

**FORGE YOUR**  
*VISIT Billings*  
**OWN PATH**



**2021-2022 MARKETING PLAN AND BUDGET**

[VisitBillings.com](http://VisitBillings.com)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ESTABLISHMENT OF DESTINATION</b> .....	4
A Destination Marketing Organization .....	6
Montana's Trailhead Today .....	8
FY21 in Review .....	10
The Montana Brand .....	12
<b>TRAVEL DECISION PROCESS</b> .....	14
Three Phases: Inspire, Orient, Facilitate.....	16
<b>MARKETING STRATEGY</b> .....	18
Forge Your Own Path.....	20
Summer Strategy .....	22
Regional Year-Round Strategy .....	26
Motorcycle Enthusiasts .....	28
Group Tour Market.....	29
Meetings & Conventions .....	30
Sports Tourism.....	31
Servicing .....	32
Cooperative Opportunities.....	33
Content Strategy .....	34
Earned Media .....	36
<b>2021-2022 STRATEGIC GOALS</b> .....	38
Strategic Priorities .....	40
<b>BUDGETS</b> .....	42



FORGE YOUR  
OWN PATH  
VISIT *Billings*

ESTABLISHMENT  
OF DESTINATION





**A DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATION**

Visit Billings is a leading brand of the Billings Tourism Business Improvement District and the Billings Convention and Visitors Bureau and is managed by the Billings Chamber of Commerce. Together with the Billings Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau (BCC/CVB) and Billings Tourism Business Improvement District (BTBID) boards, the Visit Billings team is committed to growing visitation at Montana's Trailhead. The staff is an extension of its stakeholders (lodging partners) working to provide sales, services, and marketing support as a destination marketing and management organization which boosts the local economy as a whole.

Visit Billings is funded primarily through the BTBID. The BTBID assesses \$2.00 per occupied room per night on all hotels and motels in the city of Billings with six (6) or more sleeping rooms. The BTBID funds stay local for the marketing and promotion of the city as a destination. This marketing helps grow visitation and supports stakeholders, tourism partners, and general businesses at the destination.

Additionally, there are two Montana taxes imposed on users of an overnight lodging facility (such as a hotel, motel, campground, dude ranch, and guest ranch), which are collected by the facility and remitted to the Montana Department of Revenue. These two taxes are a 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax and a 4% Lodging Facility Sales Tax, for a combined 8% state lodging tax. A majority of the Lodging Facility Sales Tax goes to the State of Montana's General Fund while Visit Billings receives a small portion of the 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax as the Billings CVB. As a destination marketing organization (DMO), Visit Billings is charged with representing Billings as a tourism destination, helping with the development of the industry through promotion of the city.

The year 2020 proved to be an extremely challenging time for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) like Visit Billings. According to The New York Times, it is estimated that in the United States, 4.5 million jobs were lost in the travel and tourism industry as of the end of year 2020 - making it the hardest hit of any industry in the U.S. due to COVID-19 directives and impacts. Approximately 75% of independent restaurants that temporarily closed during the crisis will not recover which impacts visitor experiences. Closer to home, according to a fall 2020 survey conducted by the University of Montana Institute for Tourism and

Recreation Research, 53% of the Montana's outfitter and guide businesses that responded to the query temporarily closed their doors. Another 6% shuttered their operations permanently. Bookings were down by 74% and inquiries from travelers had dropped by 62%. State Lodging Tax Collections were down more than 30% which directly impacted FY22 budgets for Visit Billings.

Moving into 2021, Visit Billings staff and boards are still navigating the pandemic based on an ever-evolving landscape. The key to navigating a recovery - as travel habits and mindsets changed and adjusted - lies in capturing the data needed to properly prepare for the growing increase in consumer demand for travel. This will allow Visit Billings to plan accordingly, devising strategies and marketing campaigns designed to drive visitation, while giving visitors a sense of security and safety with experiences that align closely with their interests.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of Visit Billings is to generate room nights for lodging facilities in the city of Billings by effectively marketing the region as a preferred travel destination.

**ABOUT BILLINGS**

Billings, population 110,000, is the county seat of Yellowstone County and the largest city in the state. As Montana's Trailhead, it is the region's economic hub. Major industries including agriculture, energy, healthcare, finance, education, and tourism drive the local economy.

Popular attractions locally include the Rimrocks or rock formations which surround much of the community and offer space to take in incredible views of the region. The city also boasts a walkable brewery district in historic downtown Billings, Montana's only zoo and Botanical Park, contemporary and western museums, galleries, several theaters, music venues, a state-of-the-art public library, and a number of outdoor community venues and festivals. Billings offers nearly 50 miles of multi-use trails and 24 miles of bike lanes. From the Rimrocks to the Yellowstone River, which is the longest free-flowing river in the lower 48, residents of Billings invite visitors to experience the magic of Montana's Trailhead. Billings sits near the intersection of Interstates 90 & 94 and offers a first-class airport with numerous daily flights to major U.S. cities via Delta, United, American Airlines, Allegiant, Frontier, and Alaska Airlines. Regional carrier Cape Air, also plays a crucial role in air travel and connectivity in the state.

Amazing summer weather and snowy winters with blue-bird days offer ample opportunity for outdoor enthusiasts to experience all four seasons and the accompanying adventures. Nearly 4,500 hotel rooms as well as numerous retail and restaurant offerings (Billings offers an incredible food scene), flexible meeting space, and sports venues are ready to accommodate any traveler or planner's needs and preferences.

# BILLINGS IS "MONTANA'S CITY"

Shaped by the Yellowstone River and sheltered by the sandstone Rimrocks, Billings is a place of forever views and forever memories, where urban amenities and modern conveniences meet - where the adventure of the untamed wilderness and history are right outside your door. Conveniently positioned in southeast Montana as the largest city between Calgary and Denver, as well as Spokane and Minneapolis, Billings proudly serves a trade area of more than 500,000 residents with diverse shopping, award-winning cuisine, arts and culture.

Warm, genuine people take the time to welcome you and greet you with a smile. Billings offers unparalleled access to some of the most breathtaking natural and historic wonders in the United States including Yellowstone National Park, the Beartooth Scenic Byway, Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area, Little Bighorn Battlefield and Pompeys Pillar National Monuments, as well as amazing state parks. The region is an idyllic destination for those seeking out the best that Montana and the western U.S. offers.

## VISIT BILLINGS TEAM

- ★ **JOHN BREWER, CAE**  
President & CEO  
Billings Chamber of Commerce  
john@billingschamber.com
- ★ **ALEX TYSON, IOM**  
Executive Director  
Visit Billings  
alex@visitbillings.com
- ★ **ALY MURNION, MSPR**  
Leisure Marketing, Sales  
and Social Media Manager  
alyson@visitbillings.com

- ★ **LUKE ASHMORE**  
Special Projects Manager  
luke@visitbillings.com
- ★ **MEGAN STEVENSON**  
Director of Finance  
megan@billingschamber.com

The Visit Billings Team is available via call or text at (406) 245-4111.



815 S. 27th St. Billings, MT 59101  
406.245.4111  
VisitBillings.com  
info@VisitBillings.com

## BILLINGS TOURISM BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT BOARD LEADERSHIP

- ★ **JOE STUDINER**  
Erck Hotels  
Hampton Inn  
Hampton Inn & Suites  
Homewood Suites by Hilton
- ★ **GEORGE MARAGOS**  
Northern Hotel
- ★ **LORI WALKER**  
Home2 Suites by Hilton
- ★ **SHELLI MANN**  
Boothill Inn & Suites
- ★ **JEFF SCHOENHARD**  
Kelly Inn Hotels  
Best Western PLUS Kelly Inn & Suites  
La Quinta Inn & Suites  
Kelly Inn
- ★ **RON SPENCE**  
Billings Hotel & Convention Center
- ★ **STEVE WAHRLICH**  
Best Western Plus  
Clocktower Inn & Suites

# MONTANA'S TRAILHEAD TODAY

With the widespread roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines and flexible cancellation policies, travel confidence is moving in a positive direction. The past 12+ months have created pent-up demand and a surge of travel, particularly for less-populated areas that offer recreation and exploration adventures without constant crowds. Billings and southeast Montana are ideal destinations as the travel and tourism industry works toward recovery.

As noted in FY21 strategies, travel and tourism at Montana's Trailhead thrives on recreation, exploration, learning, competition, and networking. Travel restrictions and social distancing left many people confused and unsure of travel, but as the warm season of FY22 approaches, Visit Billings' strategies encourage people to re-engage and choose Billings as their vacation destination, while increasing awareness for Billings as the perfect trailhead for their western adventures.

Upon the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Visit Billings team worked from a strong structure based on responsibility and resiliency. Today, the Visit Billings staff is actively managing the organization with its boards and helping the destination through this ongoing but continuing crisis through strong marketing and sales strategies. For example, the Visit Billings team is leveraging its owned channels such as social media to stay engaged with repeat and prospective visitors. Tourism management continues to be important as staff evaluates how the organization can be best positioned in the future. As staff, board members, and Visit Billings' agency of record (Sunshine & Bourbon) continue navigating the organization in light of budget reductions and priority adjustments, new perspectives are being applied to ensure all opportunities are being leveraged.

Visit Billings' staff members are focused on:

## **RELATIONSHIPS, RESOURCES, REEDUCATION, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCY**

### **RELATIONSHIPS**

Communicating with and accommodating meeting planners, tour operators, and sports tournament directors who either cancelled or postponed events in Billings continues to be a priority during this recovery phase. Staff members prioritize communication with stakeholders, tourism partners, and volunteers as well. At the onset of the pandemic, staff supported peers, colleagues, and neighbors with the "Billings is Strong - #HospitalityStrong" efforts. As

we move further toward recovery, those relationships are critical to the success of our industry, and we will continue to support one another.

### **RESOURCES**

Communication to potential visitors regarding all resources available is still a priority. For example, the COVID-19 section at VisitBillings.com is consistently updated as new information becomes available. Staff are fulfilling traveler information requests to engage with travelers, ultimately helping to increase visitation appropriately. As travelers seek out Billings' travel information via mail, email, website, call, or text, those requests are fulfilled expeditiously. The Visit Billings team is helping travelers better understand why they should choose Billings, while showing them how to best enjoy the area and reimagine their itineraries.

### **REEDUCATION**

As consumers begin to travel again, Visit Billings is reeducating them as to why they should select Billings as their destination to visit and begin their western adventures. The brand responsibly reemerged in summer 2020 and the Visit Billings team responsibly promoted the destination throughout the fall and winter season. In FY22, our marketing strategies will advance to the next level knowing the competition among destinations is going to be fierce as tourism recovers.

The marketing strategy will continue to emphasize the Great American Road Trip as data shows travelers are still seeking out road trips to less-populated destinations. At the same time, the national marketing strategy will evolve as the flight markets recover and the passenger numbers for the direct flights grow. Visit Billings regional and national marketing campaigns are fully integrated, including the Visit Billings social channels which provide travelers with inspirational messaging as well as content that focuses on responsible travel. As the travel landscape evolves, how Visit Billings staff conducts business must also evolve. Travelers' motivations and habits have and will continue to change. Business plans and strategies have been, and will continue to be adjusted. Innovation remains key in the reeducation and reimagining of travel.

### **RECOVERY**

Being funded by hotel tax and assessments, travel data like Smith Travel Research's occupancy reports allow staff and the agency to monitor recovery and growth, while assessing the budget and evaluating additional marketing and sales opportunities.

Assessing and reassessing the pandemic's impact on the Visit Billings' budget, as well as on the industry locally and in the future, is a constant task. The organization's role in recovery, and in helping to reset the local economy, is still relevant today. Adapting the budget was a first priority and remains such. Strength in leisure travel during this recovery is key and funds are poised to help execute leisure marketing and other segments accordingly to grow visitation to Billings. These efforts help support stakeholders and the hospitality industry. Visit Billings is rebuilding visitor volume through strategic marketing campaigns that differentiate the destination among the competitive set, while communicating with visitors sensitively and responsibly.

According to the Destination Analysts' Coronavirus Travel Sentiment Index Report from February 21, 2021, approximately 60% of respondents indicated they are ready to travel, with or without some hesitation, in anticipation of the vaccines being widely available. June, July, and August were noted to be the most likely months to travel. In mid-March 2021, the Transportation Security Administration said the number of people flying in the United States had eclipsed the year-ago level for the first time in the pandemic period. These are all strong signs of travel growth, yet there are still variables like the COVID-19 variants that make travel unpredictable. For Visit Billings, projecting the lodging tax revenue and TBID assessments to protect mission, is, and will be, a priority as the recovery progresses and resiliency leads.

### **RESILIENCY**

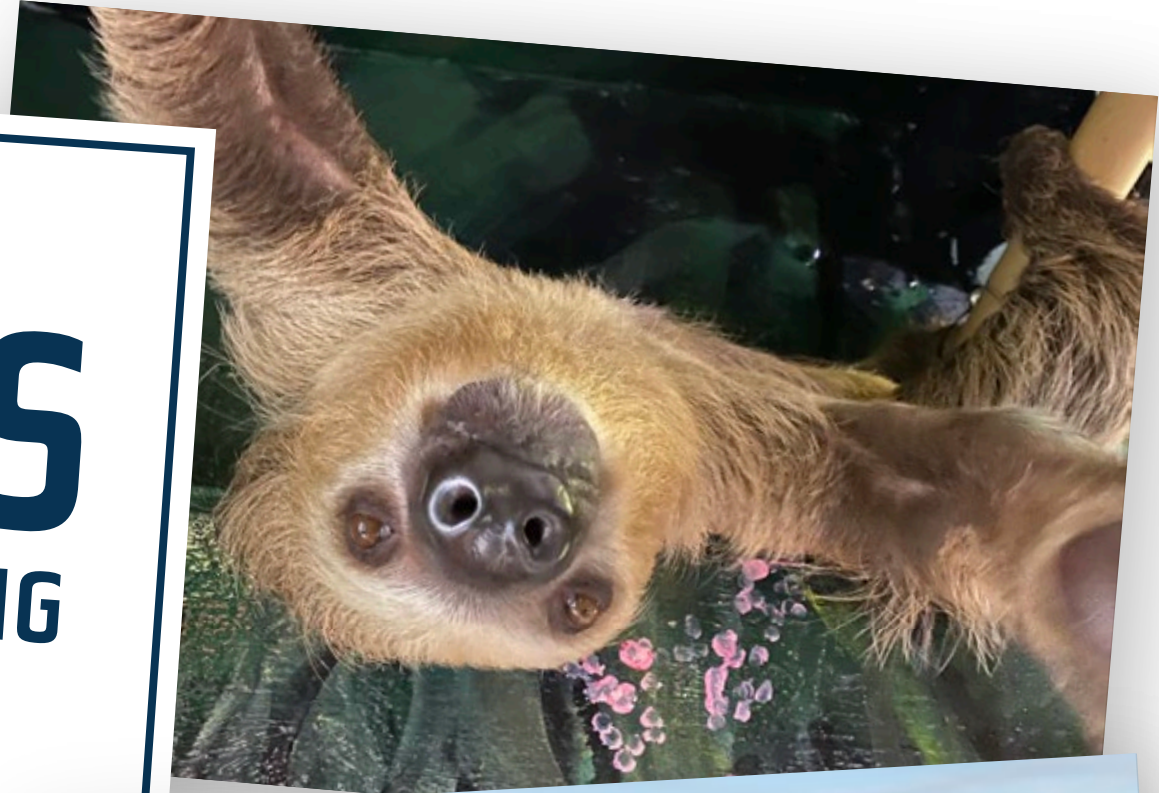
Visit Billings, with tourism partners and community leadership, will recover from this pandemic by continuing to support each other. As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic decimated the travel industry and local stakeholders, with the cancellations and postponements of sporting events, group business, meetings, and leisure trips. Travel restrictions and the loss of transient lodging demand - with at least three temporary hotel closures in Yellowstone County - harshly impacted funding for Visit Billings as well. While some travel resumed in 2020, it is only now in 2021 that we are seeing a much stronger intent to travel among consumers, with occupancy numbers and demand beginning to edge near pre-pandemic levels albeit inconsistently. That being said, relationships, resources, and reeducation will help lead the destination through this recovery while supporting one another professionally and personally will help the community rebound from difficulties created by the pandemic. Billings' tourism and hospitality industries are remarkably resilient.



**BILLINGS IS STRONG,  
HOSPITALITY STRONG**

COVID-19 directives and reponses changed the way of life for the world and the heart of the travel and tourism industry. It took a tremendous toll on the hospitality and lodging industries.

Visit Billings led the way with the *Billings is Strong; Hospitality Strong* campaign which was a local effort to support lodging businesses at Montana's Trailhead. From window clings and storefront posters, to PSA's and media exposure, this campaign helped display the strength and positivity of industries that represent vital economic sectors.



**WINSTON**

It was a long, slow, cross-country journey during the pandemic, but Visit Billings teamed up with ZooMontana and the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development to welcome Winston the sloth to his new home in Billings. The two-toed sloth became quite the center of attention on ZooMontana and Visit Billings' social channels while en route to town. Winston's popularity rose during "the Sloth is coming - slowly" campaign, led by Visit Billings. This followed the journey to his new home and offered a reprieve from the heaviness of the times.

Mission Accomplished: the campaign was a wild success performing better than anticipated in the regional market and attracted people from all over the country along their travels in the west.



**TRAILHEAD  
TUESDAYS**



**MONTANA AWARE /  
EXPLORE RESPONSIBLY /  
DO YOUR PART**

Visit Billings was a proud partner in the state's "Montana Aware - Let's Keep Montana Safe" efforts. In the fall of 2020, CARES Act Grant funds allowed Visit Billings to prioritize the health and safety of visitors and citizens by alerting travelers regarding what to expect in Yellowstone County when visiting.

Websites, digital assets, and out-of-home programming offered resources to visitors, so they were aware of local and state regulations when staying in Billings or traveling to Montana.

Visit Billings was also a proud partner in the "Do Your Part" program which offered varying coronavirus safety messaging to visitors to protect public health during the highest case counts during 2020. The goal was to protect citizens and focus on keeping local youth in the classroom and area schools open. Visit Billings partnered with the Billings Education Foundation, Billings Clinic, St. Vincent Health-care, Riverstone Health, Billings Catholic Schools, and other entities to spread the "Do Your Part" message.

**« GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP**

Visit Billings launched the Great American Road Trip campaign in the warm season of 2020. During the spring of 2020, 53% of travelers surveyed wanted to take road trips to less populated areas due to the pandemic. Visit Billings and its agency, Sunshine & Bourbon, developed the campaign to promote monumental adventures and outdoor recreational opportunities under Montana's big sky.

Roadtrippers learned about what an ideal neighbor Billings is to national and state park wonders. The messaging encouraged visitors to make the less populated destination of Billings part of trips and itineraries that stretched from the Badlands to Yellowstone in wide open spaces.

# THE MONTANA BRAND



It's important to note the crucial role a state tourism brand plays in destination marketing. The marketing strategies and programs led by the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development (MOTBD) help boost not only Montana's tourism brand, but also those brands of Montana's cities, towns and regions. In spite of challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presents, it's as important as ever that MOTBD foster the Montana tourism brand and get people excited about visiting Montana and doing business in Montana destinations. Visit Billings works to align with MOTBD brand pillars and strategies in all the integrated marketing efforts.

The MOTBD brand pillars, which will help identify and guide areas of opportunity in travel promotion, are as follows:

### STRATEGY I

**COMMUNICATE AND DELIVER MONTANA'S SPECTACULAR UNSPOILED NATURE IN A WAY THAT MAKES IT REAL, TANGIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE TO THE VISITOR.**

### STRATEGY II

**HIGHLIGHT AND HELP DEVELOP VIBRANT AND CHARMING SMALL TOWNS THROUGHOUT MONTANA.**

### STRATEGY III

**INTEGRATE NATURE AND TOWNS TO OFFER AND DELIVER A BALANCE OF BREATHTAKING EXPERIENCES AND RELAXING HOSPITALITY.**



FORGE YOUR  
VISIT *Billings*  
DOWN PATH

# TRAVEL DESTINATION PROCESS





# THREE PHASES: INSPIRE, ORIENT, FACILITATE

According to the current Montana Tourism and Recreation Strategic Plan, the best way to consider how the potential traveler considers and contemplates trip planning and execution of an itinerary are listed below. While these pillars and phases remain relevant in a COVID-19 pandemic recovery, Visit Billings will adjust marketing efforts as needed to accommodate the safety and security of visitors.

## THE PROCESS IS DEFINED BY USE OF THE FOLLOWING TERMINOLOGY AND CORRESPONDING DEFINITIONS:

### INSPIRATION

The process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative.

### ORIENTATION

The relative physical position or direction of something.

### FACILITATION

The action of facilitating something to make it easy or easier.



**THE INSPIRATION PHASE** is where the traveler is made aware of the general product and develops a desire to visit the destination. The Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development (MOTBD) is responsible for the foundation of this marketing mindset via Montana’s brand image, per the strategic plan. MOTBD markets Montana’s key tourism pillars to encourage potential travelers to visit the state with inspirational imagery and copy. MOTBD’s strategy focuses on Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks as well as adventures – which aligns with the outdoor recreation travelers are seeking, and even more so due to the pandemic. Therefore, in the inspirational phase, Billings must strategize to position the destination as a viable city to include on one’s itinerary. Efforts by MOTBD to elevate eastern Montana towns and attractions will assist with this phase for the region.

Billings is well situated between the historic landmarks of southeast Montana and the awe-inspiring landscapes of the Yellowstone River valley. Working to compliment MOTBD efforts, Visit Billings leverages stunning imagery, targeted messaging and compelling calls to action in the integrated marketing materials including the Great American Road Trip campaign which speaks well for those visitors who are re-engaging in travel.

Billings boasts access to the Beartooth Highway which Charles Kuralt called “the most beautiful drive in America.” As a destination, Billings offers stunning vistas via the sandstone Rimrocks and access to the Yellowstone River, which are all reasons to choose southeastern Montana as part of one’s route. Targeted marketing and out-of-home (OOH) programming aim to help boost Billings as a must-stop city along western and national park trips.

Regionally, Billings is the perfect vacation destination for many neighboring communities. Ongoing “weekender” campaigns will inspire and invite the driving audience to

explore and enjoy all Billings has to offer in entertainment, outdoor activities, cultural, and historic interests and recreation. Visit Billings will emphasize this focus as part of the Great American Road Trip campaign, as more people are embarking upon getaways by vehicle in the year ahead.

**THE ORIENTATION PHASE** is where the traveler begins researching the details of his or her trip. This phase focuses on the route the traveler will take to arrive at the chosen destination and the mode of transportation used to get there. Per the strategic plan, Montana’s visitors have multiple destinations to consider within the state and bordering states when building trips and researching travel to this part of the West. Montana’s DMOs provide tools to help the visitor plan a route while encouraging a longer stay.

### VISITBILLINGS.COM

The Visit Billings website is the destination’s primary branding and communications tool, where the destination’s “Forge Your Own Path” brand has been brought to life to orient potential visitors. Throughout the pandemic, it was key to communicating the destination’s mitigation efforts and “open for business” messaging. In today’s digital landscape, destination marketing websites must work even harder to engage the consumer. While travelers filter through user-generated content (UGC), TripAdvisor reviews, Instagram posts and travel blogs, a destination website should be positioned as a trusted resource for travel inspiration and planning. VisitBillings.com is designed to ensure the content is consistently updated and relevant to the individual needs of potential travelers. New persona-driven web content is developed to guide prospective History Buffs, Outdoor Enthusiasts, Foodies, Shopaholics, Arts & Culture Aficionados, and Wellness-Seekers to Billings. Simultaneously, the Great American Road Trip microsite also inspires travelers to hit the road and choose Billings as their vacation destination.

Recently, the site was audited to ensure it was providing the greatest experience, speed, and functionality for users and travelers. The website also is a clearinghouse of sorts for COVID-19 safety resources for travelers to Montana and Yellowstone County. The COVID-19 landing page is a key element in easing the minds of visitors who may be looking for local case counts, testing locations, and general COVID-19 information.

### VISIT BILLINGS VISITOR GUIDEBOOK

The Visit Billings Visitor Guidebook is available digitally via the website and is mailed at no-charge upon request. The Billings guide focuses on the “Forge Your Own Path” branding and encourages travelers to seek adventure and live life to the fullest around every corner. With the assistance of beautiful imagery, maps, recreational listings, and more, Visit Billings’ focus is to provide accessible and authentic information. There is no advertising included in Visit Billings publications or collateral materials.

### BILLINGS LOGAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (BIL)

Visit Billings is working closely with Billings Logan International Airport to monitor the emergence of travel by air during the pandemic recovery. Prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, the Billings airport launched its four-year, \$57 million remodeling project to expand the capacity of the facility and offer a modern look and feel with more capacity for partners. With flight travel resuming, Visit Billings is highlighting carriers offering direct flights in markets that include Denver, Minneapolis (MSP), Seattle (SEA), and Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW), Chicago (ORD), Portland, Phoenix, San Diego, and Salt Lake City (SCL). Cape Air is also an important partner in the regional leisure market serving smaller eastern Montana communities where residents may choose to fly to Billings to shop, schedule services, and enjoy entertainment.

**THE FACILITATION PHASE** is where the traveler seeks experiences en route to a destination and during a stay. DMOs, communities, and organizations must all work together to make visitors aware of the full array of experiences available to guests. The Visit Billings team is knowledgeable, welcoming, and on-the-ready to facilitate visitor queries via phone, text, or email. The goal is to foster successful stays and future Montana travels.

The Visit Billings staff keeps an open dialogue of communication and information with tourism partners, area hotels, attractions, businesses and the community to provide exceptional customer service for visitors. This initiative is spearheaded by the Billings Trail Guide program of Visit Billings. This civic-minded program works to unite and motivate the Billings community in raising the bar and level of service for visitors. It provides frontline employees training and support so they can easily communicate and provide hospitality and experiential options for visitors in and around Billings and southeast Montana.

Visit Billings continues to foster connectivity within different social media platforms by offering visitors current and relevant content via Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. Visitors also are invited to engage with the #VisitBillings brand throughout their journey.



# MARKETING STRATEGY



**FORGE YOUR**  
*VISIT Billings*  
**OWN PATH**

SHAPED BY THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER. BORN IN THE SHADOWS OF THE RIMROCKS. WELCOME TO MONTANA'S TRAILHEAD. BE GUIDED BY THE GREATNESS THAT LIES AHEAD. BIG SKIES AND BIG THINGS. FORGE YOUR OWN PATH.



Leveraging Montana's Trailhead, Visit Billings' "Forge Your Own Path" brand invites visitors to participate in a memorable journey that is authentic to the Big Sky experience.

# SUMMER STRATEGY

As Visit Billings enters FY21, there are two specific hurdles. First, Visit Billings must find the visitors who are once again traveling despite the uncertainty of the pandemic. The second hurdle is the competitiveness of the market. With good news regarding the vaccines, DMOs around the country are preparing to spend large budgets to persuade visitors to choose their destination. Already, keyword search budgets are increasing and destinations are introducing large-scale campaigns to the market. It is imperative to ensure Billings is a top choice amongst travelers as they begin determining where they will go for summer vacation.

It also will be important to take into consideration any new offerings among key competitors. For example, Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport introduced a new \$26.5 million addition of a second concourse, adding five new gates and 75,000 square feet to Montana's largest airport. In Missoula, Alaska Airlines announced its plans to begin new daily service from Missoula to three destinations in California - San Diego, San Francisco and San Jose - beginning March 2021.

With the start of 2021, there is a sense that the worst is now behind us. Vaccines are being distributed, travelers' sentiment is more positive and people are eager to leave their homes and start exploring again. However, it still will take time for things to return to normal, although the definition of normal will never be the same. Yet even the industry is beginning to feel positive once more. Dax Schieffer, director of Voices of Montana Tourism, shared his thoughts with the Billings Gazette: "The state's tourism industry may be well positioned to rebound in 2021. With cruise ships and indoor venues still seeming unsafe, the outdoors are a healthy option. Fewer people flying has increased the airline industry's interest in serving more remote places like Montana."

## GOALS

1. Increase awareness for Billings as an ideal spring/summer travel destination, leveraging the destination's brand, "Forge Your Own Path."
2. Increase awareness for the big skies, unspoiled outdoor adventure, a unique urban downtown and hospitality offerings all found in a visit to Billings - while reminding visitors that Billings, Montana is the most scenic route into Yellowstone with incredible proximity to iconic attractions.
3. Encourage visitors to experience the culinary and cultural offerings in the city of Billings paired with the natural attractions surrounding the city.
4. Drive unique and repeat traffic to the website with a strategy that leverages digital and video-driven channels.
5. Integrate the Great American Road Trip into the campaign that also speaks to visitors in the flight markets, targeting both drive and flight markets.
6. Stay flexible to evolve the campaign as necessary based on travelers' ongoing response to the pandemic situation.

Billings' safe, welcoming vibe and deep roots in Western culture and Native American heritage set it apart from its competitive set. It is a place for new experiences, where one can find new ways to experience the familiar. The destination gives access to uniquely powerful encounters with the natural world, alongside the comforts of modern life. This is what visitors are seeking in 2021. The marketing campaign should introduce them - or remind them - of the adventures that can be found along the Rimrocks and the Yellowstone River. The campaign will give them a sense of the unique vibe found only in downtown Billings, with the only walkable brew trail and a nationally-renowned new sloth exhibit at ZooMontana - combined with the comfort that travelers are seeking in hotel offerings.

It will be critical to re-engage with visitors and remind them why Billings should be their first choice when choosing a vacation destination, with its proximity to an array of outdoor wonders, historic monuments and local arts, cuisine and culture providing a unique experience unlike any other in the competitive set.

Visit Billings also aims to align with MOTBD's messaging to increase Billings' exposure with out-of-state visitors. MOTBD's primary messaging positions Montana as a place for free-spirited adventure, a place for new experiences where one can find new ways to experience the familiar, and a place where one has access to uniquely powerful encounters with the natural world, as well as the comforts of modern life. Their marketing highlights the unique scenic beauty (sweeping mountain ranges, big sky ambiance and diverse geography). Billings is the center of all the best that Montana has to offer.

## A LOOK AT THE RESEARCH

According to Destination Analysts, 33.7% of Americans say they have begun planning trips in anticipation of the vaccines being available, with June, July and August being the most likely months to travel. The interest to take leisure trips to small towns, rural and mountain destinations were at 43% and national parks and road trips at 54%.

The Visit Billings' audience is primarily a mix of couples and families ages 25-44 with pre-teen/teen children. According to research, only 35% of the audience is very likely to schedule a vacation in 2021, and COVID-19 is still top of mind. 57% of the audience is considering the state of COVID-19 in their vacation considerations in 2021, with the vaccine and hygiene of travel also appearing in the top factors.

The pandemic hasn't stopped them from thinking about travel though - almost half (47%) of the audience have some ideas and are doing research toward a 2021 vacation (as of Jan 2021). Flexibility is top of mind for potential travel consumers, with over half citing the ability to cancel trips easily and flexible booking policies as top incentives to book from travel providers, and 38% are seeking a value

for their money. Further, 16% are also more likely to want contactless options available in their travel plans.

## TARGET AUDIENCE

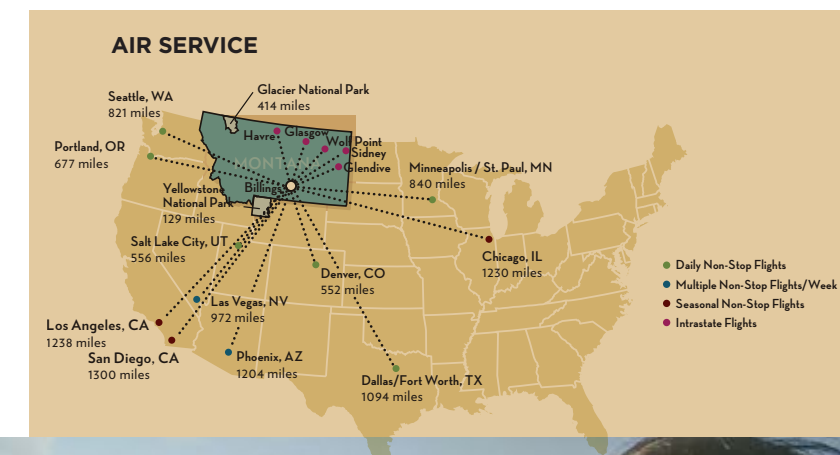
After a year of uncertainty, turmoil and impacts on the organization's budget, Visit Billings will execute a national campaign this year as flight markets are recovering. Flexibility will be important for the media campaign, to ensure dollars are spent where they are generating the most response.

Behavioral targeting will focus on the domestic traveler - those looking for a long weekend escape from their metro area, those interested in nature-related trips, and those looking for a rural escape into their surrounding outdoor paradises. The target audience is families with a household income of \$75,000+.

The geographic markets will include the following:

**PRIMARY:** Key feeder markets include Minneapolis, Denver, Salt Lake City, Chicago and Dallas with interest in travel to Montana and the western region of the U.S., including monuments, state and national parks and western heritage.

**SECONDARY:** Regional close-in drive markets, primarily in-state and Wyoming. Bozeman, MT; Great Falls, MT; Helena, MT; Missoula, MT; Minot-Bismark-Dickinson, ND; Rapid City, SD; Casper, WY; Buffalo WY; Sheridan WY; Billings DMA (excluding city of Billings) + city of Gillette, city of Cody.



TRAVELERS CLEARLY SEE MONTANA AS AN ALLEGORY FOR OPEN-MINDEDNESS, FREEDOM, ADVENTURE, SELF-CONFIDENCE, A REVERENCE FOR THE NATURAL WORLD AND A REJECTION OF FEAR AND SUPERFLUOUS RULES.

-DESTINATION ANALYSTS

## MEDIA

The planning for the next campaign will include re-entering the flight markets, researching potential new audiences and any additional platforms Visit Billings can leverage to fully maximize the campaign's success. The Fall/Winter campaign has generated solid increases to the website and has laid down the foundation onto which Visit Billings staff can build the next campaign.

Knowing what is working - and optimizing against platforms that aren't performing as well - will allow us to continue strengthening brand awareness for Visit Billings and encourage visitors to consider this beautiful location as a destination not to miss. As outdoors, rural towns, national parks and uncrowded cities are still a high priority with travelers, Billings is the perfect place to entice, welcome and host eager visitors who are ready to book.

Paid media on digital and social platforms including Facebook and Instagram will remain prominent in the integrated campaign. Creative materials will place emphasis on video placement through Instagram stories, Facebook's Instant Experience and a video network, so that impressions are not locked to the content on just one platform but can be optimized to whichever channel is showing the best performance.

Paid search also will continue to play a prominent role in driving qualified traffic to VisitBillings.com.

### MEDIA KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

To balance quantity and quality of website visitation, the marketing campaign will optimize digital media toward conversion actions and monitor for an efficient CPC (cost per click) and CTR (click-through rate).

The following engagement actions will be tracked:

- ★ Landing page visits
- ★ Requests for Visitor Guides
- ★ 3+ minutes on site
- ★ eNewsletter sign-ups
- ★ Foot traffic to hotels and key destinations

The campaign will be set up dynamically allowing retargeting of the budget toward the market that is performing the best. This will be closely monitored, so the budget remains spread over the entire campaign.

Visit Billings staff in partnership with agency colleagues will also monitor the following data:

- Smith Travel Research demand, occupancy, & ADR
- VisaVue Spending Trends
- AirDNA Data
- Destinations International Economic Impact Calculators
- Destination Analysts reporting



The Great American Road Trip will again play an important role in this year's campaign. Travelers who are cautiously optimistic about the current climate will be more comfortable with creating their own vacations through car travel. Wide open spaces and less crowds are still a focus for most people.

Therefore, Visit Billings will evolve the creative messaging to showcase Billings as Montana's Trailhead, offering monumental, unexpected adventures. Located in southeast Montana, Billings neighbors iconic American sites and attractions, like Yellowstone National Park. When paired with the Black Hills and Badlands regions of South Dakota, along with all of the incredible trips available throughout Montana, the Great American Road Trip is revealed with an unprecedented bucket list of must-see national parks and monuments. There is no better place to start your road trip than the "Trailhead of Awesome."



# REGIONAL YEAR-ROUND STRATEGY

Billings is Montana's largest city and, with that, the opportunities are endless. From arts and culture to food scenes and history to outdoor recreation, it is easy to fill days with unique experiences. Regionally, Billings is the city travelers will crave as it offers the hustle and bustle of a city without the huge crowds. Cultural attractions such as concerts and art galleries, as well as a culinary scene that features unique farmers markets, walkable breweries, restaurants and more will engage visitors. The regional year-round strategy is designed to highlight experiences that can't be found for hundreds of miles and is customized so that it speaks specifically to each unique traveler, encouraging them to "Forge Your Own Path" while exploring the city and the region.

## GOALS

1. Increase awareness of "things to do" in Billings for the regional audience.
2. Establish a sense of urgency around seasonal events and attractions as they begin to return.
3. Continue utilizing the creative assets and messaging of the Great American Road Trip, while leveraging "Forge Your Own Path" as the umbrella brand position, inviting prospective visitors to experience Billings.

Creative messaging will incorporate messaging that emphasizes: "Two days off. Time to turn it on." This messaging encourages state residents to take that weekend escape for which they are yearning. This will emphasize experiences and activities unique to the city and the region, consistently providing potential visitors new reasons to travel to Billings. The marketing efforts will responsibly establish a sense of urgency in booking for special seasonal features such as the Grand Opening of the Alberta Bair and other events. Primarily promoted through digital targeting, these travel drivers will be communicated through the brand lens of "Forge Your Own Path." A content calendar will outline key travel-driving events, activities and attractions by season, and map out markets and allocated budgets throughout the year.



## TARGET AUDIENCE

The regional focus will remain on potential travelers with higher awareness and familiarity of Billings in markets that would encourage at least one overnight stay primarily outside a 125-mile radius of the destination including neighboring states like Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota. For leisure travel, these close-in drive markets have a higher propensity to visit year-round for events, outdoor activities, and nearby skiing in the winter, as well as short getaways for shopping and dining in Montana's largest city. In some cases, travel may align with extending a necessity visit (for example, a doctor's appointment) overnight to include leisure activities.

Billings' regional target audience includes adults ages 25-65 with an annual household income of \$75,000+. Regional markets include Bozeman, MT; Minot-Bismarck-Dickinson, ND; Great Falls, MT; Rapid City, SD; Helena, MT; Missoula, MT; Casper, WY; Cody, WY; Gillette, WY; Billings DMA (excluding the city of Billings).

## MEDIA

The regional year-round media plan is primarily digital allowing the plan to stay flexible with recurrent changes in creative and messaging. Online display through a Demand Side Platform (DSP) partner allows us to purchase digital ad inventory while providing efficient reach and targeting with the ability to easily adjust creative throughout seasonal flights.

Social and native placement provides opportunity to promote event-driven content and messaging on Visit Billings' owned channels. Search is critical for driving site traffic from the regional audience already researching Billings' key events and things to do. Billboard and out-of-home placement is incorporated to maintain front-of-mind brand awareness in surrounding regional markets.



Billings is a craft beer hotspot and the Billings Brew Trail is Montana's only walkable self-guided brewery tour. Although it continues to grow, the current list includes six breweries, two distilleries and a cider house. In May 2019, the city hosted the first-ever Billings Craft Brew Week with Taproom Cards to earn stamps for prizes, yoga, and movie events, as well as a Beer Run and post-race party. Over 350 runners arrived in downtown Billings for the event. After the event was canceled last year, 2021 will see it return with the craft beer week being hosted August 15th-21st and the Last Best Beer Run & 5k scheduled for August 21st. Visit Billings through its grant program has been a supporter of this event.

## EVENTS

In the year 2020, almost all events in Billings were either canceled, postponed or delayed due to COVID-19. Fortunately, events are beginning to return with confirmed dates in place or plans to commit on the horizon. Concerts are returning to both ZooMontana and MetraPark. Billings will introduce a new mountain bike race, the first annual Rimrock MTB Dash which is an X-country style mountain bike race located at Acton Recreation Area. Some fan favorite road races also are returning including the Heart and Sole Run and Montana Marathon. Visitors will delight in the reopening of the Farmers Markets and the 30th Annual Strawberry Fest in July. This year also will see the long-awaited reopening of the Alberta Bair Theater in September. Events are a key component in the overall effort to drive tourism to Billings, and to give visitors those memorable experiences that will bring them to the destination year after year. Sharing these experiences with family and friends through social media delivers widespread interest in Billings and piques the interest of potential visitors. Research is showing that demand is growing for these live, social experiences that people value now more than ever.



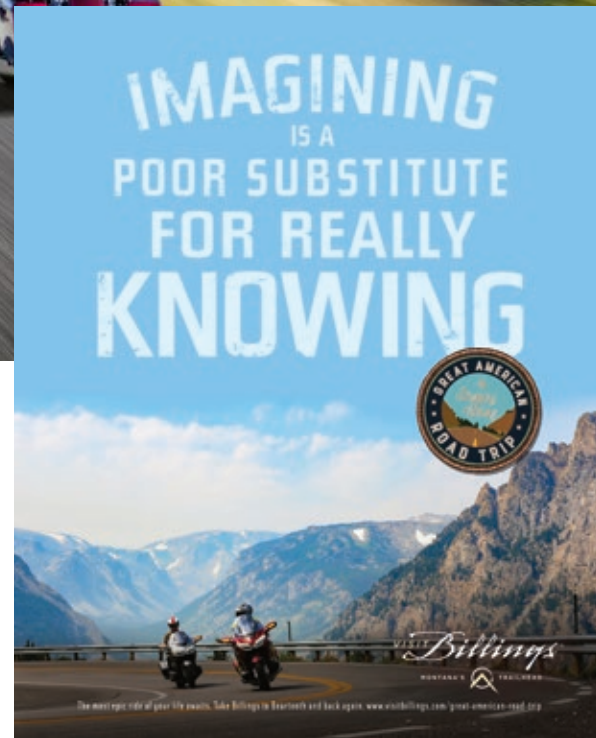
# MOTORCYCLE ENTHUSIASTS



The Beartooth Scenic Byway continues to draw in the two-wheeled market. The 68-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 212 has been described as “the perfect definition of what a great bike ride should be” by National Geographic and is consistently in the Top 10 best motorcycle rides in the U.S.

The Great American Road Trip campaign builds awareness of the destination’s proximity to the most scenic route into Yellowstone National Park, aligning with the 2-wheeled market which is drawn to curvy roads, riding long distances and experiencing the epic journey. National parks are key drivers of visitation in this segment.

BMW MOA’s 2020 Rally was rescheduled to 2021 in Great Falls due to COVID-19 concerns with organizers stating that features will essentially remain unchanged, encouraging this important audience segment to once again visit Billings.



FY21 plans include additional sponsored content development and niche digital targeting of the two-wheel audience. Billings’ hospitality amenities and access to surrounding Big Sky Country roads elevate its position with groups like BMW Motorcycle Owners of America, Gold Wing Road Riders Association, Harley Owners Group, and Yamaha Star Motorcycles. Visit Billings saw success in drawing the two-wheel audience with publications like RoadRUNNER Magazine and having a presence at Sturgis Bike Rally.

# GROUP TOUR MARKET

Yellowstone National Park and Little Bighorn Battlefield, along with the Lewis and Clark Trail, are key attractions positioning Billings as a trailhead to access Montana’s iconic sites. These points of interest make Billings a group-friendly destination for the domestic or international traveler. Billings’ proximity to the Beartooth Scenic Byway, as well as the northeast and north entrances to Yellowstone National Park, position the city well as a fantastic stop for a group tour itinerary.

With international restrictions still in place, the international group tour market still will differ from a typical year. However domestic group travel is certainly still a viable market of business for Billings. With many of the partners and stakeholders already reporting booked business for this summer, Visit Billings staff expect to have a strong return of group tour business to the destination.

While the destination and partners are fortunate to have a level of group business returning in 2021, it is

important to note that as the world reopens, Visit Billings and the destination will be in ever-greater competition with larger destinations in both budget and attractions. Visit Billings will remain strong in efforts to build relationships with operators by attending events such as ACGI, IPW, and International Roundup, which all help the team maintain relationships with both international and domestic tour operators.

Partnerships are critical to the continued success and growth of the group tour market. Regional partnerships with Visit Southeast Montana and the Red Lodge business community help Visit Billings to facilitate strong routing. Local partnerships with Billings Depot, ZooMontana, and others ensure our guests receive the best possible experiences while spending time at Montana’s Trailhead. Alongside these partnerships, continued work with MOTBD, Rocky Mountain International, and Brand USA position Billings well to earn new business and ensure the destination’s current business remains up to date on all that Billings has to offer.



# MEETINGS & CONVENTIONS



The recovery of in-person meetings is underway. Meeting recruitment continues to be an important priority to Visit Billings. According to Destination Analysts, the appeal of attending in-person meetings has improved in the last 12 months. Even a majority of those surveyed who are skeptical of travel for meetings still look forward to the next in-person meeting or convention opportunity once vaccinated or to a region deemed safer to travel.

Americans' travel readiness has resulted in an increase in leisure trip plans but travel for meetings or general business is slower to recover. Research shows that more than 86% of American travelers currently have at least tentative leisure travel plans and 73% expect to travel for leisure within the next three months alone. However, it was not until a mid-April 2021 report that showed the appeal of attending in-person meetings is improving. As of April 12, 2021, 54% of business travelers say they would be happy if their employer asked them to attend an in-person conference, convention, or group meeting in the next six months, according to Destination Analysts. However, two-thirds of business travelers feel it won't be until this summer or later that they will be truly comfortable attending in-person meetings.

In FY22, Visit Billings staff will support meetings planners in this time of uncertainty - providing them innovative thinking and fresh perspectives - to help Billings recover as a meeting destination. The team will help in accommodating rescheduling and format adjustments to help planners during these challenging times, in an effort to strengthen the destination's meetings business and support local stakeholders.

## GOALS

- 1.** Build greater brand awareness of Billings as a meeting destination.
- 2.** Foster relationships with qualified meeting planners looking for support to book small-market meetings, citywide events, and reunions.
- 3.** Service groups with high levels of customer satisfaction and event execution during the recovery, reassuring planners that Billings is an amazing meeting destination from both a support perspective and successful place to execute a meeting agenda for attendees.

### POTENTIAL ATTENDANCE - MEETINGS INDUSTRY CONFERENCES/SHOWS

Small Marketing Meetings • Military Reunion Network

# SPORTS AND TOURISM

Along with the leisure market, sports tourism played a major role in helping Billings' area businesses recover from COVID-19 impacts in early 2021. Organized youth sports, amateur, and high school events are essential in helping grow visitation to Montana's Trailhead.

In FY22, positioning Billings as a sports events destination remains a priority for Visit Billings with staff looking at new technologies and innovations that will shape the future of sports events and sports tourism. Key to success in sports for Billings is supporting local tournament directors whose commitment to softball, lacrosse, basketball, soccer, baseball tournaments as well as mountain bike and road races prove to be wildly successful for businesses as major draws for the city.

Also of key importance will be supporting governing bodies, executing awarded events like the DII CCA Women's Basketball Tournament with Montana State University Billings, as well as hosting state and local divisional tournaments. Following health guidelines for schools, teams, fans, officials, etc. also will be critical.

Visit Billings appreciates relationships with Montana State University Billings (MSUB), Rocky Mountain College (RMC), the MHSAA, area school districts, local tournament directors, as well as the City of Billings and Yellowstone County (MetraPark).

## GOALS

- 1.** Elevate Billings and Yellowstone County as the strongest sports destination in the region.
- 2.** Be a valuable and innovative resource to tournament directors and associations in efforts to host and grow competitions that draw athletes and fans from across the region while generating room nights for lodging partners during the recovery.
- 3.** Monitor conversations surrounding additional sports facilities in the destination to prepare for future sports sales for the DMO.





# SERVICING

## THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND BILLINGS TRAIL GUIDE PROGRAM

With the pent-up demand for travel and much greater optimism in 2021, people are once again planning everything from weekend getaways to epic road trips. Widespread vaccination efforts and safe-travel habits have done wonders for putting minds at ease, even for those with the most concerns. Travelers are more excited than ever to get out and explore, and Visit Billings is ready to show visitors the memorable experiences available at Montana's Trailhead. Visit Billings understands that the visitor experience plays one of the most important roles in growing visitation at a destination. Exceptional service leads to extended stays and repeat visitation. Making sure travelers feel welcomed and enjoy their stay at Montana's Trailhead is a major priority for Visit Billings. This will continue to be very important in a post-pandemic environment as well.

Initially launched in 2010 as the Trailhead Tourism Ambassadors (TTA) program and then transformed in 2019 into the Trail Guide Program, Visit Billings implemented the Billings Trail Guide program to elevate the city and help champion repeat visitation by shining a light on the importance of visitor orientation and facilitation. Today, the program inspires Billings' locals to promote their community by inviting visitors to experience authentic moments in the destination and with the locals. Participants of the program are more than frontline staff; they include all those in the hospitality industry, business community, as well as area residents. All residents play a crucial role in elevating the destination and growing visitation.

As the desire and enthusiasm for travel recommence, Visit Billings' aspirations to grow community pride with Trail Guides resume as well. In-person training, centralized digital resources, email communications, and incentives will continue to be important aspects of the program, but Visit Billings is always looking at new additions to grow this program's footprint. With upcoming events in the city and thriving attractions, this program can do even more to highlight the many opportunities visitors have to forge their own path when it comes time to make an itinerary.

In FY22, Visit Billings staff will continue to certify residents and frontline staff as Trail Guides while expanding the many communication outlets that exist within the program. This program will continue to bring the community together to ensure positive, memorable experiences for visitors. Additionally, the offerings provided by Trail Guides will be valuable as local tourism recovers and will echo the same excitement visitors bring to the destination.

## THE FACILITATION OF THE VISITOR

As summer 2021 approaches, the way Visit Billings directly interacts with visitors has drastically changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During FY21, the visitor information center (VIC) was closed to the public due to safety guidelines. This didn't stop visitors from gathering the information they needed; it instead changed where they found that information. Luckily for Visit Billings, pivoting to a more flexible model of direct visitor interaction allowed staff to continue helping visitors effectively, and this experience has transformed how operations move forward in an ever-changing tourism landscape.

Interestingly, travel habits practiced by visitors during the last fiscal year (in the midst of the pandemic) confirmed trends Visit Billings has been privy to during the last few years. Generally speaking, visitors are incredibly proactive by finding travel information online, and they're comfortable speaking to someone from Billings in avenues outside of the typical face-to-face conversation. In the last year, the Visit Billings team has answered visitor questions via email, phone calls, text message, social media, and even Reddit threads.

In FY22, materials produced by Visit Billings will continue to be a valuable and efficient way to learn about the destination. The materials Visit Billings produces are always used as the primary source of information when visitors have questions about the city and region. Additionally, the Visit Billings team works hard to ensure the visitor guide answers any question about Montana's Trailhead. This 30-page, ad-free publication is further supported by other popular pieces like the Visit Billings Scenic Guide Map and Billings Brew Trail one-sheeter. In tandem, these pieces do more than inspire visitors; they position the city as Montana's premiere leisure travel destination and are mailed at no cost to potential visitors inquiring. The guide is also available digitally at [VisitBillings.com](http://VisitBillings.com).

Moving forward, Visit Billings will continue to make an impact on as many visitors as possible. Even in a travel environment where a visitor center may not be as effective as it once was, the team will continue to meet travelers where they are - digitally and physically. In FY22, Visit Billings is looking forward to fully committing to a wider footprint of facilitation, making it easier than ever for travelers to find the information they need and the hospitality the city is known for.

# COOPERATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

## MONTANA OFFICE OF TOURISM AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Due to COVID-19, MOTBD placed their Joint Venture programs on hold which typically include co-op advertising opportunities such as TripAdvisor and Sojern. Once available again, there is value in not only leveraging dollars toward increasing audience reach and frequency, but in the association and tie to MOTBD messaging and brand pillars. Digital opportunities that hyper-target a qualified audience of travelers have performed strongly for Billings for decades. Accordingly, staff will look for those opportunities when they arise again.

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Visit Billings staff are proud to work with neighboring destinations and tourism regions and will continue to partner in strategic fashion in FY22 including:

- Partnership with Visit Southeast Montana will continue to be a priority for Visit Billings. As budgets allow, Visit Billings staff will work together in execution of familiarization tours, media buys, and site inspections. Visit Billings also participates on the Visit Southeast Montana Board as an ex-officio member which helps maintain an already strong relationship and communications.
- The Yellowstone Country travel region, particularly the Red Lodge area, continues to be an important region where Visit Billings will maintain and build relationships. Many wins have been realized through team efforts

between Billings and Red Lodge including the Travel Blog Exchange (TBEX), Hot Bike Tour, Outdoor Writers Association of America, BMW MOA Rally, and GWRRA Wing Ding 38. Billings is a gateway to the Beartooth Highway (considered part of Yellowstone Country) and Yellowstone National Park via Red Lodge. Billings is also a welcome destination for travelers coming out of the park who are seeking services, as well as shopping and urban amenities. There is value in strengthening these regional partnerships.

- Visit Billings will continue to partner with MOTBD, Montana's tourism regions, and DMOs on relevant consumer trade shows when appropriate. Billings has and will continue to partner with MOTBD and Visit Southeast Montana at the Rocky Mountain International Roundup and the USTA's IPW.
- Finally, falling in line with MOTBD's strategic goals, Billings will partner with the City of Billings, Chamber of Commerce, Yellowstone County, Downtown Billings Alliance and local leaders to preserve the assets and quality of life in the community, maintaining productive dialogue around seeking ways to improve Billings area tourism products to grow Billings as a year-round destination.



## CONTENT STRATEGY

A strong content strategy continues to play a vital role in Visit Billings' marketing strategy. Social media has proven to be effective in the inspirational phase of travel decision-making. Paired with the Visit Billings blog and email channels, the team is able to tell a complete story to potential visitors. As we grow closer to a vaccinated public and destinations begin to open up, we have stayed active in content creation initiatives to attract those who are ready to travel now and continue to inspire those who are still cautious. The Visit Billings social channels not only inspire future travel, they also assist the team in facilitating those who are already at Montana's Trailhead by giving them relevant information regarding travel in the area.

Visit Billings' social media strategy is focused on sharing the destination's story in a compelling, consistent and editorial manner, thus strengthening awareness for Billings' culture and heightening its position within the online space and among its competitive set. This will continue to be critical as travelers once again start planning getaways and vaccines continue to be accessible. According to a study by the World Travel & Tourism Council, 58% of American travelers will be focusing on domestic trips. As travel reemerges, Visit Billings owned social channels will keep us connected to the visitors and engage them with inspiring travel and destination content as well as upcoming events and the continued reopening of our area.

With storytelling as its driving characteristic, the content strategy focuses on extending the Visit Billings' voice into the online space as a persona – the approachable and lighthearted Billings Trail Guide. "Forge Your Own Path" represents the Billings mentality and is rooted in the local way of life. Visit Billings combines a friendly familiarity with a down-to-earth tone, finding a path for any personality. This includes a new one for Wellness, offering more than spas and saunas but an entire holistic approach to expand vacation options for any potential visitor. Visit Billings' voice reflects the optimism and inspiration that comes from being surrounded by the land of big skies and big dreams. New to Visit Billings' social channels this year are the Trailhead Tuesday videos where staff have spent time with local businesses and attractions to help highlight activities in the area.

Visit Billings' owned channels rely on an integrated editorial content calendar. The content calendar provides the opportunity to plan and prepare content (e.g. copy, photos, videos, etc.) ahead of time, week-by-week – streamlining social content development efforts across all channels and seeing how they all interrelate (i.e. from e-newsletters to media outreach). It will further facilitate the integration of seasonal messaging, key events, new local businesses, etc. The calendar assists the team in planning future videos to create content that engages a variety of personalities on social channels. Visit Billings also will increase exposure through the tagging of relevant accounts and hashtags to piggyback on timely industry conversations.



### FACEBOOK

Facebook serves as a Billings Trail Guide, posting consistent updates and addressing followers' inquiries in a timely manner. The type of content will include information on events, photography/video, details on attractions, closings/openings, what's new, user-generated content, and third-party endorsement through press coverage, etc. The Facebook channel will:

- Encourage dialogue by asking followers' questions.
- Be a channel for highlighting partners when special events are happening through ticket giveaways when possible.
- Include links within posts, when relevant, to help drive traffic to the Billings blog and website.
- Tag relevant hospitality partners, attractions, events and visitors in posts, when applicable, to maximize visibility and reach.
- Create greater social reach with the Trailhead Tuesday videos.
- Incorporate paid campaigns aimed at attracting new followers from key markets.



### INSTAGRAM

Instagram is the inspiration channel for Visit Billings with more than 5,000 followers, guiding travelers on their dreaming and ultimately planning phases. The Instagram channel features compelling imagery and videos, both branded and consumer-generated. The Instagram channel will:

- Curate and utilize consumer-generated photography and video.
- Create editorial photos and videos aimed to highlight destination experiences and offerings in a visually-compelling way.
- Leverage the existing #VisitBillings and #MontanasTrailhead hashtag while encouraging visitors and stakeholders to do the same.
- Create engaging and authentic "Stories" to show followers real-time activities and inspire them to follow upcoming events.
- Create greater social reach with the Trailhead Tuesday videos.
- Engage with traditional media through the use of designated hashtags to aggregate related content and join in on relevant and timely social media conversations.

Visit Billings also used Instagram to help expand the Sloth Campaign with ZooMontana by creating an Instagram page for Winston the Sloth. Visit Billings and ZooMontana staff co-manage this channel to continue engagement and interest in coming to Billings to see Winston. This summer, the team will use this channel to highlight other great attractions by introducing Winston as an "unofficial" mascot of Billings.

### EMAIL

Email marketing is an effective way to reach those travelers who have specifically expressed interest with Visit Billings, connecting with them in a valuable and cost-effective way. The Visit Billings team educates, engages and inspires them to travel to this destination by exposing travelers to editorial content, blog articles and social content. Visit Billings has a 15% open rate with a database of just over 30,000 contacts.

### VISIT BILLINGS BLOG

Visit Billings will continue to utilize social and email channels to promote new blog content, featuring experiences that align with the interest-based personas established for the website, from History Buffs to Foodies and Outdoor Enthusiasts. Visit Billings team members along with tourism colleagues and stakeholders will have the opportunity to be blog post authors and feature their own unique Billings Trail Guide experiences

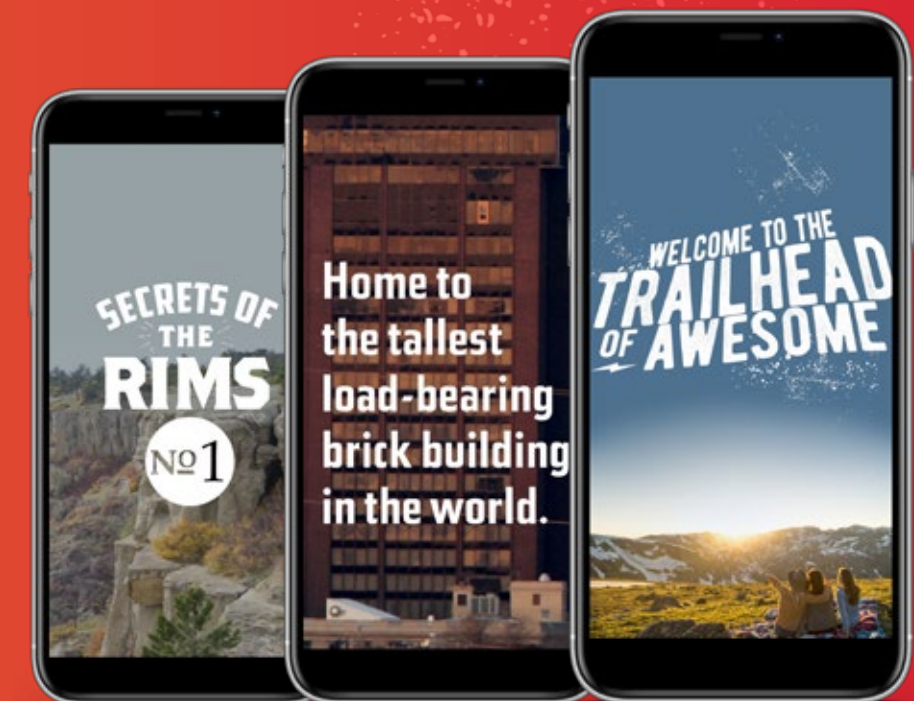
### GIPHY'S

Also new to the Visit Billings' content strategy is the creation of animated GIFs through GIPHY, which is the best way to search, share, discover and create animated GIFs on the Internet. These Billings and Montana inspired stickers can be used on any GIF keyboard to help enhance user-generated content for locals and visitors alike. Ten GIPHY animations were created in spring 2021, and as Visit Billings expands its campaigns, the team will have the opportunity to add to these.



## Tik Tok

TikTok is now boasting more than 800 million monthly active users, worldwide. This newer social channel is now the 6th largest social network and is expected to keep growing. TikTok celebrates storytellers, making this an opportunity for Visit Billings to expand our content strategy. This channel will be first tested in the Summer 2021 marketing campaign by sharing unique facts about the destination in hopes of inspiring additional research into visiting the area.



# EARNED MEDIA



Visit Billings' public relations strategy focuses on driving tourism through generating earned media coverage and influencer engagement for the destination in target markets, with editorial stories and influencer commentary that focuses on the many experiences Billings' visitors can enjoy in a way that brings the "Forge Your Own Path" brand to life. In spring 2020 as COVID-19 closed many destinations and their attractions, travel media likewise halted a majority of coverage they dedicated to destinations and instead pivoted more toward travel safety content. Now, with

vaccines restoring confidence, travel media are likely to again turn their editorial focus to the top leisure travel destinations in the country, with digital leading the way and topics such as regional travel and outdoor experiences being of particular interest.

Local writers and content creators help tell these local stories of Billings and the region. Visit Billings partners with the MOTBD, tourism and hospitality partners, and neighboring regions in promoting visitation to Billings through earned media initiatives.

A few key FY22 tactics include:

## MEDIA RELATIONS AND OUTREACH

Throughout the year, Visit Billings will continue to build relationships with influencers and journalists that will help grow the brand and inspire travel. While the typical events Visit Billings attends, such as Public Relations Society of America Travel and Tourism Conference and North America Travel Blog Exchange haven't returned, past attendance has allowed the team to build relationships for the influencer program. With the positive news on vaccinations and reopening, Visit Billings has begun reaching out to potential influencers to visit the area in Summer and Fall of 2021. In addition to inviting journalists and influencers to visit the region to experience Montana's Trailhead for themselves (and of course by extension share that experience with their readers), Visit Billings will be regularly and consistently reaching out to regional and national media with news angles and stories as we introduce new tourism product in the region, whether it be a new hiking trail, a new restaurant, or a special seasonal beer from one of our breweries. This frequent contact will help further develop critical relationships with travel media and influencers, and generate an increase in editorial coverage for the destination.

## PRESS ROOM AND BLOG

The VisitBillings.com press page will be updated this year to include sample itineraries for niche audiences (outdoor adventure, culinary, couples, families, etc.), story ideas, trail guide videos and more video and image assets. This is part of the necessary step of developing media/influencer relations content to promote Billings. The pressroom will serve as the content hub for all ongoing media/influencer outreach as we begin to further reintroduce Billings to national and targeted regional media/influencers as the country recovers from COVID-19. Content is an important part of marketing and earned media efforts and, as such, the previously mentioned blog content is produced not only for consumers, but to inspire influencers, journalists and bloggers and therefore nicely complements public relations initiatives.



FORGE  YOUR  
VISIT *Billings*  
OWN  PATH

# 2021-2022 STRATEGIC GOALS



# STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

## FOSTER VISITOR GROWTH

Tourism is vital to the success of the local business community and the community as a whole. Tourism supports more than 15,000 jobs locally and enhances the overall quality of life by helping support business. As a leading industry in Yellowstone County and Billings, the travel and tourism industry generates more than \$500 million in new revenue locally every year. Fostering visitation is crucial to the health of the lodging and hospitality industries even more so as the economy recovers from COVID-19 impacts.

As Visit Billings works to reeducate potential visitors and the economy begins a recovery, the investment in tourism marketing by Visit Billings remains key. Appropriate marketing and sales efforts and strategies work to elevate Billings as a travel destination supporting stakeholders and tourism partners including retailers, restaurants, and local attractions.

The role tourism plays in Billings is significant. The economic impact is priority, but so is the opportunity to host visitors from all parts of the world. People come to Montana and Billings to experience the culture, traditions, and gastronomy. At the same time, residents are able to welcome guests and make them feel included no matter their hometown, home country, or background. Tourism creates a cultural exchange between local citizens and tourists. Such enrichment is important to the future of the destination and visitor growth as well as the quality of life and health of the Billings community as a whole.

Visit Billings is proud to join the Billings Chamber of Commerce and other city leadership to identify and dismantle conscious and non-conscious systemic bias and discriminatory actions within the community through education, training, advocacy, mentorship, and conversations. This is the Chamber's and Visit Billings' Diversity and Inclusion mission and is woven into greater strategies as well as every conversation and decision contemplated and made by Visit Billings.

## THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Creating the best visitor experience imaginable is a top priority for the destination, and the Billings Trail Guides program leads the way in the local tourism industry. This program continues to foster a sense of pride and place for residents by educating them about all Billings has to offer as a community and tourism destination. In Billings, research has previously reflected a weakness in civic pride among Billings' area citizens. Staff members continue to work to grow this program and not lose momentum by graduating Trail Guides who are ready to help visitors feel welcome despite COVID-19 impacts to the tourism industry and community. Even as we

deal with the pandemic and its impacts today, Billings' residents have the capacity to elevate Billings which can significantly impact visitor growth and the visitor experience.

The purpose of the Billings Trail Guide Program is to give residents the opportunity to become brand ambassadors for Montana's Trailhead. All Trail Guides should have extensive knowledge of the best of Billings, and are able to share the local flair with visitors they encounter. As guests come to Billings, and seek to connect with the city and locals, Visit Billings staff wants to make sure the community is prepared to help. That's why exclusive resources for Trail Guides have been created to provide insightful recommendations for residents, which are available at VisitBillings.com.

Visit Billings understands that the visitor experience plays one of the most important roles in growing visitation as a destination. Exceptional service leads to repeat visitation and extended stays. Making sure travelers feel welcome and enjoy their stay at Montana's Trailhead is a major priority for Visit Billings. This is very important in the post-pandemic environment. The Visit Billings staff works in a myriad of ways to help create a positive experience for visitors.

## INCREASE LEISURE VISITATION

Visit Billings' marketing and sales efforts aim to position Billings and the surrounding area as a preferred destination for leisure visitation. Leisure travel marketing strategies will remain the highest priority for the organization as leisure visitation supports all Visit Billings' stakeholders (hotels, motels, campgrounds) as well as tourism partners including restaurants, retailers, and attractions. Regional marketing campaigns will focus on road trip itineraries and partnerships with attractions like ZooMontana, Alberta Bair Theater, MetraPark, and cultural entities to name a few.

Covid-19 required the Visit Billings team to be flexible in Leisure Marketing. In spring 2020, it was expected that the world would be fully reopened and, as a destination, we would be competing for visitors with larger destinations such as Denver. However in summer 2020, research showed that people were looking to travel to less populated places and enjoy more outdoor experiences. As vaccinations continue to roll out into summer 2021, Billings is well positioned to capture the audience seeking outdoor adventures. A report conducted in March by ADARA showed Billings, MT in the Top 10 destinations for outdoor and remote travel between July 1 and August 31, 2021. Billings is well positioned to meet that need with amenities like fine dining and the brewery district along with

gateway access to national historic, cultural and natural attractions - all without the crowds found in a typical major destination.

## MEETINGS, REUNIONS, GROUP TOURS, AND SERVICING

Even with the COVID-19 pandemic impacts to the meetings industry, Billings is a desirable meeting destination. By marketing, promoting, and selling Billings as a meeting destination, Visit Billings can generate room nights and revenue for stakeholders which can eventually help in a recovery for the community's economy overall.

Visit Billings staff strives to be innovative in how to meet the needs of meeting planners during this time and incentivize decision-makers to choose Billings. Staff inspire and orient meeting professionals with thoughtful sales strategies. This segment can continue to have a strong economic impact on the community. The Visit Billings staff also assists planners who are in-market to execute meetings in the destination by helping facilitate their needs with attendance-building, travel reassurances, registration needs, welcome activities, and in some cases financial assistance.

Reunions and domestic group tours are also important segments that can grow visitation to Billings in a pandemic recovery. Similar to leisure visitation, opportunities for growth for both the reunion and group tour segments are priorities for Visit Billings staff. Working with tour operators and reunion planners to boast Billings as key partner for their booking needs is a key priority.

## SPORTS TOURISM

Next to leisure visitation, sports tourism is playing a large role in the economic recovery of Billings as a travel destination following COVID-19 transitions and impacts. Therefore, positioning Billings as a sports events destination will remain a priority for Visit Billings in FY22. Staff will continue to foster growth in this segment by supporting partners like the MHSA, MSU Billings, Rocky Mountain College, area school districts, local tournament directors, as well as the City of Billings and Yellowstone County.

## THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

Together with tourism partners, Visit Billings has made strong gains in growing international travel to southeast Montana in recent years. The impacts of this travel segment due to COVID-19 and accompanying international travel restrictions are substantial. As the world continues to reopen, it is important for Visit Billings to remain competitive in this segment as (similar to group travel) there is strong

competition. In FY22, Visit Billings plans to attend IPW, ACGI and International Roundup. It is important for Visit Billings to maintain relationships with international tour operators so overseas visitors who have ranked sightseeing, fine dining, and national parks/ monuments as major draws in deciding where to spend time while visiting the United States keep Billings top-of-mind as new travel habits emerge. Visit Billings will work with the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development and partners like Visit Southeast Montana and Rocky Mountain International to remain relevant in travel recovery to the international market.



FORGE YOUR

Billings  
VISIT  
WITH

# BUDGETS



# BUDGETS

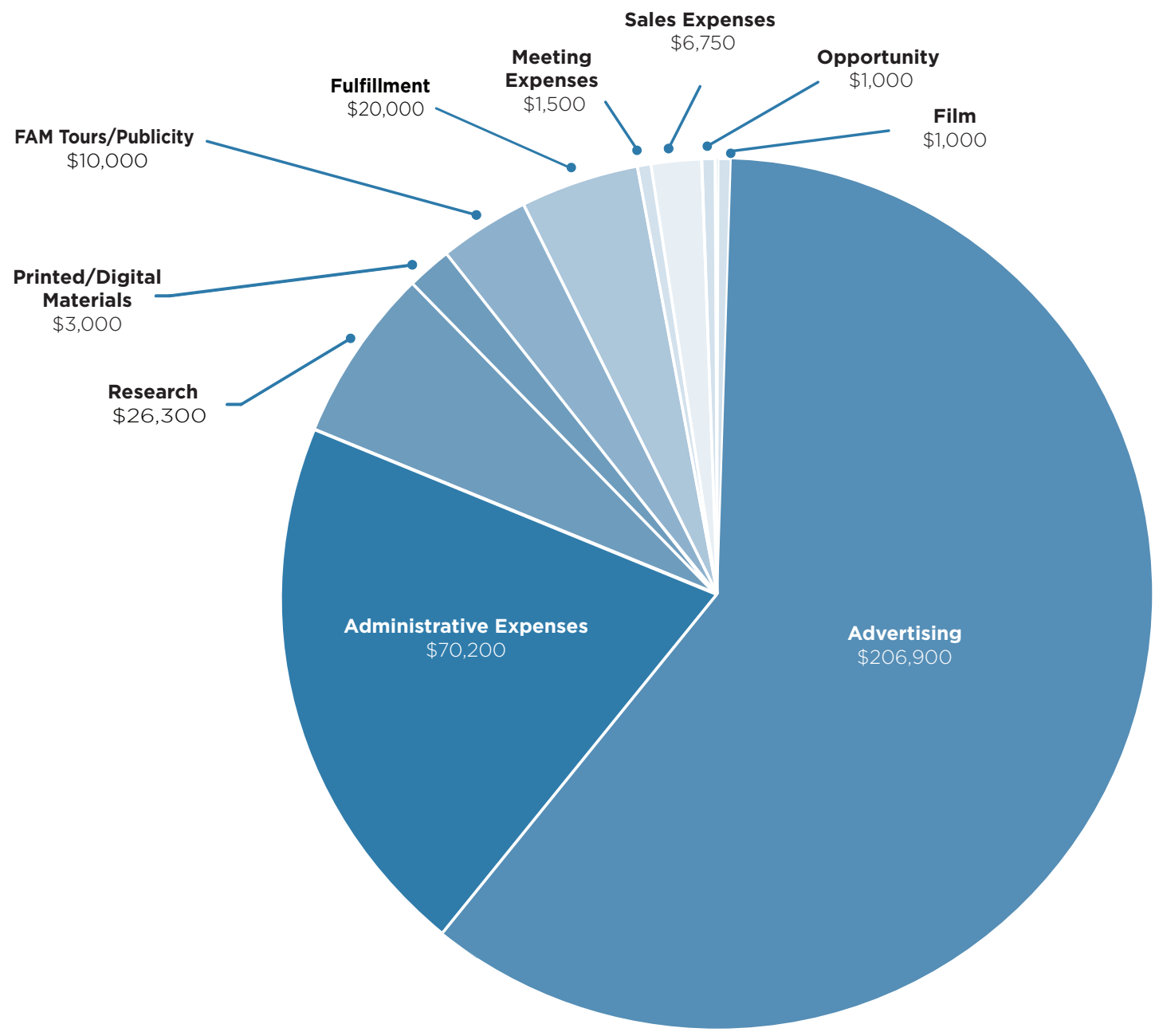
## STATE LODGING FACILITY USE TAX BUDGET (CVB)

Advertising	\$206,900
Fulfillment	\$20,000
Printed Materials	\$3,000
Sales Expenses	\$6,750
FAM Tours/Publicity	\$10,000
Research	\$26,300
Opportunity	\$1,000
Film	\$1,000
Meeting Expenses	\$1,500
Website	\$2,500
Staff Expenses	\$1,850
Administrative Expenses	\$70,200

**TOTAL FY22 BUDGET \$351,000**



## STATE LODGING TAX DOLLARS (CVB)



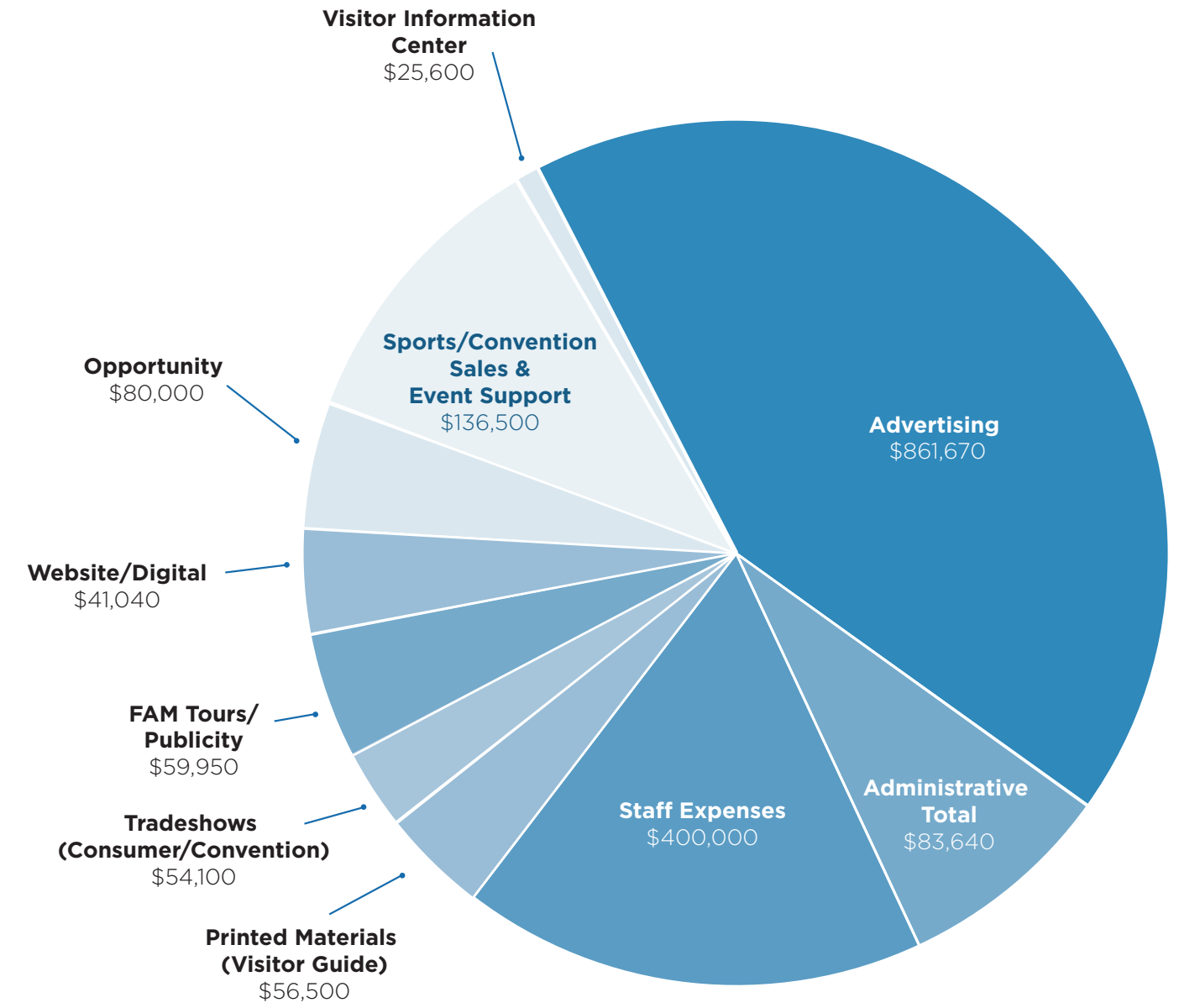
**Projected Lodging Tax Income: \$351,000**  
**TOTAL LODGING TAX BUDGET: \$351,000**

**BILLINGS TOURISM BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BTBID) BUDGET**

<b>REVENUES TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,800,000</b>
Projected Revenue	\$1,800,000
<b>MARKETING &amp; SALES TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,316,360</b>
Advertising	\$861,670
Opportunity	\$80,000
Printed Materials (Visitor Guide)	\$56,500
Sports/Convention Sales & Event Support	\$136,500
Tradeshows (Consumer/Convention)	\$54,100
FAM Tours/Publicity	\$59,950
Website/Digital	\$41,040
Visitor Information Center	\$25,600
Film Recruitment	\$1,000
<b>STAFF &amp; ADMINISTRATIVE TOTAL</b>	<b>\$483,640</b>
Staff Expenses	\$400,000
Administrative Expenses	\$83,640
<b>BTBID TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$1,800,000</b>



**BILLINGS TOURISM BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BTBID) DOLLARS - BUDGET FY22**



**BTBID TOTAL EXPENSES: \$1,800,000**  
REVENUES TOTAL \$1,800,000



