



VISIT KEWEENAW

2024-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

ZEITGEIST CONSULTING

**DMO
PRÖZ**

FORWARD

The evolution of Destination Marketing as a function of community development and prosperity has hit break-neck speed over the past five years. Along with the growing realization that Destination Marketing is not limited to just attracting overnight visitors to a community, a recent study by Destinations International identifies organizational imperatives that weren't part of the conversation in a pre-pandemic world.

This philosophical evolution actually began in the Summer of 2009 when industry thought leader Maura Gast (then the outgoing Chair of Destinations International) spoke these words:

If you build a place where people want to visit, you'll build a place where people want to live.
If you build a place where people want to live, you'll build a place where people have to work.
If you build a place where people want to work, you'll build a place where business wants to be.
If you build a place where business wants to be, you'll be back to building a place where people want to visit. It all starts with a visit.

Destinations International recently codified Maura's concept into the following graphic:



The marketing of destinations has been occurring for over a century...but the stakes have never been higher nor the opportunity greater than right now. In American cities and counties, the latest iteration of Destination Marketing began sweeping the nation in the 1980s and 1990s as revenues from hotel occupancy taxes became available to virtually every community.

Today, however, the mandate has grown significantly larger as it is increasingly obvious that communities need effective marketing for more than just attracting visitors; destinations need to be marketed to attract investment, workforce, entrepreneurs and future residents. Every community is in a competition to attract the best and brightest as a way to enhance quality of life and long-range sustainability. And, as we emerge from a worldwide pandemic, this new directive is even more crucial to a community's success. Indeed, the road to recovery is through the Visitor Economy.

The realization that a Destination Marketing Organization's (DMO) role has grown stems, in part, from a 2015 study by Longwoods International that proves that tourism advertising has a marked effect on consumer interest in communities as a place to live, go to college and start a business. That means DMOs must focus on more than just "Heads in Beds." DMOs help plow the road for Economic and Community Development agencies.

It is with these concepts in mind that the Visit Keweenaw Board of Directors met on May 28th, 2024 to map out a strategy for the evolution of the organization and destination over the next three years. No longer content to continue with traditional destination marketing strategies, the Board has re-imagined the role of the DMO within the greater community development imperatives within the region.

In preparation for the Board Workshop to develop this Strategic Plan, DMOproz gathered online survey responses from community and business leaders. We met with community representatives and convened focus groups of industry leaders. This background intelligence was shared with the Board as it gathered to ideate how the organization will address the opportunities before the community and the DMO. A summary of the findings can be found as an appendix beginning on Page 11.

In the DMO world, **a Strategic Plan is the Board's Action Plan**, outlining things that it can and will do to propel the destination and the organization forward. This is the value-add that the Board of Directors can and must bring to the table. The DMO Marketing Plan is the roadmap for professional staff as they identify and work the markets most appropriate for the destination with new promotional and sales tactics.

The full 2024-2026 Strategic Plan for the Board of Visit Keweenaw begins on page 4.

PURPOSE, VISION & MISSION

Purpose is why we exist. Vision propels us forward. Mission focuses us. Core Values are what we believe.

These Statements are crucial to the success of organizations as they power us forward and keep us on task. Members of the Board of Directors of Visit Keweenaw took these concepts into consideration as they sought to develop to update the Strategic Plan.

Vision

The Keweenaw Region will be known as a vibrant Midwest destination, respected for its progressive mix of arts and history nestled within one of the most accessible outdoor recreation meccas in the nation.

Mission

Visit Keweenaw helps people from around the world discover our vibrant, sustainable and inclusive attractions and experiences as a way to build economic activity and enhance the Quality of Life in Houghton and Keweenaw Counties.



VISIT KEWEENAW 2024-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

GOAL: Enhance the Visitor Experience

Objective A

Work with community partners to develop shoulder season attractions

Tactics:

- Explore partnerships with Rozsa Center to host events capable of drawing overnight visitors
- Explore opportunities to enhance July 4th festivities in central and southern Keweenaw Peninsula
- Work with Copper Country Junior Hockey Association to host invitational tournaments during early and late season
- Work with University to host association conferences (e.g. Vernacular Architecture Forum) during early summer

Objective B

Collaboratively Work with Local Government and Landowners to Enhance Directional Signage throughout the Keweenaw Peninsula

Tactics:

- Advocate for enhanced wayfinding signs at trailheads and directional signs to area points of interest to support responsible recreation
- Work with organizers of the Copper Country Trail National Byway to sign the scenic/historic byway and spur routes

Objective C

Work with local Heritage Interests to bring the stories of Keweenaw's rich past to light

Tactics:

- Maximize awareness of visitors regarding the Keweenaw National Historical National Park and Heritage Sites and Copper Country National Scenic Byways
- Advocate for better signage identifying historic sites
- Identify relevant industry conferences and pursue hosting them in the Keweenaw

Objective D

Work to establish the Keweenaw as one of the premier Dark Sky destinations in America

Tactics:

- Become a subject matter expert to educate the community on the issue of light pollution
- Support development of appropriate ordinances to ensure that the Keweenaw is the best place to view Dark Skies in the Midwest, year 'round

Objective E

Encourage area visitor businesses to stay open later and longer

Tactics:

- Identify and utilize case studies to encourage area businesses to extend seasonal operations



GOAL:

Collaboratively Lead Sustainability and Stewardship Efforts to Ensure that the Keweenaw Peninsula Continues to be a Place Visitors Crave

Objective A

Engage Municipal and County governments to identify key goals in Sustainability and Stewardship

Tactics:

- Work with local governments and community partners to identify how they define sustainability and desire stewardship to take place
- Recruit local governments and community partners to become supporters of the *Love The Keweenaw* (www.lovethekeweenaw.org) campaign

Objective B

Develop a Visitor and Resident Education Program to better inform recreationalists on where to go and how to respect our community

Tactics:

- Utilize the Leave No Trace message of responsibility (pack in-pack out)
- Engage with Outdoor Recreation providers to provide guidance and literature to support environmental respect

Objective C

Work with destination businesses to help reinforce our message of stewardship for our region

Tactics:

- Continue Keweenaw Sustainability Tourism Series...
- Develop branded materials for partners that can be used to educate their customers (visitor and local alike)
- Celebrate those businesses that join in on our sustainability crusade

Objective D

Encourage the enhancement of mobile communications and EV charging availability

Tactics:

- Advocate for enhanced Mobile communication coverage while advising carriers on view-shed concerns
- Advocate for the installation of more high-speed EV chargers as our preferred customers are more likely to have transitioned to electric vehicles
- Advocate for the installation of EV infrastructure to support outdoor recreation industry (e.g. ORVs, Snowmobiles, etc.)

GOAL:

Leverage the Keweenaw's Collection of Outdoor, Historical, and Cultural Amenities to Support the Region's Visitor Economy

Objective A

Ensure destination marketing, branding, and promotion professionally positions the Keweenaw as a destination for year-round leisure travel

Tactics

- Partner with industry firm to develop media strategy and campaign implementation to ensure the Visit Keweenaw brand remains top of mind to travel audiences in target markets
- Maintain and enhance VisitKeweenaw.com as a leading resource for travel inspiration and planning
- Identify and collaborate with select content creators who model our destination and community values

Objective B

Connect with Industry Partners to share stories of the Keweenaw's rich history, outdoor amenities and vibrant communities

Tactics

- Host relevant and trusted media outlets in the Keweenaw for familiarization tours
- Strategically work with Pure Michigan to participate in media trade show opportunities (e.g. IPW)
- Identify opportunities to enhance curated group tours of the region

Objective C

Enhance Visit Keweenaw's understanding of visitor trends, in-market behavior, and destination positioning

Tactics

- Work with research firm to assess destination positioning and audience targeting in select markets
- Contract with data services company (e.g. Placer AI, Datafy, Arrivalist) to offer insight into visitor in-market patterns
- Identify and attend relevant industry conferences and associations to keep abreast of best practices and trends

GOAL:

Advocate for Destination Enhancing Development

Objective A

Analyze opportunities to develop team sports infrastructure to support the growth of the travel sports market

Tactics:

- Meet with area sports clubs, leagues, schools/universities and sports commissions to better understand their present need for additional facilities for residents
- If appropriate, partner with local government agencies and community development organizations to collaboratively fund feasibility studies on the most promising concepts
- Work with local sports organizations to strategically support tournaments and invitations, prioritizing shoulder seasons and events of high impact

Objective B

Work with area agencies to secure additional Commercial Flights into CMX

Tactics:

- Work with Airport officials to support their efforts to secure additional carriers and flights
- Increase our marketing presence in the airport to encourage arrivals to expand the exploration of the area

Objective C

Work to Develop an Enhanced Events Calendar for the Region

Suggested Tactics:

- Establish Visit Keweenaw as the primary source for scheduling destination-wide events
- Work with community organizations to establish a process of “smart scheduling” to avoid conflict with dates that they need hotel inventory to be available
- Develop guidelines that limit grant funding to events that are scheduled on peak dates

GOAL:

Continue to build Organizational Capacity and Excellence

Objective A

Analyze the potential of new Revenue Streams to increase the impact of Visit Keweenaw

Tactics:

- Identify opportunities to recruit Short Term Rentals into the assessment on lodging properties

Objective B

Continue to work to ensure that the Visit Keweenaw Board is the best and most effective it can be on behalf of the region

Tactics:

- Continually review organizational by-laws to ensure the best possible governance model
- Consider the addition of an Advisory Committee to expand and diversify participation with Visit Keweenaw
- Increase the number of presentations that the organization makes to local government and area service clubs to share the Visit Keweenaw story
- Host Visit Keweenaw public meetings throughout the region to cultivate relationships with community leaders and organizations
- Cultivate future board members through direct outreach

Objective C

Enhance local businesses capacity to provide exceptional hospitality experiences to local and visiting customers.

- Collaborate with organizations such as MRLA, the Small Business Administration, MSU Extension, Michigan Works!, KEDA, and the Chamber of Commerce to offer hospitality training programs
- Design and implement a shoulder-season FAM program to enhance front-of-house staff's awareness of local attractions and experience to improve customer referrals

BACKGROUND INTEL

Prior to meeting with the Visit Keweenaw Board of Director to develop this Strategic Plan, DMOproz fielded an online survey among community leaders and stakeholders and met with several individuals during their time in-market in November 2023. What follows is a condensation of the responses to several questions that were posed that served as a backbone for the Board's discussions in May.

The Online Survey:

In the Year 2035

Respondents were asked to imagine the Keweenaw in 2035. Among their responses:

It will continue to be a "hot spot" for tourists looking for a nice remote getaway.

Visitors are educated about the outdoors and the wilderness...and respect the outdoors and the wilderness. The Keweenaw is a leader in sustainable tourism.

A balance between well-done tourism assets and untouched natural zones.

The volume of tourists has clearly increased with mountain biking and ORVs being a big part of how the experience has changed.

A rotating tourist attraction for every season.

There has been a PLANNED blending of historic spaces and structures with urban growth. No Dollar Generals located in designated historic districts. No superhighway LED signs marring the visual landscape at night.

Evening hours for the shops in the Keweenaw are standard.

More purpose-built resorts, cabins and lodging establishments.

Controlled visitation to conserve the natural habitats and beauty and optimize the visitor experience.

The Keweenaw is the close Alaska.

Tourists are here, and their presence makes the area feel lively and fun. That said, the area doesn't feel crowded or congested, and tourists do not interrupt the daily lives of those who live here, or decrease quality of life.

Just the right amount of visitors to boost our economy but not so many that locals are pushed and priced out of housing, food, ability to participate in local events.

The tourism landscape includes all parts of the area's history and culture, going beyond individual events like the 1913 strike and the Italian Hall tragedy. The landscape would encourage visitors to care for the environment and respect the need to act responsibly.

We are a vibrant, sought-after place to live with a strong, diverse economy which is supported by both the visitor economy and a variety of local businesses with global reach; with those visitor economy assets supporting the residents' enjoyment of their hometowns.

The connections the the area's history are retained, but the blight is gone. Calumet Depot is a destination.

Robust, diverse, experiential with something for everyone. It hasn't changed, just became better.

It feels equitable and responsible. VK's focus on responsible recreation has helped lesson the environmental cost of tourism and help spread equity to all communities in Houghton/Keweenaw Counties.

What's Next?

Respondents were asked to share their thoughts regarding what addition of enhancement would make the Keweenaw a more appealing destination. Among the responses:

More support services for the visitors (e.g. lodging, restaurants, roads, signs, water and sewage infrastructure) and educational facilities (e.g. like you see in national parks).

Increased availability of mobile phone service.

Enforce blight ordinances.

The area needs more things to do, especially with family.

Make it an electric vehicle (automobiles and ORVs, snowmobiles, etc.) destination.

A more luxurious Mont Ripley.

Updated hotels. Fully staffed restaurants.

Additional Restaurants / bars.

Better signage for the Keweenaw National Historic Park and Downtown Calumet.

A marina with adequate dockage for people that travel on their boats. Something to accomplish larger vessels.

An event center to host large numbers of people for events in all seasons.

Direct flights to other midwest cities in addition to Chicago (e.g., Detroit).

The development of the Heartlands Recreation Area with trails and access for motorized and non-motorized access, campgrounds, amenities, support businesses and workforce housing.

Natural History Museum to tell the story of the region; enhanced trail connectivity to provide multi-day excursion opportunities; expanded public transportation; more agri-tourism and local food in restaurants; more gardens and green spaces; accessible trail systems.

Welcome center and more wifi.

Improve the visitor experience to our local waterfalls (Hungarian, Houghton-Douglass, Montreal, etc).

We need the snowmobile barn for our groomers, so supporting the Keweenaw Trails Services group is a very important move for winter.

Getting the Douglas Houghton Falls Wayside/Park project done if the DNR sees that through.

What's Our Point of Differentiation

Respondents were asked what makes the Keweenaw so special. Among their responses:

So much public land and the Lake Superior shoreline.

Trail systems.

Isolation! People want to 'get away.'

The outdoor experience is immediate.

More rugged terrain than most of the state; lots of unique history juxtaposed with a high-tech economy and university. The region feels undefined, unguided, and a bit wild. Alaska light...

Geology, Lake Superior, terrain, unique mosaic of natural habitats, native and migratory species, scenic beauty, wilderness ambiance.

No. 1 in snow in the Midwest.

Some of the best skiing, hiking, biking, snowmobile and ATV trails in Michigan, if not in the Midwest.

Two National Parks, scenery, Lake Superior.

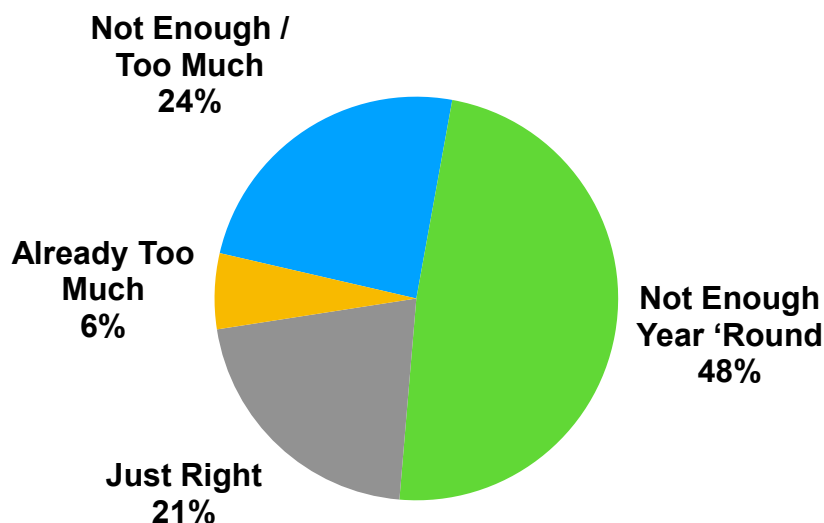
Peace, quiet beauty, a safe place with not too many people.

"The French Riviera of the UP," our food traditions, the mushrooms, the berries.

This isn't a place you accidentally visit, so most people here are doing so very intentionally. We can leverage that into the kind of desirable development we want.

Perception of Tourism Volume

Roughly half of respondents believe there is not enough tourism business year 'round. Roughly a quarter think there is too much in the summer and not enough in the winter.



How to Jump Start Winter / Spring

Respondents were asked for suggestions on how to increase off-season business. Among their responses:

First, attractions and businesses need to be convinced to stay open during those months.

More educational activities (maybe related to MTU). The UP Dark Sky Festival improved our occupancy. Hopefully it improved other establishments as well. Stargazing can be done in the slow months.

Focus on small unique things that can still be fun during these times and then package the existing lodging, dining, shop around it to make the trip trouble free.

Better lodging and restaurants. Less reliance on snowmobiling as a revenue stream and more cultural events to attract people. Lighthouses, history, attractions for mud-lovers (designated truck romping zones?).

Promote winter waterfall viewing, establish more winter festivals/community events.

History, geology, migratory birds.

Something like an "authentic" Christmas market. Focus on hunter-friendly activities.

Some kind of spring festival in a stadium? Or suite of hotel / restaurant activities? Concerts, special cuisine / food event?

Conventions and conferences.

More festivals, activities, and recreational events.

Nothing. We need time off as well. Shoulder seasons provide that.

Organizational Strengths

Respondents were asked to comment on Visit Keweenaw's strengths. Among their responses:

The vision of the executive director and board to promote the area and get people to come visit us. Brad is forward thinking, and understanding how to utilizing the wilderness aspect of the Keweenaw.

Promoting the Keweenaw to both potential visitors as well as local residents.

Social media, new branding. Enthusiasm.

The signage/pamphlets are looking good and seem to be getting attention.

Effective communication with/to the community. Regional collaborator.

Working with the local communities on messages.

They are wonderful to work with. They are organized and dedicated. They have a wealth of knowledge and connections.

Building bridges with local organizations to support the local community which is essential.

Great website and app.

Creating and promoting a unified vision for the area. Getting a lot of people / organizations pulling in the same direction instead of all going it alone. And getting groups together to inspire each other and help solve each others problems. It really does "take a village."

Thinking of and assisting the smallest businesses.

I have been really impressed with the data-driven decision-making and direction that it's taking.

Organizational Challenges

Likewise, respondents were asked to identify perceived organization challenges. Among their responses:

Educating everyone on what sustainable tourism is, and educating the residents how visitors provide a benefit rather than being a liability.

Lack of sufficient funding for the job at hand.

Short term rentals not paying their fair share and the number of communities you need to work with in a small area.

Many competing groups that could work better together to funnel our strengths.

Some resident backlash on its promotional efforts.

Balancing local needs and private property with inviting tourists.

An economy that struggles due to poor cell service, broadband and particularly in Keweenaw County infrastructure.

Often organizations / people / businesses are independent and resistant to change. It must be challenging for Visit Keweenaw to convince people to forge a new path.

The balance between prosperity and over crowding. There is still a relatively large contingent out there that harbors contempt for the visitor economy.

Providing equal attention to all locations within the area (north shore versus south shore).

The lack of understanding in the community what DMOs are, why they are important.

I'd Like Visit Keweenaw to...

Respondents were finally given an opportunity to make suggestions. Among their responses:

Continue doing what you are doing. This is great! You've really stepped up your game recently and we like the direction you're going. Keep it up!!

Invest in wayfinding projects as a primary focus.

Communicate the need to respect local residents, private property and private roads. Make very clear true public areas and access routes.

Continue to work with local stakeholders to build bridges and not divides regarding tourism and REALLY focus on tourism that is not extractive to the local community but supportive.

Include Baraga and Ontonagon more.

Keep investing in the infrastructure and support services that improve the visitor experience.

Organize a UP Renaissance Fair; support/invest in more local food events; plant a pollinator garden at their building in Calumet; start an internship program; sell VK swag at their building.

Definitely appreciate the videos you guys are doing to promote our community...keep that up!

You are on the right track. Make sure you get your information from those that know and have real responsibility.

Help organizations with social media would be great.

Feature information about the organization's true purpose.

Stay in touch, and let us know how we can help and partner with you.

Accept legal adult use cannabis businesses that are locally owned the same as places that legally serve alcohol.

Community Conversations

DMOproz' Bill Geist was in the Keweenaw in November 2023. We list here the several trains of thought he heard in his conversations with community and industry leaders:

On the subject of Tourism

Is a Benefit...

Serves as the basis to establish more amenities (restaurants, retail, enhanced recreation assets) that residents can use for higher quality of life in our communities. It also provides the recreation assets and amenities that help us retain and attract talent and startup technology companies.

Tourism supports our community financially but also it helps people to be aware of our community and therefore, perhaps be interested in supporting it in additional ways. The remoteness of our community can lend easily to isolationism, which although that is something we somewhat pride ourselves on, can actually inhibit our ability towards progress.

It's the life blood of our business.

Tourism is a major part of our economy. Our economy is what makes it livable here for many of us. Without tourism as one of the pillars of our economy, it would not be as strong and we'd only be livable for a small demographic.

My business relies almost exclusively on tourism.

We wouldn't be here without abundant outside money brought in by visitors from afar.

Is a Challenge...

Normal things are more expensive because businesses are selling to tourists who don't mind spending more.

The downside is that it can also lead to a rapid rise in property values that excludes local residents from purchasing a home or property in the area.

As more and more people come here, there is an effect on our Sheriff and other essential services that we provide for the County. Not good or bad, but the increases in tourism are noticeable and they do have an impact as more folks keep coming to our County.

Tourism is both...

It brings both bad actors and good stewards. We need to optimize, not maximize, visitors. Tourists may be donors and benefactors. They also wear down and sometimes destroy property and natural resources. Tourists get into problems they are not prepared for.

Synopsis of Conversations

HOUSING was the number one (and often pervasive) issue on everyone's minds. Believed to be the primary reason the region is struggling to keep pace with growth. That government is failing in its response to this crisis (though that is not the belief of government).

LACK OF COMMUNITY PRIDE was also often mentioned as a Pain Point. That it is endemic from years of being an extractive economy. But that we need to celebrate the many superlatives that are this destination. We need a shared community vision (and, as some asked, is that the responsibility of VK to lead that discussion?).

CHALLENGES:

Fear of becoming an over-tourism destination.

The belief that Visitors extract our resources without compensation.

Volunteerism is declining...and how to maintain the experience without them.

Visitors that do not respect our home or values.

The negative voices that scuttled the Veridia project.

REQUESTS:

More transparency on the VK Budget.

Increased awareness about VK (how we are funded, how we make decisions).

If there is consumer research being done, can it be shared?

More awareness requested regarding the Grant program and guidelines.

SUGGESTIONS:

Increased accessibility.

Curb Appeal & Aesthetics.

More Performance Venues / Third Spaces.

Change the Negative Perception of the Region.

Foster more collaboration across the region.

Educate visitors to be good stewards during their visit.

Standardized signage to direct visitors and inform them of areas that are private property.

Bring STRs in line with hotels regarding the Assessment.

For VK to be our liaison with the Cruise Industry.

Provide Step-on Guides for Group Tours.

Embrace our copper history (including the indigenous story before European occupation).

The Board to be better versed in community Master and Comprehensive Plans to be a better partner with local government.