



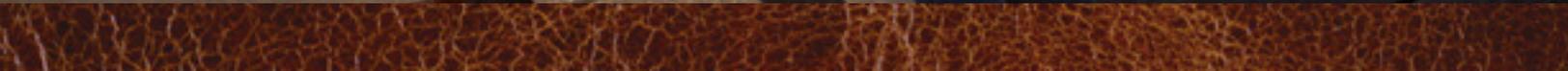
## 2020-2021 MARKETING PLAN AND BUDGET

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

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# 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 to the hospitality industry which boosts the local economy as a whole.

Visit Billings is funded primarily through the BTBID and through a portion of the State Lodging Facility Use Tax. 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 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. 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.

## 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, 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, Little Bighorn Battlefield, and Pompeys Pillar making the region an idyllic destination for connecting to the best that Montana offers.

# VISIT BILLINGS TEAM

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As managed by:



## VISIT BILLINGS BOARD LEADERSHIP



### BILLINGS TBID BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

★ **JOE STUDINER**  
 Chairman, Erck Hotels

★ **BRIAN ARNESON**  
 Vice Chairman,  
 Quality Inn & Suites

★ **GEORGE MARAGOS**  
 Treasurer, Northern Hotel

★ **SHELLI MANN**  
 Boothill Inn & Suites

★ **LORI WALKER**  
 Home2 Suites by Hilton

★ **RON SPENCE**  
 Billings Hotel and  
 Convention Center

★ **STEVE WAHRlich**  
 Best Western Plus  
 Clocktower Inn

### BILLINGS CHAMBER/CVB EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

★ **MIKE NELSON**  
 Chairman,  
 Northern Hotel

★ **BRIAN BROWN**  
 Immediate Past Chair,  
 First Interstate Bank

★ **NICHOLE MILES**  
 Chair Elect, St. Vincent  
 Healthcare Foundation

# MONTANA'S TRAILHEAD & COVID-19

Travel and tourism at Montana's Trailhead thrives on recreation, competition, exploration, learning, and networking. Travel restrictions and social distancing have left many people confused and unsure of travel, with much of the data showing Americans being less likely to resume travel until a vaccine is available. The Visit Billings staff and boards (Chamber/CVB and Billings Tourism Business Improvement District boards) are committed to scalable solutions for FY21 as a vast majority of budget impacts to the non-profit organization will be realized in the future depending on multiple economic recovery scenarios. That being said, there is a mission to meet and stakeholders to assist, which remain the top priorities for Visit Billings in transition from FY20 to FY21.

Visit Billings staff will adjust budgets as well as marketing and sales strategies continually, as it has since March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, Visit Billings is preparing to regain momentum in visitor growth with innovation and ingenuity. Looking at a continuum of three phases of focus, Visit Billings is working through the following phases of the COVID-19 pandemic: Mitigate, Restart, and Reimagine - all aligning with resiliency.

At the writing of this document, the organization, and Billings community in general, are toward the end of the mitigation phase of the Destination THINK! reference. Re-normalizing life with COVID-19 by working through the pandemic and its impacts is challenging. Staff will continue to adapt programming and finances in order to continue to meet missions. This is all part of the Restart phase. As travel resumes in a new normal, and hotel occupancy increases, tourism marketing with messaging of safety, responsibility, and wide-open space under Montana's big sky will be relevant.



Charts by: Destination THINK!

Additionally, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Visit Billings team has 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 a crisis by offering positive messaging, staying active on social channels which speak to repeat visitors and potential visitors in a #VisitBillingsLater tone, and preparing for tourism's role(s) in a recovery. Tourism management is key for today, tomorrow, and the weeks, months, and years ahead. As we work to anchor the organization, new perspectives will be applied and strategies adjusted. Visit Billings' staff members are focused on:

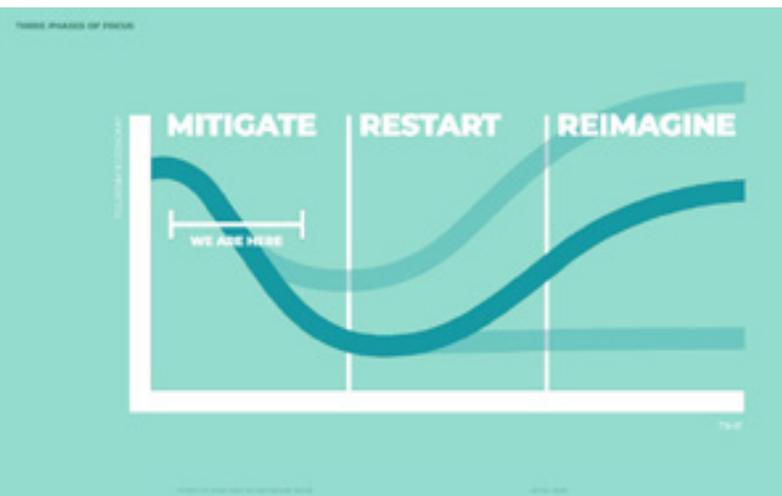
## **RESPONSIBILITY, RELATIONSHIPS, RESOURCES, REEDUCATION, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCY**

### **RESPONSIBILITY**

From Governor Steve Bullock's first directive, Visit Billings staff and board members have met the demands of the mandates and regulations. Leadership at the federal, state, and local levels continue to be key to best curb the spread of this virus and soften concerns pertaining to the so-called second wave. At the writing of this document, Visit Billings marketing efforts are not encouraging people to visit the community. Travel awaits and we encourage people to be responsible and prepare to Visit Billings later. In the meantime, looking at past trips, dreaming, and planning for the next adventure are all important actions for the traveler's mind and soul. Visit Billings wants to play a responsible role in that planning.

### **RELATIONSHIPS**

Staff have made it a priority to communicate with stakeholders, tourism partners, and volunteers in a show of support. It's also important for staff to support



peers, colleagues, and neighbors. After all, Billings is Strong - #HospitalityStrong. During the first week of the first closure directive from the Governor, Visit Billings executed a board request to create positive messaging, and created the HospitalityStrong message that was available via digital graphic, sticker, storefront posters, and window clings. Additionally, staff have communicated and accommodated meeting planners, sports tournament directors, and other colleagues who either cancelled or postponed events in Billings.

### **RESOURCES**

Communicating resources to potential visitors in the best way we can, including the COVID-19 section at VisitBillings.com, has been a priority. Staff are still fulfilling traveler information requests to grow visitation appropriately. If a person asks for Billings' travel information via mail, email, website, call, or text, that request has been fulfilled. The organization remains a resource for travel planning. Also, the Billings Chamber of Commerce, which manages Visit Billings, has hosted Chamber Town Hall Meetings via Zoom, offering a wealth of information to colleagues and stakeholders. A specific tourism meeting allowed Visit Billings to communicate with stakeholders, peers, and colleagues, locally and regionally.

### **REEDUCATION**

There will be an appropriate time to begin reeducating the traveling public about choosing Billings as a destination to visit. The team is ready for this reemergence of the brand – once appropriate. Marketing strategies are strong with a regional focus supporting data that shows people will travel less by air and more by road opting for trips closer to their home. Staff are prepared to attract visitors in the drive-market when it is responsible to do so. Social channels are active now and will continue to be used responsibly even beyond the mitigation phase. How Visit Billings staff conducted business a month ago or yesterday no longer applies. Habits have and will continue to change. Business plans and strategies have been, and will continue to be, adjusted. Innovation is key.

### **RECOVERY**

Assessing and reassessing the pandemic's impact on the Visit Billings' budget, on the industry locally and in the future, is a constant task. The organization's role in recovery, and in helping reset the economy, is relevant. Adapting the budget was a first priority and remains such. Strength in leisure travel in a recovery will be key

and funds are poised to help execute leisure marketing efforts accordingly. How does Visit Billings help rebuild visitor volume in a recovery? Operating effectively and communicating with visitors sensitively may help drive short-term hospitality business. However, there are many surrounding communities where residents are concerned about travel resuming. They don't want transient business in order to protect the health of their residents. These communities are partners to Visit Billings. With Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development (MOTBD) and local leadership, concerns will be addressed and Billings will be positioned as 'an open for business' destination.

During the 2008 recession, recovery efforts focused heavily on booking sports and hobbies, concerts and festivals and gradually growing from staycations to wider-market visits. Recovery from this crisis will likely be quite different and dependent on shifting attitudes toward travel and public gatherings, respecting social distancing until a vaccine is available. Being funded by hotel tax and assessments, travel reports like Smith Travel Research's occupancy reports will allow staff to monitor growth and potential budget increases which may allow the organization to invest in additional marketing and sales efforts and possibly additional personnel.

### **RESILIENCY**

Visit Billings, with tourism partners and community leadership, will get through this collectively by supporting each other – together.

According to HVS Advisors, the COVID-19 pandemic will have two types of impacts on the lodging industry. The first impact is from the travel restrictions the United States is slowly beginning to emerge from (domestically only at the writing of this document), which have been necessary to save lives. Billings has felt the impact of these restrictions with cancellations or postponements of sporting events, group business, meetings, and leisure trips.

The loss of transient lodging demand and at least three temporary hotel closures in Yellowstone County have harshly impacted funding for Visit Billings. After travel restrictions are lifted, the second impact will occur as the economy struggles to regain its footing. This is what is difficult for DMO's like Visit Billings. Projecting the lodging tax revenue and TBID assessments in order to protect mission, is, and will be, a task as there will be uncertainty from the Mitigate to the Restart phases and ultimately into the Reimagine phase where a recovery is in process.

# POSTCARDS FROM FY20

**Travel Blog Exchange**

In September 2019, more than 500 people with ties to the blogging industry descended on Billings, Montana. These professionals gathered for the Travel Blog Exchange, the largest blogging conference of its kind. Visitors came well prepared with laptops, cameras, notebooks, and adventure gear.

Visit Billings and a variety of amazing partners came together to give some of the largest online voices currently writing a taste of Montana's Trailhead.

**Billings Trail Guides**

The Billings Trail Guides Program was launched this past year to fantastic results and community support. Our Visitor Services Manager pairs an engaging, in-person presentation with online content in order to showcase Billings' most historic and visitor-friendly sites.

Look forward to seeing this program continue as an educational piece and a way to encourage community pride.



A postcard featuring the Visit Billings logo, the GNAC Cross Country Championships logo, and a photograph of runners. The back of the postcard has a dashed box for a stamp and the handwritten message "See you at the finish line 😊".

**GNAC Cross Country Championships**

This past October, Billings hosted the GNAC Cross Country Championships. A cold weekend did little to discourage the many athletes and teams that came to compete in Montana's Trailhead. Runners in both the Men's and Women's divisions received a warm welcome to our city, and these athletes inspired every spectator who enjoyed the race at Amend Park.

Visit Billings takes pride in our city's receptive attitude of sporting events, and we can't wait until our next chance to welcome another tournament and group of athletes.



A postcard featuring a "TIME TO HIT THE ROAD" graphic, the Great American Road Trip logo, and a photograph of a desert landscape. The back of the postcard has a dashed box for a stamp.

**The Great American Road Trip**

After years of research and planning, Visit Billings finalized plans for an initiative that is incredibly apt in the current travel climate: the Great American Road Trip. This campaign is a call to action for many travelers searching for open space and breathtaking views.

The Visit Billings team is confident the Great American Road Trip will lead to safe travel in our region and state, and we hope it helps people appreciate the 'little things' even more.

# MOTBD BRAND PILLAR ALIGNMENT



It's important to note the crucial role a state tourism brand plays in destination marketing of cities. The marketing strategies and programs led by the MOTBD help boast not only Montana's tourism brand, but also those brands of Montana's cities and towns. In spite of issues the COVID-19 pandemic presents in tourism and travel, it's as important as ever for Visit Billings to align with MOTBD's brand.

In considering the MOTBD brand pillars in marketing and sales strategies of Billings as a tourism destination, it's also key to rely on resources that tell us more about who is visiting Big Sky Country, eastern Montana, and Billings. For this, Visit Billings and its agency of record, BCF, review tourism data from Destination Analysts, VisaVue, Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) from the University of Montana, and Smith Travel Research. The pillars which will help guide decisions identifying areas of opportunity in promotion are:

## **STRATEGY I**

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

The Montana "Big Sky" experience ranks high as a wish list destination, but a significant gap exists among those who desire to visit and those who actually travel to Montana, likely due to perceived challenges with accessibility, cost and perhaps those who find the desired wilderness experience intimidating. People seek adventure and unspoiled nature but a majority of travelers also prefer to have the creature comforts of civilization and hospitality. Visit Billings' creative messaging will focus on Billings' proximity to the surrounding unspoiled nature without sacrificing the modern hospitality travelers appreciate. Positioned as Montana's Trailhead, drive less than an hour in any direction from Billings and a visitor is offered access to national monuments like Pompeys Pillar and Little Bighorn Battlefield as well as attractions like the Beartooth Highway and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. From Billings, visitors can see five mountain ranges - Pryor, Big Horn, Bull, Crazy and Absaroka-Beartooth. Billings pairs these recognized "Big Sky" attractions with modern hotel amenities, great brunch spots, the Billings Brew Trail, local cultural and art exhibits, as well as dozens of multi-use trails that are framed by remarkable sandstone Rimrocks and the Yellowstone River.



## STRATEGY II

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

Billings may boast big city amenities that don't always align with this pillar, but it does offer a small-town feel. Billings offers travelers a destination for shopping, nightlife, dining, great accommodations, access to the arts, and a chance to learn about regional cultures. Equally as important to the visitor are Montanans. Montana residents make amazing Trail Guides who invite visitors to connect with local artists, artisans, and historians – to name a few.

## STRATEGY III

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

Whether visitors seek adrenaline-pumping adventure, fun recreation, or easy-paced experiences, Billings is the perfect place to set up home base. It is Montana's Trailhead. With nearly 4,500 hotel rooms, a wide variety of local attractions, and access to breathtaking views, Billings is a perfect part of a Great American Road Trip itinerary or a quick weekend get-away.



# TRAVEL DECISION 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 is as follows. While these pillars and phases still hold true, Visit Billings is adjusting marketing efforts to take into account the effects of COVID-19 on travel planning.

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

### **INSPIRATION**

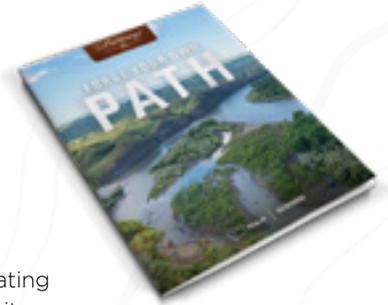
The process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative.

### **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 inspire potential visitors to the state with inspirational imagery and copy. MOTBD focused strategies on Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks as well as adventures – which aligns with the outdoor recreation travelers will be increasingly seeking once travel reemerges after COVID-19 directives relax. 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 will assist with this phase for the region. Visit Billings appreciates investments made by MOTBD for the Eastern Montana Tourism Marketing Initiative.

- 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 will continue to leverage stunning imagery, targeted messaging and compelling calls to action in marketing materials and the Great American Road Trip campaign.
- 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, all reasons to choose southeastern Montana as part of one's route. Wyoming's state tourism office strategizes to keep the drive market in Wyoming by enticing travelers making 'on the road decisions' to access Yellowstone National Park via Cody. Visit Billings hopes to work closely with partners to help ensure potential travelers are inspired to make eastern Montana part of their travels for incredible

adventures and ease of access to landmarks. Targeted marketing and out-of-home (OOH) programming including billboards can assist. Visit Billings has contracted several billboards in South Dakota and Wyoming to help boost Billings as a must-see stop along travels.

- Regionally, Billings itself offers a vacation destination to 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. In a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and until there is a vaccine available, Visit Billings can emphasize this focus as part of the Great American Road Trip campaign, as more people will embark upon getaways by car 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. Regions and CVBs provide tools to help the visitor plan a route and encourage a longer stay.

### **VISITBILLINGS.COM**

Visit Billings launched its newly re-designed VisitBillings.com website last year, where the destination's "Forge Your Own Path" brand has been brought to life. The new site also addressed critical site design and functionality updates. 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. The new site is designed to ensure the content is relevant to the individual needs of a potential traveler. New persona-driven web content was developed to guide prospective History Buffs, Outdoor Enthusiasts, Foodies, Shopaholics and Arts & Culture Aficionados to Billings. The Great American Road Trip microsite will also orient visitors.

### **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 AIRPORT**

Visit Billings is working closely with Billings Logan International Airport to monitor the emergence of travel by air relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. When flight travel resumes without mandatory quarantines for non-residents, Visit Billings will continue to highlight direct flights with United, Delta, American Airlines and Frontier Airlines from cities such as Denver, Minneapolis (MSP), Seattle, and Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW). 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 use of services, and enjoy entertainment.

**THE FACILITATION PHASE** is where the traveler seeks experiences en route to a destination and during a stay.

- Tourism Regions, Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs), communities and organizations must all work together to make visitors aware of the full array of experiences available to guests.
- The Billings Visitor Information Center (VIC) is managed by Visit Billings and housed on the main floor of the Billings Chamber of Commerce office one mile from the Interstate 90 corridor. Nearly 25 part-time volunteers operate the center, which is normally open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with expanded hours on some high-season weekends. The VIC is complete with brochures, maps, guides and retail offerings. The Visit Billings and Chamber teams are knowledgeable, welcoming and on-the-ready to facilitate visitor queries. The goal is to foster successful stays and future Montana travels. At the writing

of this document, the Billings VIC remains closed due to COVID-19 impacts; however, protective shields, signage, and social distancing protocols are being installed and implemented to protect visitors, employees, and volunteers upon reopening.

- The Visit Billings staff keeps an open dialogue of communication and information flow with tourism partners, area hotels, attractions, businesses and the community in preparation to provide exceptional customer service to 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 to visitors. It provides frontline employees training and support regarding 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, and YouTube. Once COVID-19 directives relax, visitors will be invited to engage with the #VisitBillings brand throughout their journey, safely.







# MARKETING STRATEGY

# FORGE YOUR 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

Impacts to the upcoming summer travel season remain unknown due to COVID-19 implications. Visit Billings marketing strategies are focused on being highly flexible so staff can react quickly to the changing environment.

Emerging travel will be heavily impacted on three factors:

- National and state-level lifting of restrictions on travel
- When travelers feel safe to travel once more; vaccination included
- How potential travelers are financially impacted by the economy

While Billings is poised to successfully capture market share when travel resumes, there are a number of factors that must be holistically taken into consideration as Visit Billings moves into the summer or warm season marketing strategies.

Due to COVID-19 concerns, Destination Analysts' research shows the 2020 warm season traveler will be more inclined to travel by car. As a destination, Billings not only rewards their journeys with easy access to the Yellowstone scenic route via Beartooth Highway, but also the inspiring Rimrocks, Pompeys Pillar, and vast, iconic points of interest easily accessible from Billings.

## GOALS

1. Inspire travel to Billings once again after the COVID-19 impacts begin to subside, and travel re-emerges, with the intent to quickly recapture market share, drive hotel occupancy, and eventually focus on lengthening average stay.
2. Generate awareness of Billings as the Most Scenic Route into Yellowstone and its proximity to iconic attractions as part of a Great American Road Trip. Staff will closely monitor COVID-19 restrictions for Yellowstone National Park and other National Park Service entities as well as Montana State Parks, events, and local draws to the destination.

3. Increase awareness of Billings, Montana as being the place to experience unspoiled adventure without sacrificing the comfort of hospitality – particularly as travelers specifically seek outdoor adventure travel.

4. Leverage the “Great American Road Trip” campaign – integrating the ZooMontana’s sloth exhibit – as a marketing re-entry strategy targeting prospective visitors, while “Forge Your Own Path” will continue to serve as an umbrella brand position.

5. It will be important for Visit Billings and the local business community to pledge to be open and safe for visitors. Signage in storefronts reassuring best health practices with the Yellowstone County Open and Safe badge will be key.

With the Great American Road Trip campaign, the summer season marketing strategy will continue to establish ownership of the most scenic route to Yellowstone National Park via Beartooth Highway. Ranked alongside Bryce Canyon and Glacier National Park, Yellowstone is a bucket list family attraction. The “Billings - Yellowstone’s Scenic Route” messaging will continue to emphasize all that Billings has to offer within the city – excellent hospitality and hotels, walkable brewery trails, great brunch spots, and western heritage sites surrounded by unparalleled and unspoiled nature.

The Great American Road Trip will incorporate ZooMontana’s new Sloth exhibit which will be both integrated into the Road Trip creative as well as have stand-alone creative elements. The campaign will focus on driving traffic to the new Great American Road Trip landing page on the Visit Billings site, primarily using digital and video-driven channels. This will speak to the resident and non-resident traveler.

## TRAVELING IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

COVID-19 will continue to impact the travel industry in 2020 and 2021. According to a Longwoods International tracking study of American travelers and the coronavirus pandemic, 85% of them are changing their travel plans over the next six months (May–October 2020) because of coronavirus. However, the percentage of American travelers planning trips in that same time frame is increasing – indicating that

## TRAVELERS SEEKING THE **COMFORT ZONE**

In addition to safety concerns related to the coronavirus pandemic, travelers are also balancing concerns regarding an uncertain economy and new regulations which differ by destination. Ultimately, while travelers still want to create new experiences and explore, they will also want to travel where they feel safe and comfortable. Pairing Montana’s Big Sky experiences and incredible landscapes with familiar hospitality creature comforts makes the journey more accessible for a broader audience once travel re-emerges. Billings is an economically feasible destination too, with reasonable hotel rates.

travelers' are experiencing wanderlust and are currently in the dreaming phase, seeking inspiration. When travelers shift into the planning phase, Visit Billings' marketing efforts must take into account longer booking windows.

With that in mind, it is expected that local and regional travel will be the first to recover as travelers will be more comfortable embarking on road trips rather than flying. With the Great American Road Trip campaign, Visit Billings is well positioned to be that road trip destination that provides safe experiences. There will be a renewed sense of appreciation for outdoor adventure, natural scenery, and local small businesses, away from more crowded, urban destinations. The Visit Billings campaign will not only be relevant and sensitive to travelers' needs and concerns, but also designed to create an emotional connection with the target audience, reflective of the destination, and the brand's higher purpose to live big in Big Sky Country.

## TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience for Visit Billings will shift, as will the marketing budget. The organization's funding has been drastically impacted, thus audiences with the highest propensity to travel to the destination and the region will be targeted. Taking into account the effects of COVID-19 on specific demographics and their intent to travel, given their concerns regarding health and safety, is key.

The family traveler will be an important summer demographic as surveys show this group has a higher propensity for travel than older demographics such as Baby Boomers who are less likely to travel until the current situation has completely been resolved or there is a vaccine. The focus will be on families with a household income of \$75,000+, couples, as well as younger male-skewed markets more likely to book a road trip sooner.

Creative messaging and media targeting are designed to behaviorally target those who are vacation planning and booking with an interest in the outdoors, national parks, and western heritage experiences. According to the Billings' visitor profile, current visitors have an average HHI of \$97k and average age is 50.

### GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP PRIMARY AUDIENCE

Previously, the primary market has focused on summer vacationers from key feeder markets (Minneapolis, MN; Denver CO; Seattle, WA) with interest in travel to Montana and the Western region of the U.S. to visit monuments, state and national parks, and to experience western heritage with a HHI of \$75k+. In light of COVID-19, summer 2020 will pivot to target regional drive markets, primarily in the neighboring states of Western North Dakota and South Dakota as

well as Wyoming. We will focus on potential travelers who show interest in traveling to Montana as well as an interest in monuments, outdoor recreation, family vacations, state and national parks, and have a HHI of \$75k+.

### ZOOMONTANA SLOTH EXHIBIT AUDIENCE

The campaign will focus on the regional drive markets in-state including Bozeman, MT; Great Falls, MT; Helena, MT; Missoula, MT; Cody, WY; Sheridan, WY; Buffalo, WY; Gillette, WY; Billings DMA (excluding city of Billings); with a HHI \$75k+.



# MEDIA

Visit Billings' Summer 2020 Media Plan will focus on responsible marketing post COVID-19, as it is the responsibility of the DMO to be a resource in promoting relevant and responsible recovery for the destination. Highly-visual elements such as video and social media marketing, as well as directing travelers to the COVID-19 information page on the Visit Billings website, will help to educate travelers on how to safely enjoy the experiences found in the destination.

The media plan also must be highly flexible to ensure we are able to pivot and adjust based on market conditions and budgets. There are a variety of elements to consider which will impact which paid media platforms are used, when they will be engaged, and the budget allocated for each platform. The goal is to be as nimble as possible with paid media to ensure the marketing budget is being used wisely and will result in delivering maximum impact.

Among paid media, social, Facebook and Instagram will remain prominent. Creative materials will place emphasis on video placement through Instagram stories, Facebook's Instant Experience and a video network, so impressions aren't locked to the content on just one platform but can optimize to whichever channel is showing the best performance.

Paid search will also 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, we will optimize digital media toward conversion actions and monitor for an efficient CPC (cost per click) and CTR (click-through rate). The team will measure 25% of view-through conversions and 100% of click-through conversions.

The following engagement actions will be tracked:

- ★ Partner referrals
- ★ Page views
- ★ Requests for Visitor Guides
- ★ 3+ minutes on site
- ★ eNewsletter sign-ups
- ★ Web traffic through ZooMontana

In instances where social ad units direct a user to stay within the platform, social engagement metrics will be monitored and optimized. The campaign will be set up dynamically to retarget the budget toward the market that is performing the best.

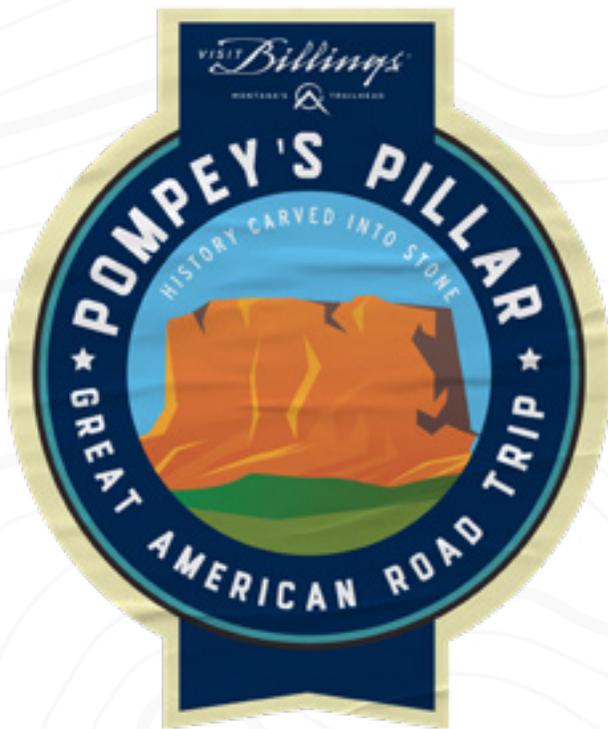


## GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP



As previously noted, according to Destination Analysts, 53% of travelers surveyed in April 2020, will be taking more road trips this year to avoid airline travel. Billings is Montana's Trailhead to 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 - in one vacation.

Visit Billings is developing partnerships with aligned-destinations and lifestyle brands to target road trippers and bucket-list travelers and bring awareness to this untold story. The Great American Road Trip was intended to make its debut in 2020; however plans were altered due to COVID-19. In light of this pandemic, research shows that when it becomes safe to travel again, there may still be a fear of air travel. The Great American Road Trip fits well with the return of tourism as it promotes travel by car. The attractions along the way also leave room for social distancing if that is still a recommended practice for summer travelers.



# REGIONAL YEAR-ROUND STRATEGY

Billings is Montana’s largest city, and with that, the opportunities are endless. From arts and culture to food scenes, history to outdoor recreation, it’s easy to fill days with unique experiences. Regionally, Billings is the city, when it is safe, 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, when appropriate.
- 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 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 opening of the Sloth Exhibit at ZooMontana, 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

Regional focus will remain on target markets with higher awareness and familiarity of Billings. These include markets within 350 miles, primarily in-state, as well as Wyoming 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, and short getaways for shopping and dining in Montana’s biggest 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 25-65 with an annual household income of \$75,000+. We will continue to evaluate if the target demographics need to shift based on market conditions related to COVID-19. 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 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 OOH 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. Visit Billings, through its grant program, is a supporter of this event.



## STAYCATIONS



Following COVID-19, many travelers will be looking for more staycation-type trips. According to Destination Analysts, 55% of travelers believe a staycation will replace other types of trips for them. Regionally, Billings can be that staycation for many who are looking for experiences outside of their hometown but still within their home state or region.

# MOTORCYCLE ENTHUSIASTS



Aligning with the destination’s leisure Great American Road Trip campaign, and to continue building awareness of the destination’s proximity to the most scenic route into Yellowstone National Park, Visit Billings will also continue to leverage the Beartooth Scenic Byway as a key draw for the lucrative two-wheeled market. Among its “Top 10 Motorcycle Rides in the U.S.,” National Geographic describes the 68-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 212 as “the perfect definition of what a great bike ride should be.” BMW MOA’s 2020 Rally was set to take place in Great Falls in the summer of 2020. This has been rescheduled to 2021, due to COVID-19 concerns. Despite not having this influx of motorcyclists to the state, the two-wheel market remains important to Billings visitation.

Motorcyclists in Montana are drawn to curvy roads. They enjoy touring vacations, riding long distances and experiencing the journey. National parks are key drivers of visitation in this segment. In 2018, June through

September, an estimated 394,000 motorcyclists rode in Montana, 4.4% of all non-resident visitors to the state. The target audience is men and women motorcycle enthusiasts ages 35-64 on any model bike. Non-resident motorcyclists spent an average of 4.74 nights in a hotel (*Motorcycle Touring in Montana: A Market Analysis 2019*, published by the Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research).

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.



# 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 stop on a group tour itinerary.

Amid COVID-19 concerns, social distancing requirements and travel restrictions, Visit Billings staff will work with regional and state partners to monitor this segment while continuing to foster partnerships with domestic and international tour operators. These professionals are key partners to Visit Billings staff and are critical in efforts to grow visitation at Montana's Trailhead in the future. As staff monitor the international landscape in a pandemic, they will consider marketing opportunities through MOTBD, Rocky Mountain International, and the United States Travel Association.



# MEETING & CONVENTION SALES



Despite convention cancellations, postponements, and budget adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Visit Billings staff must remain supportive and innovative to, and for, the meeting planner. Accommodating rescheduling and format adjustments planners may be facing is, and will be, a priority.

Along with the pandemic impacts in the spring of 2020, 2019 witnessed continued declines in meeting and convention bookings for Billings as other destinations offer larger, state-of-the-art convention space. However, meeting recruitment remains a priority for the destination. It will be more important as ever for staff to help facilitate this segment by providing planners with assistance and services that benefit and enhance events meeting social distance needs and calming concerns of future meeting attendees, especially until a COVID-19 vaccination is available.

Meeting planners often have a misperception of Montana, but this is Big Meetings Country and awareness of the wealth of amenities and resources available for meetings and conventions at the

destination is important to promote. Billings' walkable downtown with dining and entertainment, close proximity to Billings Logan International airport with nonstop services, and surrounding regional attractions, are strong value propositions for planners.

## GOALS

1. Continue to build brand awareness of Billings as Big Meetings Country and offer security that Billings businesses are open and pledge to be safe for attendees.
2. Foster relationships with qualified meeting planners looking for support during a recovery particularly small market meetings, citywide events, and reunions.
3. Service groups with high levels of customer satisfaction and event execution during a recovery reassuring planners that Billings is open and safe for attendees.

## POTENTIAL ATTENDANCE - MEETINGS INDUSTRY CONFERENCES/SHOWS

- Small Marketing Meetings
- Military Reunion Network

# SPORTS TOURISM

Strong gains in sports tourism in FY20 continue to position Billings as a sports events destination. However, with COVID-19 and budget impacts, sports recruitment efforts will be adjusted for FY21 unless a recovery is quicker than what could be anticipated.

Positioning Billings as a sports events destination will remain a priority for Visit Billings with staff looking at new technologies and innovations that will shape the future of sports events and sports tourism at Montana's Trailhead.

Supporting governing bodies, executing awarded events like the 2020 NCAA DII Cross Country West Region Championships, and hosting Montana High School Association (MHSA) state and local divisional tournaments will be a major priority. Following health guidelines for schools, teams, fans, officials, etc. will also be critical.

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

## GOALS

- 1.** Continue to elevate Billings and Yellowstone County as a strong 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 generating room nights for lodging partners in a recovery.
- 3.** Monitor conversations surrounding additional sports facilities at the destination to prepare for future sports sales for the DMO including the position of a sports sales manager.



# SERVICING

## **THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND BILLINGS TRAIL GUIDE PROGRAM**

The coronavirus pandemic has left Americans longing to travel again and a positive visitor experience is a significant piece in recovery for the tourism industry. In FY20, Visit Billings officially launched and implemented the Billings Trail Guide program. The program is designed to build a wider net of knowledgeable Billings' ambassadors within the community. It consists of in-person training, centralized digital resources, email communications, and incentives.

Visit Billings understands that the visitor experience plays one of the most important roles in growing visitation at a destination. The program emphasizes how exceptional service leads to repeat visitation and extended stays. Making sure travelers feel welcomed and enjoy their stay at Montana's Trailhead is a major priority for Visit Billings. This is very important in the pandemic environment as well.

The Trail Guide program has helped elevate the city and helped champion repeat visitation by shining a light on the importance of visitor orientation and facilitation. The program inspires Billings' locals to promote their community by inviting visitors to participate in authentic moments of the destination and its people. Participants of the program are more than frontline staff but all those in the hospitality industry, business community, as well as area residents. All residents play a crucial role in elevating a destination and growing visitation.

Throughout FY20, Visit Billings certified over 180 people from the lodging industry, restaurants and hospitality industry to Leadership Billings and Youth Leadership participants. Visit Billings completed four training videos where locals discussed authentic Billings' experiences. The videos focus on assisting Outdoor Enthusiasts, Arts and Culture Aficionados, and History Buffs to forge their path throughout the community. Billings 101 discusses the importance of facilitating visitors with excellence and showcasing Billings as a travel destination.

In FY21, Visit Billings staff will continue to certify residents and frontline staff as Trail Guides while following COVID-19 guidelines. Visit Billings understands this program will help to bring our community together to ensure positive, memorable experiences for visitors. Changes to the programs in-person training are underway to include information on the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery process.

## **THE VISITOR INFORMATION CENTER - MOVING FORWARD**

As Visit Billings approaches the 2020 warm season, visitor habits will have drastically changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the Billings Visitor Information Center (VIC), concerns potential visitors may have considering the current travel climate may influence traffic to the Center and may influence the reach of the VIC. However, the VIC offers several other means to orient and facilitate the visitor through additional channels of communication. The VIC staff and volunteers can assist visitors via phone, text, and email to still provide a memorable experience for travelers in need of an in-person conversation with knowledgeable residents while proper social distancing is encouraged.

In this scenario, volunteers act as the first point of contact for anyone visiting the VIC. For some visitors, Visit Billings volunteers provide a smile and directions to the restroom or a complimentary cup of coffee, but for those particular travelers who meaningfully engage with the Visit Billings team, travel plans can change for the better. Billings VIC volunteers are champions for Billings. Their sage advice can sway travelers to visit a fantastic locally-owned restaurant or spend an extra night in a Billings' hotel. When this advice is paired with specifically-curated information, the Billings visitor center can be seen as a source of valuable travel information for the entire state and region.

In FY21, materials stocked within the visitor center will continue to prove invaluable for those who rely on physical copies of guides, maps, and brochures. 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.

Moving forward, the VIC will continue to offer in-person services to every guest who'd like to stop by. But in a changing travel landscape, the entire team also will work hard to use print and digital resources to orient and facilitate travel inquiries for people across the country and the globe.

# COOPERATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

## MONTANA OFFICE OF TOURISM AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Visit Billings will continue partnering with the MOTBD in marketing and advertising opportunities including print, digital, OOH, and trade shows. In FY20, these partnerships included MOTBD co-op advertising opportunities such as TripAdvisor and Sojern, as well as a boosted billboard presence in the Dallas area which was put on hold due to COVID-19 impacts.

Visit Billings relationship with MOTBD was strengthened even more during the planning and execution of Travel Blog Exchange and the partnership of our organizations. 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 been heavy-lifters for Billings. Accordingly, staff will look first to those opportunities again.

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Visit Billings' would like to participate in the following cooperative opportunities with neighboring regions:

- In FY20, Visit Billings partnered with Visit Southeast Montana on media buys as well as execution of Familiarization Tours, Travel Blog Exchange events, and more. In the coming year, Visit Billings will continue its important partnership with Visit Southeast Montana to draw visitors to the area as budgets allow.

- Yellowstone Country travel region, particularly the Red Lodge area, is another important region where Visit Billings will continue building relationships. Many wins have been realized through team efforts between Billings and Red Lodge including the 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. Visit Billings believes there is value in strengthening the benefits each city offers the other.
- Visit Billings will partner with MOTBD, Montana's tourism regions, and CVBs on relevant consumer trade shows when appropriate. Many of Montana's tourism regions and CVBs came to the table to sponsor Travel Blog Exchange, showing a united effort from our state while welcoming over 500 Travel Bloggers, Influencers and Industry Professionals to our city. Billings has and will continue to partner with MOTBD and Visit Southeast Montana at the Rocky Mountain International Roundup and the USTA's IPW. These partnerships have proven successful in the past and are expected to be in the future, budget allowing.
- 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



Visit Billings' social media, blog, and email channels act as storytelling tools, serving content that is as timely and relevant as it is practical and inspirational. Never has this been more important, as people are seeking out inspiration and hope during this pandemic. The Visit Billings social channels are encouraging followers to dream of future travel plans and remember special memories spent in Billings, while also giving them relevant and up-to-date information regarding travel information specific to COVID-19, such as closure of the Visitor Information Center.

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 their getaways. According to a Longwoods International tracking study of American travelers and the coronavirus pandemic conducted in April 2020, 70% of American travelers are planning trips in the next six months. As travel begins to reemerge, Visit Billings owned social channels will keep us connected to our visitors and engage them with inspiring travel and destination content. This is where we are guiding visitors to virtual experiences within our destination, while also asking followers to tell us about their favorite parts of past Billings vacations, and to share inspirational photos of Billings and the region.

Staff also closely monitor the type of content visitors are seeking. That same Longwoods survey found that the travel information of most interest to consumers at the time of the survey include local food options (50%), ways to help local businesses and organizations impacted by the pandemic (49%) and offers for future travel, dining and entertainment (49%). Our social channels allow for engagement tracking, which helps to inform what type of content generates the most interest as we focus on continuing to grow Visit Billings' social following.

With storytelling as its driving characteristic, we will continue with our content strategy to extend 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 our way of life. We combine a friendly familiarity with a down-to-earth tone, much like how you would interact with a local on the streets in downtown Billings. Our voice reflects the optimism and inspiration that comes from being surrounded by the land of big skies and big dreams.

Visit Billings' owned channels will continue to 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, month-by-month – 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. Visit Billings will also increase exposure through the tagging of relevant accounts and hashtags to piggyback on timely industry conversations. We may also use hashtags such as #TravelAwaits to bolster morale and inspire travel as we continue to feel the effects of COVID-19.

## Instagrammability



There is no denying social media's impact on travel, introducing the broader population to new, once unknown and now highly-desired destination experiences. The hashtag #nationalparks alone reveals 2.08M beautiful Instagram posts – up from 1.4M just last year. Travel will continue to be driven by a destination's Instagram-ability. Approximately 86% of people (and 92% of Gen Z) said they've become interested in a specific location after seeing user-generated content, according to a Stackla report, and 60% of people said user-generated content is the most influential, up from 42% in 2017. Epic landscapes, art-driven experiences and beautiful foodie shots on the Visit Billings social channels will continue to inspire travel.



## FACEBOOK

Facebook serves as a Billings Trail Guide, posting daily and 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, third-party endorsement through press coverage, etc. The Facebook channel will:

- Tourism Regions, Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs), communities and organizations must all work together to make visitors aware of the full array of experiences available to guests.
- Encourage dialogue by asking followers questions.
- 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.
- Incorporate paid campaigns aimed at attracting new followers from key markets.

## INSTAGRAM

Instagram is the inspiration channel for Visit Billings with more than 4,500 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 hashtag while encouraging visitors and stakeholders to do the same.
- Engage with traditional media through the use of designated hashtags to aggregate related content and join in on relevant and timely social media conversations.

## PINTEREST

Almost half of U.S. travelers currently on Pinterest use the platform to begin planning their next trip, and 76% of travelers searching on Pinterest make a purchase after seeing travel content from brands on Pinterest, according to comScore. These globetrotters are typically booking within two months of the start of their research. The Visit Billings Pinterest channel – which currently sees 6.5k monthly viewers – will:

- Re-pin content from popular travel bloggers, travel planning sites and other brands.
- Develop boards and pin content by interest, including thoughtful descriptions to keep pins inspiring and searchable.
- Pin Visit Billings website content and blog posts.
- Ensure that all pins link back to relevant and useful information to ensure a positive user experience.

## EMAIL

Email serves as a valuable and cost-effective marketing channel with which to continue the conversation with potential visitors, and ultimately, inspire travel. In FY20, Visit Billings redeveloped email templates to incorporate rebranding initiatives. An editorial content calendar assists in re-aligning email, blog, and social content to incorporate consistent destination newsletters.

## 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.



# EARNED MEDIA



Visit Billings' public relations strategy focuses on generating distinct story angles and themes centered around the "Forge Your Own Path" brand-level campaign with an emphasis on elevating awareness of Montana's Trailhead. The very nature of public relations allows us to be nimble in our response as travel re-emerges after COVID-19. In spring 2020, many media outlets paused coverage as writers weren't able to travel and the destination experiences were closed. However, digital coverage focused on local travel and outdoor experiences is expected to rebound quickly. 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 FY21 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. Attending events such as Public Relations Society of America Travel and Tourism Conference and North America Travel Blog Exchange have increased contacts in the past and allow the team to build the influencer program. When the time is right, Visit Billings will proactively reach out to appropriate media and influencers with original, relevant, and timely stories.

**TBEX, FAMILIARIZATION (FAM) TOURS, AND PRESS TRIPS**

As a result of journalists and influencers visiting the destination, Billings has received incredible media coverage highlighting the experiences and favorites of the destination. This past year, Billings hosted TBEX (Travel Blog Exchange), a conference that brought together travel journalists and digital influencers for workshops focused on digital and travel technology.

Over 500 attendees joined and participated on “pre-BEX” tours that included excursions to national monuments and the Beartooth Highway as well as in-town adventures like climbing and biking the Rimrocks, paddle-boarding on the Yellowstone River, taking in the Billings Brew Trail, downtown arts and galleries, Montana State Parks and ZooMontana. VisitBillings coordinated 38 pre-conference tours, all beginning at Montana’s Trailhead.

From this event, Visit Billings partnered with colleagues from Visit Southeast Montana, Visit Big Sky, Yellowstone Country Tourism, Glacier Country Tourism, Montana State Parks as well as local partnerships with the Billings Depot, Camelot Ranch, Billings Cultural Partners, and the Pub Station. The Visit Billings team will continue outreach and collaboration with the attendees throughout the year to generate even more media and digital coverage.

**PRESS ROOM AND BLOG**

The VisitBillings.com website includes a press page with featured press hits, story ideas and easily accessible images for press use. Content is an important part of our marketing and earned media efforts. Blog content is produced not only for consumers, but to inspire influencers, journalists and bloggers.





A scenic landscape featuring a road in the foreground with a silver SUV and a few people. The background consists of dark, rugged mountains with patches of snow under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The overall color palette is dominated by earthy browns, greys, and blues.

# 2020-2021 STRATEGIC GOALS

# GOALS

## FOSTER VISITOR GROWTH

Tourism remains a leading industry in Billings and will be important as the COVID-19 curve settles and people become more mobile in the region. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry generated economic impact that was crucial to local businesses. Nearly \$500 million was injected into the economy between out-of-state and in-state visitation to Yellowstone County in 2018 (ITRR).

As Visit Billings works to reeducate potential visitors and the economy begins a recovery, the investment in tourism marketing by Visit Billings will be key. Appropriate marketing and sales efforts will elevate stakeholders once again as well as tourism partners including retailers, restaurants, and attractions. Tourism supports thousands of jobs within Yellowstone County and enhances the overall quality of life in Billings.

## THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

During FY20, Visit Billings successfully executed a new program, Billings Trail Guides, focused on fostering 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 residents. It will be the goal of the Visit Billings team to not lose momentum in this programming despite COVID-19 impacts to the tourism industry and community. Gains were made in FY20 by presenting to groups, large and small, the importance of residents playing a role in the positive visitor experience in Billings by welcoming out-of-towners and facilitating any questions or needs they may have.

Even as we deal with the pandemic and its impacts, Billings' residents have the capacity to elevate Billings which can significantly impact visitor growth and the visitor experience. Staff will work to strategize ways to appropriately convey the highlights of the Trail Guides program digitally or possibly in small group settings that support social distancing prior to vaccine availability.

## INCREASE LEISURE VISITATION

Visit Billings' marketing and sales efforts aim to position Billings and the surrounding area as a preferred destination for leisure visitation. Destination Analysts' research during COVID-19 'shelter in place' directives across the country in March and April showed once restrictions were lifted, but

prior to there being a vaccine for the virus, people would stay close to home, road trip, and/or enjoy a staycation. Visit Billings' staff, together with its boards and advertising agency, believe this close-to-home, regional travel mindset will be key in rebuilding visitation to Billings and southeast Montana in the future.

Leisure tourism marketing strategies will remain the highest priority for the organization as leisure visitation supports all Visit Billings' stakeholders (hotels and motels owners) as well as partners including restaurants, retailers, and attractions. Regional marketing campaigns will focus on road trip itineraries and partnerships with attractions like ZooMontana where social distancing is feasible. Safety also will be key in all marketing efforts.

## MEETING/CONVENTION SALES AND SERVICING

Even with the COVID-19 pandemic impacts to business travel, 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 will work to be innovative in how to meet the needs of meeting planners during this time. Staff will continue to inspire and orient meeting professionals with thoughtful sales strategies in a time of meeting cancellations and postponements. This segment can continue to have a strong economic impact on the community. The Visit Billings staff is assisting planners through this by facilitating their needs and re-orienting them with our offerings should they need to adjust attendee numbers, digital needs, etc.

FY20 saw continued declines in meeting and convention recruitment. In 2010, such business accounted for nearly 25% of total visitation to Billings. That number, according to HVS Advisors, has decreased closer to 17%. With the closure of the Red Lion Hotel and Convention Center in Billings in 2019, Billings now offers five convention hotels. However, the market segment is still viable to the destination and despite COVID-19 expense reductions and adjustments in sales strategies, meeting recruitment will be a priority. It will be more important as ever for staff to help facilitate this segment by providing planners with assistance and services that benefit and enhance events meeting social distancing needs and calming concerns of attendees.



## **SPORTS TOURISM**

Strong gains in sports tourism in FY20 continued to position Billings as a sports events destination. With COVID-19 impacts, sports recruitment efforts will be adjusted.

Positioning Billings as a sports events destination will remain a priority for Visit Billings in FY21, with staff looking at new technologies and innovations that will shape the future of sports events and sports tourism at Montana's Trailhead. At the writing of this document, Visit Billings had partnered with Montana State University Billings (MSUB) for NCAA bids as well as MetraPark for Montana High School Association (MHSA) bids. 2020 brings the execution of major sporting events like the NCAA DII West Region Cross Country Championships. Strategizing with NCAA officials to meet the needs of protecting athletes, officials, fans, and volunteers from COVID-19 during this event, for example, will be key.

Meanwhile, staff will continue to foster growth in this segment by supporting partners like the MHSA, MSUB, 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. However, 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 continue to 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



# MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20 - YTD*
<b>Total Bookings</b>	36	47	45	46	53	31
Citywide Events	4	4	3	7	8	1
Meetings & Conventions	20	23	22	26	25	13
Sports Events	5	10	10	8	14	12
Citywide Sports Events	7**	10	10	5	6	6
<b>Citywide Events and Meeting &amp; Conventions</b>	32,564	8,924	7,720	11,293	7,545	3,415
<b>Citywide Sports Events and Sports</b>	23,600	21,180	34,580	16,890	21,895	12,050
<b>Total Room Nights</b>	56,164	30,104	42,300	28,183	29,440	15,465
<b>Web Visits</b>	190,759	241,457	158,215	221,801	219,027	116,353***

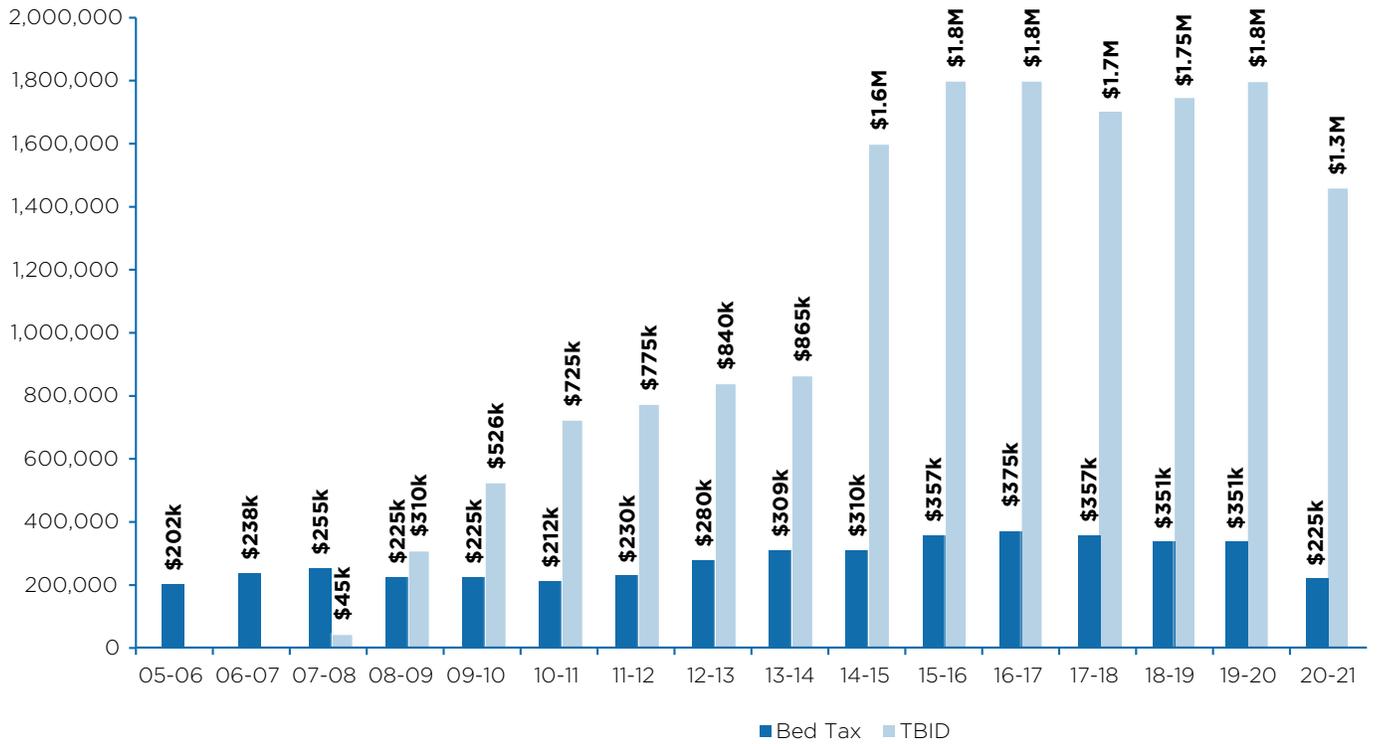
\*The data for this plan was extracted during the third quarter of FY20. All FY20 information is YTD as of April 1, 2020.

\*\*First official entry for Citywide Sports Events was recorded.

\*\*\*Analytics show those exploring VisitBillings.com are spending 22% more time on the website with a bounce rate that is 7% lower than previous year data.

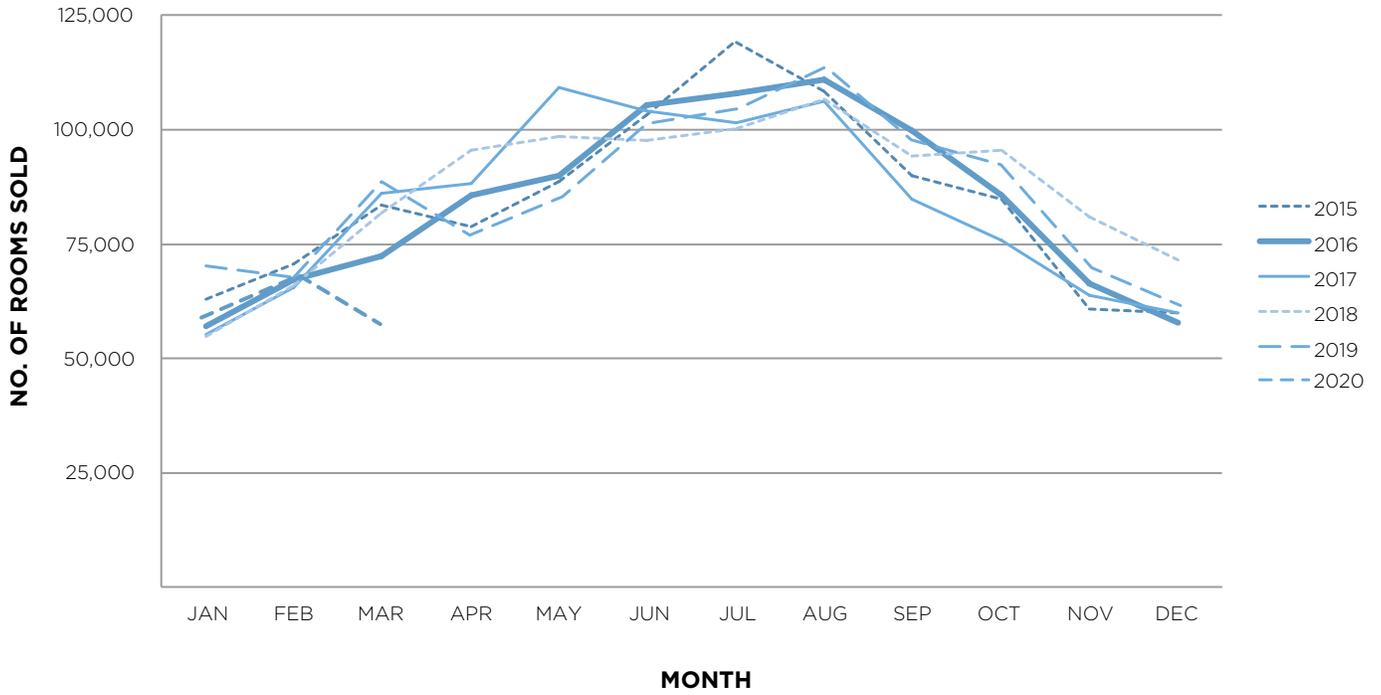
ITEM	DEFINITION
Citywide Events	A sports group utilizes three (3) or more hotels.
Meetings & Conventions	Anything smaller than defined above.
Sports Events	Any athletic event that utilizes hotel rooms and a sports venue in the Billings area.
Citywide Sports Events	A sports group utilizes three (3) or more hotels.
Total Bookings	Citywide Events + Meetings/Conventions + Sports Events.
Total Room Nights	Total room nights sold.
Web Visits	Success is measured by total visits to VisitBillings.com. Conversion is considered to be any activity beyond the home page. Google Analytics is used for tracking and monitoring.

**COLLECTIONS 2000-2018**



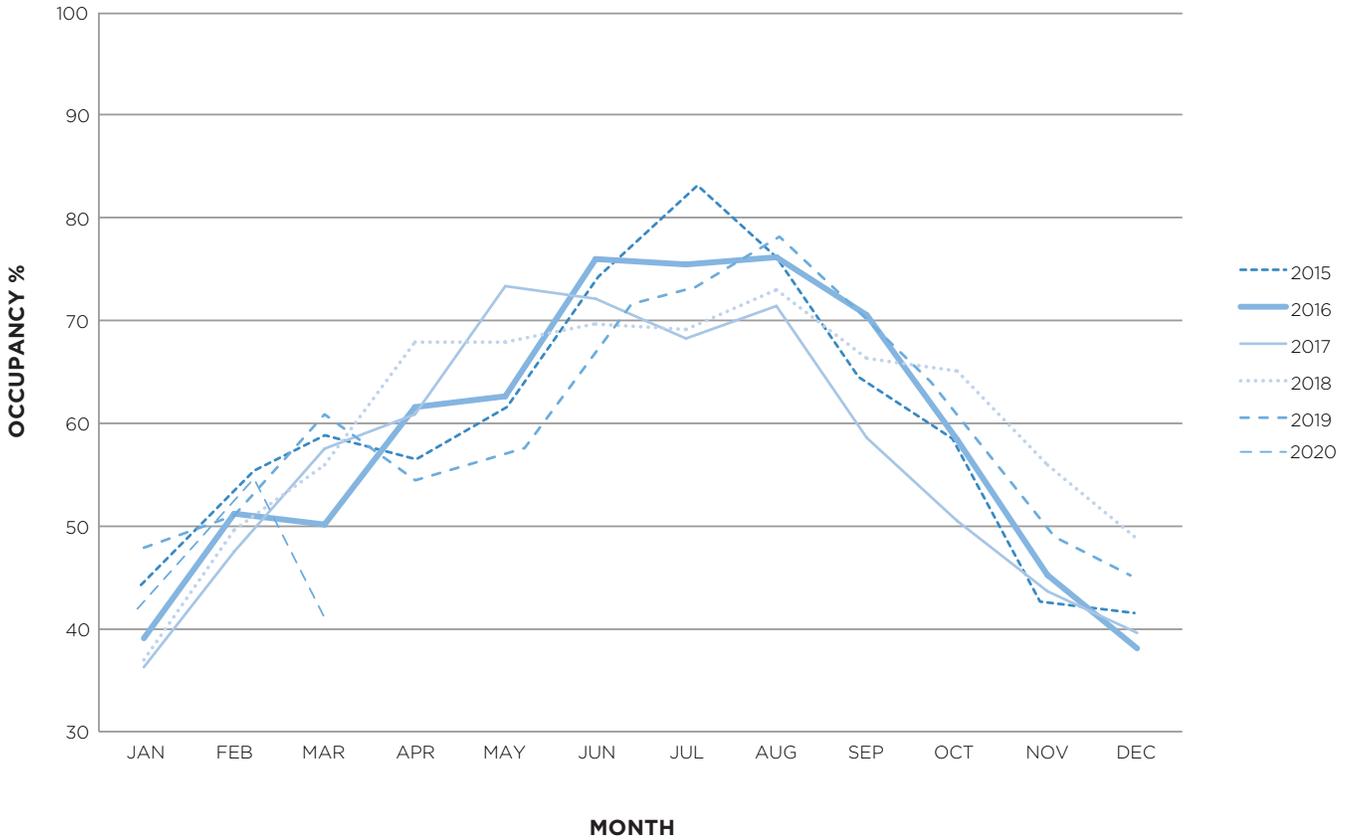
### ROOM DEMAND

Demand reflects accurately increased visitation. Where Occupancy is impacted by the number of rooms in inventory, Demand is a true picture of the number of total rooms sold.



## ROOM OCCUPANCY

Room Occupancy is  $(\text{Rooms Sold}) \div (\text{Rooms Available}) \times (100)$ . Occupancy is expressed as a percentage of rooms occupied.



### ROOM OCCUPANCY DATA INSIGHT

YEAR	CENSUS PROPERTIES	CENSUS SLEEPING ROOMS
2005	43 hotels	3,759 rooms
2010	45 hotels	3,992 rooms
2015	50 hotels	4,493 rooms
2017	54 hotels	4,840 rooms
2018	58 hotels	4,712 rooms
2019	53 hotels	4,339 rooms







# BUDGETS

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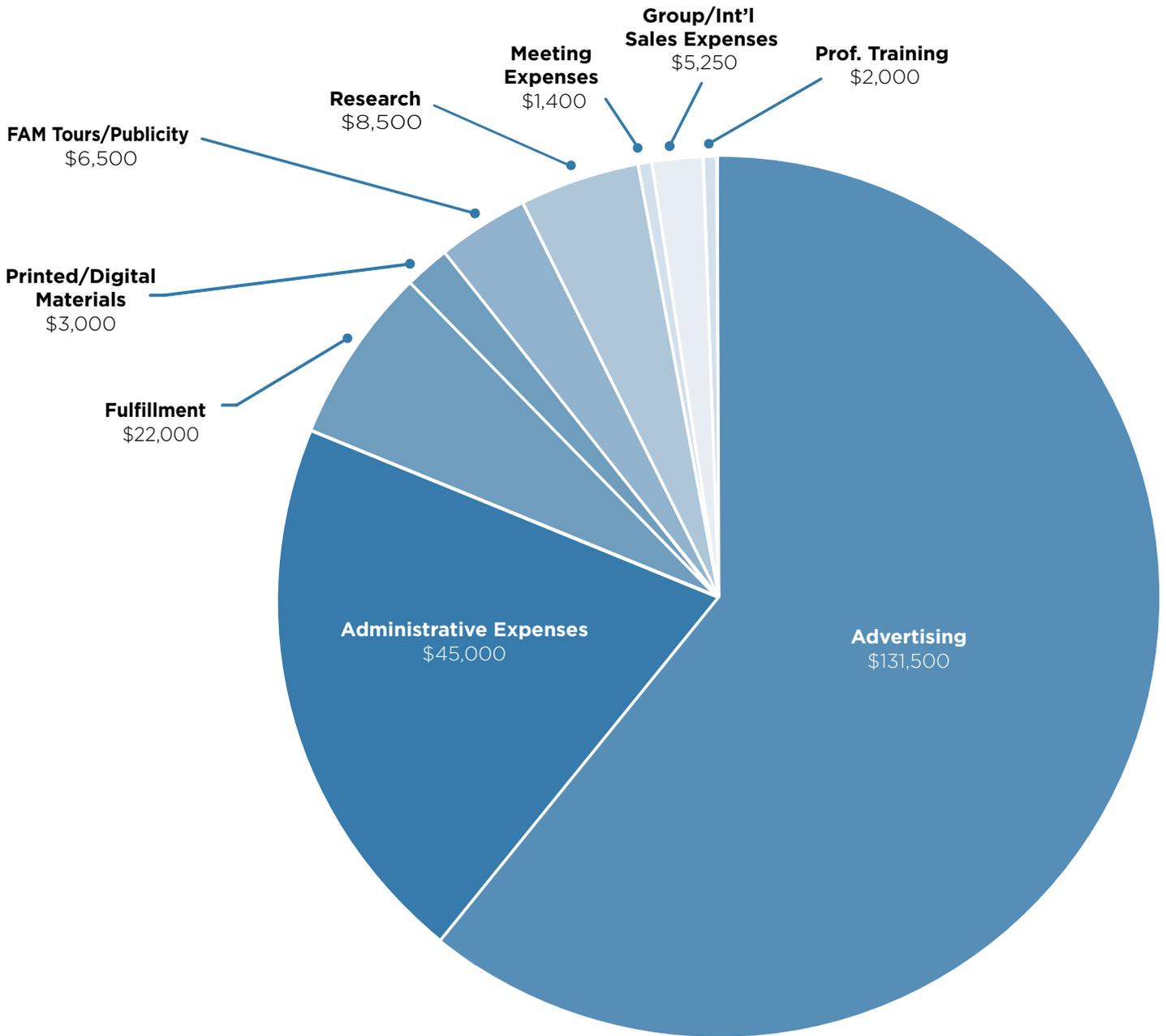
## STATE LODGING TAX BUDGET (CVB)

Advertising	\$131,500
Fulfillment	\$22,000
Printed/Digital Materials	\$3,000
Group/Int'l Sales Expenses	\$5,250
FAM Tours/Publicity	\$6,500
Research	\$8,500
Prof. Training	\$2,000
Meeting Expenses	\$1,400
Administrative Expenses	\$45,000

**TOTAL FY21 BUDGET \$225,150**



**STATE LODGING TAX DOLLARS (CVB)**



**Projected Lodging Tax Income: \$225,150**

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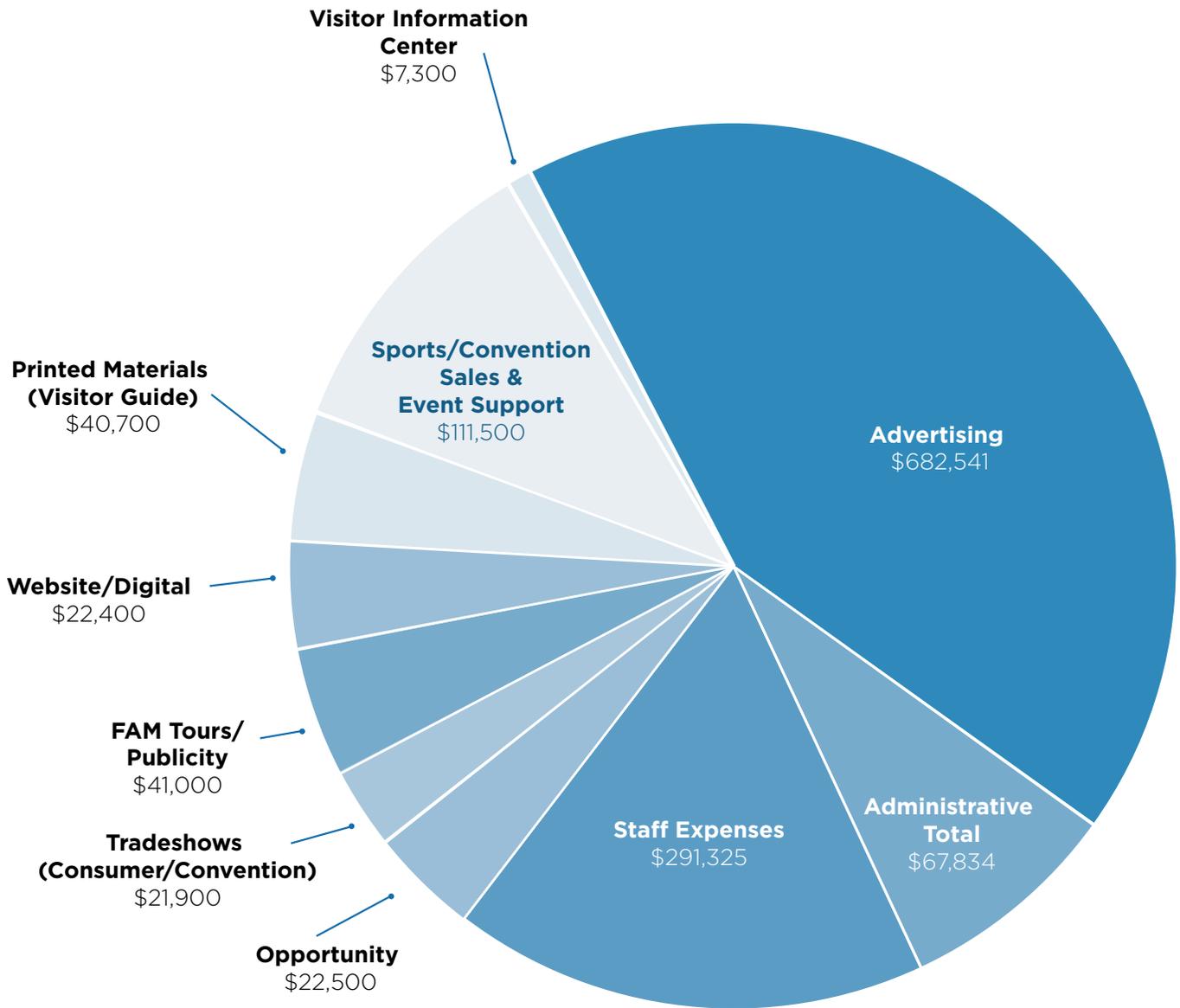
**TOTAL LODGING TAX BUDGET: \$225,150**

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

<b>REVENUES TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,309,000</b>
Projected Revenue	\$1,309,000
<b>MARKETING &amp; SALES TOTAL</b>	<b>\$949,841</b>
Advertising	\$682,541
Opportunity	\$22,500
Printed Materials (Visitor Guide)	\$40,700
Sports/Convention Sales & Event Support	\$111,500
Tradeshows (Consumer/Convention)	\$21,900
FAM Tours/Publicity	\$41,000
Website/Digital	\$22,400
Visitor Information Center	\$7,300
<b>STAFF &amp; ADMINISTRATIVE TOTAL</b>	<b>\$359,159</b>
Staff Expenses	\$291,325
Administrative Total	\$67,834
<b>BTBID TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$1,309,000</b>



**BILLINGS TOURISM BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BTBID) DOLLARS - BUDGET FY21**



**BTBID TOTAL EXPENSES: \$1,309,000**

REVENUES TOTAL \$1,309,000

