

Destination 2028

DESTINATION STRATEGIC PLAN PRIORITY

3. Events



3. Events

Priority Focus

Adopt and implement an event management and creation process with set criteria to decide which events receive funding via public dollars

Any comprehensive tourism plan should include a proactive strategy for leveraging and growing events that are of the scale or popularity level to drive overnight visitors. Destination marketing organizations (DMO) and event organizers understand the potential value of such events because of the economic impact they can have on a destination. When managed well, such a proactive event strategy can catapult a strong destination into being a more sought-after one and can be a critical component of increasing overnight visitation or expanding tourism opportunities in a softer demand period for businesses and industry stakeholders.

While events of the above scale can generate significant impact to a community, they are often seen as one-offs and/or are met with a sense of distrust from the community that does not see the direct ROI from public funding or support for large-scale events. In addition, events of such a scale can also be a pain point for locals who are impacted by traffic or congestion and inconvenience.

Overarching Goal

Wake County has the potential to leverage existing events of this scale and to consider creating signature events for the destination that would extend its brand. The overarching goal for the Events priority is to adopt and implement an event management and creation process with set criteria to decide which events receive funding via public dollars. Not only will this event management and creation process provide the county with a standard mechanism to measure the impact of events that draw overnight visitors, it will also provide a transparent platform that educates stakeholders and the public at large on the value and reasoning behind public funding and destination partner support of viable events that drive overnight visitation.

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Current Event Landscape

JLL's research indicates that there are currently a limited number of events held in Wake County, excluding sporting events and conventions, that have been a significant draw for overnight visitors. Current countywide events understood to be tourism demand drivers include IBMA's World of Bluegrass week, Brewgaloo, Freedom Balloon Fest, Hopscotch Music Festival and the North Carolina State Fair. These events have all been built to achieve a level of scale that impacts the community through money spent by overnight visitors and the ROI from increased tax collection. During JLL's interviews and focus groups, stakeholders were clear that outside of the above events and other sporting events, only a few existing events in the county have demonstrated the potential to draw overnight visitors.

Importance and Components of an Event Strategy

While event organizers and destination partners in Wake County have a long history of working together to produce and support events of various sizes (as the above list reflects), no formal event strategy exists to guide whether and how Wake County can support events with the potential to drive sizeable overnight visitation. To fully leverage the potential of such events, Wake County needs an outlined events strategy and countywide process to align stakeholders and organizers around a common set of overnight visitor generation goals. An inherent part of this process will be articulating criteria by which potential events can be judged and the outcomes against which the potential impact of the event can be measured.

Events should be evaluated based on an agreed upon matrix of relevant criteria that measure the economic impact of the event on the community. Below is a sample matrix that could serve as the baseline for ongoing event support in Wake County. In addition to guiding decisions on funding and support for the event, the matrix also communicates to event organizers the county’s criteria and priorities and allows them to structure their events accordingly. The matrix can also be applied to sporting event development.

Components	Fail	Poor	Average	Above Average	Excellent	Total Points Awarded
Point Allocation Maximum = 5 points per component*	1	2	3	4	5	
Program Components						
1. Tourism Promotion impact						0
2. Benefit to the Destination						0
3. Innovation						0
4. Evidence of Partnership						0
5. Organizational Structure & Management Capability						0
6. Economic Impact						0
7. Quality of Research						0
8. Suitable Target Market						0
9. Comprehensive Marketing Approach						0
10. Previous Replacement Funding						0
11. Evaluation/Measurement Plan						0
12. Room-nights* (10 points)						0
13. Scale of Project						0
14. Application Quality						0
Total Maximum possible points = 75						0

Definitions for the above criteria are included in Appendix A.

Signature Event

Beyond supporting existing events and growing them to a scale that drives overnight visitation, Wake County should consider creating signature events that will eventually both drive overnight stays and also extend the destination brand. The development of a signature event, or events that are centered on an authentic Wake County brand experience, requires investment, time for growth and additional resource support. However, once a signature event is groomed and catches on with the community, it can be an incredible tool beyond the economic impact it generates by communicating a destination’s values and/or personality and furthering a destination’s message.

Example of signature events include South by Southwest in Austin, Texas, Art Basel in Miami Beach, Fla., or WaterFire in Providence, R.I.; these events all have significant impact on the destination. They generate ROI from

spending in the local economy, deliver thousands of overnight visitors into the destination and create a stronger brand platform for the destination.

During focus groups and interviews, many stakeholders mentioned the same set of existing events with the potential to become Wake County’s signature event; however, there was no definitive consensus on the one or two events that currently accomplish the dual goal of generating substantial overnight visitation and extending the destination brand through an authentic Wake County experience.

Event Management Process and Funding

Whether leveraging existing events or creating signature ones, another key component of any event strategy is to bring together the appropriate and needed partners into a common event management process to nurture the growth of the event. Partners include the event organizer (potential fund recipient), as well as the funder (interlocal committee) and other destination partners. While the county’s interlocal committee ensures the recommended criteria are adopted and enforced, the event organizer and destination partners should work to educate stakeholders and the broader community on the benefit to the destination of hosting the event. This is accomplished via stakeholder education, as well as measuring and reporting the positive impact of the event on the destination. Lastly, a strong event management process appoints a single entity as the keeper of the community calendar.

Elements of an Event Management Process

- Funding
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Measurement and Reporting
- Calendar Coordination
- Site Coordination

Event Funding

Currently, Wake County does not maintain a funding source or line item to support events. Some of the municipalities within which the events are held often provide financial support or sponsorship. Because it takes time and initial funding support to nurture and grow an event to the scale at which it drives overnight visitation or evolves into a signature event that ultimately serves to brand the destination, successful event strategies contain an element of financial support from the destination. In building such a funding mechanism, decisions to help fund events should be based on strict criteria (as noted in the matrix above) that measure the event’s potential to generate substantial overnight visitation. Whether to support existing events that draw substantial overnight visitation or to augment efforts to launch a signature event, JLL recommends that the elected bodies in the county consider establishing such a funding mechanism using the current interlocal model.

By laying out criteria for receiving support and setting goals for overnight visitation, Wake County will have a transparent platform through which event organizers can apply for and potentially receive funds to support events that currently or in the future produce substantial overnight visitation. Since the current interlocal funding program is built on hotel occupancy and prepared food and beverage taxes (i.e., metrics that measure overnight visitor economic impact), the priorities for the events' funds disbursement model would align well with the existing interlocal funding program.

Stakeholder Education

Another key component of an event management process is educating stakeholders, potential applicants and the broader community that may be impacted about the process and criteria. The biggest challenge with such an education process is the initial change to the existing system of municipal and partners support for events. The County and the destination partners will need to work with event organizers to understand the criteria and how support for their event will be measured against them. The socializing of the new model could be shared through workshops held prior to the opening of the funding cycle and providing adequate time for questions and clarifications on submitting applications with these new criteria.

Additionally, the stakeholder education process provides a transparent mechanism to ensure the new criteria are understood and that applicants provide the metrics and event information required. Because the criteria used to evaluate potential support for an event are made public, the broader community can better understand how and to what extent the event delivers from an ROI perspective. This understanding will answer questions or concerns as to how and why funds are distributed to one event and not others. The process of deciding funding against set criteria ultimately removes politics and positions the process as objectively as possible.

Measurement and Reporting

Another critical component of an event management process is the ability to measure success and a standardized way to report results to stakeholders. Many event management processes lack this component entirely, or they miss an opportunity to report on key outcomes of the event to stakeholders that show the ROI of supporting events. The lack of communication can cause a lack of trust and uncertainty that the public funds are delivering the expected outcomes.

Without a measurement and reporting function within the event management processes, the destination misses an opportunity to report on key outcomes of the event to stakeholders and show the ROI of supporting those events.

If the funding trigger for the event management process is placed within the interlocal structure, Wake County can require event fund recipients to report specific metrics. The standardized criteria for prioritizing funding, coupled with the standardized reporting process will ensure transparency in the event management process. GRCVB can support these efforts by helping to streamline the calculation of

event impacts. As the official DMO for the county, GRCVB has access to industry tools, i.e., an Event Impact Calculator, that can help measure the impact of events. The Event Impact Calculator was developed for Destinations International, the industry association that represents hundreds of DMOs worldwide, including GRCVB. The Calculator has three modules: Meetings, Sports and Festivals and Cultural Events. When adopting an event management process, the County should require applicants to calculate all event projections and subsequent reporting in conjunction with GRCVB. This will standardize the reporting so that each applicant is using the same formulas and metrics when calculating the event's impact.

“The Event Impact Calculator has empowered destination organizations and CVBs to

quantify this value and, by extension, the case for the ongoing development of the meetings and events sector.”

- Don Welsh, President & CEO, Destinations International

The Event Impact Calculator is a highly valuable tool that produces output in terms of visitor spending and tax collection. The output should be reported out to stakeholders. Moreover, utilizing this tool through GRCVB ensures that all events are measured the same way. This prevents an organizer from including impacts that could be interpreted as being inflated or from failing to include impact that is customarily included in such calculations. Because the County does not have a uniform method to screen or double-check those projections, it must trust that the organizer has calculated the event's impact correctly. By utilizing GRCVB as a partner in event measurement and reporting, there will be standardization countywide and clear accountability for the impact calculations.

Calendar Coordination

Once the funding criteria are put into place, the next step to a successful event management process is promotion and marketing of the event. Much of this is the responsibility of the event organizer. However, the ability to share the breadth of visitor-facing activities occurring in a destination can be a strong selling point to travelers. All destinations struggle with the task of collecting information on the valuable events occurring and other programming within the community and sharing that information with visitors. Moreover, many destinations have three or more calendars, compiled by different entities that claim to be comprehensive, but that are merely duplicative efforts competing for air and facetime with potential visitors.

The ability to streamline the calendar coordination of the various events occurring in a destination is another element of a successful event management process. Given that no one comprehensive calendar exists for Wake County, there is an opportunity for GRCVB to be *the source* for all visitor-facing events in the county. Destination stakeholders understand the value in a singular source, and GRCVB staff recognizes value and is interested in serving this role. The ability to credibly produce a comprehensive inventory for visitor-facing events (or events with the potential to be so) across the county would add value to the visitor experience. It would also be a valuable service for the event organizers. The exposure received through being connected to the GRCVB platform would also add value to smaller venues and those with stretched marketing budgets.

In taking on this role of creating a comprehensive calendar platform, GRCVB should further explore and implement technology platforms and options that will enable staff to calendar events in the county (see page 139 for more detail). Despite advances in applications to automate such coordination, the most important part of any platform is the human resource that will need to be dedicated to this effort. Coordinating a comprehensive calendar will require human capital to continuously work with small- and large-event organizers to gather information and even input data into the system. The resulting platform will need to be integrated with the calendar functions of the 12 municipalities and have the ability to plug into other partners' websites and the option for visitors to sort events by type. Communication with independent organizers, as well as towns and venues hosting the events will be a critical component of a comprehensive calendar platform.

Creating a comprehensive calendar platform can be challenging and time-consuming, but its result is a valuable marketing and community building tool that is worth the effort. As this is a complex, multistep process, implementation may take three to five years to be fully maximized.

Site Coordination

In addition to creating and managing a comprehensive calendar platform, there is also a need for coordination among the various event partners in the lead-up to and execution of events. This is especially true in downtown Raleigh, where residents and business owners have expressed concerns related to traffic, congestion from closed streets and other impacts that may negatively affect business owners. With over 200 special events in downtown Raleigh annually, the City of Raleigh and the applicable destination partners will need to begin to be more selective about which events are granted permits. With the event matrix as a guide, the City of Raleigh and any municipality facing similar negative event impacts or resident concerns can better determine which events impact the community the most positively and select accordingly.

The City of Raleigh could and should be more proactive in its investments within the public realm. Many criticisms aimed at downtown events came from stakeholders who were concerned about the same streets being closed or blocked and events being held in the same areas that had been recently beautified or developed. It became evident that there are other areas of downtown or Raleigh's midtown where events could be placed; however, the surrounding area was not an ideal fit because of aesthetics. This could be due to vacant lots or lack of landscaping,

etc. Where the City could add value is investing in short-term solutions to “clean up” and prepare sites to be better hosts. This may solve the problem of events effecting the same areas consistently. The City of Raleigh, in conjunction with GRCVB and the Downtown Raleigh Alliance, should work to identify these sites and determine what investments are needed (be they landscaping and hardscaping or other beautification needs) to enhance the visitor and event attendee experience.

Lastly, the respective municipal and County event liaisons should meet on a regular basis to review the success and further development of the DSP event strategy. The group should establish goals for growing the type and number of events that will generate incremental overnight stays in Wake County.

Takeaways

Events are a critical component of a balanced tourism plan and the ability to develop an approach, including all municipalities and the County, to identify events with the highest ROI through the criteria included in the matrix will support events countywide in the future. This will support the goal to increase the number of events that generate overnight visitation. This will also include the development of new “signature” events over the next several years akin to the scale and brand recognition of South by Southwest in Austin or Firewater in Providence. These signature events will have a significant impact on both visitation and raising awareness of Wake County as a whole.