matters: Nine out of 10 travelers want more sustainable travel options and 76% of business executives want sustainable corporate travel choices—even if it costs more.

Business Travel, Meetings & Events

A return to a thriving travel industry—and American economy—is dependent on the full return of business travel, meetings and events.

Business travel, meetings and events produce significant economic contributions to destinations and host communities around the country in the form of travel spending, job creation and tax revenue.

Cornell University offers a Tourism Sustainable Destination Management program that aims to train global hospitality and tourism professionals in using sustainable practices across all areas of the tourism industry.

Cornell University - [Learn more on YouTube.](#)

For more research on market recovery data and advocacy efforts by the US Travel Association, visit their website.

US Travel Research - [click for more Free data.](#)

Why it matters: In the past, despite making up 20% of total trip volume, business travelers accounted for 40-60% of lodging and air revenue—underscoring the essential role of this critical segment to the travel industry and our economy.

In 2022, total business travel generated \$255 billion in travel spending and directly supported 1.3 million jobs.

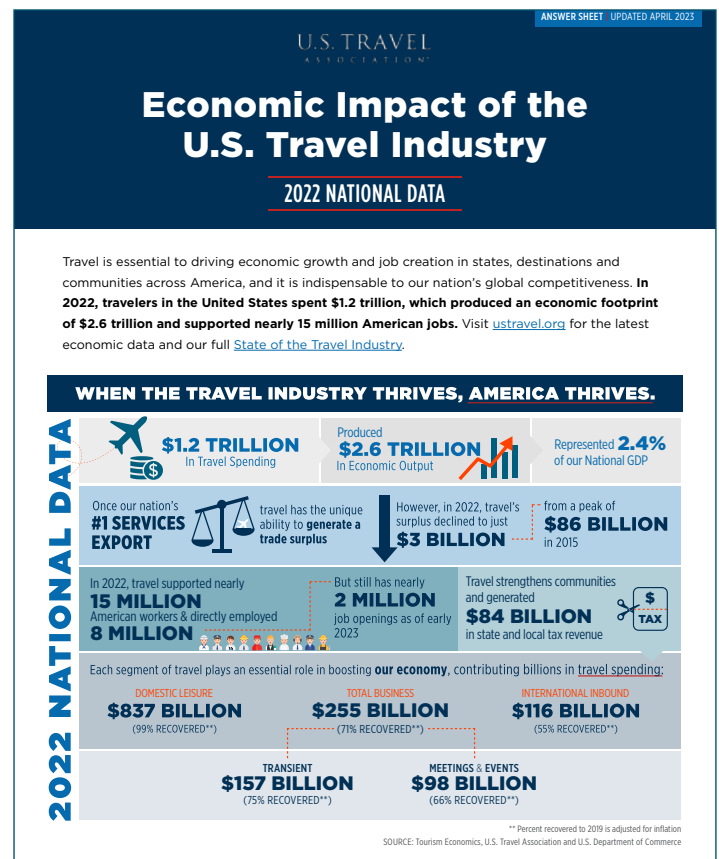
Transient business travelers generated nearly \$160 billion in spending in 2022. While transient business recovered to 75% of 2019 levels in 2022, growth has slowed as companies maintain cost constraints.

Group travel, while initially declining more than transient business travel, has made significant progress and is poised to grow faster than transient travel through 2024 as a result of the desire for face-to-face interactions. In 2022, group travel generated nearly \$100 billion in spending and recovered to 66% of 2019 levels.

On the horizon: While an economic slowdown is expected later this year and cost constraints remain the top barrier to business travel, recovery is expected to continue, just at a slower rate.

The Q2 Business Travel Tracker found that nearly four in 10 corporate executives expect business travel spending to be on par or greater than last year for all types—up from less than three in 10 in Q1.

Barriers to business travel: While cost constraints remain the top barrier to business travel, travel hassles are having an increasingly negative impact



while cost concerns fall.

Nearly six in 10 (57%) corporate executives cited cost controls as a barrier restricting upcoming business travel, down from 71% in Q1. Additionally, corporate policies controlling costs and restricting business travel are on the decline.

Some good news: The FY23 omnibus bill, passed in December 2022, authorized the establishment of an Assistant Secretary of Travel and Tourism—a presidentially appointed, U.S. Senate-confirmed position that will work to increase international business travel by facilitating large conventions, sporting events and meetings held in the U.S.

To accelerate our industry's full recovery, businesses must get back to business in-person.

Business travel and professional meetings and events are critical to the full recovery of not only travel, but also the U.S. economy.

For more indepth discussion and data, visit the US Travel.org website.



2022 Strategic *Plan Update*

The Johnston County Tourism Authority and Visitors Bureau staff met on March 9, 2022, to conduct a strategic planning retreat, which was led by Dr. Twyla Casey Wells. Due to COVID, the Authority was unable to hold its regular two-year retreat. The half-day retreat started with a short historical review and focused on what is different for the tourism industry, and what is different for the Visitors Bureau following the pandemic.

The Authority and Staff reviewed the 2019 Strategic Plan which was adopted just a few months before the industry-changing pandemic hit in March 2020. The group agreed that the majority of the strategic plan was still relevant and the 3-year goals would simply shift to FY 2023-2025 and that the staff would update the current document.

Through the technique known as compression planning and SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results), new goals were developed and ranked by the retreat participants. The following additions to the Strategic Plan will be used to direct the staff and board for the next three years.

Many of these goal's important steps have been folded into the FY 24 Marketing Plan and several are now underway. Updates or status updates are provided here.

Goals from the 2022 Staff Retreat

GOAL 1 - County-wide Branding Project

Description of the project: Johnston County's brand was updated in 2017 embracing the JoCo name to flip the narrative that using JoCo reflects a positive experience and brand for the county. The County leadership has considered also adopting the JCVB logo for the county and its departments but has not at this point. Inviting the county to join the Visitors Bureau in the final steps of creating the overarching brand position statements and tagline is the final and missing part of this project.

Need for the Project: Unifying the county with a brand that reflects the growing and changing county in which we live, work, and play with a more modern logo and message is needed to truly project who we are as a county. A brand is not what we think we are, but how others see and feel about us whether that be visitors, residents, economic developers, the Triangle communities, or a national audience. First, we must aim to understand ourselves before conveying that to others in the form of branding and marketing. A branding exercise will help us achieve that!!

Important Steps:

Get the commitment of the County Commissioners to join us in developing a unified county brand either in partnership with JCVB's refresh and use of the JoCo brand, or something "alongside" our project.

How the roll-out of the project will be handled and the implementation of the final project will be an important decision.

Involvement of the community, town leadership, chambers, and tourism partners is an important consideration.

Take that refreshed brand and tagline and integrate it into our advertising, website, and messaging to target markets.

Continue vetting local branding agencies such as Engine Brandmakers that have worked with the Durham CVB and Durham County.

Update: The county has contracted with Engine

Brandmakers to lead the county departments in a 12-month branding project.

GOAL 2 - Developing a Deeper Alliance w/ other CVBs

Description of the project: Our efforts to be included in the Triangle region beyond just the Raleigh - Durham - Chapel Hill definition has been years in the making and unfortunately does not seem to be possible. The leadership of the Triangle CVBs does not embrace a regional approach to marketing the Triangle. Although difficult, this will remain a goal of the JCVB, but efforts will shift back to the I-95 CVB Association group and other smaller bureaus within a 50-mile radius such as Goldsboro, Sampson County, the new Sanford CVB, all who may be more willing regional partners.

Need for the Project: The Triangle markets are a critical part of the JCVB's 50-mile radius plan to attract visitors to local attractions, performing arts, recreation, outlet shopping and special events. Visitors do not define their trips based on county lines and some niche markets transcend these lines and would enhance some visitor experiences. Visitors discover these experiences on their own, why not step up these marketing efforts as a region like other areas of the state as had Charlotte and the Triad area of Winston-Salem, Greensboro and High Point. It is possible with some improved efforts and open minds in the Triangle.

Important Steps:

Host a regional CVB meeting in Smithfield to see how we may work together in the future.

Create a group email tag in Simpleview to step-up communication efforts to this 50-mile radius group.

Continue to develop regional experiences in culinary trails, recreation, and craft beverage marketing.

See how the I-95 Corridor CVBs Association could be revitalized and become a leading regional organization in the state.

Goal 3 - Consider New Markets of Importance



Description of the Project: How COVID-19 has changed the landscape of tourism marketing is now shaping how the JCVB will direct assets towards marketing the county, investing in data intelligence, using AI marketing platforms, and restructuring the staff.

Need for the Project: COVID 19 has forced tourism marketing organizations to adapt and pivot in so many ways as budgets funded by room tax were greatly affected by the drop-in travel in 2020. As the JCVB budget is recovering, and the staff returns to the office full time the FY 24 Marketing Plan will reflect many new investments in technology, restructuring of job duties because of the reduction in staff, and some return to traveling to trade shows for group, leisure, and media outreach.

Important Steps:

Potential new visitors to market to or key target markets to continue JCVB marketing efforts:

Remote business workers and how to attract them to work “anywhere,” and the shared office space available in our market. Broadband Internet is an important issue for this visitor.

The Family/Social Events and Weddings market remains strong with several new facilities opening during COVID.

With our meetings market not returning to full strength for the next 24 months per national trend reports - when the JCVB returns to NC meeting conferences and trade shows will most likely be in FY25. How the renovated JCC auditorium and its meetings market plan evolves

will most likely affect the meetings market.

The JCVB will continue to invest in the NC Retire Communities programs with limited trade shows in the DC and New Jersey markets and continue to fulfill inquiries for pre-retirement visits to Johnston County.

The JCVB meetings market will remain focused on the SMERF market - Social, Military, Education, Religious and Fraternal. These meetings tend to be more flexible for unique meeting spaces and seek more affordable options than those offered in major markets.

Adding diversity to our marketing message and target markets via photography and outreach to diverse meeting planner groups, travel trade groups, and leisure influencers will increase via all avenues available to the bureau.

The JCVB staff will continue to partner with the VisitNC Outdoor NC Program to promote recreation tourism assets in Johnston County as leisure travel during and following the pandemic remains focused on outdoor recreation.

Investment in Simpleview email marketing module Act-On to step-up community, visitor, and partner communications. (Done)

Investment in near.com data intelligence and using this data to tailor future messages and campaign to top overnight markets to drive more hotel stays. (Done)

Investment in SemRush SEO services to increase our website’s authority and step up our competition for Keywords with our regional CVBs

to convert more website visitors to attract more visitors. (Done)

Goal 4 - Explore DI Accreditation

Description of the Project: The DI Accreditation program is similar to the US Chamber of Commerce Accreditation program to showcase that the Visitors Bureau meets the high standards and best practices outlined by the DI trade association for bureaus. This program involves over 30 standards and requirements for a bureau to provide and complete to achieve accreditation.

Need for the Project: The JCVB has reviewed the requirements and the cost both financially and the staff time needed as well to complete this program. Our strategy in the past has been to operate at this level or higher to be a top CVB for our size in North Carolina. Operating with integrity and complete transparency has been a core value for the bureau for over 20 years.

Important Steps:

The 2022 Retreat has identified this project as something to explore and make a recommendation to the board in the next 12-24 months if to move forward or to continue to operate the bureau with the highest possible standards and to continue to be a leader in the tourism industry in NC.

Download the Requirements to Apply for DI Accreditation and review them with the JCVB staff. (Done)

Based on the review of requirements, develop a work plan excel spreadsheet on what the project will take for staff to complete. (Done)

Based on the evaluation, cost, staff time, and value of the accreditation to the organization, make a recommendation for or against to the board in the 2023-24 budget. (Done)

Update: After a review of cost and staff time to complete this project, it is the recommendation of staff not to proceed.

Goal 5 - Develop the JCVB Advocacy Plan

Description of the Project: During COVID the JCVB turned our communications efforts inward to residents, community leaders, and tourism industry partners needing critical health and

safety information, and sharing info on closings, hours, digital experiences, and how businesses pivoted during this difficult time. Our efforts resulted in new communication tools, the JoCo Insider Newsletter and the Tourism Does That? Newsletter to tourism industry partners on the activities of the bureau. The JCVB Crisis Plan has been in existence for many years, but like other CVBs around the world, there were no plans to address a pandemic. Having a more comprehensive Advocacy Plan is needed to be more prepared for the next event that the bureau has to face.

Need for the Project: The national conversation about travel and the impact it has both positively and sometimes negatively is something that CVBs cannot ignore. At any time a destination may face politically charged issues around race relations, diversity and inclusion, natural disasters, or even mass shootings which are all too common in our society. How would the JCVB respond in any of these situations and will we be ready, recognized as a leading resource for the county, and how will we pivot during the next challenge. These questions should be addressed and plans should be in place. Having an Advocacy Plan will hopefully set us up for success or at least give us a road map to follow as a staff to be leaders in our county.

Important Steps:

Components of the Advocacy Plan includes the following:

Resident survey on the awareness of tourism as economic development

Updating the Visitors Profile Study

Producing Annual Reports for the County and each Town with a 2% Room Tax

Annual luncheon with the County Commissioners

Monthly "Tourism Does That?" Newsletters to the tourism industry, chambers, and elected officials

Community speaking engagements for "Get to Know your Visitors Bureau"

JCVB Board Responsibilities include the following:

Frequently review strategic plan to keep projects moving forward and that resources are provided to the JCVB staff as needed

Provide Board speaking points on the impact of Tourism in Johnston County

JCVB staff reorg and training and items needed:

IT plan for the next 3-5 years for budget planning

HR plan for the next 3-5 years to address; restore staff to 7 full-time employees

Succession plan for future retirement of President/CEO

Discuss and determine what is the next staff person needed

What items on the work plan could be outsourced or contracted

Develop a Video on “Tourism Does That” similar to this example: Mat-Su CVB - A Community Resource - YouTube

Update: The JCVB Advocacy Video is under development.

Goal 6 - Continue Destination Development Projects

Description of the Project: The JCVB, since its inception in 1987, has invested in tourism development projects from direct room tax allocation to Johnston Community College, and the Triangle East Chamber of Commerce, to marketing grants for festivals and events, and Capital Grants with more than \$2 million dollars invested in the county. How the bureau continues to invest these dollars into the community, what the impact these dollars have on tourism, and what future funding opportunities are available, are vital to the JCVB story and mission to build the tourism infrastructure in Johnston County.

Need for the Project: Johnston County is still an immersing tourism destination in the Triangle and along major interstate corridors 95, 40, and future 42 in North Carolina and has the potential to grow, especially in the area of recreation, meeting space, full-service hotels, sports tournaments, and agritourism.

Important Steps:

Write a Johnston County Destination Master Plan to include the following:

How to engage the arts groups to develop public art.

Document roads project timelines and transportation disruptions.

Create a Tourism Development historic review of JCVB & Towns 2% support of projects.

Review the current Workforce shortages and document plans in place locally and statewide to address the issue for the hospitality industry.

Funding sources: provide a list of possible grants to write and the room tax for the Town of Clayton that may be implemented in 2023.

Support and advocate for a Recreation bond to support recreation and park development and to complete the Mountains to the Sea trail in Johnston County.

Determine if the Conference Center study needs to be updated and then allocate funds to conduct the study.

Work with hotel developers as needed to attract a full-service hotel with meeting space for groups of 200-500 people.

Continue to seek family-oriented attractions for children to enjoy while traveling in the county.

Continue the work of the JoCo Grows Agriculture Steering Committee to market and protect the county's agriculture heritage.

Continue the promotion and expansion of the 301 Endless Yard Sale event to hopefully reach through to Lumberton.

Have staff increase their involvement in area tourism-related organizations to support growth of tourism projects.

Discuss the future role of the Johnston County Recreation and Sports Council on the development of recreation in the county.

Seek state funding for the new Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site expansion and new Visitor Center which is estimated at a little more than \$16 million.

Update: The NC State Budget for FY 24 may include some major funding for tourism partners.



MARKETING

Leisure Travel

The primary focus of destination marketing efforts of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau is to drive visitor demand in the identified top target markets for leisure travel. The bureau's in-house team of marketing professionals use data insights from Near.com to place the county's destinations in the forefront of visitor's minds as they travel Interstates 95 & 40 in North Carolina.

Leisure travel marketing includes messaging for pass-thru visitors, visiting friends and family, outdoor enthusiasts, visitors seeking culinary experiences, festival and major event attendees, and outlet shoppers. Leisure travel is the top producing market for Johnston County, for in-state and out-of-state day trips and overnight trips. Leisure marketing messages are integrated into the bureau website(s), social campaigns, print advertising, digital and email outreach, as well as publicity and in-person sales missions.

The Bureau's team is using Near.com Data Intelligence, which provides real-time data on where visitors to Johnston County come from, exactly where they go while in-market, and how long they stay. The data allows the Bureau to

define our leisure markets top DMAs and reach visitors in new and targeted ways.

Defining the Leisure Market

Near.com splits the leisure market into 4 categories: out-of state overnight, in-state overnight, out-of-state day trip, in-state day trip. Johnston County pulls in-state overnight visitors from areas including Greensboro, Charlotte, Greenville, and Wilmington. Out-of-state feeder markets include Florida, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, New York, and Pennsylvania. Top performing months of leisure travel for the county starts with spring break and Easter vacation travel and peaks for the months of July and August for summer vacation travel. Off season peak leisure travel revolves around snow bird travel to warmer climates in late October to November and return travel in early spring.

Marketing Goals

Increase the use of email marketing and email automation via Act-on to build curated email lists based on segmented visitor interests: outdoor,



culinary, shopping, holidays, and family activities.

Continue to grow the audience for both monthly bureau email newsletters: Events Calendar & JoCo Insider Blog.

Create more engaging content on the website to appeal to each visitor segment.

Run a regional Shop Local campaign in October/November as a lead-in to holiday shopping with a focus on Shop Small Saturday.

Extend marketing support to major festivals and events that draw non-resident attendance to the county that will stay overnight in our hotels.

Increase cabin stays at Howell Woods, Raleigh Oaks, and AirBnB unique venues as defined by the Visitors Bureau for listings on the website.

Revamp the culinary marketing messages to all target markets as one of the county's strengths; Focusing on the new food hall and new restaurant openings in the next year.

Formulate and implement an expanded digital marketing and social strategy in select feeder market cities utilizing Google Ads, web ads, sponsored content, and paid social using the top DMAs from Near.com data.

Prepare the 18 month campaign for marketing the 160th Anniversary Bentonville Battlefield event in March 2025, with billboards, print, and digital campaigns.

Use VisitNC partnership to further increase reach in both the retirement and outdoor leisure segments via the RetireNC and OutdoorNC programs.

Through JoCo Grows, the NC Tobacco Trust Fund and NC Specialty Crop Block grants, continue to increase agritourism marketing messaging to visitors focusing mainly on the in-state day trip market regarding farm products and events.

Tactics

Google Ads paid marketing with a focus on Performance Max and new display campaigns and

video promotion with JNow agency.

Implement monthly digital and social campaigns in target markets in peak season travel months through third-party partnerships.

Work with food travel influencers and culinary podcasts both regionally and in target markets.

Place sponsored content with Philly Voice, the Washingtonian, and other magazines in select feeder markets through out the year.

Use Visitnc.com co-op programs and direct placement to focus print advertising mostly within the Southeast market to reach overnight visitors in top feeder markets.

Create and execute mini marketing plans for the JoCo Grows initiative timed around u-pick seasons and in partnership with the county's Co-operative Extension office., and the Visit NC Farms App.

Return to direct-to-consumer leisure sales shows in partnership with VisitNC; attend shows in select feeder markets including retirement and travel adventure themed shows in DC and Atlanta.

Visit NC's 1-800-Call Center and the 1-95 Welcome Centers throughout the year to stay top-of-mind with frontline staff.

Maintain billboard programs for attractions, as well as individual campaigns for Smithfield, Selma, Benson and Kenly utilizing 2% funding drawing interstate travellers off the highway.

Paid print advertising in leisure publications including the NC Travel Guide, Our State Magazine, Southern Living, and The Local Palate and others in key markets like Richmond, VA.

Expand sponsored content with email newsletters in the same print publications above. Seek out

“ GenZ, Millennials, GenX and Boomers all have distinctly different approaches to shopping. Understanding these generational disparities is vital for brands and shopping centers to effectively adapt their strategies.”

The Great Generational Shopping Divide, Near.com.

addition digital display ads and any sponsored content offers to tell the JoCo story.

Use Town of Smithfield funds to support the Ham & Yam Festival, Ava Gardner Festival, and three calendar of events postcard mailings to residents and businesses.

Use Town of Selma funds to support direct marketing for Selma Railroad Days Festival and other town events downtown like Rockin' on Railford. New digital billboards on US 70 in both Wilson's Mills and Princeton to be used to rotate messaging for the town.

New to leisure marketing will be the Towns of Four Oaks and Clayton when the NC Legislature approves their 2% Room Tax which will be dedicated to marketing each town. At the time of writing this marketing plan, the tax has not been implemented.

Expand the use of video placement on YouTube and 30 second advertising on Hulu television for leisure markets, JoCo Grows campaigns, and major festivals.

Design and print guides to promote the destination and for visitor in-market use:

Official Johnston County Visitors Guide
You are Here - Smithfield Map
JoCo Bike Routes
Geocaching Brochure
Girls Weekend Rack Card
Beer, Wine, Shine Trail Guide
Smithfield Walking Tour Guide
Selma Visitors Guide

Maintain and keep the content fresh on johnstoncountync.org, and the many microsites managed by the bureau staff: visitbenson.org, visitclayton.org, visitfour Oaks.org, visitkenly.org, visitpinelevel.org, visitprinceton.org, visitselma.org, visitsmithfield.org, avagardner.org, 301endlessyardsale.com, and jocogrows.org

Measurable Objectives

Update current BLOGS and/or articles weekly to use on the website and social media to drive traffic to the websites.

Use Near.com data to measure increases in visitation from targeted feeder cities/states to compare leisure market increases.

Increase visitor inquiries and brochure downloads on the website by 10%.

Increase email calendar list in Act-on from 8,100 to 10,000 in FY 24.

Increase occupancy tax revenues by 5% in FY 2024 over FY 2023.

Complete the new destination video for the Town of Smithfield, place on YouTube and use paid ads to get 10,000 views.

Add (3) additional inclusive photo shoots which build the image database with diversity.

Conduct the 301 Endless Yard Sale marketing



campaign for the June 2024 sale.

Execute the JoCo Grows Agriculture campaigns per the NCTTF and NCSCBG grants to achieve the grant deliverables.

GROUP MARKETS

Getting partner involvement for group sales whether it be direct sales calls to meeting planners in Raleigh or sales missions to motor coach companies in Virginia; the JCVB team is ready to shift efforts to bring more group business to the county. These additional direct group sales missions will be based on the opening of the Paul A. Johnston Auditorium and the availability to book the JCC venue for meetings. More details on the college's strategic plan for the meetings market will be needed to formulate a plan.

Defining the Group Market



North Carolina, mid-atlantic, and southern states continue to be the largest feeder states for group business for Johnston County. Motor coach companies will be reached through memberships with NC Motorcoach, leads from VisitNC, and Travel South. The bureau will evaluate the need to rejoin meeting planners trade associations as things progress with JCC and booking policies for meetings/groups.

MOTOR COACH

Marketing Goals

As the motor coach market slowly recovers from the pandemic, efforts will include direct mail and email marketing as passive goals.

To return to in-person trade shows for the motor coach market including the NC Motor Coach Association, and to evaluate the changes with the Travel South Showcase.

Tactics

Update group tour itineraries including new attractions like the Food Hall in Selma.

Work with partners already attending group shows to cross-promote and encourage partners to assist with sales outreach at trade shows through physical participation or items/gifts.

Partner with Live@ The Rudy and send staff to the attend the NC Motor Coach Association show, August, 2024, Williamsburg, VA.

Send Christmas in July email blast for the Live@ The Rudy Christmas show dates.

Continue to market the Old North State Food Hall for motor coach lunch and dinner options before Rudy shows.

Measurable Objectives

Complete (3) direct sales missions to motor coach companies in NC, SC, and VA.

Increase group sales leads and services by 10% over 2023.

Work with Live@ The Rudy and the Food Hall to book motor coach groups with catered meals prior to shows, especially during the Easter & Christmas season.

Small Meetings, Weddings, & Reunions

With new venues opening and unique service providers popping up regularly in Johnston County, the wedding market continues to grow.



Marketing Goals

Increase the use of email marketing and email automation via Act-on to reach meeting planners, brides, and reunion planners during the search phase of finding space for events.

Improve content on johnstoncountync.org on the meeting, sports and group sections adding more editorial content, photos, and video.

Tactics

Build a relationship with the new performing arts Director, Krista Thorp on marketing the venue for small meetings.

Rejoin MPI and become active in the Carolina's Chapter if needed in FY 25.

Host bi-annual hotel sales meetings to exchange information on sales efforts and missions our partners can participate in.

Use the JCVB LinkedIn page to push out information on Johnston County as a meeting

destination.

Build a segmented meetings list through the use of Act-on automation.

Measurable Objectives

Set and execute new sales calls goals for local, regional, and state meeting planners.

Increase group sales leads/bookings by 10% over FY 2023.

Sports Market

Participate in the Johnston County Recreation & Sports Council to build relationships for sports tournament bids and services will continue to be the strategy with sports tourism. As facilities in the county increase, the possibility for multiple towns partnering together on bids for baseball, basketball, pickleball, and soccer will allow the JCVB to bid on more tournaments.



“ Sports tourism has a significant impact on the economic growth of cities across the globe. It creates job opportunities, increased tax revenue, boosts local businesses and attracts new businesses to the area.”

National Parks and Recreation Association, March 2023.



Marketing Goals

Goals for the sports market include keeping the content in the digital sports facility guide updated.

Develop a segmented sporting events planners list through Act-on to use for specialty sports with high potential for tournaments.

Continue listings of facilities with the NC Sports Association and sharing updates with VisitNC.

Tactics

Host JoCo Recreation & Sports Council meetings

to build relationships with venues and supply services for events being held.

Maintain a connection to the NC Sports Association and SportsNC as they restructure in FY24.

Find a sports venue partner that can attend TEAMS and Connect Sports with the JCVB sales staff when there is a partner interested in pursuing tournaments.

Consider marketing to planners with non-traditional sports now gaining in popularity: quidditch, flag football, corn hole, pickleball,

“The number of people playing pickleball grew by 159% over three years to 8.9 million in 2022, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, a trade group.”

CNN, Business Report



E-sports and disc golf.

Measurable Objectives

Work with the JoCo Rugby Club to bid on the NCAA Collegiate tournament lost in 2020 to bring to the county in Spring 2024.

Work with GALOT on the drag race seasonal events to better market the facility. Create a segmented email list through Act-on for motor sports.

Work with the Clayton Clovers on attendance growth and Clayton Parks & Recreation on

awareness of Clayton as a sports destination. Submit a bid to Cycle NC for the fall of 2024 to return to Clayton or Smithfield. Invite planners to the Town of Benson as a possible future location for Cycle NC.

Meet with the planners of the 3 Little Pigs Triathlon to see how this sporting event can grow and showcase the area for other sporting events.

Reach out to key tournament level golf courses to see if more tournaments could be held in Johnston County.

Invite golf course operators to attend a Recreation & Sports Council Meeting.



Evaluate if new trail development in the county could lead to more events like Cross Country races.

Continue to add in the new facilities in Clayton, Cleveland, Benson and Smithfield to the website as well as the Sports Facilities Guide and evaluate if these additional venues will allow sports tournaments and/or increase bid opportunities.



VISITOR SERVICES

The Visitors Bureau offers group services for meetings held in the county for small meetings, weddings, and sports tournaments. Leisure visitor services are provided in the Visitor Center by helping visitors off the interstate with brochures, maps, and coupons.

Visitor Services goals

To provide timely visitor services upon request with brochures and swag items that represent the destination.

To be knowledgeable of all attractions, shopping, dining and events to represent the destination.

To build the JoCo Hospitality Association membership to 75 members.

Tactics

Service all events in FY 24 as requested by planners and to support the sales department efforts as needed.

Distribute leisure marketing brochures to the 100+ racks in Johnston County, as well as, the NC Welcome Centers. Discover a way to distribute brochures to AirBnB guests in the county.

Engage visitors staying in area campgrounds to seek out “things to do” while camping in the area.

Host tourism partner events aligned with the JoCo Hospitality Association Meetings.

Support the Johnston County Angel Tree project recruiting presents from tourism industry partners and hosting an open house in December 2023.

Visit to the NC Call Center at the Women’s Prison for the 1-800-VisitNC program.

Send monthly emails to tourism partners to keep up with brochure distribution using Act-on automation.

Coordinate the National Tourism Week visits to the NC Welcome Centers I-95 North and South.



Visit both welcome centers during Christmas with promotional items from Johnston County.

Upon request place attraction displays in the Welcome Center to promote Johnston County.

Order swag items as needed such as 2024 Calendar strips, band-aid holders for sports tournaments, and any new items to represent the destination.

Measurable Objectives

Increase traffic to the visitor center by 10% in 2023.

Have a least 5 partners attend Welcome Centers for National Tourism Week.

Plan and host the NC Welcome Center Managers for a fam trip to Johnston County in FY 24.

**“North Carolina’s
nine Welcome Centers
promote thousands
of tourism-related
businesses — attractions,
accommodations, events and
more — to visitors already
in the state actively seeking
travel information.”**

NC Department of Commerce



PUBLIC RELATIONS & *Communications*

Public Relations

JCVB will continue to invest in public relations activities to tell our destination stories in various target markets supporting all strategic initiatives for leisure, group, agritourism, and small meetings/weddings markets.

Tactics

Weekly news releases and BLOG posts to support all leisure, group, and festival campaigns.

Use all social channels to drive visitation to johnstoncountync.org and other JCVB landing pages and microsites.

Curate content that engages potential visitors to learn more about Johnston County and encourages visits and support of local tourism assets & partners.

Host media tours and site visits with regional partners and VisitNC team whenever assignment

aligns with our feeder markets.

Conduct desk tops in media markets from the top DMAs from research, especially in the North Carolina and Virginia/DC markets in partnership with VisitNC, and Triangle CVB partners.

Engage top-tier digital influencers as brand ambassadors for our top marketing messages for leisure visitors.

The following media outreach missions are scheduled for FY 24:

State Media Mission, VisitNC - September 19 2023, Raleigh

IMM (Int'l Media Marketplace) - January, 25-26, 2024, New York City

VisitNC 365 Media Roundtable - March, 17-19, 2024, Greenville, NC



Marketing is crucial in order to raise brand visibility, engage customers, build relationships, and increase revenue. The hospitality industry is competitive, so effective marketing strategies can help a business to differentiate itself.

Measurable Objectives

Host at least five mini-media fairs or visits to the county.

Place at least 12 Bureau-generated articles in national or international publications and generate over \$2 million in earned media impressions.

Increase JoCo Grows social media followers for Facebook to 5,000, and the VisitJoCo Facebook to 25,000.

Have Visitor Service staff trained in FY 24 to take over leisure sale trade show.

Increase visitors to johnstoncountync.org to 1/2 million-page views.

Learn the ins-and-outs of the new Google G4 measurements for the website.

Use the SemRush services to improve the page authority and health of the website, as well as, use the keyword services to compete with website competitors.

Advocacy & Community Relations

JCVB will embark on strengthening our relationship with tourism partners in the county, as well as launch a new campaign of community awareness on the importance of tourism in Johnston County.

Advocacy Goals

To increase awareness of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau's marketing efforts and the importance of tourism to the county's economy.

Tactics

Have National Tourism Week proclamation read and adopted by the County Commissioners in FY 24.

Monthly "Tourism Does That" newsletter to explain the mission and activities of the bureau to local leaders and elected officials.

Use the JoCo LinkedIn company page to reach more professional contacts in-market and statewide on the activities and accomplishments of the bureau.

Continue board participation in the county by the staff: Friends of Bentonville Battlefield, Ava Gardner Museum, Clayton Piano Festival, Friends of Johnston County Parks, Benson Art Advisory Board.

Complete the advocacy video on the importance of tourism in the county.

Measurable Objectives

Design and implement a new community



awareness campaign during National Tourism Week (May), Summer Travel is Important (July/August), and Shop Local (Nov/Dec).

Build the local audience email database to 2,500 recipients for in-market messaging.

(10) speaking engagements at area chamber and civic club meetings.

Relaunch the JoCo Hospitality Heroes free customer service program with tourism partners.

Hold quarterly (4) meetings with the County PIO to stay in-sync on the bureau's activities.

Print an Annual Report and distribute to elected officials, tourism partners, and use for local speaking engagements.



“Anyone who stops learning is old, at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young.” – Henry Ford

Visitors Bureau Management

Investing in the professional management of the bureau and providing educational opportunities for the staff are key initiatives for the long term viability of the organization.

Bureau Management Goals

To have the JCVB staff continue to master the resources and knowledge base available with the Simpleview CRM and CMS.

Begin learning about AI and how DMOs will be using it for destination marketing.

Tactics

Continue the visitor bureau’s progress on the 2023-25 Strategic Plan and create a report for the tourism authority, setting goals on completing remaining projects.

Sign up for any/all educational webinars on topics helpful for staff training and development.

The following staff education and programs are scheduled for FY 24:

NCTIA Tourism Leadership Conference,
November 16-17, 2023, Raleigh

VisitNC 365 Conference, March 17-19, 2024,
Greenville

Measurable Objectives

Complete the cross-training in sales and develop the long-term staff and succession plan for the bureau.

HOW DMOS WILL USE AI

It's no secret that the way we market destinations has changed significantly over the past decade. The future of marketing is now clearly AI-centric. Just like machine learning has already transformed the way we search for new content and information online, it is also set to profoundly change how DMOs engage travelers. Some of the ways in which AI is being used to improve marketing include:

PERSONALIZATION - AI-powered systems can analyze visitor and customer data and preferences to create personalized marketing messages and offers.

PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS - AI can help predict which visitors are most likely to visit and target marketing efforts accordingly.

AUTOMATION - AI can automate repetitive tasks such as data entry and analysis, freeing up marketers to focus on more strategic work.

CHATBOTS - AI-powered chatbots can provide 24/7 customer service and support, allowing a virtual concierge to engage with customers in real-time (and this is not your 2022 chatbot!).

CONTENT CREATION - AI can be used to generate written content, such as product descriptions and social media posts, saving time and effort for marketers.

AD TARGETING - AI can analyze user data and behavior to target more relevant ads to specific audiences.

VOICE SEARCH OPTIMIZATION - AI-powered systems can optimize websites and apps for voice search, allowing brands to reach customers who prefer to use voice commands.

“Like all industries, destination marketing and tourism are already being enhanced by Artificial Intelligence (AI). While still in the early stages, it is already changing how destinations connect with travelers, such as chatbots for customer service and AI-powered virtual reality for booking experiences.”

Madden Media, January 2023.

INFLUENCER MARKETING - AI can assist in identifying and selecting the right influencers for a brand and create personalized content for them.

Overall, AI is helping marketers to work more efficiently, reach their audiences more effectively, and personalize their messaging to individual consumers. As AI technologies continue to advance, we can expect to see even more ways in which they will be used to improve marketing efforts. Below is a graphic generated by Adobe Photoshop's Firefly simply using text prompts.





DESTINATION *Development*

The JCVB budget has been restored to FY 2019 levels so marketing grants for festivals and community events, as well as capital funding for tourism development projects are in the FY 24 budget.

What's under development for 2023-24?

The long anticipated renovations for the Paul A. Johnston Auditorium have been completed and the new concert series kicks off in September with national acts.

Howell Woods is conducting a strategic plan for development at the venue offering more recreation, camping, and programming to residents and visitors.

Work is underway for the design and build at the first ever county park in the Cleveland Community, as well as, two master plan projects for county-wide trails plans that will address the route for the Mountains to the Sea trail and East Coast Greenway in the county.

Eastfield Development, Copper Development, and the Benson Hotel group have hotel projects under

development. The Benson group has broken ground on a Holiday Inn Express property, but no construction dates have been announced at this time for the other projects.

The Town of Smithfield completed the renovations of the Amphitheater at Town Commons in June 2023, and plans are underway to build a new soccer complex on Hwy 210.

The Johnston County Heritage Center continues the work on the Freedman's school building renovation project in Downtown Smithfield, but at this time no completion date has been set.

More commercial tourism-related development is on the way in the next 12-24 months including big-box retail in Selma at the Eastfield Development project. There is a new project yet to be announced in Benson which will also be a mixed-use development that will include retail and hotels.

More development is on tap for the Downtown areas of Clayton, Selma, and Smithfield. Many Downtowns continue to work on transportation,



parking, and appearance plans including murals, facade grants, alley projects, and flowers.

Partnerships with the Friends of the MTS group and Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site are underway to develop more “nature meets history” trails through state funding.

Tactics

Update the website with a list of grants awarded for matching marketing and capital grants.

Include news about grants program in the “*Tourism Does That?*” monthly newsletter.

Prepare news releases and social announcements for each grant awarded by the JCVB board.

Update the five year review of capital grants and survey tourism partners on future development plans.

For FY 24, the staff of the bureau will conduct a tourism development survey to gather an updated list from our towns and tourism partners to create a 3-5 year destination development plan.

Matching Marketing Grants

Continue to take matching marketing grants on an on-going 90-day application process for the Special Projects Committee to approve.

Capital Grants

The FY 2024 grant applications were sent out in March 2023 to ensure that the requested amounts for the budget were addressed in advance of approving the budget.

The Special Projects Committee reviewed and recommended for funding the following applications to the Tourism Authority for a total of \$150,000 awarded in the FY 24 budget:

Smithfield Parks & Rec – Smithfield Community Park Renovation Pickle Ball courts- \$30,000

Town of Archer Lodge – Benches and bicycle storage racks at the new park - \$5,000

Clayton Chamber of Commerce – Window



“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*



repair or replacement for the Chamber building - \$25,000

Town of Selma – New Pickleball courts at Richard B. Harrison Complex - \$50,000

Town of Benson Parks and Rec – Replace handicapped ramp at Grove Stage - \$30,000

Ava Gardner Museum – Conservation grant for care of the collection - \$10,000

Measurable Objectives

Conduct a resident survey on wants and needs for tourism development in Johnston County.

Continue to work with the Johnston County Parks, Open Space and Trails office and the growth of parks and trails in the county.



BUDGET *Planning*

Budget Planning AS RECESSION LOOMS

As the financial forecast for a recession is still predicting a mild downturn in the fall of 2023 and high interest rates have stalled two hotel projects in Johnston County, budget predictions continue to be conservative.

The Holiday Inn Express hotel project in Benson will be completed in late spring 2024, however, as a rule for budget planning the bureau does not count hotel room taxes for “projected” opening dates. So many events can delay construction, that it’s a conservative approach not to budget future dollars in the actual budget.

The FY 23 revenues ended up 7.7% over revenues for FY 22, and due to predictions of a recession, the budget revenues for FY 24 are fairly flat.

2023-24 Budget

REVENUES

Room Tax	\$1,851,765
Other Revenues	\$104,925
Grants	\$150,000
Total Revenue	\$2,107,690

HUMAN RESOURCES

Salaries	\$524,500
Fringe Benefits	\$183,200
Total HR Expenses	\$707,700

OPERATING EXPENCES

Office/Marketing	\$1,249,990
------------------	-------------

GRANTS

Capital Grants	\$150,000
----------------	-----------

TOTAL EXPENSES	\$2,107,690
-----------------------	--------------------

JCVB Staff

Donna Bailey-Taylor, President/CEO
dbtaylor@johnstoncountync.org

Angel Phillips, Office Manager
aphillips@johnstoncountync.org

Eric Dean, Creative Director
edean@johnstoncountync.org

Ashby Brame, VP of Marketing &
Communications
abrame@johnstoncountync.org

Jennifer McGowen, Digital Marketing
Manager
jmcgowen@johnstoncountync.org

Kristin Radford, Sales & Services Manager
kradford@johnstoncountync.org

Johnston County Tourism Authority

Rick Childrey, Chairperson

Ben Cook, Vice Chairperson

Mark McDonnell, Secretary

Bud Andrews, Special Project Committee
Chairperson

Paul Boucher, Marketing Committee Chair

Colleen Roby

Maria Smith

Jeff Jennings

James Holt

Joan Pitchett

Chad McLamb, Ex-Officio Finance Officer

The Tourism Authority meets the second Wednesday each month at 12N, excluding July. Meetings are open to the public, please join us as we tackle the task of marketing the county.

Meetings are held at the Visitors Bureau offices, 234 Venture Drive, Smithfield, NC.

Dates for JCTA Meeting

July - no board meeting

August 9

September 13

October 11

November 8

December 6 - Angel Tree

January 10

February 7

March 6

April 10

May 8

June 12



JOHNSTON COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU
234 VENTURE DRIVE
SMITHFIELD, NC 27577
919.989.8687
INFO@JOHNSTONCOUNTYNC.ORG
JOHNSTONCOUNTYNC.ORG

