

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY TOURISM

2020-2024 STRATEGIC PLAN



TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY
TOURISM

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

In October 2018, Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority (TCT) commenced work on a destination strategic plan that will guide the work of TCT for the next five years (FY2020-2024) and potentially influence the development of the destination well beyond that period. This plan is intended to be comprehensive for all of Transylvania County and influence how it is marketed, preserved, and enhanced as a destination for the betterment of its residents and visitors alike.

Destination consultant Magellan Strategy Group was hired to facilitate the planning process. Two half-day stakeholder input sessions were held to gather feedback on the current state of the visitor economy in the county. Additionally, Magellan Strategy conducted separate individual interviews with TCT board members and other tourism stakeholders to inform the process. Magellan Strategy also performed a review of TCT's staffing, budgets, grant policies and processes, marketing plans, the new destination brand, and Transylvania County occupancy tax collections and lodging market performance.

Several consistent themes emerged throughout the planning process, and some of those were also supported by observations of the consultant based upon experience in other destinations. These themes include the following eleven key points:



SITUATION ANALYSIS

THE COUNTY'S LOCATION AS A "GATEWAY COMMUNITY" FOR MAJOR RECREATIONAL AREAS AND ATTRACTIONS (PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST, BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY, GORGES STATE PARK, AND DUPONT STATE RECREATIONAL FOREST) PRESENTS BOTH CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.

Transylvania County is blessed with extraordinary scenic beauty and unusually abundant outdoor recreation opportunities. Much of the land within the county is owned and managed by state and federal government entities, which means it is preserved for future generations of residents and visitors. However, those assets are increasingly under pressure from the demands of thousands of visitors who live outside the county and who require parking, restrooms, rangers, and sometimes rescue from emergency responders. They are exposed to some of the very best of the southern Appalachians, however, making them a highly attractive potential audience of repeat visitors and word-of-mouth ambassadors.

WHILE GAINS HAVE BEEN MADE, TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY IS STILL A HIGHLY SEASONAL DESTINATION.

Like much of western North Carolina, the county is slowly evolving into a four-season destination, driven by an expanding base of population in key feeder markets and the growth in audiences such as retiring Baby Boomers who can and will travel year-round. TCT has also acted to stimulate travel in shoulder and off seasons with initiatives targeting Canadians and others who are more likely to travel at those times. Despite that growth, visitation to the county in shoulder and off-seasons still lags substantially behind the summer and October periods.

THERE IS INTEREST IN LEVERAGING TCT DOLLARS TO STIMULATE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, ESPECIALLY DESTINATION PLACEMAKING AND PLACEKEEPING.

County stakeholders have a great deal of interest in encouraging new tourism product development to increase visitor satisfaction, grow visitation, and encourage longer length of stay and increased spending. Stakeholders recognize that TCT can't do this by itself—the entity lacks the resources to take on transformation capital projects alone and won't own or develop assets. Product development and enhancement of assets will require working closely with other organizations.

AS TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY GROWS IN POPULARITY AS A DESTINATION, PRESERVATION OF ITS SCENIC OUTDOOR ASSETS AND “SMALL TOWN” APPEAL WILL BE ESSENTIAL.

Much of the interest of stakeholders in the enhancement of Transylvania County's assets is focused on the preservation and sensible expansion of outdoor recreation opportunities. This interest also extends to enhancing the destination assets that exist elsewhere in the county as potential drivers of visitation while protecting the attributes that make it special.

THE DAYTRIPPER MARKET APPEARS TO BE SIGNIFICANT, BUT THE COUNTY DOESN'T REALIZE FULL VALUE FROM IT.

The county's location in proximity to larger destinations such as Asheville and Hendersonville and metropolitan areas like Greenville also means that it is a literal backyard playground for visitors and residents who may not generate much economic return for the county. Indeed, some daytrippers to popular outdoor recreation spots like Sliding Rock may never spend any money in the county or pass through commercial hubs like downtown Brevard. Those visitors also place significant demands upon outdoor assets, which are already underfunded in the state and federal budget and outside the direct control of the county.

THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER IS AN UNDERUTILIZED ASSET.

The French Broad rises in western Transylvania County and cuts through the middle of the county, but there are few ways of accessing the river for water recreation or even just being able to walk, hike, or bike along it. The same river is a major destination and recreational asset for nearby Buncombe and Madison counties, but the development of related and complementary infrastructure along it has lagged in Transylvania County.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MEETING AND EVENT VENUE REMAINS A VISION OF MANY STAKEHOLDERS.

The idea of this facility is a popular option for tourism product development among some stakeholders, who view a centrally-located facility as a partial solution to filling hotel rooms in off- and shoulder seasons, supporting business development in Brevard, and expanding the inventory of traditional lodging in the county. Its feasibility, size, function, and location has yet to be determined, however.

GREATER COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE ENTITIES IS NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE MANY OF THE ASPIRATIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS.

With so many stakeholders focused on product development, placemaking, and placekeeping as important to the future of tourism in Transylvania County, the need to collaborate with other entities which can actually execute and support these ambitions is of critical importance.

THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION “GATEWAY” PROJECT AT PISGAH FOREST REPRESENTS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A TRANSFORMATIONAL ENTRANCE INTO THE DESTINATION.

It’s unusual for a destination of Transylvania County’s size (in both population and geography) to have so many visitors make their way through a single intersection that potentially sets the tone for much of the visit experience to come as well as the one they just completed. The intersection of U.S. highways 64 and 276 and NC 280 at the Pisgah National Forest “gateway” is one of those rare opportunities to create a lasting and welcoming impression for thousands of visitors. The NCDOT’s plans for that intersection will shape that impression—and Transylvania County’s brand—for years to come.

TCT’S DESTINATION MARKETING IS STRONG AND THE NEW DESTINATION BRAND BUILDS UPON THAT STRENGTH.

Stakeholders were generally very positive about what the TCT has been able to achieve with its destination marketing and expressed strong support for the recently launched new destination brand. Opportunity still exists, however, for the county’s destination marketing to drive additional shoulder and off season visitation and to help distribute visitor to less visited parts of the destination.

CAPACITY AND AVAILABLE RESOURCES LIMIT WHAT TCT CAN AND SHOULD DO.

The needs and wants outlined by stakeholders are many, and the county has the ambitions of a growing, emerging destination that is just beginning to realize its massive potential. But TCT is currently staffed by only two people. While its financial resources have been growing, it still has fewer marketing and tourism-related dollars to invest than its neighboring counties. It must make informed and intentional choices among the many options available to it for spending those funds.

TCT STRATEGIC PLAN PARAMETERS

In the plan that follows, TCT destination strategies and related action steps are segmented into one of three areas of direction:





IMPLEMENTATION & FOLLOW THROUGH

This plan is ambitious, but very action-oriented and achievable. It is also aspirational and communicates what we value as stakeholders and residents of Transylvania County. While TCT was started primarily as a destination marketing organization, this plan represents the continuing evolution of the organization as a destination management entity, responsible for collaborating with others to improve the visit experience and create new economic opportunities for residents. There are numerous non-marketing initiatives contained within the plan, focused on destination product development and reflective of the need to preserve and protect the uniqueness of Transylvania County and the destination TCT is legally mandated to market.

For this plan to be executed successfully, there must be both significant board engagement and collaboration with other community stakeholders. The plan implementation will fail if it is the responsibility of TCT staff alone. For that reason, there will be a regular check-in on the plan's action items, with a more thorough review of the plan each year. With an accompanying increase in plan-related activity, the TCT board will need to be less focused on tactical elements and more focused on making sure the plan is being executed as intended, with the flexibility to leverage new opportunities as needed.

TCT STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

Grow the visitor economy by promoting Transylvania County as a preferred overnight destination that seamlessly integrates outdoor recreation, scenic beauty, and small-town charm, and help protect and enhance the assets that fulfill that promise.

TCT STRATEGIC FOCAL POINTS

There are seven core areas around which this strategic plan is organized:

1. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AS PLACEMAKING AND PLACEKEEPING

2. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AS VISITATION DRIVERS

3. DESTINATION MARKETING AND VISITOR SERVICES

4. INTERNAL MARKETING

5. POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

6. ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

7. RESEARCH AND INSIGHT

STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT ONE:

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AS PLACEMAKING AND PLACEKEEPING

ISSUE: GATEWAY COMMUNITY STATUS

STRATEGY:

Acknowledge Transylvania County's unique destination location (and the related advantages and disadvantages) and develop a strategic focus that both leverages and mitigates that location.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate, Collaborate, and Advocate:

Look at like communities with similar challenges and opportunities and identify their best practices for destination management and marketing. Examples could include Moab (UT), Bar Harbor (ME), Gardiner (MT), Jackson (WY), West Yellowstone (MT), Estes Park (CO), St. George (UT), Gettysburg (PA), Front Royal (VA), Port Angeles (WA), and Banff (AB). Begin with a review of the National Park Service Connecting Parks with Gateway Communities study (2012) and then seek out opportunities for intercity visits to and speakers from other communities. *Timing:* Commence by FY2022 and ongoing thereafter.

Activate:

- Use market research data as an opportunity to segment visitors and better understand how they visit the area. *Timing:* Already initiated in FY2019.
- Determine whether the opportunity exists to convert daytrippers to overnight visitors and identify metrics for measuring conversion. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Adjust destination marketing and product development as appropriate. *Timing:* Ongoing.

**ISSUE: PISGAH
FOREST GATEWAY
PROJECT**

STRATEGY:

Leverage the reconstruction of the Pisgah Forest gateway intersection as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to use a NCDOT investment for the betterment of the destination.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate, Collaborate, and Advocate:

- Bring the city of Brevard, Transylvania County, and U.S. Forest Service together to engage immediately with the NCDOT to identify opportunities to influence design to enhance both the visitor experience and destination marketing. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing until project completion.
- Invest in and advocate for placemaking elements as TCT is able and as the project allows. *Timing:* FY2021.
- Incorporate gateway redevelopment into NC 280 Corridor project planning and implementation. *Timing:* Ongoing until project completion.

**ISSUE:
ENHANCEMENT
OF DOWNTOWN
BREVARD**

STRATEGY:

Downtown Brevard is a significant driver of the destination experience and the visitor economy, especially visitor satisfaction and spending. Seek out opportunities for engagement but recognize that TCT's role may be limited in what it can do on its own.

ACTION ITEMS:

Advocate:

Monitor architectural code development and enforcement, infill development, master plan execution, parking improvements to facilitate bike lanes, and policies and infrastructure that affect food and beverage experiences. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

Activate and Collaborate:

- Support the implementation of additional wayfinding signage and banners through collaboration with other civic entities. *Timing:* FY2020 and ongoing.
- Assist as resources allow in financial investment in meaningful and intentional placemaking that drives increased visitor spending and satisfaction. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

ISSUE: DESTINATION SUSTAINABILITY

STRATEGY:

Build upon the existing work of TCT to lead collaborative efforts to protect and preserve the destination.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate, Collaborate, and Advocate:

Continue to execute sustainability initiatives that protect and enhance the county's natural and cultural assets, including communications efforts. *Timing:* Ongoing.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT TWO: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AS A VISITATION DRIVER

ISSUE: PRESERVATION, PROTECTION, AND EXPANSION OF RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

STRATEGY: Preserve, protect, and sensibly expand Transylvania County's scenic assets and outdoor recreational opportunities which are at the heart of the destination's appeal.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

- Maintain a destination brand focus through marketing based upon scenic assets and outdoor recreation as a driver of visitation. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Use destination marketing to increase awareness of and visitation to assets in other parts of the county to enhance economic impact and create more even distribution of visitor traffic.

Timing: Initiate in FY2022 and then ongoing.

Collaborate and Advocate:

- Partner with other entities to perform a study of the potential improvements needed to make the French Broad River a greater asset to tourism and invest as able in implementation. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2021 and then ongoing.
- Identify new opportunities for expansion of outdoor recreation assets that will drive overnight visitation and protect the experience. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2023 and then ongoing.
- Work with the US Forest Service, the North Carolina Department of Forestry, and the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation to identify opportunities for enhancement of Pisgah National Forest, DuPont State Forest, and Gorges State Park visitor amenities and protection of scenic assets. Headwaters State Forest is not included due to lack of visitor infrastructure and current management plans. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2021 and then ongoing.

ISSUE: MEETING AND EVENT VENUE

STRATEGY:

Some tourism stakeholders have an interest in a centrally-located meeting and event venue for the county, but the role of TCT in such a venture is uncertain and limited by available resources and inherent market challenges. TCT will monitor the market need and determine an appropriate role in future development.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate and Collaborate:

Monitor and determine TCT role as need arises. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

ISSUE: ARTS AND CULTURE

STRATEGY:

Transylvania County has some significant arts and culture drivers of the destination experience, namely Brevard Music Center and handmade arts. They are somewhat limited as year-round destination drivers by their seasonality or a lack of competitive distinctiveness in terms of their contribution to the visitor economy. TCT will look for opportunities to leverage existing assets to drive overnight visitation while also seeking out opportunities to enhance their impact.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

Continue marketing Transylvania County arts and culture assets as destination satisfiers and occasional drivers, and target appropriately. *Timing:* Ongoing.

Collaborate and Advocate:

Partner with related local and regional arts and culture entities to invest in opportunities for exposure, differentiation, placemaking, and impact. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2021 and then ongoing.

Activate, Collaborate, and Advocate:

Seek out opportunities to increase length of stay and spending through the development of new arts and culture events. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

ISSUE: CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

STRATEGY:

Cycling tourism is an important part of the Transylvania County visitor mix but is threatened by a lack of infrastructure investment that could derail the brand promise. TCT will look for opportunities to collaborate with local partners to invest in and advocate for cycling infrastructure improvements.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

Maintain destination marketing to this segment to drive visitation and destination brand equity.

Timing: Ongoing.

Activate, Collaborate, and Advocate:

Work with local partners to identify incremental enhancements of the Transylvania cycling experience and invest as able to support their implementation. *Timing:* Initiate in FY2022 and then ongoing.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT THREE: DESTINATION MARKETING AND VISITOR SERVICES

ISSUE: BUILD UPON EXISTING MARKETING STRENGTHS

STRATEGY:

Remain, first and foremost, a premier destination marketing organization even as TCT expands its destination management role.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

- Identify potential new niche audiences to fill in demand during non-peak periods and diversify the market. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Invest more in off- and shoulder season media to drive demand, using “evergreen” brand messaging. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Increase visitor spending and length of stay, among camp-related visitors and other segments already in the destination, through targeted media and promotional initiatives. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Use destination marketing to drive visitor distribution across the county by showcasing less visited areas. *Timing:* Ongoing.

ISSUE: SERVICES TO VISITORS

STRATEGY:

Provide personalized hospitality and accurate destination information to enhance the Transylvania County visit experience, drive spending, and grow destination satisfaction.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

Continue to use the Brevard/Transylvania County Visitor Center as the primary vehicle for visitor services. Review and evolve as necessary, continuing to look at new sites for kiosks and the potential for a mobile visitor center. *Timing:* Ongoing.

**ISSUE: SUPPORT
LOCAL TOURISM
PARTNERS**

STRATEGY:

Create cost-effective means of working with local partners and reaching target audiences.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate and Collaborate:

- Continue to provide opportunities for local tourism partners to participate in co-op marketing with TCT. *Timing:* Ongoing.
- Expand partner outreach and engagement, building upon TCT activities such as the Camp and Major Event Calendar, the Adventure Guide brochure, the monthly Get Out Guide, sweepstakes, public relations initiatives, and the tourism grant program. *Timing:* Ongoing.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT FOUR: INTERNAL MARKETING

ISSUE: LOCAL SUPPORT FOR THE VISITOR ECONOMY

STRATEGY:

Build support for the Transylvania County visitor economy by expanding awareness of the work of TCT and its tourism partners.

ACTION ITEMS:

Collaborate: Work with other visitor economy influencers to achieve enhancements to both the destination experience and the community's quality of life, and promote those initiatives.

Timing: Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

Advocate: Influence non-TCT policy decisions that directly impact the destination experience.

Timing: Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.

Activate Implement communications initiatives that generate local support for tourism and its stakeholders. **Timing:** Initiate in FY2020 and then ongoing.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT FIVE: POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

ISSUE: TCT POLICIES AND PROCESSES NEED TO MEET NEW DEMANDS

STRATEGY:

Review and evolve policies and processes as Transylvania County continues to evolve as a destination, with both new opportunities and challenges.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

- Continue to execute the TCT grant program and identify and implement improvements to the process and policies that would better enable it to invest in destination enhancement initiatives, and then clarify for partners. *Timing:* Commence a review process in FY2020 and then implement as needed thereafter.
- Determine whether to pursue an occupancy tax revenue recovery initiative among non-Airbnb short-term rentals by assessing the potential magnitude of the issue. *Timing:* Commence a review process in FY2021 and then implement as needed thereafter.
- Determine what TCT's policy is regarding support for short-term rentals in the county and whether TCT should be involved in developing rules and regulations. *Timing:* Commence a review process in FY2021 and then implement as needed thereafter.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT SIX: ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

ISSUE: EXPANSION OF TCT'S COMPETITIVE RESOURCES

STRATEGY:

The size and importance of the Transylvania County visitor economy now requires more resources to be competitive with other destinations, and TCT will invest in the necessary supporting resources.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

- Add an additional TCT staff person as a marketing resource, enabling current staff to better focus upon collaboration and advocacy and management of TCT's financial investments. Consider adding a group sales representative only when the destination infrastructure allows for a competitive position in the marketplace. *Timing:* Add new position in FY2020.
- Utilize TCT's fund balance to address destination product development initiatives and support potential "transformational" projects. *Timing:* Commence a review process of potential investments in FY2020.
- Grow future available financial resources by increasing the occupancy tax rate to 6%.
Timing: Execute only after TCT fund balance has been appropriately addressed and then seek approval by the county commissioners, with a specific plan for how the additional revenue will be invested.



STRATEGIC FOCAL POINT SEVEN:

RESEARCH AND INSIGHT

**ISSUE: GROW THE
TCT PORTFOLIO OF
KNOWLEDGE**

STRATEGY:

Use market research to inform both destination marketing and management.

ACTION ITEMS:

Activate:

- Develop a greater understanding of Transylvania County visitor behavior through market research tools such as mobile phone data. *Timing:* Execute new research initiatives beginning in FY2019 and incorporate into FY2020 and then ongoing.
- Identify the best management and marketing practices of other gateway communities.

Timing: Initiate in FY2022 and ongoing thereafter.

