



Tourism Strategic Plan

JANUARY 2024



WHY A *Great Falls Montana Tourism* STRATEGIC PLAN?

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to focus Great Falls Montana Tourism (GFMT) on its core strategic initiatives to develop the local travel industry for the benefit of residents and visitors.

The plan demonstrates that the organization has carefully considered its options and established conscious priorities for moving the region forward. Using this Strategic Plan as guide, GFMT will develop a marketing / business plan each year that describes in tactical detail the actions needed to implement the initiatives from the Strategic Plan.

Great Falls Montana Tourism and its Boards of Directors should review the Strategic Plan annually to see if updates are needed because of changing trends or situations. If none are needed, no additional changes or amendments to the Plan are necessary until 2029 when a full revision is recommended.

Legend:

- *Short term: 1-2 years*
- *Medium term: 3-5 years*
- *Ongoing: All years*



STRATEGIC PLAN GUIDING PRINCIPLES

VISION

Great Falls is the only authentic Montana destination united under one brand, centered around a vibrant active river front with a robust diverse economy and world class cultural amenities.

MISSION

Strengthen Great Falls and its economy by promoting the uniqueness of the community and its attractions to visitors and residents.

POSITIONING STATEMENT

Great Falls Montana Tourism is recognized by residents, local government, and stakeholders as a strong community leader with an enviable reputation and solid organizational foundation. The organization is the storyteller that promotes Great Falls and protects the city's brand as a riverfront city with waterfalls, water scenery, outdoor recreation and vibrant cultural amenities, all while advocating for the sustainability of the travel industry.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES





CULTURE DRIVING GREAT FALLS MONTANA TOURISM

Highly Responsive Exceeding Expectations

Our *passion* is contagious as we aggressively pursue objectives that fulfil our mission. We listen to understand stakeholders, customers and partners to take calculated action, quickly.

Big Thinking Centered on Results

We develop *bold* initiatives, keenly aware of risks, that when implemented create a deliberate impact on the future. We are *accountable* for the tough, data driven decisions made to move us closer to achieving our goals.

Now is Better Than Perfect in Seeking Excellence

We are an *effective* high performing professional team who reasons what can be done well now, forgoing perfection, as we *efficiently* evolve and continually improve in our chase of industry leader status.

Leverage for the Greater Good

We seek collaborations with anyone who will bring resources to ideas that *unite* us in the ability to accomplish more, better and faster for the betterment of Great Falls, Montana.

Authentically Honest and Giving

We are *respectfully* direct and candid. We are transparent about who we are and who we are not, and what we can do. We look for the most simple and straight forward approach, openly sharing what we know, and *trust* others will do the same.

Proceed Until Apprehended

Every action taken is intentional and serves a purpose. We are *curious* life-long learners searching for solutions. When necessary, we question assumptions and actions not aligned with our culture. We thrive with established goals and processes that provide freedom to be entrepreneurial and take initiative to accomplish meaningful, significant work.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: Marketing and Public Relations

Expand awareness of Great Falls as a riverfront city through branding, marketing, and public relations. Research confirmed that Great Falls is a desirable travel destination unlike other typically Montana places. It is the combination of urban activities (arts, entertainment, shopping, dining) in a waterfront city surrounded by great outdoor experiences (water, trails, sports) that sets Great Falls apart as unique and desirable.

TARGETED MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Develop and implement a research-driven marketing plan that targets visitors when Great Falls has lodging capacity.	ONGOING
Primary focus markets – <ul style="list-style-type: none">Geographic – 2023 visitor profile research, including geo-location data, identified the following geographic markets as having the most growth potential for Great Falls<ul style="list-style-type: none">Drive – Montana, Alberta (Canada), Spokane, BoiseFly – Seattle, Denver, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, MinneapolisSecondary expansion markets will require additional funding.Psychographic targets (active by day, active in the evenings)<ul style="list-style-type: none">DINKs & empty nestersSolo travelFamilies with kidsActive outdoors enthusiasts	ONGOING
Create off-peak initiatives, promotions, social media pushes, etc. with partners to generate visitor traffic, create public relations value, and obtain partner buy-in (ex: winter weekend getaways).	ONGOING
Retain a public relations firm to work with travel media to obtain earned media coverage about the Great Falls area, especially in target markets.	ONGOING
Partner with the Montana Office of Tourism on public relations and marketing initiatives, where appropriate.	ONGOING

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: Marketing and Public Relations (cont.)

BRANDING	
Continue Great Falls tourism marketing efforts under an updated, unified brand that inspires visitation.	ONGOING
Update the Great Falls brand using a stakeholder input process (as recommended by 2023 brand research). Short term <ul style="list-style-type: none">Primary brand pillars: waterfalls; the Missouri River; outdoor recreation.Secondary: arts/culture; gateway to Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks.	SHORT TERM
Unite the hospitality industry behind the new Great Falls brand. Create tools to help hospitality partners use the brand in their marketing and PR efforts. Encourage economic development partners, civic organizations, and the City to use the brand as appropriate.	ONGOING

COMMUNITY AWARENESS / EDUCATION	
Advertise Great Falls amenities within Great Falls to create awareness of GFMT and its efforts to promote tourism and inspire residents to promote Great Falls as a destination.	ONGOING
Partner with economic development and civic organizations to highlight unique and amazing aspects of greater Great Falls and surrounding region that make the area a great place to live, work, and visit.	MEDIUM TERM
Share the connection of tourism to quality of life for all residents of Cascade County.	ONGOING

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: Marketing and Public Relations (cont.)

EVENTS / SPONSORSHIPS

Carefully invest in sponsorships that enhance visitor infrastructure and community visibility for GFMT. Do so frugally as sponsorship dollars reduce much-needed marketing efforts.

ONGOING

Develop an event impact model to determine sponsorship decisions and funding levels.

ONGOING



PARTNERSHIP MARKETING

Develop a partnership marketing pay-to-play program to extend the Great Falls message and generate partner buy-in. The program will include opportunities to have enhanced exposure on the GFMT website and various GFMT advertisements (above the standard listings that all lodging partners, attractions, etc. receive). This will replace the GFMT Tourism membership program.

SHORT TERM



MEASURES

- Annual marketing plan built on the 2023 market research
- Increased annual room demand
- Increased offseason room demand
- Co-op marketing funds invested by partners
- Hospitality partners using the new Great Falls tourism brand
- Increased engagement to off-season postings / contents

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: Group Business Development

Target group opportunities that match Great Falls' facilities, room availability, and the priorities of lodging partners. Promotion to groups requires large blocks of available hotel rooms.

MEETINGS AND EVENTS SALES

Continue to aggressively sell Great Falls as a location for meetings and events with a full-time staff member. Target regional business opportunities that match Great Falls' facilities – primarily smaller, single lodging property meetings.

ONGOING

Consider strategic targets in terms of local industry strengths (ex: agriculture, medical, higher education). In this manner, GFMT Tourism sales efforts support business and educational development, and vice versa.

ONGOING

SPORTS SALES

Routinely analyze the Great Falls sports market and target opportunities in a cost-effective manner. Adjust strategy as facilities/capacity improve/expand.

- Carefully consider sports planner's perceptions of Great Falls compared to competing destinations.
- Conduct a competitive assessment of Great Falls sports facilities compared to competing destinations.
Update annually.
- Focus sales efforts on those sports in which the facilities appeal to planners and align with hotel availability.

ONGOING

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: Group Business Development (cont.)

MEETINGS / SPORTS SUPPORT

Provide informational and planning resources to assist planners making arrangements in Great Falls

- Maintain listings / calendars of evening activities / events for meetings and sports planners.
- Consider developing turnkey evening activities with partners.

ONGOING



LEISURE GROUPS

Pursue RV groups, motorcoach tours, and affinity business cautiously, based on resources available and as opportunities are presented.

ONGOING



MEASURES

- Increase in targeted sales leads
- Evening event calendar and listings

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: Advocacy for the Local Travel Industry

Be a champion and provide leadership to the Great Falls travel industry.

TELL THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY STORY

Promote the value of the travel and hospitality industry to residents, elected officials, business leaders, and stakeholders.

- Produce a Great Falls Montana Tourism Annual Report to illustrate the benefits of the travel industry to Great Falls residents and local government. Create a digital /video version to describe the same information.
- Present the Great Falls tourism message to civic and community groups. (CEO & Board leadership).
- Perform outreach to college/university students and family members to engage them as Great Falls tourism ambassadors.

ONGOING

ELECTED OFFICIAL OUTREACH

Present the Great Falls tourism message to elected officials and senior staff at an annual special meeting or event (CEO & Board Chair).

ONGOING

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: Advocacy for the Local Travel Industry (cont.)

BE A UNIFYING FORCE FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Lead and coalesce the Great Falls hospitality industry by providing/sharing market research, co-op marketing programs, stakeholder workshops, networking opportunities, and updates on the programs offered by GFMT, Central Montana Tourism, and the Montana Office of Tourism.

ONGOING

Create an annual Great Falls tourism event to highlight the hospitality industry, showcase new businesses, provide hospitality awards, and celebrate industry successes.

ONGOING

Be the voice of the hospitality industry on societal issues that affect the visitor experience, such as workforce availability and training, housing, homelessness, etc. Support the efforts of partners addressing these issues.

ONGOING



MEASURES

- Development of a GFMT annual report
- Development of GFMT video / digital annual report
- GFMT / elected official meetings
- Stakeholder outreach meetings held
- Annual tourism industry event

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4: Organizational Excellence and Sustainability

Maintain a professional destination organization that is highly-respected in the city, state, and nation.

TRAINING

Invest in on-going staff and board training. Participate in appropriate state, regional, and industry-specific trade organizations to remain cutting-edge for both the organization and the local hospitality industry.

ONGOING

STAFF

Expand staffing to fulfill the needs to this Strategic Plan and the affiliated Master Plan. Industry standards for destination marketing organizations call for 35-40% of the budget for staffing. Medium term

MEDIUM TERM

Industry best-practices suggest the addition of an in-market strategist (or similar) to encourage, create, uncover, and promote amenities and events while connecting local businesses and partners to one another and GFMT.

MEDIUM TERM

FUNDING

When warranted by growing programs and when fully supported by the Great Falls MT Tourism boards, increase the BID room rate to fund tangible programs / services / goals.

MEDIUM TERM

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4: Org. Excellence and Sustainability (cont.)

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Maintain up-to-date policies, procedures and training to ensure the highest level of performance by Great Falls MT Tourism staff and board.	ONGOING
Work toward DMAP Accreditation from Destinations International.	MEDIUM TERM

MEMBERSHIP TO PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE

Transform the GFMT membership structure to a partnership marketing pay-to-play program. Eliminate board rules that currently require CVB board members to be dues-paying CVB members.	SHORT TERM
Continue to seek engaged hospitality industry CVB Board members and include non-hospitality business leadership with significant standing/clout in Great Falls.	MEDIUM TERM



MEASURES

- Staff training
- DMAP accreditation
- Membership program replaced by Partnership Marketing Pay to Play model
- New CVB board members (beyond CVB membership)
- New staff position added

GFMT ORGANIZATIONAL PRIORITIES – Next 2 Years

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to focus Great Falls Montana Tourism on its core strategic initiatives to develop the local travel industry for the benefit of residents and visitors.

