

VISIT HENDRICKS COUNTY

STRATEGIC PLAN

Research & Recommendations

Connecting to Benefit Visitors and Residents

Acknowledgement:

Clarity of Place would like to thank the numerous individuals and organizations who took time out of their schedules to provide insights and context for this plan by completing a survey, participating in an input session, giving their time for an interview, and/or providing data and other contextual materials.

Additionally, the project team would like to thank the leadership of the staff and Board of Directors of Visit Hendricks County. Their guidance and input were integral in understanding the ambitions of the destination, the connections between tourism and resident quality of life, and the challenges of the future.

Executive Summary

Visit Hendricks County has a opportunity to envision its future as a Destination Leadership Organization and deliver transformative marketing and destination development programs on behalf of the community. The Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan sets the tone and expectations for connecting resident needs for leisure activity as an outcome of continued destination growth. The plan establishes a clear distinction between quality of place as a built environment and quality of life as a sensory feeling.

Although the plan is guided by a destination assessment that compares the Hendricks County product mix against key Indiana competitors, the key element of this strategic plan is centered around several unique research projects:

Resident Insights on Leisure Time Activities & Quality of Place Amenities – Cutting edge research from Ball State University on how residents of Hendricks County utilize their leisure time and the opportunities for bolstering more time on leisure pursuits within the county.

Hendricks County Visitor Image Study – Research on the dynamic differences between advertising images, actual visitation, and non-visitors.

Destination Relevancy Survey – Research on tourism stakeholders views of needs and brand connectivity.

Stakeholder engagement and input helped to refine and prioritize the strategies that emerged from the planning process.

Three strategic themes emerged that would organize the strategic recommendations and shape the direction of Visit Hendricks County;

LEADING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE - Building a more effective and stronger destination organization to lead, partner, and advocate for the future of Hendricks County as a destination

LEADING THROUGH CONNECTIVITY OF INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY - Building a stronger, more connected tourism industry across Hendricks County creating a better quality of life

LEADING THROUGH AWARENESS & MARKETING - Building a brand promise ensuring Hendricks County is the choice for visitors and residents

LEADING THROUGH DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT - Building a more appealing and competitive destination through programming, investments, and other quality of place attributes

The recommendations will be used to propel this organization forward and serve as a base foundation for budgeting, individual work plans, and marketing priorities.

Purposeful Planning

Providing leadership to connect resident quality of life to destination success.

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Introduction

When Hendricks County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Inc. d/b/a Visit Hendricks County (VHC) began the process of strategic planning it became apparent that the model needed to include not only those typical visitor strategies such as destination promotion and destination development, but also bring priority to resident quality of life. The inputs that went into the planning process echoed the wisdom of this vision and the outcome highlights a series of opportunities to deliver not only heightened travel impacts but also increased resident benefit.

This plan is an evolution for the organization. VHC began 25 years ago when the county approved a theme park in 1999. While there is no theme park here today, tourism in Hendricks County exists and thrives as a $352.5 million annual industry. As the industry has evolved and changed over the years, VHC recognizes that destination leadership is about more than visitor spending and the sale of hotel rooms. When destinations create an intersection of quality of place and quality of life you have a community that is not only a great place to visit, but also a great place to live. This organization is responsible for guiding Hendricks County to that intersection and this plan will be the roadmap with a vision of delivering more recognized value over the next five years; and by 2040 VHC will be a community shared asset.

The process to complete this strategic plan has taken nearly nine months. It has included three research studies and several data sources to illustrate the connectivity between the Hendricks County brand, what visitors think of our destination, the leisure pursuits of residents, the importance of image, the disparate destination assets of a diverse County, and the input of an equally diverse mix of local partners and stakeholders. Visit Hendricks County programs and services embody this changing role, and the outcome of this plan will help produce stronger communities, tourism growth, and resident pride while generating industry success.

This plan showcases VHC's transition from being a traditional destination marketing organization into a future-ready destination leadership organization. The vision for this plan and this evolution should not be a surprise for anyone familiar with Visit Hendricks County. This organization has a proven history of destination leadership. Expressing this direction in a plan simply encourages other organizations, tourism partners, municipalities, and residents to connect with the destination vision and benefit from its outcomes.

Mission :

Enhance tourism and improve residents' quality of life through leading destination development, fostering industry-community connections, and promoting the County through trusted and impartial leadership.

Vision:

Be a trailblazer in tourism development, driving excellence in connectivity and awareness for Hendricks County. We strive for sustainable growth that reflects our deep understanding of the industry's economic benefit and adapts to the changing needs of both the industry and our community.

Purpose & Objectives

The Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan focuses on delivering meaningful outcomes for the Board of Directors, staff, and stakeholders of Visit Hendricks County to address both the growth of the visitor economy and resident quality of life.

Purpose of the Plan for the Organization :

Guide the future of Visit Hendricks County's direction through an enhanced mission and vision while maximizing efforts to grow the visitor economy by enhancing the community's quality of place through destination development and elevating the resident's quality of life.

Objectives of the Plan:

- Identify needs and opportunities for fine-tuning target markets, addressing seasonality shifts, and development priorities that strengthen Hendricks County's quality of place;
- Clarify roles and actions within Visit Hendricks County to align direction, programs, and services to more clearly enhance quality of life;
- Focus efforts to boost utilization and performance of public gathering venues, sports facilities, quality-of-life assets, special events, transportation infrastructure, key quality of place clusters, and hospitality support systems; and
- Implement timeline for the organization that encourages collaboration across the county and support from staff, board, and stakeholders.



Glossary of Terms

There are several words and phrases that repeat throughout this plan. This glossary establishes the lexicon that will be part of both the Strategic Plan and its implementation process:

Community stakeholder: Any of the municipal entities or community organizations that either directly or indirectly benefit from tourism growth in Hendricks County

Destination development: Investments that create new or enhance existing tourism products including attractions, venues, art installations, and/or other visitor amenities

Destination Marketing Organization: The traditional nomenclature for an organization designated to promote visitor assets and tourism growth within a specified area

Destination Leadership Organization: The emerging terminology for an organization designated to lead the community it serves through marketing, development, and engagement of the community

Overnight visitors: Guests to Hendricks County who spend a minimum of one night, regardless of the type of lodging used

Quality of life: The leisure attributes enjoyed by residents *(Quality of life is felt)*

Quality of place: The physical attributes that enhance the leisure appeal of an area *(Quality of place is built)*

Residents: The individuals that call Hendricks County home

Tourism partners: The businesses and organizations whose livelihood depends on visitor spending



Background & Process



Background & Process - Destination Assessment

OVERVIEW

To provide context from which to build the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan, Clarity of Place assessed Hendricks County's destination product and compared it to five peer destinations in the state:

- Clark County and Floyd County
- Hamilton County
- Johnson County
- Vanderburgh County (Evansville)
- Vigo County (Terre Haute)

By overlaying Hendricks County's destination assets onto the area's infrastructure, we have a richer understanding of the hospitality infrastructure and how it can be strengthened to enhance the visitor experience in the county.

By comparing Hendricks County to the peer counties, we can gauge the current and potential attractiveness of its destination product compared to the other counties in the state and their ability to attract the same visitor audiences.

Assessed Destinations



Visit Hendricks County identified the peer destinations against which it was benchmarked.

WHERE HENDRICKS COUNTY STANDS

Hendricks County sits on the western side of the Indianapolis MSA. The county encompasses roughly 407 sq miles and had a population of approximately 186,000 in 2023.

The county offers a blend of rural and urban experiences, with a mix of outdoor activities, cultural events, and unique local attractions. Danville is the county seat. Other communities include Plainfield, Avon, and Brownsburg.

The Destination Assessment provides a snapshot of Hendricks County's destination product (including demand drivers) and the civil infrastructure to support visitor activity in the county. A similar, high-level assessment was conducted of the five peer counties.

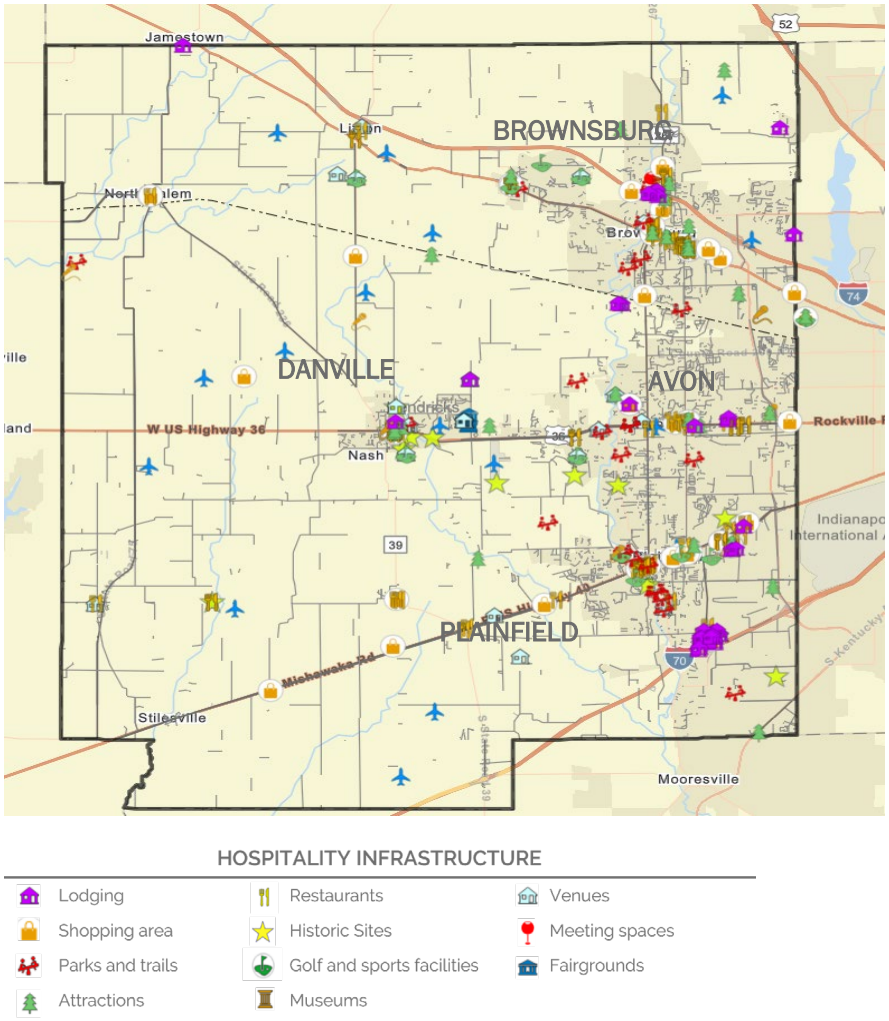
Hospitality Assets

- **Demand Drivers:** Assets and places that provide a reason for or motivation for travelers to visit
- **Attractions and Experiences:** Activities and places that visitors use to enhance/expand their visit
- **Hospitality Industry:** Services and amenities that make a visit enjoyable

Infrastructure/Accessibility

Civil and community infrastructure that services visitors and allows them to get to/from/within the destination

Hendricks County Hospitality Infrastructure



Source: Clarity of Place, Visit Hendricks County

Destination Attributes

The county's location within the Indianapolis MSA, the convergence of four interstate highways (I-65, I-69, I-70, I-74), and its proximity to Indianapolis International Airport (IND) positions Hendricks County as a natural base for guests looking to enjoy the unique character of the region. Hendricks County offers a mix of outdoor activities, festivals and events, and local attractions.

Danville is the county-seat; Plainfield is the largest community. The towns of Avon and Brownsburg also have a high concentration of the county's destination assets. The western portion of the county is more rural.

Points of Interest and Visitation

Visit Hendricks County uses Datafy, a data platform to understand visitor flows throughout the county. To inform the destination assessment, Datafy was employed to understand where "non-local" visitors travel while in the county. A "non-local visitor" is defined as one whose home address is more than 50 miles from Hendricks County.

For non-local visits observed between January 1 and December 31, 2023, the most frequently visited Points of Interest include (% of visitors)

"Districts" (downtowns and concentrations of amenities)	8%
Youth Sports facilities	0.6%
Outdoor amenities	0.5%
Marketed Restaurants	0.4%

The top metropolitan areas (MSA) from which overnight visitors originate are Chicago, Terre Haute, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and rural parts of the state.

Trips by Length of Stay



1 Day 80.7% | 2 Days 7.11 % | 3 Days 3.89% | 4 Days 3.31 % | 5 Days 2.71 % | 6+ Days 2.32 %

Avg Length of Stay: 1.8 Days

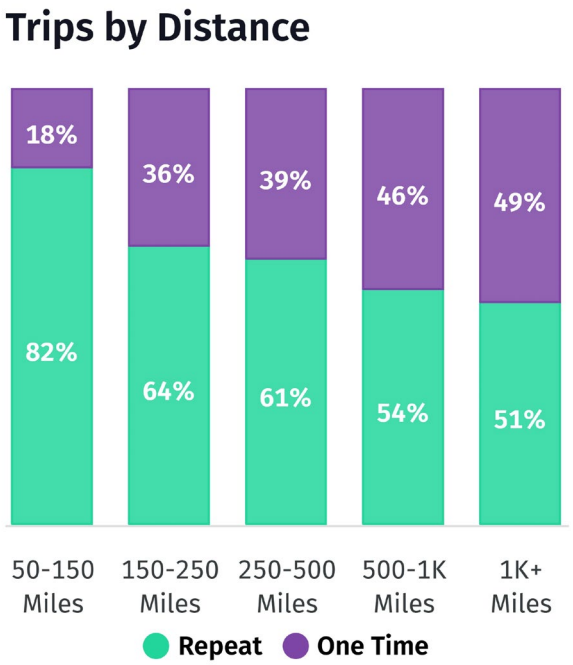
MSA Visitation

MSA	Trips
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI	634,866
Terre Haute, IN	402,838
Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN	335,593
St. Louis, MO-IL	282,433
Rural Indiana	231,048

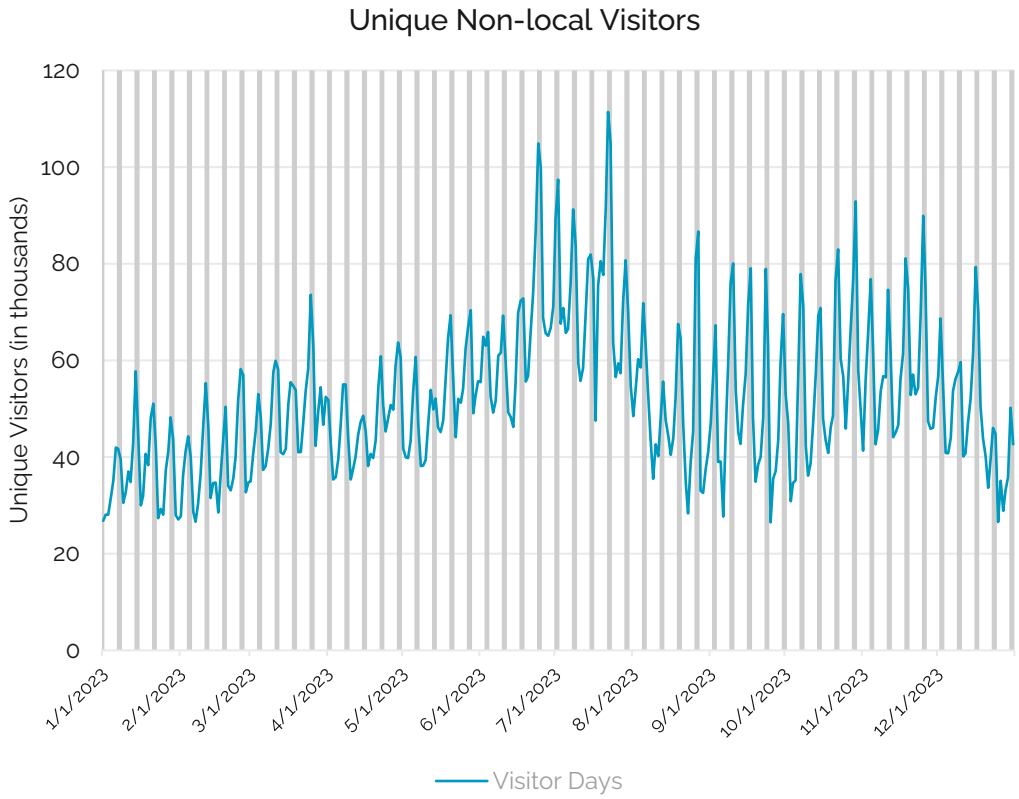
Source: Datafy, 2023 non-local visitors of 24 hours or more

Hendricks County's peak travel season is in the summer, with weekend visits throughout the year.

Visitors from closer distances tend to make more return visits to the region.



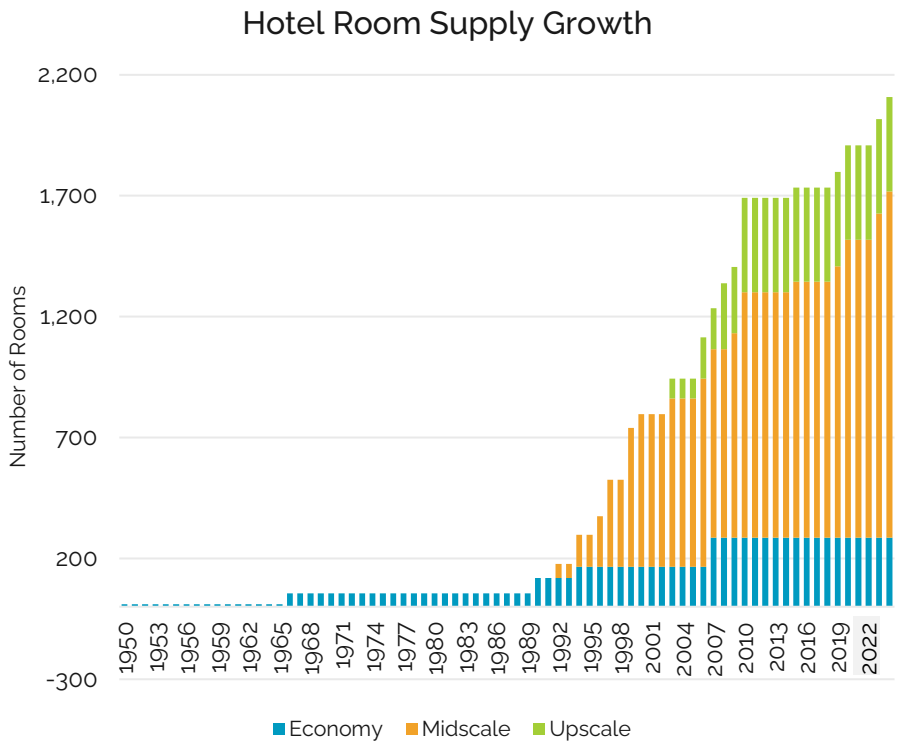
Source: Datafy, Jan 1 – Dec 31, 2023 (visitors with home address more than 50 miles from Hendricks County



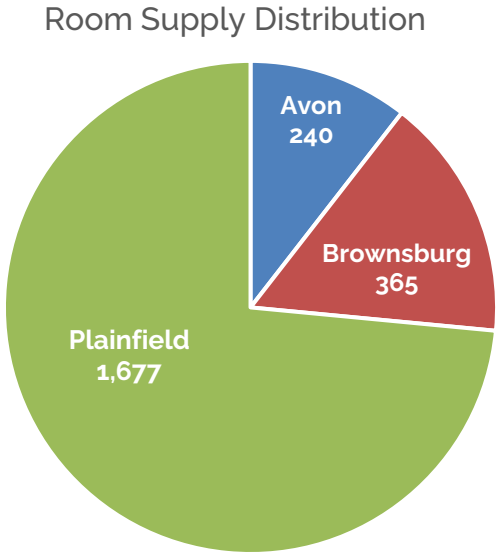
Source: Datafy, Jan 1 – Dec 31, 2023 (visitors with home address more than 50 miles from Hendricks County) Bars indicate weekend days

Lodging

Hendricks County offers a mix of hotel and short-term rental options. The majority of the hotel room supply (73%) in the county is in Plainfield. The county supports a mix of economy, midscale, and upscale hotel properties. The majority of hotel rooms in the county are in Midscale properties. The county's hotel room supply has more than doubled since 2002.



Source: CoStar, Clarity of Place



Source: CoStar, Clarity of Place (of hotel properties)

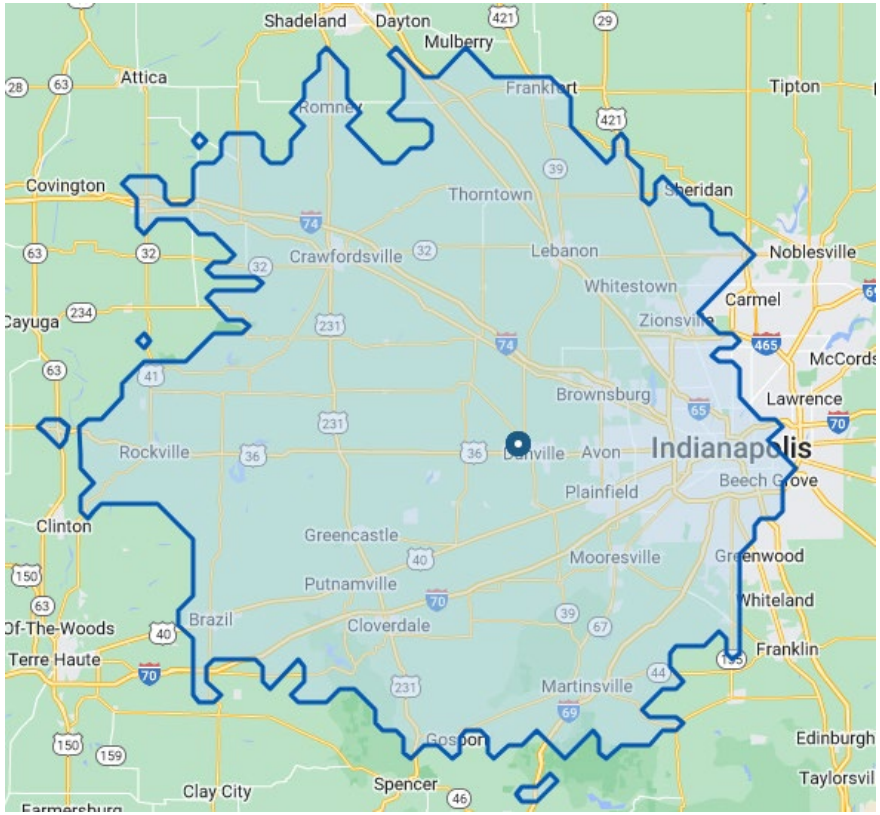
Transportation infrastructure

Hendricks County is located in Central Indiana, The county is serviced by Interstate 70 in the southeast and Interstate 74 crossing the northern portion of the county. Highways 136, 36 and 40 also provide east-west access through the county.

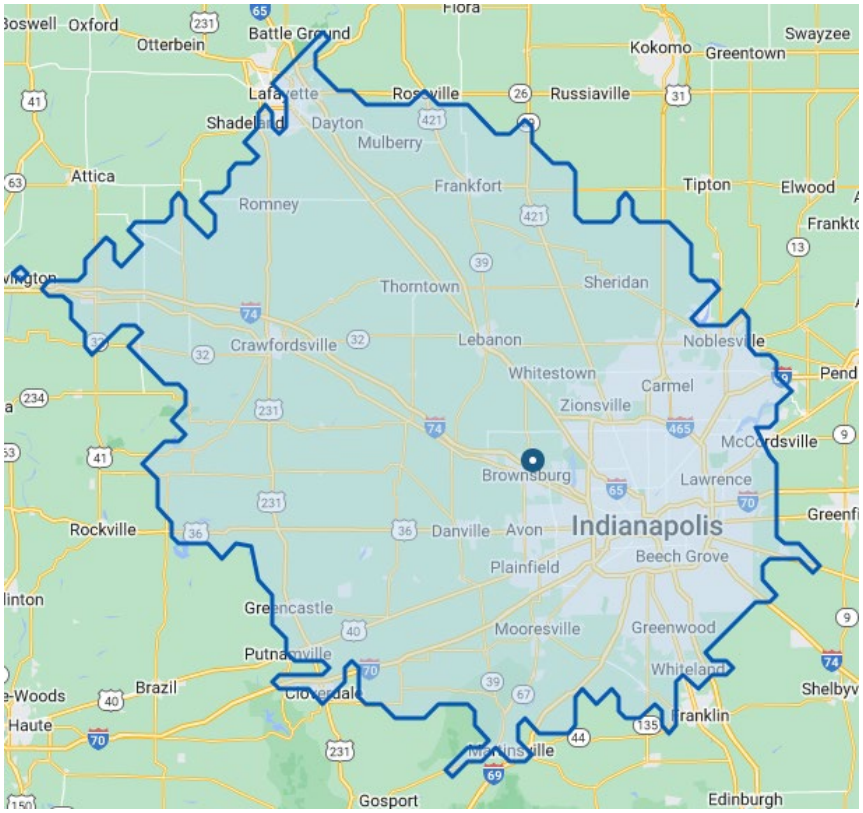
As noted above, Indianapolis International Airport is adjacent to the eastern border of the county. Hendricks County maintains approximately 770 miles of roadway, and nearly 240 bridges. There are 17 EV charging stations in the county, all of which are in the eastern part of the county. There are 10 cell towers in the county.

Much of the Indianapolis MSA is within an hour drive of most Hendricks County communities.

Hour Drive Radius from Danville



Hour Drive Radius from Brownsburg



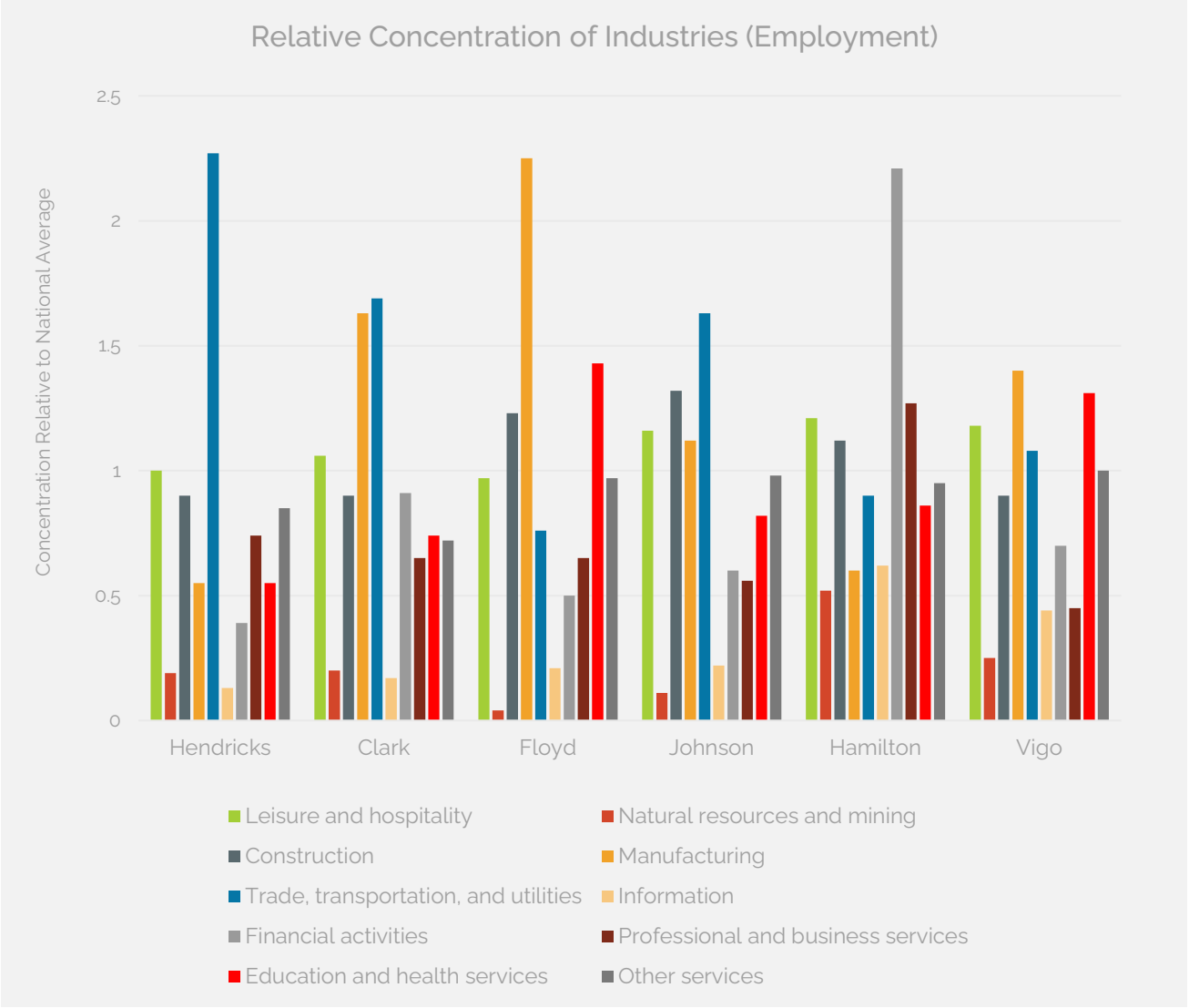
Source: CoStar

Economic Context

The concentration of leisure and hospitality employment in Hendricks County is equal to the national average. The county's concentration of trade, transportation, and utilities employment is more than twice the national average.

With the exception of Floyd County, the other peers have a higher concentration of leisure and hospitality employment than the national average.

Since 2020, the population in Hendricks County has grown by 6.6%, the second highest growth rate of the comparative set.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

COMPETITIVE OVERVIEW

	Hendricks	Clark & Floyd	Johnson	Hamilton	Vanderburgh	Vigo
Demand Drivers & Attractions	Communities and special events	Proximity to Louisville, outdoor recreation with river access	Festivals and events	Sports tourism	Sports tourism, Manufacturing	Indiana State University
Brand	Suburb of Indianapolis, outdoor amenities, family fun	Branded as "SOIN – Southern Indiana"; boasts proximity to Louisville, outdoor attractions, and access to the Ohio River	Suburb of Indianapolis, "Festival Country"	Suburb of Indianapolis, Sports tourism amenities	Sports, conferences, family friendly histories	Sports and outdoor recreation, Indiana State University
Major Airport	Indianapolis International Airport	Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport	Indianapolis International Airport	Indianapolis International Airport	Evansville Regional Airport	Terre Haute Regional Airport
County Seat and Major Cities	Avon, Brownsburg, Danville, Plainfield	Charlestown, Jeffersonville, Sellersburg Galena, Greenville, New Albany	Bargersville, Edinburgh, Franklin, Greenwood, Whiteland	Carmel, Noblesville, Sheridan. Westfield	Evansville	Terre Haute
Population 2023 (growth over 2020-2023)	186,387 6.6%	125,467 & 80,809 3.6% & 0.4%	167,819 3.7	371,645 7.0	180,128 -0.2%	106,153 0%
Land area (population/sq mile)	409 (455.7/ sq mile)	376 & 149 (333.7/ sq mile) & (542.3/ sq mile)	320 (524.4/ sq mile)	394 (943.3/ sq mile)	233 (771.8/ sq mile)	404 (262.8/ sq mile)
Traditional Lodging properties (room supply)	29 (2,282)	30 & 4 (2,588) & (345)	16 (1,000)	44 (5,097)	32 (4,900)	22 (1,891)

Background & Process – Initial Community Alignment Analysis

The various comprehensive plans, parks and recreation master plans, transportation plans, arts and cultural plans of Hendricks County municipalities and organizations provide perspectives on possible opportunities that connect to both tourism and resident quality of life. The following table contains a list of findings and potential opportunities cultivated by Clarity of Place using current industry trends applied to an initial review of market research and data.

Priorities	Significant Finding	Potential Opportunities
Outdoor Recreation	Parks, trails, & open spaces scored 7th highest priority in 2022 Hendricks County Community Foundation Community Needs Assessment	Maintain quality of existing parks; Develop parks, sports venues, nature areas, and golf resorts Connect trails
Motorsports	Indiana is synonymous with motorsports and no destination seems better positioned than Hendricks County, but the audience is highly specific	Organize business development around key motorsports dates; Build additional events into an already busy calendar
Wellness	Access to healthcare and wellness options scored 5th highest priority in 2022 Community Needs Assessment	Leverage Hendricks Regional Health reputation in cancer, orthopedic, cardiology, & critical care to grow tourism
Suburban Growth	Bloomberg.com definition - A suburb is a smaller city on the periphery of a larger city	Preserve local character while continuing to be part of metro growth – Surural (suburban and rural attributes)
Airport Adjacent	Cargo growth including a $1.5 billion FedEx expansion could bring a 3rd runway to IND	Leverage airport reputation, passenger growth, and distribution expansion for Hendricks County
Small Town Charm	In 2023, Hendricks County had the 3rd highest rate of growth and 2nd largest numeric gain of Indiana counties	Pursue independent and small business hospitality operators to complement emerging growth in chain businesses
Hospitality Sector Growth	Room supply increased by 1% between 2022 and 2023 growing from 739,855 to 746,504, all within Plainfield	Support growing clusters of hospitality providers with destination development and targeted business growth
Venues	Hendricks County Fairgrounds and Visit Hendricks County partnering to study feasible venue expansion	Support the competitiveness of meeting and event venues through research and cooperative promotion
Arts & Entertainment	Access to arts & culture scored 3rd lowest priority in 2022 Community Needs Assessment	Provide support and promotion of Hendricks Live and other arts/entertainment pursuits to help show importance/use
Cuisine	Pride in place can often be tied to the tastes of a destination	Leverage farm products and culinary trails to strengthen food reputation

Background & Process – Research Inputs

In addition to the Destination Assessment, the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan required a comprehensive mix of research, data, and listening steps. The process began in January 2024 as Visit Hendricks County engaged several different research and planning agencies to collaborate towards the needed outcome. Those inputs and agencies included:

AGENCY	STUDIES	TIMING	AUDIENCE(S)
BALL STATE UNIVERSITY	Resident Insights on Leisure Time Activities and Quality of Place Amenities	• Survey responses collected from March 27 to June 9 • Four focus groups held from May 7-8 • Six open house sessions held from April 22-25 and May 6-7	• Survey sent to 30,000 yielding 2,085 responses • Focus groups included Commuters, Diversity, Recruiters, & Small Business Owners • Residents
Longwoods INTERNATIONAL	Hendricks County Visitor Image Study	• Survey responses collected from May to June	Respondent Distribution: • Indianapolis DMA 400 • Fort Wayne DMA 110 • Cincinnati DMA 350 • Champaign-Springfield Decatur DMA 140
CLARITY OF PLACE A LONGWOODS COMPANY	Destination Relevancy Survey	• Survey responses collected from May to June	Survey sent to 250 yielding 75 responses Respondent Distribution: • Tourism Industry members 49 • Community members 26

Each of these research studies played a significant role in shaping the recommendations of this Strategic Plan. For the purposes of the Plan, each study is summarized within one or two pages, but the full reports are available through Visit Hendricks County.

Resident Insights on Leisure Time Activities & Quality of Place Amenities

Visit Hendricks County commissioned Ball State University to perform an innovative study of how and where Hendricks County residents spend their free time. The survey, focus groups, and open house sessions captured a range respondents that covered the entirety of the county.

Importance to Strategic Plan

The study reveals a mass majority of Hendricks County residents spend their leisure time close to home within the County. The top activities that interest residents in spending time in Hendricks County mirror the top activities of interest outside of Hendricks County. As the destination prepares future development, encouraging more restaurants, events and festivals, and outdoor amenities will likely prompt residents to stay local. Marketing efforts can focus on increasing resident awareness and shifting frequency from monthly to weekly and 1-2 times per year to monthly.

Key Findings

84% of respondents spend most of their free time within Hendricks County

Reasons for spending free time in Hendricks County:
1. Easier to get to
2. Familiarity with what's happening
3. Cost of amenities/activities

Top free time places in Hendricks County:
Plainfield 31%
Avon 29%
Brownsburg 21%

Top free time places outside Hendricks County:
Downtown Indy 29% Northside Indy 11% Carmel 9%

16% of respondents spend most of their free time outside Hendricks County

Reasons for spending free time outside Hendricks County:
1. More options for things to do
2. Offers what I like
3. Familiarity with what's happening

Top free time places in Hendricks County:
Avon 40%
Plainfield 24%
Brownsburg 23%

Top free time places outside Hendricks County:
Downtown Indy 24% Northside Indy 15% Carmel 12%

Interest in activities within Hendricks County:
1. Restaurants 81%
2. Outdoor amenities 79%
3. Events/Festivals 73%

Frequency of Use:		
Restaurants 65%	**Weekly**	Restaurants 29%
Downtowns, 39% Main Street	**Monthly**	Arts & Culture 45% Restaurants
Events, Festivals 51%	**1-2 Times/Year**	Activities & Events 60% Rural Amenities 59%

Interest in activities outside Hendricks County:
1. Restaurants 67%
2. Events/Festivals 60%
3. Outdoor amenities 57%

Hendricks County Visitor Image

Visit Hendricks County commissioned Longwoods International to conduct research on motivating factors and image attributes of the destination and how those attributes compare to the competitive Indiana destinations of Hamilton County, Johnson County, SoIN/Southern Indiana (Clark and Floyd Counties), Terre Haute/Vigo County, and Evansville/Vanderburgh County. The study examined the "hot buttons" that influence visitor interest and how those attributes influence the decision to visit. Additionally, the study measured the impact of destination marketing efforts on perceptions of economic development opportunities and livability in Hendricks County.

Importance to Strategic Plan

The study reveals opportunities for enhancing the image and desirability of Hendricks County which are tied to outreach and awareness. Visitors exposed to Hendricks County marketing messages or those that actually visit Hendricks County carry extensively more positive attitudes toward to the destination. The attitudes translate into perceptions of the county as a great place to live, work, or start a business that are two times or more stronger than those individuals that have not been exposed to marketing messages or taken a trip to Hendricks County.

Key Findings

Opportunity Categories	Actions to Shift Perceptions and Influence Hot Buttons	Incremental Percentage points to move ahead one position	Incremental percentage points to move ahead two positions
Place I'd really enjoy visiting	Emphasize **Fun** Continue showcasing **Family activities**	3 points behind Evansville	9 points behind SoIN
Image of exciting	Show variety of **Events/Entertainment** Showcase **Regional access/Variety**	1 point behind Evansville	4 points behind SoIN
Adult vacation	Use imagery & content of **adults having fun** together Show imagery of **Interesting landmarks & towns**	2 points behind Evansville	4 points behind SoIN
Family atmosphere	Continue showcasing the variety of **Family activities**	Tied with Johnson County	2 points behind SoIN
Popular	Showcase **adults having fun** together Continue showcasing **Family activities**	3 points behind SoIN	4 points behind Terre Haute
Sightseeing/ Entertainment	Emphasize **Fun** Highlight the ease of **Regional Access**	1 points behind SoIN	2 points behind Terre Haute
Unique	Profile variety of **Events** Highlight the ease of **Regional Access**	3 points behind SoIN	7 points behind Hamilton

Although Hendricks County did not rank above 3rd place in any category, the County can focus on using marketing to move to higher rankings.

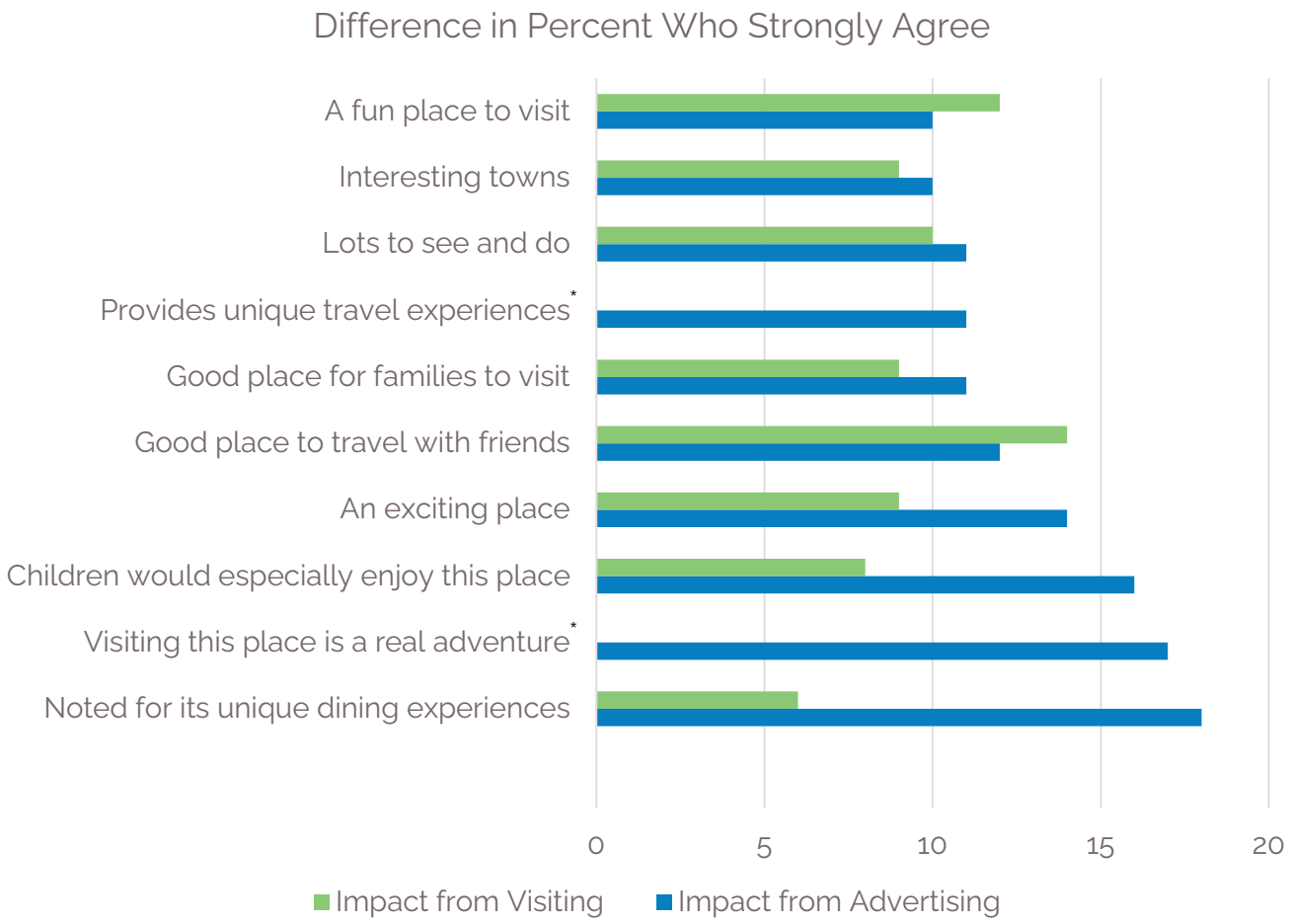
Hendricks County Visitor Image

Awareness findings based on 48% of respondents being aware of any Visit Hendricks County ad (42% social media; 34% digital; 16% out-of-home)

Hot Buttons:
(Most desired destination attributes)

- A fun place to visit
- Good place to travel with friends
- Visiting this place is a real adventure
- An exciting place
- Lots to see and do
- Noted for its unique dining experiences
- Provides unique travel experiences
- Children would especially enjoy this place
- Good place for families to visit
- Interesting towns

Hendricks County image research shows the effectiveness of Visit Hendricks County advertising at fostering positive perceptual change across primary desirable attributes. The differences in advertising driven shifts versus visitation driven shifts show key areas where the Hendricks County experience does not fully match the promotional image. Destination development and product enhancement efforts should be concentrated on adding more adventure, unique experiences and dining options, and children's activities.



* "*Provides unique travel experiences*" and "*Visiting this place is a real adventure*" both had strong impacts from advertising that did not show similar effects when asked about impacted from visiting. This suggests the product is not living up to the expectations set by advertising.

Hendricks County Destination Relevancy Survey

As part of the planning process, Clarity of Place's Destination Relevancy Survey explored opportunities to more effectively connect with tourism partners and community stakeholders. The Survey results established perceived priorities for the vision and direction of Hendricks County and the attributes most loved by the respondents.

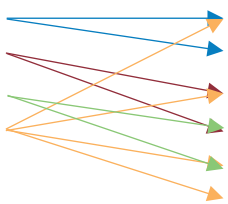
Importance to Strategic Plan

The survey results reveal several opportunities for building stronger connections between tourism partners, community stakeholders, and Visit Hendricks County. Three words best capture these opportunities – safety, activity, and connectivity. The Strategic Plan must ensure that recommendations are aggressive, but at the same time do not present a challenge to local tolerance for change. The Plan must also set a priority to pursue more activities and options for things to do around the county. Finally, the Plan needs to embrace connectivity as a priority, including organizational connectivity that continues to build collaboration with other entities, brand connectivity that provides a county-wide destination brand promise, and physical connectivity that uses product development and enhancements to link all parts of Hendricks County together.

Key Findings

Most Important Vision (by % of responses)

- Fun! (activities + venues) 37%
- Connectivity 21%
- Diversity 16%
- Managed Growth 16%



Greatest Challenges (by open ended response topic):

- Investing in infrastructure to support area growth
- Developing competitive meeting, entertainment, and sports facilities
- Making it easier to travel to and throughout Hendricks County
- Building a unified brand identity for the area
- Combatting outdated perceptions of Hendricks County as a destination
- Involving residents in decision making

Word Association – What Is Loved about Hendricks County

Key Traits	Values	Assets	Attitudes
Attributes	Time-Honored	Safe Natural	Spontaneous Kind
Descriptors	48% Authentic 47% Traditional 43% Hardworking 41% Proud 35% Trustworthy	71% Safe 49% Outdoorsy 41% Beautiful	61% Welcoming 23% Adaptable 23% Fun 29% Generous 21% Compassionate

The words used to describe what is loved about Hendricks County provide insight on the community's values and form a foundational building block for developing the community's brand promise. The words receiving the highest percentage of responses are the essence of what tourism partners and community stakeholder value most about the County.

Background and Process – Partner & Stakeholder Input

An important component of the planning process was a multifaceted approach to obtaining input from tourism partners and community stakeholders that would help connect and prioritize the various assessment and research findings. Partner and stakeholder input followed a progression of 12 initial interviews conducted in June 2024 across a range of community and tourism industry leaders. The interviews helped shape 10 subsequent small group input sessions held from July 24th to July 26th organized by group type.

Interview Questions

- What value does tourism provide to the quality of life of Hendricks County?
- What is your vision for Hendricks County as a place to visit?
- What are the readily available tourism-related growth opportunities for Hendricks County?
- What are the specific areas where your operation needs assistance from Visit Hendricks County?

Small Group Session Groups:

Community business leaders
History, arts, & culture providers
Lodging operators
Municipal & public sector representatives
Outdoor recreation/attractions suppliers
Restaurants & retail operators
Session for individuals with schedule conflicts
Sports activities & venue operators
Visit Hendricks County Board members
Visit Hendricks County staff

Small Group Session Questions

- What is one outcome you would like to see from this Plan?
- What about our quality of life is most appealing to a visitor?
- What needs to change to make it more appealing?
- What stand in our way of making the needed changes?
- What is the easiest or quickest win for growing Hendricks County as a destination?
- What role do you want Visit Hendricks County to play in advancing these opportunities

Input Outcomes

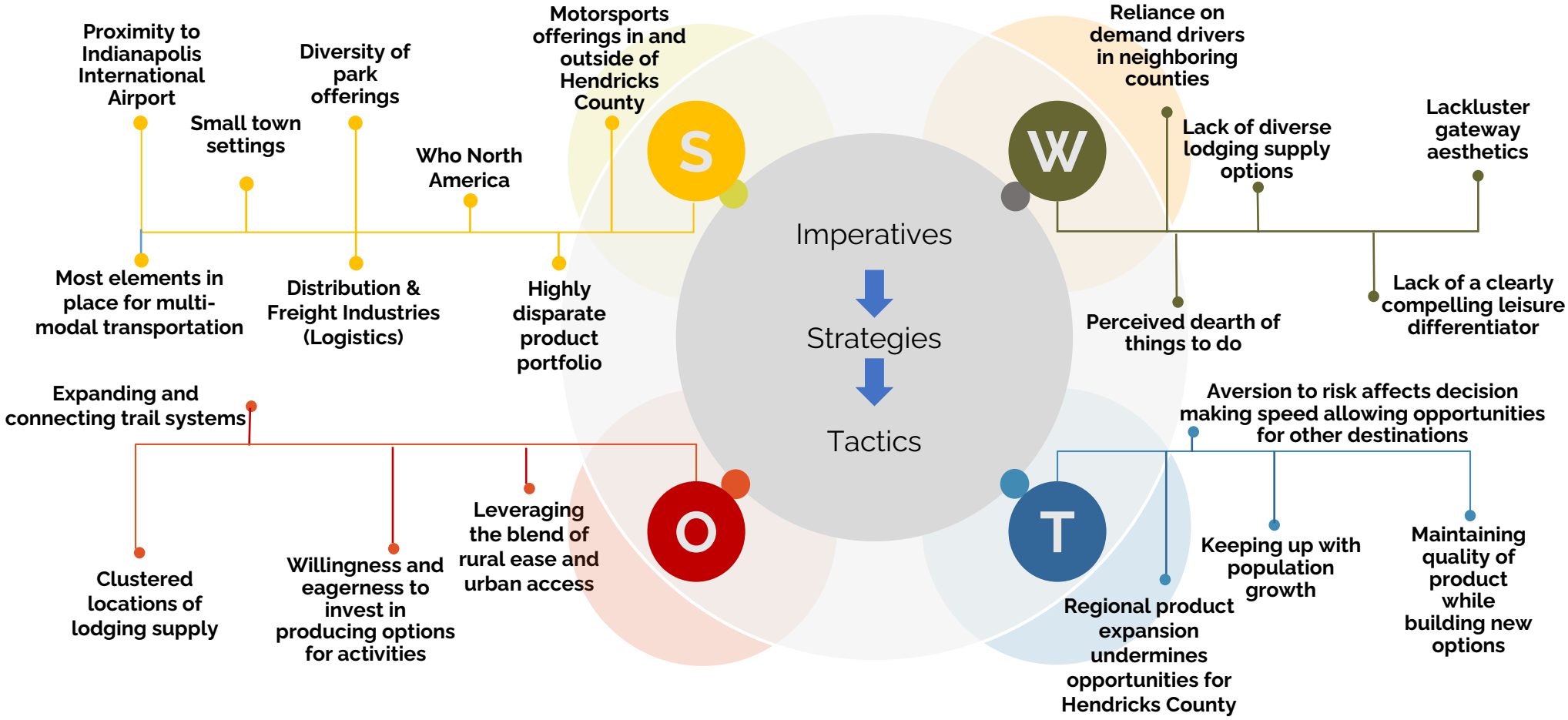
The next page shows the common themes that emerged from the interviews that would shape the direction planned for the small group sessions. It also shows corresponding input from those small group sessions and how they intersect with findings from the destination assessment and the research projects of this plan.

Background and Process – Connecting the Analysis and Input

Assessment Proof Point	Research Proof Point	Interview Context	Small Group Input
Limited number of attractions	"More Options" were top reason for spending time out of County	Infrastructure for active living is supportive of tourism as it provides an important outlet for activities	Develop more activities, events, fun "People come to Hendricks County because they have to."
Not applicable	"Safe" top aspect loved about Hendricks County	Desire to retain youth and attract talent	Missing a generation of residents as individuals move here when starting families
Travel patterns show weekend spikes; Occupancy rates highest over weekends	Community stakeholders & tourism partners desire more development of sports and entertainment venues	School use not a viable option as a venue; Hendricks County needs larger facilities as business will continue to go elsewhere	Sports (weekend business) is a recognized opportunity conflicts with when overnight business is needed (weekday)
Proximity to Downtown Indy (Lucas Oil Stadium/Convention Center); Grand Park; Indianapolis International Airport	Sports helped Hamilton County develop double the number of rooms of Hendricks County	Opportunity to replicate what residents want to find in other places; Airport is such a draw for visits and economic development	Leverage regional assets that drive overnight demand
Trails are present across Hendricks County but not fully connected to one another	Connectivity was 2nd highest ranked vision for Hendricks County	Ignite interest by connecting aspects of the community; Visit Hendricks County has a two-way street of partnership	Importance of connectivity (trails, parks, brand, community organizations/cities/towns)
Not applicable	"Welcoming" was 2nd highest scoring aspect loved about Hendricks County	Celebrate and show the diversity of Hendricks County	Welcoming mentality of the people who call this place home
Walkability is currently limited to certain areas with critical mass of destination product	"Easier to get to" was top reason for spending free time in Hendricks County	Trail systems are an advantage for Hendricks County; Connectedness draws from one place to another	Walkability is an important and attractive feature
In 2023, Hendricks County had the 3rd highest rate of growth and 2nd largest numeric gain of Indiana counties	"Managed growth" represented 16% of the expressed vision for Hendricks County	Similarities in growth patterns between Hendricks County and Hamilton County in 1990s; Need for managed not controlled growth	Attempt to find the balance between too much change and too rapid change

Background and Process
Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities - Threats

The destination assessment, research results, and stakeholder engagement process revealed clear strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The outcome of that analysis paves the way for the strategic recommendations that follow. Strategies will focus on sustaining strengths, averting threats, converting weaknesses, and pursuing opportunities.



Recommendations



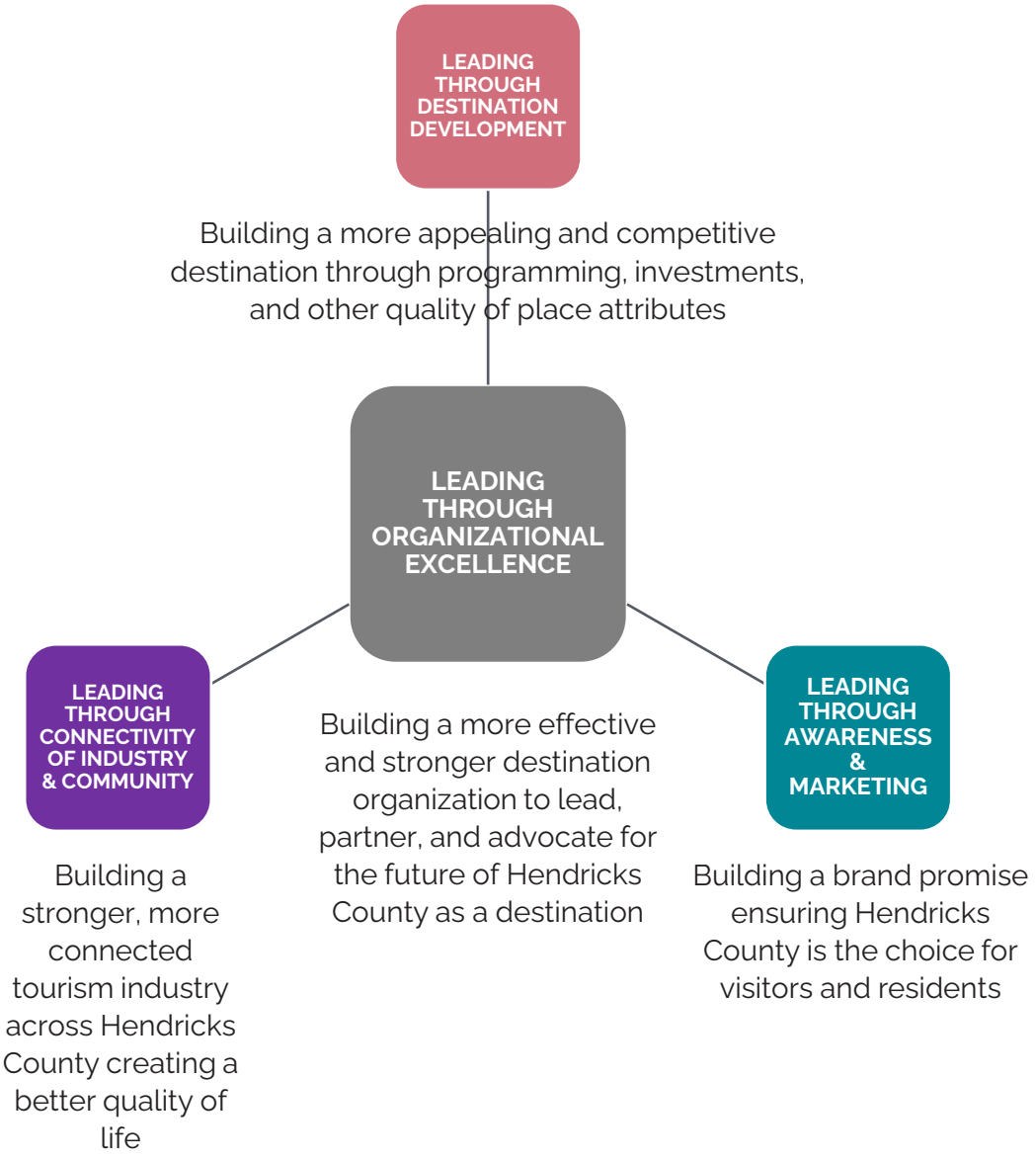
Direction

Simplicity is a key element of a successful strategic plan. Strategic plans that are perceived to be overly complicated or too immense risk being placed on the proverbial shelf to collect dust. Streamlined strategic plans allow organizations to be focused on actions and accomplishments.

Strategic Pillars

The recommended strategies for the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan are organized into four separate pillars. At the center of these themes is **Organizational Excellence** as the operations of Visit Hendricks County must continue to be best in class to compete effectively in a highly crowded market while delivering quality services for tourism partners and community stakeholders. **Connectivity of Industry and Community** along with **Awareness and Marketing** are each directly associated with programs of Visit Hendricks County, governed by the Board of Directors, and managed by staff members. **Destination Development** stands as a partnership between Visit Hendricks County, the community, and the financial investment of the Hendricks County Tourism Commission. These initiatives and investments seek to grow a stronger mix of destination assets and offerings.

The recommendations within each of these themes provide concepts that Visit Hendricks County Board members, staff, and partners can utilize to develop annual workplans and tactics.



Importance of Leadership

This Strategic Plan emphasizes the importance of ongoing leadership from Visit Hendricks County. The stakeholder engagement process showed a level of respect and support for the proven leadership of Visit Hendricks County. The longevity and the strategic vision of the Executive Director, the impartiality of a county-wide organization, and the proven commitment to results that support all communities collectively establish a feeling of trust and confidence in the organization's ability to continue leading destination growth initiatives. Visit Hendricks County's leadership extends beyond the county line as the organization's team members also play critical roles in the direction of both the Indianapolis region and the state as a whole.

Visit Hendricks County is one of many destination organizations working towards transforming its initiatives to better support the communities it serves by performing as a destination leadership organization (DLO). The Strategic Plan provides a needed road map for helping that transition.

Destination leadership organizations must play a variety of roles within a community and across the area's tourism industry. Those roles shift within the organization to help accomplish the various objectives of the area and implement the strategic plan:

Metrics for Success

The initiatives recommended within the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan focus on delivering results, but the metrics associated with those results are not always quantifiable. The Plan utilizes three different types of metrics to determine overall success from initiatives:

Accomplishments – Implementation outcomes derived from completion of a specific task or deliverable

Performance – Implementation outcomes that create business volume and growth

Perception – Implementation outcomes that establish or change attitudes and image

Timeline

The initiatives recommended within the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan include short-term, medium-range, and long-term strategies as classified below:

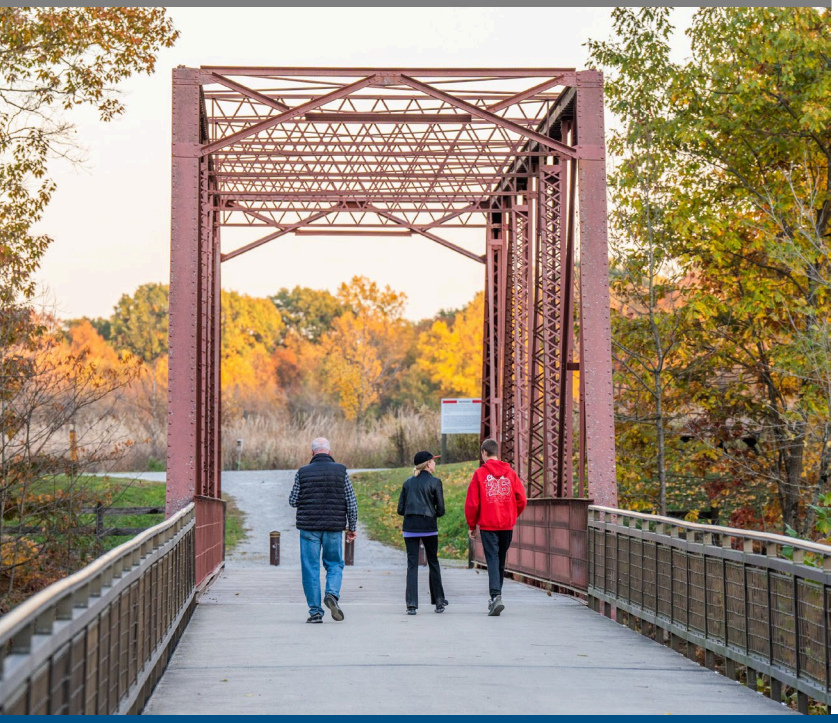
Short-term	Medium-range	Long-term
Year 1	**Year 2-3**	**Year 4+**

Visit Hendricks County Board of Directors	Visit Hendricks County Staff	Partners & Community
• Budgeting for Visit Hendricks County programs • Advocate in support of Visit Hendricks County	• Lead Visit Hendricks County programs • Facilitate partnerships across partners and stakeholders	• Partner with Visit Hendricks County on programs • Advocate for growth of tourism and quality of life

LEADING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Expected Outcomes:

- Recognized restructuring as a destination leadership organization
- Defined organizational structure that matches Strategic Plan priorities
- Documented approach and roles for key advocacy initiatives



What Visit Hendricks County Must Do

Visit Hendricks County actively engages with destination marketing and development programs at the local, regional and statewide level. The exposure to regional and statewide initiatives creates opportunities for expanding the influence and visibility of Hendricks County and helps the destination leadership organization realize opportunities that will benefit the County and its municipalities. Leading through organizational excellence extends into involvement in professional development courses, industry associations, and destination recognition or certification programs. Visit Hendricks County must continue to be actively engaged with these initiatives as the tangential benefits to Hendricks County are pronounced as the staff remains sharp, inspired, and ready to lead. The advocacy efforts of the organization will need the leadership.

Why This Is Important

Participation in local, regional, state, and even national leadership and professional development opportunities expands the reach and quality of the Visit Hendricks County team. The knowledge base and credibility connected to this level of involvement widens the awareness of how to tap programs, contacts, and knowledge base to better serve the needs of Hendricks County. Continuing the commitment to organizational excellence allows Hendricks County residents, leaders, and tourism stakeholders to place faith and trust in Visit Hendricks County to plan, develop, and implement tourism and quality of life initiatives at the highest possible level of credibility and delivery.

Who Is Needed

Visit Hendricks County Board of Directors – Ensure organizational excellence is a budgeted priority; Help develop & implement Advocacy Plan elements

Visit Hendricks County Staff – Continue participation in local, regional, state, and national organizations; Include professional development initiatives as part of individual work plans; Construct and deliver Advocacy Plan and updates

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

RENAME & REPOSITION THE ORGANIZATION

The name, Visit Hendricks County, implies that programs and strategies are focused solely on bringing visitors to Hendricks County. The important role that this Destination Leadership Organization plays in developing the destination quality of place, conducting and sharing research, inspiring resident pride, and advocating alongside the industry for tourism partners is minimized by the current organizational name. Additionally, the organization's direction must be repositioned to match the direction and priorities of the Strategic Plan.

1. **Rename the nonprofit organization, Visit Hendricks County, to blend destination leadership with connectivity of industry and community, destination development, and awareness/marketing**
   - Role – CEO & Board with assistance from Marketing
   - Timeline – Short-term ☑
   - Metric - Accomplishment
2. **Optimize the organizational structure around the strategic pillars while operating as a fiscally responsible and high performing destination leadership organization**
   - Role – CEO & Board
   - Timeline – Short-term ☑
   - Metric - Accomplishment

ADVOCATE FOR TOURISM

Businesses and organizations need advocacy efforts to foster support for needs or to educate and inform policy decisions. Tourism and quality of life are no different than other industry sectors as public policies and investments help create opportunities and support needed direction. The tourism industry is highly competitive. Limitations in available resources, workforce, and other infrastructure elements require a strategic, targeted, and proactive approach to advocacy as the organization works toward becoming a community shared value amongst community stakeholders and tourism partners.

1. **Shape the Visit Hendricks County advocacy plan to support initiatives and recommendations**
   - Role – CEO & Board
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric - Accomplishment ☑

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

IMPROVE THE ORGANIZATION

Professional development, best practices, and organizational excellence are all connected. Remaining committed to individual advancement through on-going training and educational opportunities supports continual improvement and career paths as best practices become more easily accessible to the staff and staff job satisfaction delivers success for the organization.

1. **Continue commitment to professional development and industry best practices**
   Role – CEO & Staff
   Timeline – Ongoing
   Metric – Accomplishment ☑ & Perception



LEADING THROUGH CONNECTIVITY OF INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY

Expected Outcomes:

- More closely aligned Hendricks County tourism industry
- A critical mass of successful entities working together to create a broader quality of place
- Better awareness of the vitality of tourism and its workforce



What Visit Hendricks County Must Do

Visit Hendricks County is one of many organizations serving the entirety of Hendricks County. The longevity of key Visit Hendricks County leaders, collaborative nature of the organization, and blend of vision with knack for getting things accomplished forms a general expectation that Visit Hendricks County can and should facilitate partnerships across multiple Hendricks County organizations. Visit Hendricks County can reposition the value and importance of the tourism industry across all areas of the county. Other than Visit Hendricks County there is no a singular organization that speaks out on behalf of tourism businesses, the needs of all types of visitors, the desired leisure pursuits of residents, and the overall importance of driving tourism growth to the area.

Why This Is Important

Throughout the stakeholder engagement process, the word connectivity emerged as both an expressed need and as a desired outcome. To some this was a physical connectivity that would tie one trail system to another. For most, connectivity was more organizational as in creating connections for growth, facilitating communications, and developing a shared vision across the entirety of Hendricks County. There are numerous organizations that serve the County as a whole, but only Visit Hendricks County has a clear role in producing tourism growth, communicating tourism's impact, and improving leisure options for resident quality of life.

Who Is Needed

Visit Hendricks County Staff – Continue communicating tourism successes and needs; Continue building partnerships across the County; Build industry recognition programs; Convene county-wide conversations to build shared vision; Facilitate information and research resource sharing

Community Stakeholders and Tourism Partners – Actively share ideas, opportunities and needs; Participate in Visit Hendricks County led initiatives

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH CONNECTIVITY OF INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY

STRENGTHEN THE INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY

Throughout the pandemic, Visit Hendricks County established itself as a resource to numerous businesses and organizations that needed support during their darkest days. Although the situation is vastly different four years later, the need for support still exists. The tourism related businesses and organizations of Hendricks County need information resources and counseling to help with decision making and business planning. Developers and financial institutions need data to help guide investment options. Visit Hendricks County will expand on its role as a destination leadership organization by reformatting partner engagement to strengthening the partner's operations by actively providing key decision-making tools.

1. **Expand consistency of tourism industry engagement programs**
   Role – Staff
   Timeline – Long-term
   Metric – Performance
2. **Arm industry partners and community stakeholders with appropriately targeted data resources that can assist with future decision making**
   Role – Staff
   Timeline – Short-term
   Metric - Performance

CONVENE AROUND STRATEGIC PILLARS

Hendricks County is blessed with a multitude of organizations and entities that work to create progress and advance elements of quality of life. As the County's sole destination leadership organization, Visit Hendricks County is recognized as a likely convener to bring those groups together to pursue collaborative approaches around the pillars of this strategic plan. The convening work of Visit Hendricks County can help bring the respective organizations together to advance key initiatives connected to this plan and celebrate both small and large accomplishments. A win for tourism advances all parts of the Hendricks County.

1. **Convene community/destination groups to build ongoing shared vision and accountability across Hendricks County**
   Role – CEO
   Timeline – Medium-range
   Metric – Accomplishment & Perception

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH CONNECTIVITY OF INDUSTRY & COMMUNITY

CELEBRATE THE INDUSTRY AND ITS IMPACT

Hendricks County has a thriving tourism economy that employs nearly 4,700 individuals, saves local families $662 per year in taxes, and is the 9th largest industry in the County. Visit Hendricks County currently tells the various stories of this impact through its annual report, speeches to local organizations, and on its industry information webpage. Beyond the financial impact, tourism brings new business opportunities for leisure pursuits, retail, and restaurants many of which depend on the expanded customer base that visitors provide. Showing how these impacts support resident quality of life is an important outcome of the destination leadership organization.

But, the hospitality and service industry is not easy. Individuals committed to this line of work deserve to be recognized for delivering top level service with a warm friendly smile that embodies Hoosier Hospitality. Businesses and organizations working to improve the Hendricks County tourism experience or enhance quality of life also need support and recognition for the important role they play in enhancing the County's overall offerings. Visit Hendricks County is well positioned to continue delivering a range of recognition programs that celebrate and elevate the service standards and the destination assets that provide those experiences.

1. **Build a better understanding of tourism's contribution to economic vitality and resident quality of life**
   Role – Staff
   Timeline – Ongoing
   Metric - Perception
2. **Continue to acknowledge excellence in hospitality service and innovation in hospitality investments through awards and recognition programs**
   Role – Staff
   Timeline – Medium-range
   Metric - Accomplishment

LEADING THROUGH AWARENESS & MARKETING

Expected Outcomes:

- Crafted brand essence capturing the true promise of the Hendricks County destination experience
- Improved awareness of Hendricks County assets and overall brand promise
- Increased tourism growth and resident sentiment of Hendricks County quality of life



What Visit Hendricks County Must Do

Marketing success is a paramount function of Visit Hendricks County. The transition from destination marketing organization into a more comprehensive operation as a destination leadership organization must still retain and enhance its marketing responsibilities. This functionality needs to be expanded throughout the implementation of this Strategic Plan and extended into researching and delivering a true destination brand promise for Hendricks County, one that captures the essence of the County and differentiates it from other destinations within the Indianapolis metropolitan area.

Why This Is Important

Marketing and outreach strategies provide another means of connectivity for both tourism businesses, organizations, and community stakeholders. The expressed desire by so many participants within the stakeholder engagement portion of the planning process grants a level of permission to Visit Hendricks County to not only lead marketing, but to also pursue the creation of a comprehensive and defining brand promise for the County. Given perceived similarities in product offerings among the Hendricks County competitive group as revealed within the Hendricks County Image Research conducted by Longwoods International, this brand is highly essential.

Who Is Needed

Visit Hendricks County Staff – Lead and execute branding development, marketing outreach, and media relations programming; Provide support to efforts of local hospitality businesses and venues; Research target audience options; Translate programs into needed social media, digital, and collateral content

Community Stakeholders and Tourism Partners – Actively participate in marketing and other initiatives; Adopt and utilize the brand promise within operations

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH AWARENESS & MARKETING

BRAND THE PROMISE OF HENDRICKS COUNTY

Destination marketing organizations are notorious for creating visually appealing logos and slogans. Destination leadership organization recognize that logos and slogans are only successful when they translate the promise of the destination into compelling content. Hendricks County currently lacks a definitive brand promise. The process to examine options and translate those options into a clearly differentiating and compelling brand that captures the soul of Hendricks County's unique quality of life and sense of place will not be easy. But the time is right and the importance of doing this is high.

1. **Define the brand promise of Hendricks County**
   - Role – Staff with input from partners
   - Timeline – Short-term
   - Metric – Accomplishment
2. **Evaluate and update the brand image marketing of Hendricks County**
   - Role – Staff
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric – Accomplishment Perception
3. **Craft connection options for elevating attractions and communities as part of the Hendricks County brand**
   - Role – Staff and Partners
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric – Accomplishment Perception

TARGET MEANINGFUL AUDIENCES

Delivering the brand promise through targeted content, social media, media relations, and other marketing methods while managing the program budget requires clearly identifying and prioritizing potential target audiences. For Visit Hendricks County there are two overarching market groups – (1) local residents that necessitate Visit Hendricks County playing the role of cheerleader to stoke community pride and (2) prospective visitors that necessitate Visit Hendricks County playing the role of influencer to encourage visits to the area. Each of those audience groups contains subgroupings that allow for even greater levels of targeting and specialization.

1. **Ensure residents are a primary audience for outreach and awareness**
   - Role – Staff
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric – Perception Performance
2. **Evaluate and diversify the target markets for visitors**
   - Role – Staff
   - Timeline – Short-term then ongoing
   - Metric – Perception Performance

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH AWARENESS & MARKETING

PARTNER FOR OUTREACH

Partnerships play a vital role in the success of Visit Hendricks County marketing initiatives. In most cases, the partnerships are with local tourism and hospitality businesses including hotels, sports venues, meeting facilities, arts organizations, event planners, and restaurants. In other cases, Visit Hendricks County partners with other Destination Marketing Organizations including Visit INDY and the Indiana Destination Development Corporation. The partnerships help stretch Visit Hendricks County resources, especially talent and finances.

1. **Continue connecting Hendricks County to regional and state marketing efforts**
   - Role – Staff and Partners
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric – Perception Performance
2. **Facilitate effective marketing opportunities for Visit Hendricks County, tourism partners, and community stakeholders**
   - Role – Staff and Partners
   - Timeline – Ongoing
   - Metric - Performance



LEADING THROUGH DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

Expected Outcomes:

- Increased options for activities and things to do in Hendricks County
- Expanded special event offerings to encourage overnight stays
- Documented destination development priorities and initiatives to build a stronger sense of place for Hendricks County



What Visit Hendricks County Must Do

Although destination development is an emerging aspect of many destination leadership organizations, Visit Hendricks County has been engaged in destination development initiatives for over a decade. The foresight to assemble land holdings helps ensure that destination development is a pivotal component of Visit Hendricks County's future. The organization is positioned to act on destination development opportunities.

Why This Is Important

Hendricks County needs more to do and more available options for spending discretionary leisure time. An active destination development approach will help fill some of the perceived and real product and experience gaps. The Resident Insights on Leisure Time Activities and Quality of Place Amenities study revealed clear opportunities to extend local resident engagement through quality of life activities. The resulting increase in resident satisfaction will help drive more overnight stays as local residents feel more excited about the offerings available and actively encourage their friends and family to visit.

Who Is Needed

Visit Hendricks County Staff – Lead and execute destination development planning and research; Provide support for destination development initiatives; Engage with event planners and other suppliers to enhance the area's overnight stay appeal; Encourage more resident use of leisure assets

Community Stakeholders and Tourism Partners (including Developers) – Invest in projects to develop more Hendricks County assets; Commit to improving the visual appeal of Hendricks County exits and key visitor areas; Hendricks County Tourism Commission financial investment and oversight

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING THROUGH DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

PLAN FOR DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

Destination development plans identify key opportunities for new product development investments in the community. Visit Hendricks County has a history of facilitating destination development initiatives. Commissioning a destination development plan will rekindle much of this work and help individual communities prioritize some of their own investments in topics such as hotel and restaurant development, attraction development, wayfinding, gateway aesthetics, murals and public art, venue development, parks, and transportation options while also identifying funding options to pay for the projects.

1. **Create a destination development plan in partnership with the Hendricks County Tourism Commission to determine the desired objective of destination development**
   - Role – Staff and Board with input from partners
   - Timeline – Long-term
   - Metric – Accomplishment ☑
2. **Connect the destination development plan to capital plans in each community to continue to expand the quality and maintenance of current offerings**
   - Role – Staff and community stakeholders
   - Timeline – Long-term
   - Metric – Accomplishment ☑

GUIDE EVENT & DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

Destination development projects have a lot of steps and require considerable patience as developers navigate financing and approval. Event planning is similar in both steps and risk. Visit Hendricks County can assist both developers and event planners by clearly documenting the approvals process in each community and building destination development toolkits.

1. **Expand event development initiatives into a comprehensive program aimed at growing event audiences and extending offerings into multi-day opportunities**
   - Role – Staff
   - Timeline – Medium-range
   - Metric – Performance
2. **Act as a resource for facilitating destination development**
   - Role – Staff
   - Timeline – Long-term
   - Metric – Performance

Implementation – When Do We Start

By design the Visit Hendricks County Strategic Plan requires a multi-year approach to implementation. Visit Hendricks County must continue to do the daily tasks that currently make up elements of organizational excellence, industry and community connectivity, outreach and awareness, and destination development while reshaping these tasks to fit the strategies of the Plan. The following timeline summarizes how those strategies should fit into the timeline of the Strategic Plan.

Short-term **Year 1**	Medium-range **Year 2-3**	Long-term **Year 4+**
• Rename Visit Hendricks County • Optimize the organizational structure • Professional development & best practices • Convene community/destination visioning for tourism • Expand tourism industry engagement programs • Define Hendricks County brand promise • Evaluate/diversify visitor target markets	• Assemble advocacy plan • Build understanding of tourism's contribution • Arm partners/stakeholders with data • Update brand image marketing • Connect partners/stakeholders to the Hendricks County brand • Include residents as a primary audience • Continue connecting Hendricks County to regional and state marketing • Facilitate effective marketing opportunities • Create a destination development plan • Expand event development initiatives	• Award excellence in hospitality service • Connect destination development plan to capital plans • Act as a resource for facilitating destination development

Conclusion

Hendricks County is poised for growth, and this Strategic Plan is designed to ensure that growth is both meaningful and impactful. By focusing the efforts of Visit Hendricks County, this plan will prepare the path for the organization to transition from a traditional Destination Marketing Organization into a true Destination Leadership Organization.

As this transition unfolds, the commitment to organizational excellence remains steadfast. The organization will facilitate industry and community connectivity, engage in targeted marketing and awareness programs, and deliver a true brand promise for the area, all while developing the destination experience.

The strategies for action will guide Visit Hendricks County staff and Board members in crafting work plans and setting goals that align with the Strategic Plan.

Crucially, the research and data gathered throughout this planning process provide a solid foundation for the initiatives. These resources are designed to be easily replicated in the future, establishing a benchmark for where Visit Hendricks County stands today and allowing for measurement of progress moving forward.



CLARITY OF PLACE

A LONGWOODS COMPANY

October 2024