



# Hamilton County Tourism Business Plan 2026

*Positively impacting Hamilton County through Tourism.*

## **Tourism Pulse 2026: Tracking the Heartbeat of Our Tourism Economy through Intelligence and Partnerships**

Tourism is central to Hamilton County's vitality. It creates jobs, strengthens local businesses, enriches cultural identity, inspires vibrancy, and enhances quality of life for residents. Yet, like a heartbeat, it requires constant monitoring and intentional care especially in a high-stakes, hyper-accelerated world.

We are living in a time of sweeping transformation, where technological disruption, shifting demographics, financial forces, cultural realignment, and environmental pressures are reshaping the global order at a pace and scale humanity has rarely seen. Sometimes it feels like we are caught in a whirlwind—chaotic, unpredictable, and yet full of energy that can be channeled into new directions if we keep our finger on the pulse of change.

With *Tourism Pulse 2026*, we are structuring the annual business plan around a singular vision: to track, strengthen, and support the tourism landscape through **Data-Driven Decisions** and **Collaborative Partnerships**. Our people and our business intelligence are more important than ever. For Hamilton County Tourism, it will be a year of keeping what works best, revising what can be improved, investing for future success, and inviting others to learn with us along the way.

## **State of Tourism in Hamilton County is Optimistic**

While much of the national economic indicators are unpredictable—job growth is the weakest since the pandemic, people are leaving the labor market, consumer spending is dipping toward recession levels—there is still good news coming out of the travel industry.

Airlines, having weathered a very tough first half of the year, are optimistic. Group meetings are booking out into the future. Leisure transient hotel bookings, especially premium and luxury segments, continue to outperform. The national outlook, especially for the high-income traveler who has enjoyed strong gains to household balance sheets, is promising.

Locally, growth remains in hotel room supply with a 20% increase over three years. We are building at a rapid rate, and demand will work hard to keep up which will temper YOY gains. We're tracking an additional 400 hotel rooms over several properties. Rate is surging along with short-term rental demand to keep RevPar positive. Air travel into Indianapolis International fully recovered to 2019 levels this year in 2025, and Hamilton County's share of fly-in is increasing.

State property tax reform has created financial challenges for our communities by reducing their primary revenue source and creating pressure to offset losses. Cities may need tourism and event insights to inform decisions. Hamilton County Tourism has long supported research and intelligence and will look to share more widely in 2026

In summary, despite changes or challenges, the economic outlook for Hamilton County's tourism industry appears resilient and has recovered almost entirely. HCT operations are stable with a healthy reserve. Staff work satisfaction remains high. Relationships with community and customers are solid. It is a good time to assess our core business strategies in Q1-2 next year to set a good foundation for a new long-range strategic plan.

## Strategic Objectives

- I. **Data & Intelligence**—*We invest in a wide variety of data, research, and predictive analyses to formulate our business decisions. We have an opportunity to create a more robust program by increasing the reach and frequency of business intelligence communications and fine tune our performance indicators. In 2026, we will find ways to regularly share state-of-tourism reports and information to empower others.*
  - A. Expand our tourism intelligence program by investing in talent, research, and platforms that give leadership, businesses, and policymakers actionable insights.
    - **NEW:** Hire a data analyst to return to pre-pandemic staffing in this area to manage a more robust, proactive tourism intelligence program.
    - Support market-driven master plans for better placemaking and visioning around tourism product.
    - Communicate market trends and insights regularly to grow an informed local audience.
  - B. Share information broadly to foster transparency and empower decision-making at every level.
    - **NEW:** Synthesize 2025's strategic planning sessions into actionable programs and communications that will guide our future.
    - **NEW:** Develop regular tourism and visitor insight reports made available not only to board leadership but also to business and government officials.
    - **NEW:** Partner with Invest Hamilton County to create a series of learning opportunities for hospitality businesses that match data insights with real world feedback to localize big data for small business.
    - Scale and brand our popular national speaker program to focus on timely and trending topics.
  
- II. **Marketing & Design Transformation**—*Our HCT Vision 2025 called for a greater emphasis on digital marketing solutions and high design standards which got us where we are now—an award-winning DMO with strong advertising conversions. The tech landscape is making incredible shifts, and our decade-old solutions will not get us where we need to go over the next 10 years. Strategic partnerships, better digital products, and authentic experiences and storytelling will be our guide.*
  - A. Overhaul our tech stack and digital marketing strategies to stay competitive in a rapidly changing landscape.
    - Review HCT's entire digital marketing strategy to best align with new AI practices and targeted demographics.
  - B. **NEW:** Execute a comprehensive design overhaul to ensure that all communications are clear, accessible, and compelling.
    - Revisit HCT's dual name system (Hamilton County Tourism and Visit Hamilton County) to understand how well it is working.
    - Review groups sales materials to be more in line with what clients want.
  - C. **NEW:** Explore a marketing co-op program grant program for cities and attractions.
  - D. Grow visitation through immersive and layered marketing campaigns.
    - Review national PR agency's retainer to leverage their talent and innovative spirit.
    - Deliver updated ad creative for 2026.
    - Build winter visitation to fill in gaps.
  
- III. **Business Development & Partnership**—*A hallmark of HCT's core business is our ability to foster authentic relationships that lead to positive impact through tourism. We have opportunities to engage with leaders from many sectors. We will Advocate, Relate, Communicate, and Educate to advance tourism initiatives that arise from a newly minted strategic plan.*
  - A. Grow partner benefits and relationships through stronger stakeholder engagement programs that build trust and deliver tangible value.
    - Build relevant HCSA engagement events and activities designed to strengthen relationships and leverage corporate partnerships.

- Evaluate HCT’s partnership program to provide meaningful benefits.
  - Collaborate with our large attractions in ways that foster growth and support positive tourism experiences.
  - Build avenues of communication with stakeholders at the highest level to advocate for tourism initiatives.
  - **NEW:** Seek out alignment with other countywide organizations such as Invest HC and HCCF to boost positive impact on community initiatives that have a direct correlation to tourism using our Community Capitals assessment as a guide.
  - **NEW:** Support regional efforts for national business and awareness by leveraging collaborative events with Visit Indy and Indiana Sports Corp such as ASAE, Trails Positioning, other.
- B. Develop and incentivize meeting, group, and sports events for maximum hospitality impact using predictive impact software.
- C. **NEW:** Host new national and international sporting events that raise Hamilton County’s position as a premier sports tourism destination such as through Horizon League, Big 10, Flag Football, LIV, World Fitness, or other

IV. **Experience & Sustainability**—*Hamilton County should feel welcoming, inspiring, and beautiful to everyone—resident or visitor. It is a key brand position for economic vitality, one that is important to city and county leadership, and one that is a priority with younger and future travelers. To deliver on that we will invest in products and programs that are in alignment with our communities and evolve through a product development cycle—ideation, research, planning, design, testing and launch—always focused on creating the best possible experience and return on investment.*

- A. Operationalize two Corporate Social Responsibility pilot programs (ADA Accessibility Audit and Environmental Sustainability Audit) to expand these programs and incentivize immediate action.
- B. Expand environmental sustainability initiatives among tourism partners to positively impact our community and build new audiences.
- **NEW:** Investigate tree canopy mapping and native species adoption to educate and advocate for a healthy and beautiful environment for outdoor recreation audiences.
  - Continue the PUP vinyl banner recycle program and inventory additional promotional supplies to eliminate waste.
- C. **BEST PLAN** and **NEW:** Make capital investments in the *HamCo Hubway* trail system’s user experience with a plan for iconic art installations, and seek to position it nationally as one of the best trail systems in the U.S.
- D. **BEST PLAN:** Invest in ways to support music culture and the creative economy by amplifying Hamilton County’s unique sense of place.
- E. Support cultural assets that foster local pride, authenticity, and visitor appeal seeking to uncover new tourism assets that have the capacity to attract a visiting public.
- F. **NEW:** Support primary research and reporting for priority developments such as Hotel Pipeline and Market Forecast, Conference and Event Center Plan, Grand Park Customer Sentiment, and other research needs identified in the long-range strategic plan.

V. **Organizational Strength**

*Robust operations are essential for underpinning business initiatives, ensuring the delivery of outcomes and allowing for effective adaptation to shifting priorities. By investing in robust systems, efficient processes, and ongoing staff development, we ensure our organization is equipped to respond to industry trends and community needs.*

- A. Review and invest in support systems that will allow operations to adapt to a growing organization.
- Review HCT accounting software products to streamline and create efficiencies.
  - **NEW:** Invest in a performance management platform to enable continuous feedback and strengthen a culture of transparency and engagement.
  - Expand staff usage of AI large language models and capabilities for greater insights and efficiencies.
  - **NEW:** Assess the back office demands and fiduciary support needed to maintain a growing Invest Hamilton County and HC Sports Authority.

Through these priorities, Tourism Pulse 2026 ensures that Hamilton County not only listens to the heartbeat of tourism but also strengthens it. This framework enables us to adapt in real time, expand our impact, and deliver a quality product and service for residents, visitors, and partners.