



FY 2022-23

Johnston County ANNUAL REPORT

**Johnston
County**
VISITORS BUREAU

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MESSAGE FROM DONNA



We would love to report **11.5% growth** in visitor spending every year for tourism in Johnston County, that would be awesome for our tourism partners. In 2022, not only did Johnston County experience an upsurge in visitor spending, but we also ranked third in growth within the Triangle compared to 2021. Furthermore, we led the I-95 corridor in terms of spending increase. However, the inconsistent trends in occupancy for hotels this summer and the looming “mild” recession continue to concern destinations, hotel operators, and Visitor Bureaus on how to budget and market during this third year of recovery following the COVID pandemic. Visitor sentiment research indicates people want to travel, however, they are spending less than 2021.

Looking ahead, the most promising aspect on our horizon is the anticipated growth over the next 12-36 months. The amenities sought after by both residents and visitors, including new retail mixed-use developments, hiking and biking trails, parks, nightlife, and entertainment options, are aligning with the growth of our residential communities. As a destination accessible from both I-95 and I-40, we have consistently advocated with developers the importance of “car tops” alongside “rooftops.” Visitors to Johnston County contribute more than **\$780,000 a day** to our local economy, placing minimal demands on our county’s infrastructure and services. In fact, the **\$9 million in local tax** revenue generated by visitors aids in supporting essential services for our residents.

Tourism often remains underestimated as an economic driver in many communities like ours. Consequently, it is our responsibility as the Visitors Bureau to continually emphasize its vital role within our county. For a deeper understanding of our activities, strategies, and supported projects, we encourage you to subscribe to our *“Tourism Does That?! ”* Newsletter.

As we look forward to 2024, we remain optimistic about the positive impact that tourism will continue to have on Johnston County.

Donna

OVERVIEW OF 2022 VISITOR SPENDING

Travel statewide rose 15.2 percent in 2022 to set a record in visitor spending. Total spending by domestic and international visitors in North Carolina reached **\$33.3 billion** in 2022.

In Johnston County, visitors spent **\$284.93** million in 2022, which is an **11.5%** increase over 2021 spending. This places the county 28th in the state in total spending and 32nd in spending growth rate. In the Triangle Region, Johnston County is ranked third in total visitor spending behind Wake (\$2,951.56m) and Durham (\$1,018.33m), and Orange County (\$236.29m) fourth.

What does \$284.93 million in visitor spending mean for the county?

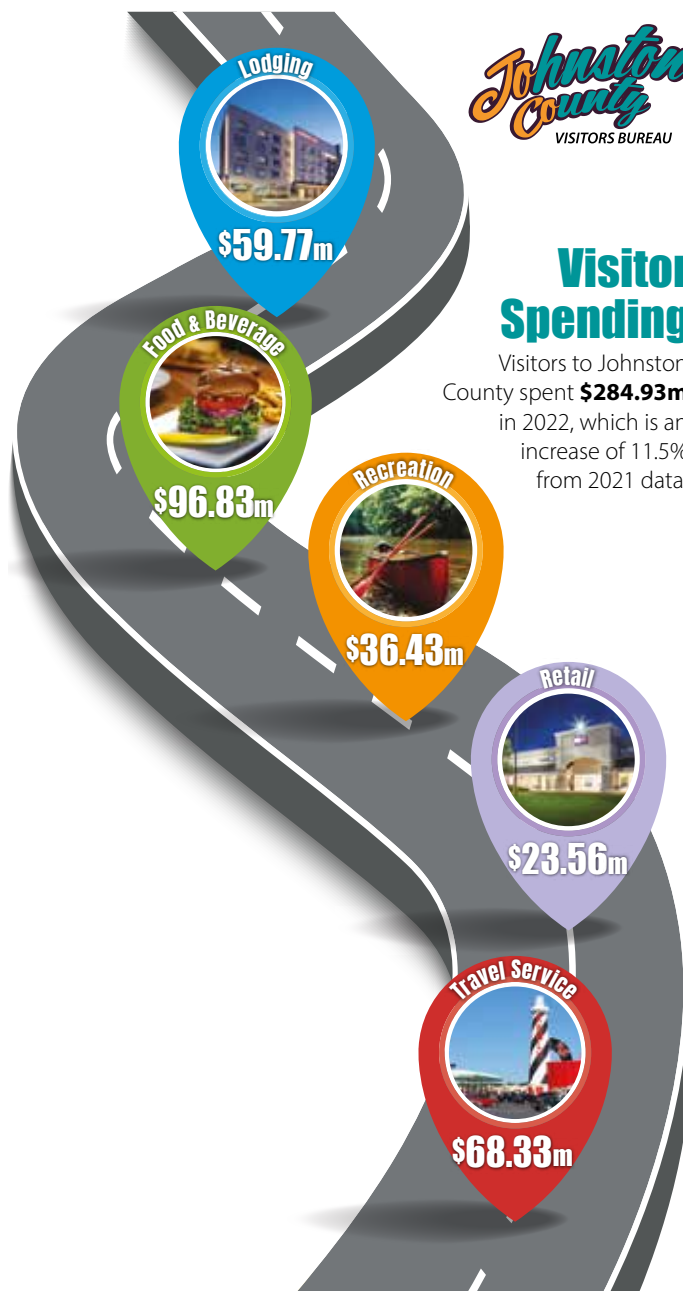
- Visitors to Johnston County spend **\$780,630 a day** at local businesses such as hotels, retail and outlet shopping, attractions, dining, and travel services.
- **\$11.9m** in state tax and **\$9m** in local tax receipts which provide county services and reduce the tax burden on every household in the county by almost **\$300**.
- Johnston County's visitor spending represents **9%** of the state's tourism economic impact.
- Room tax collection paid by visitors is the sole source of operating funds for the Visitors Bureau's marketing campaigns; **no local town or county taxes fund the bureau.**
- More than **2,000** people are employed in the tourism sector, with labor income more than **\$70m**.

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



Visitor Spending

Visitors to Johnston County spent **\$284.93m** in 2022, which is an increase of 11.5% from 2021 data.



Based on tourism industry segments, visitors spent in the following categories: (millions)

Lodging	\$59.77m
Food & Beverage	\$96.83m
Recreation	\$36.43m
Retail	\$23.56m**
Transportation	\$68.33m
Total	\$284.93m

FINANCIAL REVIEW

The following is an overview of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau financial data for the FY 2022-23.

NET REVENUE

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau is funded by a county-wide 3% Room Tax paid by visitors staying in accommodations in the county, which generated **\$1,279,214.45** in gross revenues for FY 22-23.

Month-by-month Johnston County 3% **gross collections** for Comparison FY 2020 to FY 2023:

	FY 2019-20	FY 2020-21	FY 2021-22	FY 2022-23
July	\$95,891.37	\$59,446.47	\$113,888.13	\$105,191.80
August	\$90,392.71	\$59,624.08	\$97,158.41	\$121,420.39
September	\$84,917.39	\$52,954.70	\$84,940.43	\$86,670.76
October	\$85,663.26	\$60,262.55	\$95,970.98	\$104,807.30
November	\$79,913.11	\$59,937.52	\$97,816.54	\$119,981.42
December	\$70,584.71	\$49,468.60	\$77,551.73	\$92,862.83
January	\$61,938.56	\$50,251.91	\$90,469.68	\$82,329.53
February	\$61,262.98	\$52,995.15	\$81,157.64	\$88,936.12
March	\$65,425.36	\$80,289.83	\$105,402.17	\$120,683.31
April	\$31,615.63	\$77,827.48	\$117,545.77	\$111,728.54
May	\$41,952.76	\$97,434.79	\$112,479.35	\$114,891.96
June	\$61,115.12	\$83,109.70	\$114,175.67	\$129,710.49
TOTALS	\$830,672.96	\$783,602.78	\$1,188,556.50	\$1,279,214.45

JCVB financials are audited by the Johnston County Finance Department under a 3rd-party contract and a completed audit is 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 20 through FY 23:

	FY 2019-20	FY 2020-21	FY 2021-22	FY 2022-23
Smithfield	\$225,777.99	\$235,251.98	\$373,147.73	\$413,628.52
Selma	\$87,195.52	\$56,276.72	\$90,653.58	\$92,135.67
Kenly	\$27,440.85	\$26,980.08	\$28,776.58	\$26,772.38
Benson	\$54,565.30	\$57,928.00	\$80,021.38	\$78,499.39

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 or by Town Council's request.

The Town's have the following Fund Balance Reserves as of 6/30/23:

- Smithfield** - \$764,214.59
- Selma** - \$140,340.19
- Benson** - \$34,235.35
- Kenly** - \$20,153.35

	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	Var. 23 vs 22
REVENUE					
Johnston 3% Tax	1,291,239.60	1,176,003.87	791,770.76	910,717.82	115,235.73
Town of Benson	76,144.48	77,620.75	56,129.22	63,884.69	-1,476.27
Town of Kenly	29,481.88	28,776.64	26,980.10	30,541.07	705.24
Town of Selma	89,371.61	87,933.99	54,588.42	105,516.39	1,437.62
Town of Smithfield	401,219.68	361,953.32	228,956.44	267,898.05	39,266.36
Misc. Revenue	4,377.89	4,352.00	5715.00	5,104.43	25.89
Reimbursements	2,659.81	2,308.00	2,082.02	2,269.29	351.81
Investment Income	6,200.53	394.15	356.48	821.63	5,806.38
Grants	59,294.99	8,209.59	126,950.00	-0-	51,085.40
Total Revenues	1,959,990.47	1,747,552.31	1,293,528.44	1,386,753.20	212,438.16
HR EXPENSES					
Salaries & Wages	399,859.73	380,066.61	363,005.82	389,294.44	19,793.12
Longevity Pay	6,000	5,700.00	5,300.00	4,500.00	300.00
Travel Per Diem	6,000	6000.00	6,000.00	6,000.00	-0-
Fringe Benefits	150,845.36	144,154.62	137,676.42	138,302.69	6,690.74
Total HR Expenses	562,705.09	535,921.23	511,982.24	538,097.13	26,783.86
OPERATING EXP.					
Professional fees	4,500.00	2,250.00	3,500.00	2,500.00	2,250.00
Telephone	7,133.13	7,526.47	7,968.47	7,521.49	-393.34
Postage	13,739.98	5,917.26	8,189.37	8,776.17	7,822.72
Printing	32,978.63	20,389.25	13,189.24	37,042.96	12,589.38
Utilities	5,430.53	4,430.10	4,188.08	5,144.57	1,000.43
Travel & Trade	20,735.85	14,831.13	4,460.15	35,332.88	5,904.72
Equip/Building/Main.	52,852.35	44,173.73	44,058.58	44,159.93	8,311.82
JoCo/Coop Adv.	180,615.32	166,778.93	130,654.87	231,015.85	13,836.39
Office Supplies	14,159.95	9,191.67	4,162.75	12,381.28	4,968.28
Software Expense	2,160.99	7,155.83	8,638.16	10,552.69	-4,994.84
Benson Marketing	92,417.62	38,610.74	33,160.35	24,930.71	54,173.65
Kenly Marketing	20,101.64	41,939.34	30,842.84	17,186.51	-21,837.70
Selma Marketing	85,748.55	49,480.68	60,769.75	101,480.66	36,267.87
Smithfield Marketing	151,211.65	149,894.76	136,552.96	114,219.09	1,316.89
Professional Dues	59,407.01	15,535.16	14,189.96	13,750.00	43,871.85
Marketing Grant	11,000.00	5,000.00	-0-	13,750.00	6,000.00
Insurance & Bonds	593.00	647.00	647.00	647.00	-54.00
Research	5,661.00	2,376.00	2,200.00	5,700.00	3,285.00
State Grants	51,866.87	9,036.52	20,873.18	-0-	42,830.35
Capital Grants	116,663.00	25,130.46	74,097.79	115,242.75	91,532.54
Total Operating	928,977.07	620,295.03	602,342.51	848,656.07	308,682.04
Total HR + Operating	1,491,682.16	1,156,216.26	1,114,324.75	1,339,431.67	335,465.90
Net +/-	468,308.31	591,336.05	179,203.69	47,321.53	-123,027.74

01

ABOUT THE BUREAU

What is a Tourism Authority?

In North Carolina General Statutes, the term “authority” is used to refer to many different kinds of entities that are created by government to perform specific functions or services. Authorities are quasi-government agencies following G.S. 159 Local Government Finance rules.



Visitors to Johnston County staying in local accommodations pay a 3% room tax, which funds the Johnston County Visitors Bureau's marketing budget.

A SHORT HISTORY ON THE FORMATION OF THE JOHNSTON COUNTY TOURISM AUTHORITY.

In 1987, the NC General Assembly approved HB 893 allowing Johnston County to levy a room tax. In November of that year, the Johnston County Commissioners levied a 3% county-wide occupancy tax, and the Tourism Authority was formed to promote tourism.

The legislation also established the format by which the Board of Directors was created. The Tourism Authority is a 11-member board composed of five representatives appointed by Chambers of Commerce in Benson, Clayton, Four Oaks, Kenly, Smithfield/Selma, five representatives appointed by the County Commissioners that are involved in tourism, and one ex-officio member, the County Finance Officer as the treasurer. There are Occupancy Tax Uniform Provisions established which outline how funds may be used to promote the county.

With the creation of the Tourism Authority there was a mandate in the legislation to give 50% of the tax collection for the first two years to the Johnston Community College Auditorium building fund which amounted to approximately \$235,000. In addition, the tourism authority contributed \$30,000 a year for five years to the Smithfield/Selma Chamber of Commerce Lee House Renovation project which created the Visitor Information Center for the county, and provided office space for the Visitors Bureau staff. So for the early years of the Tourism Authority funds were dedicated to development projects before a majority of funding was available for marketing.

Johnston County tourism revenue has been generated mainly by the leisure traveler passing through on I-95 and I-40 to other destinations. In the last few years, the Visitors Bureau has been dedicated to creating packages and tourism products to create reasons for visitors to choose our destinations for girlfriend shopping trips, golf vacations, and culinary trails. Current efforts continue to build awareness of Johnston County for several niche markets including the JoCo Grows Agriculture initiative, OutdoorNC and promoting recreation, seeking to bid on sports tournaments, outlets and downtown shopping, promotion for wedding venues, and marketing to heritage travelers interested in history to visit our county's museums.

MISSION, GOALS & CORE VALUES

MISSION

The mission of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau is the marketing and development of the destination's brand experiences to targeted visitor markets for economic growth and quality of place.

VISION

Johnston County Visitors Bureau is the recognized and influential community tourism leader through its successful, productive, and technology savvy marketing, development, and advocacy partnerships.

5 STRATEGIC GOALS

Strive to achieve excellence in destination marketing utilizing the highest industry standards set forth by Destinations International.

Position Johnston County as the preferred visitor, group tour, and meeting destination along the I-95 and I-40 corridors targeting select visitor markets along the East Coast and Canada.

Stress the importance of educational opportunities for the visitor industry with the purpose of encouraging quality visitor services for leisure, meeting, and group tour travelers to Johnston County.

Work cooperatively with municipalities, chambers of commerce, and visitor industry partners both locally and statewide to achieve an effective and comprehensive marketing program.

Proactively pursue economic development projects that benefit the tourism industry in Johnston County.

CORE VALUES

As the official destination marketing organization for the county of Johnston, the Tourism Authority Board adopted the following core values to guide the decisions which manage the organization. We aspire to operate at the highest level of excellence in marketing, benchmarking our performance against top performing CVBs in the United States.

- We promise to exceed expectations in the delivery of public services for our stakeholders;
- We are professionals, committed to serving with honesty and integrity;
- We are committed to solving problems;
- We are committed to achieving real results that earn the public's trust;
- We are committed to working cooperatively with the visitor industry for the overall good of the county;
- We encourage and value open and honest communication;
- We are committed to continual learning and the pursuit of excellence;
- We are committed to being active partners with all municipalities, county government, and the Chambers of Commerce;
- We are committed to being good stewards of our natural environment and the preservation of the county's cultural, agricultural, and Civil War heritage;
- We are committed to development of partnerships and alliances both in the county and statewide.

MEET THE BOARD

Meet the Johnston County Tourism Authority members who served for FY 23. Five members are appointed by County Commissioners and five from local chambers of commerce.

APPOINTED BY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Rick Childrey, Chairperson

Retired from the Smithfield/Selma Chamber of Commerce.

Paul Boucher, Marketing Committee Chairperson

Operates a family-owned travel agency, Small World Travel, in Benson.

W.E. "Bud" Andrews, Chairman, Special Projects Committee

Retired from First Citizens Bank, and a previous Tourism Authority board chairman.

Jeff Jennings

Works for Representative Donna White, and previously for the NC Tobacco Trust Fund Commission.

Mark McDonnell, Secretary/Treasurer

Works with the Eastfield Development group which opened the Old North State Food Hall in Selma.

APPOINTED BY LOCAL CHAMBERS

Ben Cook, Vice-Chairperson

Owner of Benton Card Company and Grndhaus printing company in Benson.

James Hoke

Community member in Kenly, previously the Chairman of the Kenly Chamber of Commerce.

Joan Pritchett

Executive Director of the Four Oaks Chamber of Commerce.

Maria Smith

Director of Events and Operations for the Clayton Area Chamber of Commerce.

Colleen Roby

Owner of Simple Twist Restaurant located in Garner (I-40, Exit 312).

Chad McLamb, County Finance Officer

Ex-Officio Member of the Tourism Authority.

MEET THE VISITORS BUREAU STAFF

We are often asked how many staff members do we have working at the Visitors Bureau. Below is a short recap of the six staff positions and each person's responsibilities.



01

**DONNA
BAILEY-TAYLOR**

President/CEO

Directs and leads the Bureau toward its mission. Works with the JCVB Board on policy making and strategies for the organization. Serves as the key executive within Johnston County to represent the interests of the travel and tourism industry. Speaks at public events and other meetings on tourism as well as other matters pertaining to the industry and the JCVB. Participates in industry associations and travel and tourism boards. Acts as the primary spokesperson for the organization.

02

ERIC DEAN

Creative Director

Helps execute the vision of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau while supporting the needs of the marketing, sales, and services departments. Develops all creative aspects and direction of the Bureau's marketing platforms including graphic design, advertising, print materials, social and digital campaigns, and publications. Manages all technical aspects of the Bureau's websites, including SEO, design, layout, and functionality.

03

ANGEL PHILLIPS

Office Manager

Performs accounting functions in accordance with County Finance Purchasing Procedures, and assists the President/CEO with the overall financial operation of the Bureau. This position also assists in the management and operation of the administrative offices, IT duties, and oversees the operation of the Visitor Center providing visitor services for leisure and group markets.

04

ASHBY BRAME

VP of Marketing & Communication

Responsible for identifying market opportunities and developing short and long-term marketing strategies with the objective of attracting overnight business. These strategies include advertising, public relations, media trade shows/industry meetings, familiarization tours, research, and special promotions. Responsible for strategically planning, implementing, and reviewing internal and external communication programs.

05

**JENNIFER
MCGOWEN**

Digital Marketing Manager

Helps promote the vision of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau while supporting the needs of the marketing department. This position drives all digital marketing programs within all levels of the organization and engages with vendors and partners. Duties include management of social media content, website updates, publication inventory, and email marketing.

06

**KRISTIN
RADFORD**

Sales & Service Manager

Welcomes and provides relevant and helpful information about Johnston County to all Visitors to the Visitor Center, while providing superior customer service. Assist all walk-in visitors, phone call inquiries and email inquiries promptly and informatively. Manages the CRM and the Extranet for the tourism industry partners, events, and all brochure distribution in the county. Also manages leisure and group sales efforts for the county.

WHAT CAN THE OCCUPANCY TAX BE USED FOR?

Below are the General Statute Rules governing the use and collection of occupancy taxes.



In 1997, the General Assembly enacted uniform municipal and county administrative provisions for occupancy tax legislation – G.S. 153A-155 and G.S. 160A-215. These provisions provide uniformity in the areas of levy, administration, collection, repeal, and penalties. Subsequently, the House Finance Committee established the Occupancy Tax Subcommittee, which regularly reviews occupancy tax legislation and looks for the inclusion of the following uniform provisions in the bills it considers:

RATE – The county tax rate cannot exceed 6% and the city tax rate, when combined with the county rate, cannot exceed 6%.

USE – At least two-thirds of the proceeds must be used to promote travel and tourism and the remainder must be used for tourism-related expenditures, which may include beach nourishment. However, local governments in coastal counties may allocate up to 50% of occupancy tax proceeds for beach nourishment, so long as all remaining proceeds are used for tourism promotion and provided that the use of occupancy tax proceeds for beach nourishment is limited by either a statutory cap or sunset provision.

DEFINITIONS – The terms “net proceeds”, “promote travel and tourism”, “tourism-related expenditures” are defined terms:

NET PROCEEDS – Gross proceeds less the costs to the city/county of administering and collecting the tax, as determined by the finance officer, not to exceed 3% of the first \$500,000 of gross proceeds collected each year and 1% of the remaining gross receipts collected each year.

PROMOTE TRAVEL AND TOURISM – To advertise or market an area or activity, publish and distribute pamphlets and other materials, conduct market research, or engage in similar promotional activities that attract tourists or business travelers to the area; the term includes administrative expenses incurred in engaging in these activities.

TOURISM-RELATED EXPENDITURES – Expenditures that, in the judgment of the Tourism Development Authority, are designed to increase the use of lodging facilities, meeting facilities, and convention facilities in a city/county.

ADMINISTRATION – The net revenues must be administered by a local tourism promotion agency, typically referred to as a “Tourism Development Authority,” that has the authority to determine how the tax proceeds will be used, is created by a local ordinance, and at least 1/2 of the members must be currently active in the promotion of travel and tourism in the taxing district and 1/3 of the members must be affiliated with organizations that collect the tax.

COSTS OF COLLECTION – The taxing authority may retain from the revenues its actual costs of collection, not to exceed 3% of the first \$500,000 collected each year plus 1% of the remainder collected each year.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Part of destination development in the county involves the staff of the Visitors Bureau serving on area boards, volunteering, providing marketing support, and participating in special committees related to tourism. The following is a list of activities by the staff within area organizations to advance tourism in the county.

Donna Bailey-Taylor serves on several area boards and works on many tourism development projects:

Member of the **Benson Art Advisory Board**. Projects in this fiscal year included the sculpture lease program to rotate art pieces in front of the Mary Duncan Library on Main Street, mural and alley project behind the Cornerstone Restaurant, and the selection of artist Zac Bender to paint a mural on the Lee Street Gym.

Chairperson for the **Ava Gardner Museum**, and heads the Ava 100th Centennial Planning Committee. Projects included design work for the Collectors Exhibit, the installation of Husbands Exhibit, the Television Costume Exhibit, and fundraising.

Serves on the board of the **Clayton Piano Festival** to assist in marketing and promotion of the local music events and for fundraising efforts. Jonathan Levin led the opening night concert for the Ava Gardner Festival at The Clayton Center.

Serves on the board of the **Friends of Bentonville Battlefield**, the support group for the state historic site which provides funding for a variety of projects needed by the staff. In addition, she serves as the NC Regional Director on the Civil War Trails board and the Marketing Subcommittee.

Served on the following committees during the year: **Ham and Yam Festival Advisory Committee**, **Workforce Alliance Strategic Planning Committee**, and the **Johnston County Branding project committee**.

Serves on the **Johnston County Grows Agriculture Marketing Committee** and has written and been awarded \$264,000 in grants from the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission and the NC Specialty Crop Block grant to further the mission to market the county's agriculture partners and agritourism.

Donated her time to design the Ava Gardner Family Exhibit for the opening of the new **Johnston County Heritage Museum** on Market Street in Smithfield.

Worked closely with Gary Johnson, Smithfield Parks & Recreation Department on the design and build project for the renovation of the **Neuse River Amphitheater**.

Ashby Brame serves on the **Friends of Johnston County Parks** board, which is a new grassroots community group that supports local park and trail development in the county. This year the Friends partnered with the Johnston County Arts Council to complete two mural projects in outdoor spaces around JoCo. Ashby sat on the project committee and helped to shepherd the project as well as promote its completion.

Ashby also serves on the **SSS Academy of Hospitality & Tourism** board, a group that works with high school students interested in pursuing a degree in hospitality.



Beer, Wine and Shine Trail

This culinary and beverage trail continues to draw visitors to the county interested in craft beverage tastings, special events and barbecue.

02

MARKETING HIGHLIGHTS

TELLING OUR DESTINATION STORY

The JCVB staff does much more than putting up billboards and managing a website for promoting the county. A multi-faceted marketing plan is used to reach potential visitors for inspiring travel, providing messaging as they consider where to stop or visit in North Carolina, and showcasing our stories via many, many avenues available to us including digital, email marketing, social media and public relations. Here are some highlights of our efforts in FY 22-23.

The JCVB Staff uses a media database, Critical Mention, which measures the earned value of media placement.

Total Online & Print Audience: 166,517,126

Total Online & Print Publicity Value: \$4,912,672

Top Media Features in FY22-23

WRAL Tarheel Traveler Love JoCo

Scott Mason featured visits to DeWaynes, Steven's Sausage, and Ronnie's Country Store.

ONSFH Opening Generates Media Buzz

The week leading up to the much-anticipated opening of Selma's Old North State Food Hall (ONSFH) saw an increase in positive press and anticipation thanks to the work of the Bureau, AdVenture Development, and Hospitality HQ (HHQ). Outlets such as CBS17, WRAL, ABC, News & Observer, Triangle Business Journal, and regional influencers covered the food hall during the grand opening.

PBS North Carolina's popular travel-themed show NC Weekend shares must-visit places across the state with its audience every week. They filmed an episode in the Fall of 2022 in the new Old North State Food Hall. Host Deborah Holt Noel interviewed General Manager Nathan Lambdin, spoke to vendors, and shared with viewers all the many delicious food options at the food hall.

“

The following are the top three partners by media value in 22-23.

Ava Gardner Museum
\$3,338,287

Old North State Food Hall
\$3,109,697

Redneck BBQ Lab
\$1,288,560



Gotham's Featured in *Our State*

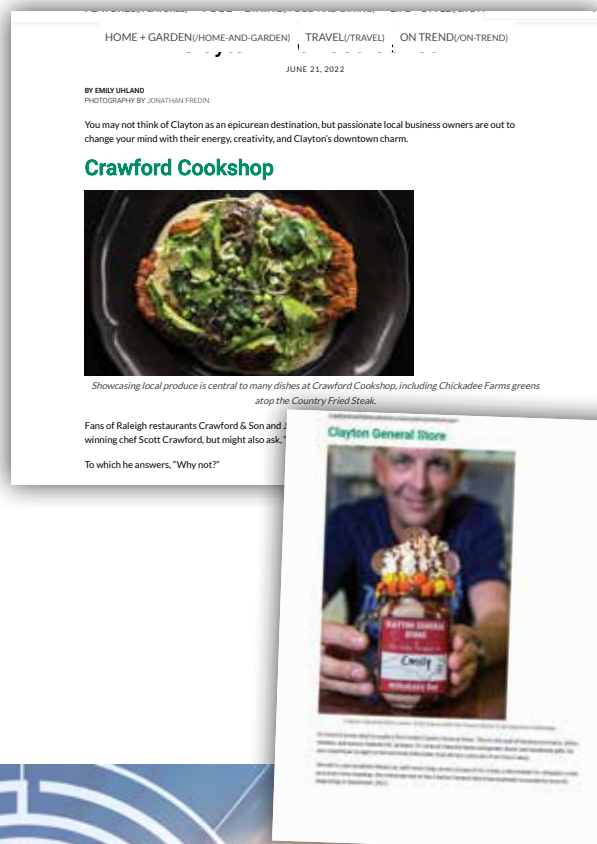
The August issue of *Our State* magazine had a big feature on a little deli in Downtown Smithfield: Gotham's.

The piece was pitched to the *Our State* team in previous years and the article was written by Billy Warden with photography by Alex Boerner. Learn about Scott and Lisa Gandolph and the amazing family atmosphere and delicious food combos they serve up daily at Gotham's Deli. It's a little piece of NYC nestled just a few miles off I-95, Exit 95 that draws locals and visitors alike.



Clayton Food Scene Story in *WAKE Living*

WAKE Living magazine's July/August 2022 issue featured a round-up focusing on Clayton's emerging food scene; surprising to others but no shock to locals who hang out around Main St. on the regular. Featuring chefs and makers, the article highlighted just a few of the many places to start a discovery of Clayton's food (and beverage) scene: Crawford Cookshop, Clayton General Store, Deep River Brewing Company, Jones Cafe, Manning's Restaurant, and Revival 1869 - A Drinkery. The piece was written by Emily Uhland with photography by Jonathan Fredin.



Partner communications

40 partner emails
12 *Tourism Does That?! Newsletters*



PUBLICITY HIGHLIGHTS

MEDIA VISITS

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau works with journalists, travel writers, photographers, and influencers throughout the year to facilitate Familiarization Trips or FAMs to JoCo's many towns. With the help of our tourism partners, we help the media write about and share their visits with travelers.

Therese Iknoian visits multiple partners

As a follow-up to her previous article detailing her travels to Johnston County, Therese Iknoian published another article earlier this year. Her “7 things to do in Johnston County NC: Civil War history to Ava Gardner Museum” covers history, hiking, farm visits, and of course Ava. Therese visited Bentonville, Howell Woods, the Ava Gardner Museum, Smith’s Nursery, and more when she visited JoCo in 2022.



[Hear Jeremy Norris on NC F&B Podcast](#)

The NC F&B Podcast has had quite a few Johnston County makers on their show in recent years. It's always exciting when one of our tourism partners stops by to talk to Matt & Max. Broadslab Owner and Master Distiller, Jeremy Norris, sat down for the first time to discuss publicly his soon-to-be-released bourbon product. Listeners learned about his new, patented aging technique, his dirt-to-bottle process, and how Broadslab has grown over the years.

This is Raleigh Visits JoCo Again

A few years ago the Bureau brought in Caz & Craig Makepeace with yTravel. Caz & Craig are native Australians who now live in the Triangle and they've grown their yTravel brand to include This is Raleigh. We were very excited to bring them back to JoCo in the Fall of 2022, and to work with them two more times after that in FY 23.

They wrote articles and did social posts and videos detailing three separate day trips to JoCo from their home in Raleigh. They did a fun date night to Downtown Clayton. They visited with their daughters for a family-friendly, holiday-themed exploration of Selma, Smithfield, and Benson. Lastly, they came in May to pick strawberries, grab coffee, and more in Princeton and Pine Level.

A big thank you to our awesome tourism partners who help us host media and share all that JoCo has to offer visitors!

JoCo Featured in Triangle Magazines

A big thank you to the team over at Triangle Media Partners for including Johnston County in the September 2022 issues of *Chapel Hill Magazine*, *Durham Magazine*, and *Chatham Magazine*. In the “Hit the Road” section JoCo was included as a great day or weekend excursion outside the Triangle area. Partners included in the editorial were Bentonville, Tobacco Farm Life Museum, Ava Gardner Museum, the Beer, Wine, Shine Trail, Clayton Fear Farm, Carolina Packers, and Stevens Sausage.



Media Outreach

Ashby Brame worked with her counterparts at Visit Raleigh and Discover Durham to organize and execute a regional Richmond Media Mission. The three destinations met with multiple media representing various Virginia publications, as well as influencers and freelancers. The plan is to follow-up the successful trip with media visits to the region, creating coverage for all three areas’ tourism partners.

Other staff projects included the IMM Media Show in New York and the NC Media Mission with Visit NC held in Durham in 2022.

JCVB Blog

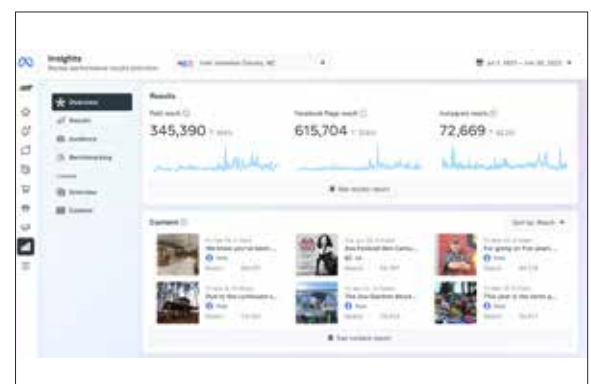
Telling our stories about new business openings, local chefs, artists, and festivals and events is the focus of the weekly JCVB blog. The staff utilizes the blog on social media to drive visitors to the website.

Top BLOGs of interest for our readers in FY23:

301 Endless Yard Sale Just Two Months Away - **5,120**

Old North State Food Hall Vendors & More - **4,639**

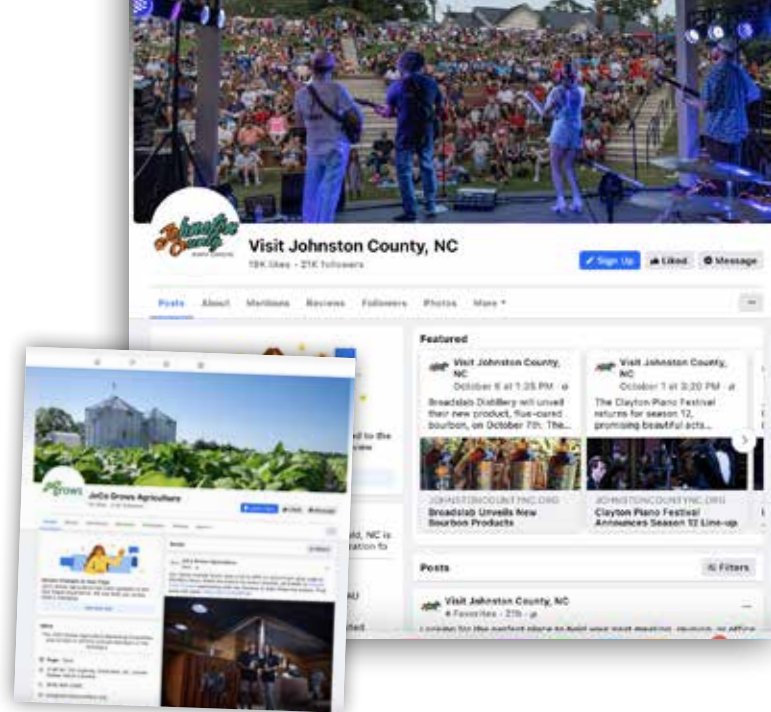
Old North State Food Hall Announces Vendors - **4,247**



The Visitors Bureau Manages 5 Pages on Facebook, and supports several others:

Visit Johnston County - **21,434** followers
 Visit Selma, NC - **1,429** followers
 301 Endless Yard Sale - **26,472** followers
 Beer, Wine and Shine Trail - **12,878** followers
 JoCo Grows Agriculture - **2,021** followers

Instagram - **4,025** followers
 Twitter - **2,935** followers
 Pinterest - **1,355** followers
 YouTube Channel - **315** subscribers



JCVB Designs & Sends Event Postcards

As part of a two-fold marketing strategy to reach new residents and provide event information to residents who may have visiting friends & family throughout the year, the Bureau is working with the Town of Smithfield and the Downtown Smithfield Development Corporation to design, print, and mail quarterly postcards. Postcards were designed with themes for Fall, Spring and Summer and mailed to more than 5,500 contacts and distributed throughout town and in area hotels.



Digital Billboard Campaign on US Hwy 70

A content calendar of digital billboards was developed to rotate information to residents and visitors traveling along US Hwy 70 to include major festivals, JoCo Calendar website, JoCo Grows Agriculture and more. Messages were rotated out every two weeks.



Our State Magazine Articles

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau works with our tourism partners throughout the year to host media, pitch travel stories, and garner positive press for JoCo as a destination. In recent years a number of partners have been featured in *Our State Magazine*. JP's Pastry, Redneck BBQ Lab, Brightleaf Hot Dogs, just to name a few.

The JCVB worked recently with Magic Murals to design and print these stories in a way that they could be easily and professionally displayed. JCVB staff then delivered these design pieces to partners. The Bureau has worked with *Our State* for over a decade to promote Johnston County as a destination through both editorial coverage and advertising placement. It can take time and persistence as *Our State* has 100 counties to cover and only 12 issues a year. But we love working with the *Our State* team to promote JoCo, and we love it when our tourism partners shine.



Are my county property taxes used for funding the bureau?



No, only visitors staying in local hotels, cabins, bed & breakfast inns, and AirBnB rental properties pay the occupancy tax that funds the bureau's budget.

Culinary travel is of great interest to media and for visitors -- and the Johnston County food scene is getting noticed with the Food Hall, Crawford's Cookshop and the very popular Redneck BBQ Lab.



PRINT & VIDEO PROJECTS

New Video Projects

The JCVB staff worked with the county to shoot footage for a Fall Family Fun video to promote agritourism in the county. Footage was shot at Sonlight Farm and Ashlan Meadow Farm to be used in the next FY. Staff also worked with Jonathan Levin to create promotional videos to use across Youtube, Google Ads, and social media.



Total Video Views Across Channels:

Ava Gardner Festival - **65,085**

Beer, Wine, & Shine Trail - **5,562**

CPF Holiday Gala - **4,695**

New Visitors Guide

JCVB staff researched other destination guides, redesigned, and printed the 2022 Official Johnston County Visitors Guide to promote the county. Guides are distributed to more than 125 locations in the county, Visitor Centers, and NC Welcome Centers in the state and along I-95.

The 2023 Visitors Guide celebrated *The Year of the Trail* initiative which encouraged the creation, extenuation, maintenance, and use of physical, cultural, historical, and other types of trails for the entire year. Throughout the guide and on the website, the Bureau utilizes day trip themed maps and trails to inspire travel to around the county while visitors are in-market.





Ken Tart Photography, Benson.



Jonathan Levin Photography.

Increasing Our Image Database

Over the last few years, the bureau has been working with JoCo-native Jonathan Levin - a photographer and drone operator who also founded and manages the Clayton Piano Festival. The Bureau will continue to curate local photography, which the bureau and our partners use across marketing mediums to promote JoCo's activities, food, rural beauty, and more!



JCVB Staff Photography.

SALES MISSIONS

JCVB Attends Shows with RetireNC

The JCVB has been working with VisitNC (the state tourism office) for a few years now as part of its RetireNC program. As a state-certified retirement community, and the first county to become one, Johnston County works with VisitNC to promote JoCo as a great place to retire; this includes a guide and website, produced by the state office, and also attendance at in-person shows in specific markets. In September, staff attended two Ideal-Living retirement shows with the VisitNC team and other certified retirement communities - one was in NJ and the other in DC.



What's Poppin' AAA Holiday & Media Mailing

The JCVB staff sent AAA direct mail packages for the holidays with a "What's Poppin' in Johnston County" flyer and Christmas-themed popcorn from the Old Fashion Ice Cream Shop in Selma. These mailings help the bureau communicate new destination information about JoCo's tourism offerings across our towns for AAA employees to share with the leisure visitors they serve.



JoCo Grows Agriculture Marketing Committee Projects

Nicole Youngblood Joins JoCo Grows

Due to the need for more awareness about what agriculture means to the county, a grassroots effort resulted in the formation of the JoCo Grows Agriculture Marketing Committee. The committee began in 2018 with the work of Cooperative Extension Staff in Johnston County, and the Johnston County Visitors Bureau, funded in part by the Johnston County Farm Bureau. As the work of this committee continued to grow so did the need for a staff member to champion the program. On Oct. 1, 2022, Nicole Youngblood officially joined the NC Cooperative Extension Service in Johnston County as an Agriculture Agent focusing on agriculture marketing and communications. To learn more about what the JoCo Grows Agriculture efforts entail visit jocogrows.org and follow JoCo Grows on, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.



JoCo Grows (cont.)

Campaigns included JoCo Grows Strawberries with on air interviews with WQDR and visits to Smith's Strawberry Farm by local radio host, Amanda Daughtry.

The Visitors Bureau team works closely with Nicole providing design services for all materials, promotional items, social graphics, Google Ad campaigns, and more.

The grant program has extended marketing support to farmers with Cost Share grants, with 18 farms expanding their marketing efforts with new logos, social media campaigns, farm signage, website design and more.

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau has been awarded a second grant to continue the marketing efforts of the JoCo Grows Agriculture committee. Donna Bailey-Taylor submitted a grant application for the NC Specialty Crops Block Grant, entitled JoCo Grows Specialty Crops, and was awarded \$149,315 to execute several marketing projects over the next 24 months.

People First Tourism Partnership

P1t will be working with the JCVB, Cooperative Extension staff, and county farmers to create unique, hands-on agritourism experiences. People First Tourism works to connect farmers with visitors and residents in a meaningful, sustainable, and profitable way. Through the P1t partnership public-facing farms can create, promote, and sell on-farm classes, workshops, tours, and events, allowing P1t to do the heavy logistical lifting of idea generation and promotion while still benefiting financially. Learn more at peoplefirsttourism.com/joco.



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

The Visitors Bureau uses Smith Travel Research data to measure the county's occupancy, ADR (Average Daily Rate), and RevPar (Revenue per available room). As the much talked about mild recession loomed over summer travel, occupancy levels were “soft” , however ADR and RevPAR remains healthy.

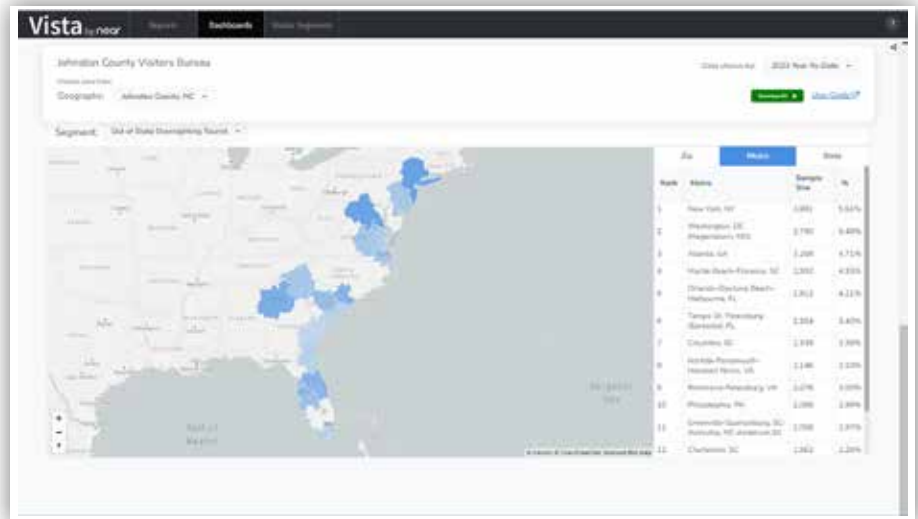
YTD Running 12 month data comparison for last two years:

	2022	2023
OCC	55.9%	57.0%
ADR	\$86.80	\$92.28
RevPAR	\$48.54	\$52.64

The Visitors Bureau utilizes a data intelligence service, Near.com, to better understand our visitors to the county, and adjust marketing efforts based on zip codes, top Points of Interest, and Demographics of visitors to the county. Near.com estimates that they capture 10% of phones in the market segments. What has been learned using first party data has helped the bureau adjust target audiences for digital and social marketing campaigns.

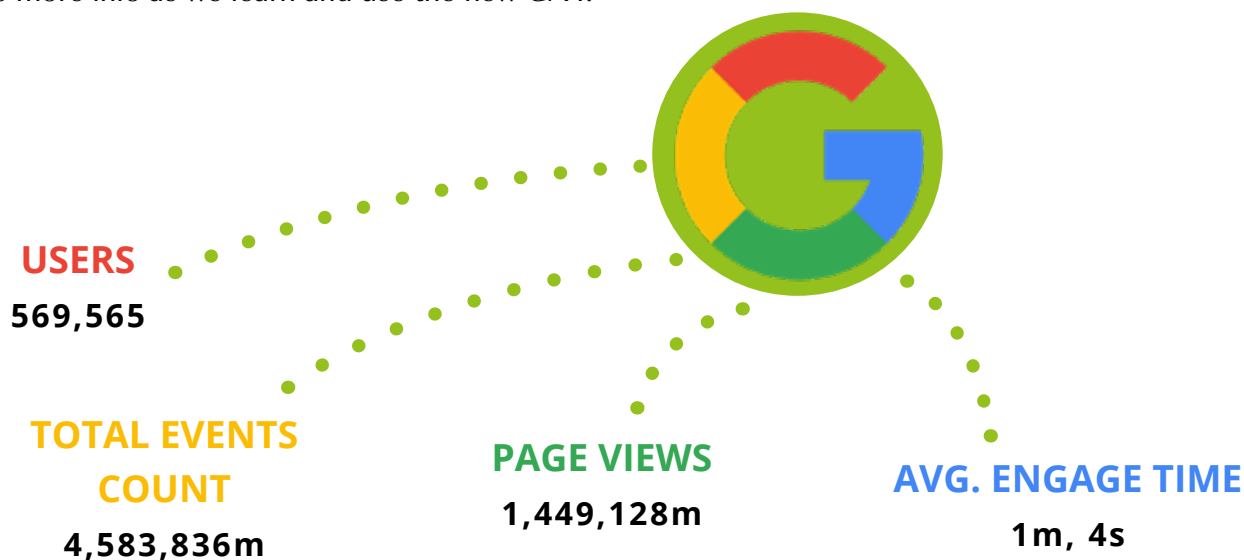
Our focus remains on markets that generate overnight visits to the county to our hotels. For tourism partners focusing on marketing to out-of-state markets, Near.com data indicates the following top Metro area for overnight visitors are: (interesting to note they also align with the top Point of Interest markets for Carolina Premium Outlets)

1. New York, NY
2. Washington, DC
3. Atlanta, GA
4. Myrtle Beach-Florence, SC
5. Orlando-Daytona, FL
6. Tampa-St. Petersburg, FL
7. Columbia, SC
8. Norfolk-Portsmouth, VA
9. Richmond-Petersburg, VA
10. Philadelphia, PA



GOOGLE ANALYTICS

In this year's annual report we are using GA4 data for the first time. Back in July 2023, Google Analytics migrated to GA4 which uses different data models. The Universal Analytics data model was based on sessions and page views. In contrast, the GA4 data model is based on events and parameters. We are not comparing data sets this year, as it would truly be *apples to oranges*. Stay tuned to more info as we learn and use the new GA4.



SESSIONS SOURCES

Organic - 469,564
Direct - 111,634
Social - 63,216
Referral - 26,993
Paid Search - 11,579

TOP TEN STATES

North Carolina
Georgia
Virginia
New York
Florida
Ohio
Michigan
Pennsylvania
Indiana
South Carolina

TOP 10 PAGE HITS

301 Endless Yard Sale - 99,860
JoCo Home Page/ - 52,486
Ham & Yam Micro-site/ - 41,800
Events/ - 40,515
Ava Gardner Museum - 24,725
Shopping/Carolina Premium Outlets - 20,433
Selma/ - 15,873
Smithfield/ - 14,914
Listing/42 Tavern - 12,142
Restaurants/ - 12,138

TOP GOOGLE AD RESULTS (CLICKS)

Johnston County Performance Max - 7,619
Ava Gardner Performance Max - 7,312
301 Endless Yard Sale Display Ads - 4,448

03

BUREAU & PARTNER NEWS

BUREAU NEWS

NC TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION DESTINATION MARKETING AWARDS

Each year the JCVB attends the North Carolina Travel Industry Association annual conference to network with peers and attend educational and legislative sessions. There is also an award banquet in which destinations from around the state are recognized by their peers for their outstanding work in marketing, creative, and public relations. This year the bureau won Gold for our Digital Meeting Guide and Platinum for our JoCo Strong Crisis Community Plan.

In addition, the JCVB was recognized as a member of the Circle of Friends at a recent Johnston Community College (JCC) appreciation luncheon. The bureau awarded JCC a \$50,000 grant for the auditorium renovation project.

Donna Bailey-Taylor was honored with the 2023 Frances Finch Hobart Award for Voluntary Community Service. The Frances Finch Hobart Award for Voluntary Community Service was established as a donor-advised fund in 2006 to recognize and honor the tireless efforts of Frances Finch Hobart and the countless hours of community service she has given through the years. The intent of this award is to recognize an individual from Johnston County who demonstrates vision, vitality, determination, selflessness, generosity, and a full caring heart to his or her community.

McGowen Joins JCVB Staff

Jennifer McGowen, started June 1st as the Bureau's Digital Marketing Manager. Jennifer is a recent graduate from Ball State University with a Masters of Arts in Public Relations. Jennifer will manage all social media and website content, photography needs for tourism partners, and digital marketing with Google and other platforms.



Retail Items in the Visitor Center



Improvements to the Visitor Center were made over the last year to feature JCVB swag items - t-shirts, postcards, umbrellas, and more. Several local products, books, and art are also for sale.



PARTNER NEWS

Bentonville Pull Off Ribbon Cutting

The Division of State Historic Sites, Friends of Bentonville Battlefield, and the Flowers family, held a ribbon cutting of a new stop along the Bentonville Driving Tour. In June, thanks to the financial support of the Flowers family and the Friends of Bentonville Battlefield, the new pull off area was unveiled. This particular tour location focuses on the second day of the battle at Bentonville as fighting shifted East. After the ceremony, a short discussion was held regarding the "Fight for the Crossroads". The Bentonville self-guided, driving tour allows visitors to explore miles of history at their own pace. The driving tour has 11 stops in the immediate Bentonville area, but can be combined with Civil War Trails stops which extend into other parts of the county - Selma, Smithfield, and Clayton - to create a larger opportunity for travel and learning.



Hospitality Association Gives Back

The JCVB's Hospitality Association decided to switch things up this year. The bureau offered quarterly digital information packets, and hosted a mid-year luncheon in July. The association also decided to do more community service projects. For the first one, much needed items were collected for Harbor House. A big thanks to our Hospitality Association group and all our industry partners who participated. Items collected included toilet tissue, paper towels, cleaning supplies, and more. Harbor, Inc. is a domestic violence and sexual assault agency located in Johnston County. Since 1984, this non-profit organization has provided victims with a variety of services and programs in an effort to aid them to move beyond a life of violence to one that is violence free and encourages self-sufficiency.

Neuse River Amphitheater Project

The renovations to the amphitheater were funded by a State Capital Infrastructure Fund (SCIF) Grant of \$989,500 and improvements include new seating, handicap accessibility, a rebuilt stage, plus a new roof, new wiring and lighting, and an improved drainage system. The design for the project was performed by McAdams Company of Raleigh; Balfour Beatty Construction performed the transformations to the amphitheater. Concept drawings by WithersRavenel were presented to the Town of Smithfield in 2018 and were paid for by Smithfield's 2% rooms tax. Plans for future programming at the Amphitheater include free films, concerts, and special events for residents and visitors alike.



Congrats to Scott Crawford!

Scott Crawford, the owner of Crawford Hospitality, was named 2023 Restaurateur of the Year by the North Carolina Restaurant & Lodging Association (NCRLA). Scott opened his third restaurant, a casual concept, on Main Street in Downtown Clayton at the end of 2021. Crawford Cookshop continues to be a local and visitor favorite. The JCVB is happy to have Scott as one of our tourism partners.



across the state. The grant makes it possible for JCC to extend its already popular Culinary Arts continuing education program into an Associate in Applied Science degree program by supporting new faculty and equipment. The curriculum program is scheduled to begin admitting students in the Fall of 2023.

American Pickers Films in Benson

The Town of Benson showed off its small-town hospitality to the film crew of *American Pickers* on



The History

Channel in early 2023. Cast and crew enjoyed their visit and had a blast 'pickin' at Benton Card Company, searching the second floor for printing press memorabilia and movie posters. The JCVB, the town, and Benton Card Company will work to announce an episode air date when one is available.

ONSFH Wins TBJ 2023 Space Award

AdVenture Development was recognized with a Triangle Business Journal 2023 SPACE award for Top Hospitality/Entertainment Development.



They were awarded for their Old North State Food Hall (ONSFH) property, which opened in Selma in August 2022.

JCC Opening Culinary School

Johnston Community College received \$310,260 from the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges to support the Culinary Arts. The state board approved the amount as part of a \$5-million allocation to 14 community colleges to build capacity for workforce training in high-demand occupations

Tru by Hilton Opens in 2022

The new Tru by Hilton Smithfield (located at 167 S. Equity Drive), opened in late October 2022. The hotel offers 91 modern-style rooms, and a fun-filled lobby for



guests to work, play, or get a snack or two. The hotel was developed by Crown Hotel and Travel Management of Wilmington, NC. Hotel development is on the rise in Johnston County with several projects in the planning stages in Selma, Smithfield, Clayton, and Benson.

JoCo at WRAL Voters Choice Awards

A huge congratulations to our JoCo tourism partners who were recognized for their hard work and devoted following at the **WRAL Voters Choice Awards**. The people have spoken and **#VisitJoCo** has some of the Triangle's best bbq, cocktails, and more.

Winners included **Revival 1869 - A Drinkery & The Redneck BBQ Lab**; finalists included **Pace Family Farms, Fainting Goat Brewing Company, Celtic Creamery, and The Grocery Bag**. With many more businesses nominated!

JCVB Attended the JCC Gala

Donna Bailey-Taylor, JCVB President/CEO along with Tourism Authority board members, Rick Childrey and W.E. "Bud" Andrews attended the opening night gala on January 28th, for the Paul A. Johnston Auditorium which has been closed for renovations. More than 31 major donors were recognized for their contributions to the Student Success Center and the Auditorium. The Tourism Authority awarded the JCC Foundation a \$50,000 grant to assist with renovations, and in particular the fire suppression curtain for the stage. Since 1987, the Tourism Authority has supported tourism development projects throughout the county, investing more than \$2.0 million dollars for museums, parks and recreation, sports venues, and more.



2022 Angel Tree Most Successful Yet



Each year the JCVB staff and all our Hospitality Association partners team up with the Johnston County Department of Social Services to participate in their Angel Tree program; making sure that deserving children in JoCo get all the things on their Christmas lists. Thank you to all of our partners who donated and organized presents for all 30 of the children we took on for this year's Angel Tree event. Each year we are blown away by the generosity shown and how tall the gift pile gets.

JCVB Distributes Leave No Trace (LNT) Posters

The JCVB has been working with OutdoorNC, a program between

VisitNC and the Leave No Trace organization (LNT), to promote North Carolina and participating partner destinations as a place to explore the outdoors while recreating responsibly. The JCVB has taken some of the provided materials in the program and photography from across JoCo's outdoor assets to create posters that promote JoCo recreation and remind visitors and residents to consider the LNT principles when exploring the outdoors. JCVB staff distributed posters for indoor and outdoor use to towns, Parks & Rec Departments, Howell Woods, and Clemmons Forest.

Ava Gardner Festival Recap

After years of preparation by the Ava Gardner Museum board and staff, and over a year of promotional efforts by the JCVB, the Ava Gardner Festival Oct. 7-9 was a wild success. Visitors from all over the state and country, as well as places as far away as Germany, Brazil, and Australia, came to celebrate and remember Ava during her 100th year. A special musical tribute concert, film screenings, new exhibits, and even a proclamation from the Governor making Oct. 8th, "Ava Gardner Museum Day" were just a few highlights of the weekend.



Through generous media partnerships and PR efforts by the JCVB, buzz around the festival in 2022 generated 147 press mentions that reached over 58 million people. Earned news coverage for the museum and the festival had a total publicity value of over \$800,000.

The Johnston County Visitors Bureau is the official destination marketing organization for the county of Johnston - charged with the mission to attract and serve visitors to the county, therefore, increasing visitor spending and the vitality of the tourism industry.



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