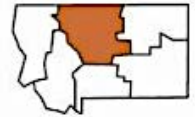


centralMONTANA



New Directions:

Tourism Strategic Plan
& Marketing Analysis

Central Montana Tourism

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Executive Summary

Central Montana Tourism Region (CMT) has a 39-year history of tourism promotion in the 13-county region that encompasses an area larger than the state of South Carolina in the center of Montana. CMT is the “go-to” source for all things tourism in the region. It is the link that ties regional organizations and communities together (large and small, frontier, rural and urban, tribal and nontribal) to host visitors.

Following a transition to a new Executive Director in late 2022, CMT contracted The Hingston Roach Group in 2023 to help conduct an organization and marketing assessment, and to develop this Strategic Plan for the next 3-5 years.

How to Use This Strategic Plan

This document is organized into nine sections:

1. The **Introduction** describes the CMT organization and planning process (1 page).
2. The **Situation Assessment** describes the region, the economic impact of tourism, visitation trends, regional strengths and challenges, and Central Montana’s competitive niche and opportunities (4 pages).
3. The **Marketing Analysis** describes Central Montana’s visitors, its marketing program and budget, target markets, results, and recommendations (6 pages).
4. The **Mission – Vision – Values** are the foundation of the organization and the Plan: Why it exists, Where it’s going, and What it stands for (1 page).
5. The **CMT Organization** section is an overview of the current and proposed organization structure, based on the future needs to implement the goals and actions identified by the Board and its partners (1 page).
6. The **Strategic Framework** graphically describes how the Goals and Actions are organized, and how they fit together, along with the Partners (private, public, tribal, nonprofit) to assist, *see graphic below* (1 page).
7. The **Goals and Actions** are the “meat” of the Plan—the specific steps that will be taken over 5 years to achieve the Mission and Vision of the organization, led by the Board and Executive Director (9 pages).
8. **Measuring Results** describes qualitative and quantitative ways to determine the effectiveness of the actions taken to achieve the goals: Is it working? How do we know? What adjustments should be made? (1 page).
9. The **Appendices** provide resource information used to develop the Plan, or useful in its implementation.

Tourism Situation and Marketing Analysis Show Tremendous Opportunities, Despite Some Challenges

Tourism has grown in Central Montana, and key markets like Millennials and nearby growing urban areas are interested in the kinds of authentic recreation and cultural experiences offered in the region. Marketing strategies can generate more visitation in off-peak times.

Mission – Vision – Values

Mission: *Central Montana Tourism advances the economic vitality of the 13-county region through effective tourism marketing, destination development, advocacy, and knowledge growth that preserves the region’s unique character, honors residents’ quality of life, addresses visitor needs, and enhances business opportunities.*

Vision: *Central Montana Tourism is the lead organization for innovative, visionary guidance to achieve sustainable levels of year-round tourism region wide. We listen carefully to our visitors and stakeholders, and work with our community partners to develop strategies that ensure every guest has an unforgettable, authentic experience in Central Montana, they share it with others, and come back again.*

Values: *Strategic, Authentic, Respect, Economy, Fun, Resilient, Teamwork* (details described on page 17).



Executive Summary *(continued)*

Strategic Goals and Actions Will Be Updated Annually

This Strategic Plan contains 17 goals and 84 actions to be implemented over a 5-year period. The Plan is intended to be a “living document”—to be reviewed and updated annually. It was developed based on conditions at a point in time, and as conditions change, the Plan will require refinement as some actions are shifted to an earlier or later year, some are added or subtracted, and some are revised.

The number of Actions may sound overwhelming, but note that the *Actions include activities that CMT already is doing*. There are 31 Actions for the remainder of FY24 (October-June), many of which are one-time, check-the-box decisions by the Board. There are 37 Actions in FY25 (July 2024-June 2025), 12 actions in FY26, and 4 actions in FY27-28. A number of the Actions in FY24 and FY25 will carry over into the later years.

Successful Implementation Relies on Effective CMT Governance

The earlier Actions focus more heavily on Organization Governance, since the Plan cannot be implemented effectively until changes are made within the organization to make it operate more efficiently. The proposed new organization structure assumes active engagement by the Board members and committees (e.g., a “Working Board-Executive Director-Working Committee” model, with each committee run by a chair or co-chairs who are *not the Executive Director*, and each committee member taking responsibility to complete tasks as part of their work).

If the Board instead prefers to use an “Advisory Board—CEO model”, where the Board does little work outside of attending meetings and making decisions, then the Executive Director role needs to be enhanced with more authority and remuneration, and support staff (or contractors) are needed to help implement the strategies.

No Tourism Organization is an Island—Partners will Assist

Regardless of the organization structure used, no Strategic Plan can be implemented by one or a few people. The term “Partners” is used in this Strategic Plan to mean ALL the private businesses, attractions, nonprofit organizations (museums, chambers of commerce, arts organizations), economic development organizations, cities, counties, tribes, state and federal agencies, etc., who are affected by and participate in regional tourism. Networking, communicating, working with, and obtaining feedback from those partners as needed is a *critical* role of the CMT staff—a time-consuming one, but a worthwhile investment.

CMT is Poised for Future Success, Needs More Resources for Capacity

CMT has accomplished much over its 39-year history. It is a large region but has one of the smallest budgets of the six regional organizations because it is more rural, with larger swaths of agricultural and public lands. Since its budget comes from lodging tax collections, and it lacks large numbers of hotel rooms, its budget always has been slim, but has grown incrementally.

Brand MT resources have increased, and there is more focus on assistance to rural and underserved populations. *CMT leadership and their partners must advocate for additional resources* to build organizational capacity (staffing and professional development) to implement activities like destination management and stewardship.



Introduction

Central Montana Tourism Has a 39-Year History

The Central Montana Tourism Region encompasses 13 counties from the Canadian border to White Sulphur Springs—a distance of about 235 miles north to south, and from the southeast corner of Glacier National Park to the east side of Fort Belknap Indian Reservation—a distance of about 240 miles west to east.

Central Montana Tourism (CMT) was formed in August 1984 as Russell Country, Inc., one of six nonprofit regional tourism organizations prior to passage of the Montana Lodging Tax by the state legislature in 1987. Its current annual lodging tax allocation is about \$523,000. The organization began using the assumed business name Central Montana Tourism in March 2014.

CMT is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors representing tourism interests in all thirteen counties, supported by a full-time Executive Director and contracted marketing agencies. CMT is categorized as a Destination Marketing Organization, or DMO (see sidebar), and works collaboratively with other tourism partners in the region, Brand MT, and adjacent regions.



A Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) is a non-profit entity charged with marketing and providing visitor services locally. DMOs promote a town, city, region, or country to increase the number of visitors. They promote the development and marketing of a destination, focusing on tourism marketing, convention sales, and services. DMOs are often called travel, convention, visitors, or tourism bureaus; welcome centers; information centers and more. Regardless of the name, these organizations offer many services to the traveling public.

– Montana DMO Handbook

The Strategic Plan Points a Clear New Direction

In March 2023, the CMT Board contracted The Hingston Roach Group to assist in developing a 5-Year Tourism Strategic Plan. The purpose of the Plan is to create a clear direction for CMT action in 2024-2028, including updated Mission, Vision, and Values statements, Strategic Framework, refined organization structure, and Goals and specific Actions to achieve implementation. The Board and Executive Director will be responsible to track and report results of the progress.

The Plan Development was a 7-Month Process

The chart to the right shows the planning process steps and timeline, beginning with an Alignment Meeting with the Executive Committee and Executive Director in early April 2023. Input was gathered from CMT Board members and other partners throughout the process, and supplemented by analyses of data from multiple sources to reveal specific strengths, challenges, opportunities, and trends related to tourism development. Findings were reported for feedback at the CMT Annual Meeting in Havre in June (photo, lower right).

STRATEGIC PLAN TASK	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
Alignment Meeting w/ Exec Cmte							
Literature and marketing review							
Data analysis and implications							
Board survey, results analysis							
Retreat planning and preparation							
Retreat with Board, ED, guests							
Draft Plan development							
Meet with Board: organization dev't							
Executive Director review of Plan							
Board review/input, approval of Plan							

Appendix A summarizes the Board survey and planning retreat results, which led to many of the Plan's recommendations. Concurrent with the CMT Strategic Plan, the Coraggio Group was developing a statewide Destination Resilience Plan for Montana, with Regional Sub-Plans, and the Rudloff Group was creating a Strategic Plan for the Great Falls Convention and Visitor Bureau (CVB). The Hingston Roach Group communicated with both firms to avoid duplication of efforts, and to focus CMT's Strategic Plan on its highest priority issues and initiatives.



Situation Assessment

This section summarizes Central Montana's **strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats**, based on findings from the survey of CMT Board members and partners, the consultants' analyses of tourism and economic trends, one-on-one interviews, the strategic planning retreat, and feedback from the CMT Annual Meeting.

Central Montana is Ideally Positioned, Very Rural

The region's location in the center of the state, at the junction of major north-south and east-west corridors, makes it ideally positioned to capture more tourism. Many visitors traveling between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks pass through the region. Geographic highlights:

- 13-county agricultural region with a total population of only 146,000, Great Falls is the largest city (pop. 72,900).
- Regional boundaries are the Canadian border to the north, U.S. Highway 12 generally along the southern edge, the Rocky Mountains (including Continental Divide) to the west (Glacier National Park borders NW corner), Fort Belknap Reservation and Mussellshell River to the east.
- The Missouri River bisects the region, flowing west to east across the middle of Central Montana, irrigating farms and providing recreation, while the Little Belt and Big Snowy Mountains dominate the southern tier.
- Interstate 15 runs north-south through the west side of the region; U.S. Highway 2 runs east-west across the northern tier, paralleling the transcontinental railroad on the "Hi-Line", 35 miles from the Canadian border.



Other than international and state borders, visitors pay little attention to political boundaries such as counties and regions. Therefore, tourism marketing efforts should highlight highway corridors, major landmarks, communities, and natural features like mountains, rivers, and lakes.

The region's remote rural character and charming small towns are both a strength and a challenge: they provide a unique experience for visitors, but also lack workforce and basic tourist services in many locations (lodging, dining, retail, cell phone reception, etc.).

Tourism Boosts the Economy by \$600 Million

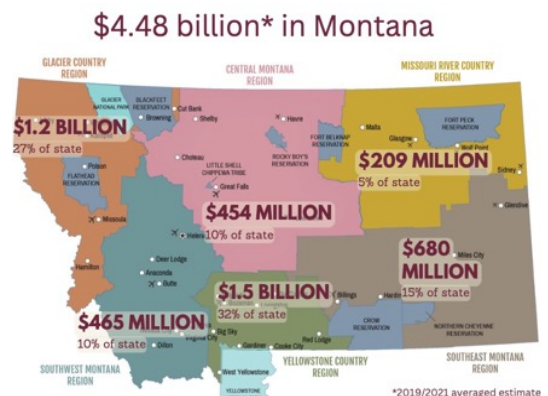
- Statewide, Montana's population is projected to grow by 160,000 people (+15%) between 2020 and 2040.
- However, Central Montana will lose population in nearly half of its 13 counties (see table at right), unless more broadband infrastructure and the rural lifestyle attracts remote workers, entrepreneurs, and locals returning home.
- Meanwhile, in 2021, nonresident visitors spent \$454 million in Central Montana, boosting sales for businesses year-round (especially fuel, food/beverages, lodging, and retail).

	2020	2025	2030	Change	% Change
Blaine	6,579	6,158	5,898	-681	-10%
Cascade	81,342	80,139	81,960	618	1%
Chouteau	5,693	5,346	5,133	-560	-10%
Fergus	11,097	10,924	11,050	-47	0%
Hill	16,361	16,044	16,382	21	0%
Judith Basin	1,991	1,889	1,910	-81	-4%
Liberty	2,366	2,148	2,043	-323	-14%
Meagher	1,832	2,088	2,317	485	26%
Petroleum	500	483	457	-43	-9%
Pondera	5,786	5,410	5,310	-476	-8%
Teton	6,241	6,250	6,325	84	1%
Toole	4,690	4,810	5,035	345	7%
Wheatland	2,154	2,207	2,241	87	4%
	146,632	143,896	146,061	-571	-0.4%

Spending Category	%
Gas, Diesel	25.8
Restaurant, Bar	20.9
Lodging	16.1
Retail	11.8
Groceries, Snacks	10.4
Outfitter, Guide	8.0
Auto Rental, Repair	3.3
Licenses, Fees	2.0
Services	1.2
Gambling	0.6
Total:	100.0

Total economic impact from nonresident visitors in 2021 was more than \$602 million in Central Montana (direct and indirect impact), creating 5,409 jobs, \$141 million in wages, \$19 million in proprietor income, and \$26 million in tax revenues.

(Source: ITRR)



Visitors Arrive by Planes, Trains, Automobiles

In addition to the highways mentioned above, Central Montana is accessed by 7 flights daily and 2 weekly into Great Falls airport, and daily flights to Havre from Billings. The Port of Sweetgrass provides access from Canada via I-15 to about 2% of destination visitors. Amtrak runs daily in both directions, with stops in Havre and Shelby.

More than one-third of nonresident destination visitors (34%) drive from the south (I-90, Yellowstone/Bozeman area), while 17% travel from the east (Dakotas, Minnesota), 14% fly in, 11% drive from the southeast (WY), and 9% arrive from the west (ID, WA).

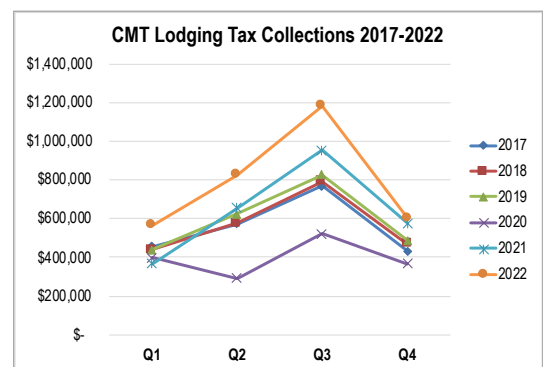


Natural, Historic, Cultural Attractions are Popular

Central Montana's attractions include more than 150 public lands sites (state parks, fishing access sites, rivers, lakes, trailheads, national monuments, wildlife refuges, national forests, and wilderness areas). It also boasts 39 museums and interpretive centers, 70+ community events and pow wows, dozens of supper clubs, local bars, guest ranches, lodging facilities, tours, and retail shops. Popular activities are hiking, scenic driving, wildlife viewing, photography, fishing, boating, camping, historic/cultural sites, shopping, breweries, events, golf, skiing, hunting, and star gazing.

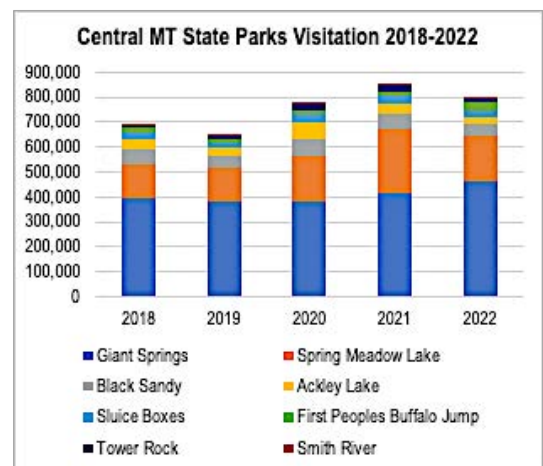
Off-Peak Season is an Opportunity for Growth

- July to Sept (Q3) is peak season in Central Montana, with *double* the lodging revenue of 1st or 4th quarters (Jan-Mar, Oct-Dec), see chart; April-June (Q2) is a distant second.
- Due to COVID, 2020 dropped 34% from 2019; but lodging sales overall increased 42% from 2017 to 2022 (Q3 grew 54%, while Q1 grew only 24%).
- Lodging tax growth reflects increases in the number of available rooms, plus higher occupancy and room rates. In the Great Falls area alone, there are 182 Airbnb/Vrbo properties, and 43 in Lewistown, according to AirDNA.
- The upward trend in room rates has continued in 2023 (statewide, national), but occupancy is generally flat or slightly lower. Higher rates may negatively impact visitation if price-conscious travelers go elsewhere.



State Parks See Large Increases in Visitation

- After a dip in visitation from 2018 to 2019, State Parks saw a jump of more than 100,000 visitors in 2020 because of the pandemic. The growth continued in 2021—up 200,000 visitors from 2019, straining park facilities and staff.
- Visits dropped by nearly 60,000 in 2022—still an overall increase of 15% since 2018. Giant Springs has the most visitation of any MT State Park, with 465,000+ visitors.



Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center Sees Rebound

In 2019, the outstanding Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls hosted 52,000 visitors. That dropped to 18,000 in 2020, 25,000 in 2021, and 42,000 in 2022. They report strong numbers so far in 2023, possibly exceeding 2019 with the return of motorcoach and other group tours. About 15% of their visitors are Canadian, and they estimate 6-8% are other international visitors.



American Prairie Reserve is a Recent Addition

A new (and rather controversial) attraction in Central Montana is the American Prairie Reserve (APR), whose goal is to connect 3.2 million acres of public and private land to create a contiguous prairie ecosystem and restore historic bison herds. The APR Discovery Center in Lewistown provides interpretive displays and visitor information.

In 2022, APR hosted 5,600 overnight visitors at five developed lodging and campground locations. The majority of overnight guests were Montanans (54%), including 5,000 hunter days; others came from WA, CA, MN, IL, CO, ID, UT, PA, TX, and WI. Primary activities of APR visitors were hiking, wildlife viewing, scenic driving, biking, fishing, hunting, and paddling.

Services, Distances, and Funding are Challenges

CMT Board members and other survey respondents indicated that “small towns” and “lack of services” are the region’s biggest challenge (76%). Another 41% cited “remoteness” and “long travel distances”. About one-quarter of respondents noted “unpredictable weather/harsh winters” (29%) and “lack of awareness/not enough promotion” of the region (24%).

Other challenges mentioned at the retreat include housing, workforce, lack of funding for historic/cultural facilities (for operations and capital projects), and lack of collaboration and awareness. Threats to tourism include volunteer/staff burnout, EMS services, liability insurance, funding for infrastructure/roads/recreation, and loss of institutional knowledge/transfer of stories (history, culture, tribal).

The rural character and open spaces also are assets: friendly people, no traffic, unspoiled landscapes, authentic communities, no light pollution, natural beauty. The amount of public and agricultural lands, length of season, and long days provide opportunities for development of new agri-tourism, astro-tourism (star gazing), recreation equipment rentals, and guided adventure experiences.

The key is strong branding to ensure promotion efforts target visitors seeking this kind of experience, and clear communications to shape expectations, so visitors are prepared for it.

Visitor Information and Teamwork are Essential

Basic visitor information is needed in small communities, such as wayfinding signs (see icons above right), visitor maps and planning tools, geolocations, updated website/app listings, and podcasts.

Many small towns cannot afford staffed visitor centers or Chamber of Commerce offices—especially with workforce challenges, but they can provide outdoor information kiosks with interpretive signs (see photo, right), information at local businesses or museums, and online information.

Businesses located off primary routes (and in areas with limited cell service) may be able to purchase Tourist-Oriented Directional Signs (TODS) for placement along the nearest state/federal highway to guide visitors (see example at right and Appendix C: Information Resources).

Also critical to success is cooperation and “cross-pollination” between communities, attractions, and businesses to share referrals and keep visitors in the region. Awareness among residents about the value of tourism and ways to assist visitors improves the experience and helps to avoid bad traveler stories.



Competitive Niche: What Central Montana is, and is Not

Central Montana is a place of superlatives: vast open spaces, endless skies, star-filled nights, magnificent landscapes, uncrowded adventures, compelling history, unique Indigenous cultures, convenient crossroads, scrumptious supper clubs, jovial pubs, varied activities, fun festivals, and famous fishing and hunting. Best of all are its people: hard-working, fun-loving, self-reliant residents, who are proud of their Montana heritage and enjoy welcoming guests with authentic smiles, self-deprecating humor, and a hot meal.

Central Montana does NOT offer ritzy resorts, pampered spas, overpriced cuisine, designer shopping, urban cowboys, theme parks, traffic, and long lines—and doesn't want them! Therefore, this special region appeals to visitors who appreciate its authentic charm, rough edges, and unspoiled beauty. Central Montana's target visitors don't seek chain stores, limousines, contrived communities, valet parking, or cruise directors. They bring their sense of adventure, sense of humor, and flexibility. They want "real", expect the unexpected, appreciate local culture, respect the environment, and understand that unplanned experiences often make the best memories.

Summary: Situation Assessment Reveals Opportunities for CMT Inc.

Central Montana has tremendous opportunities to leverage its central location and outstanding attractions.

Tourism data confirm that visitation has increased in Central Montana, though the pace has slowed a bit. Specific visitor segments seek the types of experiences offered in the region.

New business offerings can capture more visitors, keep them in the region longer, increase the economic impact of tourism, and improve quality of life for local residents. Because of its ruralness, low maintenance visitor information tools are needed, such as wayfinding and interpretive signs, mobile-friendly planning apps, maps, and podcasts.

CMT as an organization can boost the quality of the visitor experience through increased education and awareness for local residents and businesses. Armed with information about visitor trends and demographics, regional partners can better respond to their needs.

A key role for CMT is enhanced communications with regional partners to encourage more collaboration, provide tourism education, and build an effective regional team.

CMT can maximize its marketing return on investment by focusing on the region's competitive niche, and targeting nearby markets—including visitors to Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks—that represent the "low-hanging fruit" of potential visitors (those *most* likely to seek a Central Montana experience). Off-peak seasons provide the best opportunity for growth, particularly from visitors in nearby markets.

Results will be measured by growth in lodging sales, dispersion of visitors geographically and seasonally, business sales, visitor counts at key attractions, new business development, jobs, and visitor satisfaction. Additional research into the interests of existing off-peak season visitors would provide insights to guide marketing efforts.

Bottom line: Central Montana's priority is to be its authentic self – clearly define its brand and communicate that message to desired markets with a unified voice.



CMT Marketing Analysis

This section evaluates CMT’s marketing efforts and results, beginning with a profile of visitors. The Institute for Tourism Recreation and Research (ITRR) at the University of Montana conducts surveys of nonresident travelers in Montana. The overview below summarizes their data about travelers who visited Central Montana in 2022.

Central MT Visitors Seek Outdoor Recreation, History, Local Food & Beverages

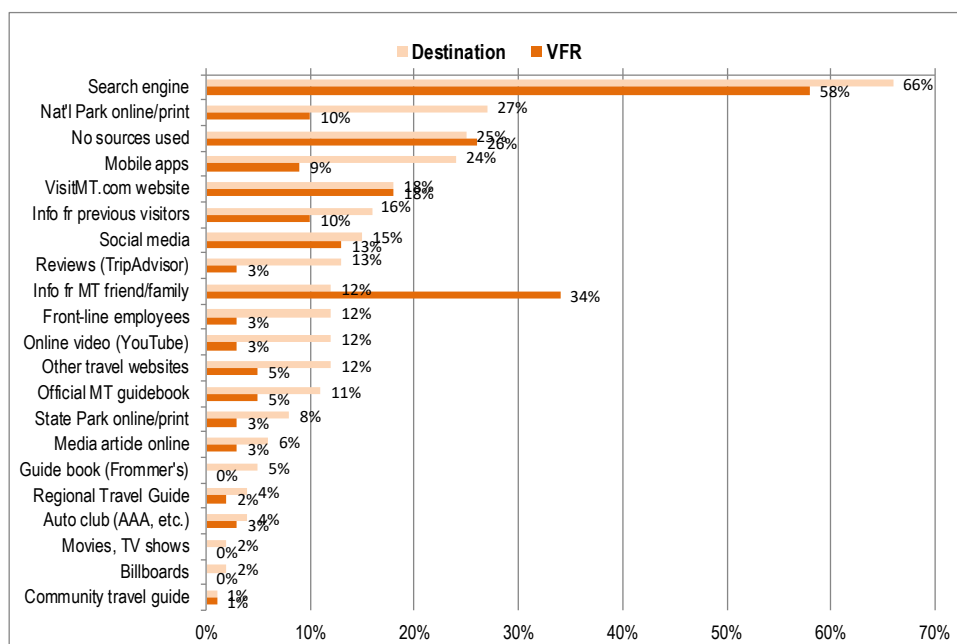
The table shows key nonresident visitor characteristics: on the left are “Destination” visitors (those not in Montana to visit friends/relatives), and on the right are “VFR” (people visiting friends/relatives) in Central MT. States of origin that are common to both groups are WA, CO, WI, and MN. Destination visitors tend to be more affluent, and nearly one-in-five were combining business and leisure travel (18%). One-third of the Destination visitors flew to Montana, more than half were couples, a majority visited Glacier Park (one-third visited Yellowstone). Activities enjoyed by both groups were outdoor recreation, breweries, shopping, and history. The VFR visitors were more likely to arrive by car, attend events, and engage in winter activities (often while visiting family/friends over the holidays).

Destination (all except VFR)	VFR (Visiting Friends/Relatives)
Top origins: CO, WA, TX, OR, CA, WI, ALB, MN	Top origins: WA, CO, WI, ID, SD, MI, MN, ND
17% 1st time visitors, 34% flew, 18% business travelers; Avg trip: 7.1 nights	7% 1st time visitors, 19% flew; Avg trip: 8.4 nights
% of parties that contained: Boomers 75%, GenX 18%, GenY 21%, GenZ 15%	% of parties that contained: Boomers 89%, GenX 22%, GenY 17%, GenZ 31%
57% couples, 22% individuals, 13% immediate family, 7% friends	48% couples, 31% individuals, 19% immediate family, 2% friends
59% earn \$100k+, 20% \$75-\$100k, 13% \$50-\$74k, 10% <\$50k	39% earn \$100k+, 21% \$75-\$100k, 20% \$50-\$74k, 19% <\$50k
Sites visited: GNP 57%, YNP 31%, L&C Interp Ctr 12%, State Parks 8%	Sites visited: GNP 31%, YNP 10%, L&C Interp Ctr 10%, Ft. Peck Lake 9%
Felt welcomed: 96% satisfied; Availability of travel info during trip 71% satisfied	Felt welcomed: 96% satisfied; Availability of travel info during trip 75% satisfied
Top activities: hiking, scenic driving, wildlife viewing, photography, camping, breweries, shopping, history, <u>farmers market, Indian culture/reservations</u>	Top activities: scenic driving, hiking, wildlife viewing, photography, camping, breweries, shopping, <u>skiing/snowboarding, attend event</u> , history

(Source: Nonresident Visitor Research 2022, UM Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, ITRR.)

Travelers Plan Their Trips Using Online Sources and Word of Mouth

The chart below shows the top information sources used by visitors to plan their trips to Central Montana. Note that digital sources and word of mouth (MT friends/family and front-line business employees) are the top sources of information, while printed guidebooks and billboards are much lower on the list (this does not include digital versions of travel guides posted online). Word of mouth from friends/family can extend to social media pages and online endorsements.



CMT's Marketing Program Uses Multiple Strategies to Promote the Region

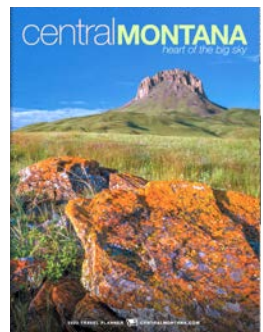
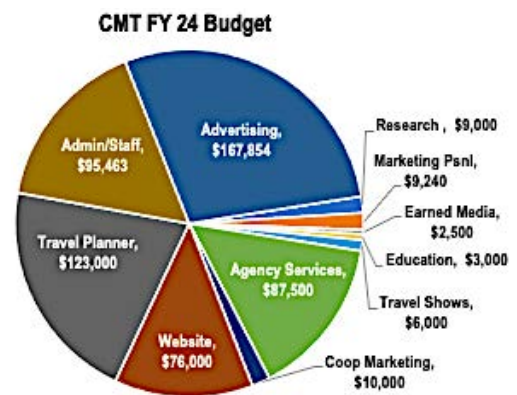
CMT's total FY24 budget is approximately \$550,000—less than most other Montana tourism regions. The pie chart at right shows how it is allocated. The funding comes from the Montana statewide lodging tax, which is collected by lodging facilities, administered by the Dept. of Commerce, and overseen by the Tourism Advisory Council (TAC).

Up to 20% of the funding can be spent on Administration: staff, office expenses, insurance, computer, phone, Internet, travel within the region, etc. The rest is available for marketing efforts.

The CMT marketing program consists of fifteen elements:

1. **Paid advertising/search/social media/email** targets CMT's identified markets to generate interest and drive traffic to the CMT website, including Joint Ventures with Brand MT and other tourism regions/CVBs. FY23 stats: 22+ million impressions, 180,000+ click-throughs.
2. **CentralMontana.com website** highlights attractions, activities, itineraries, travel information, maps, and services. FY23 stats: 8,000-24,000 users per month.
3. **Social media** pages (Facebook, Instagram) gain followers, attract visitors, and drive traffic to the website. The CMT Facebook page currently has 64,000+ followers, and Instagram 15,000+, with more added monthly.
4. **Travel Planner**, a regional guide in printed and digital versions, is distributed to 197 locations in western Montana by Certified Folder Display, and by CMT to regional Chambers, CVBs, and potential visitors who request it. In FY23, 1,800 people viewed/downloaded the digital version online.
5. **Multi-regional promotions** leverage themes across adjacent regions and state/federal/nonprofit partners: Dinosaur Trail, Montana Trail to the Stars, Montana's Great Wide Open (formerly Badlands-Breaks-Beartooths), Lewis & Clark Trail, Nez Perce National Historic Trail, and Inspiring Road Trips (targeting Canadians).
6. **Email newsletters and monthly blog** sent to 31,000+ people who sign up for CMT monthly eNews updates.
7. **Media relations** connects with travel journalists and influencers via news releases, media kits, story pitching, and familiarization (fam) tours to generate earned (free) media stories.
8. **Themed Itineraries** are developed to guide visitors in trips of varying lengths.
9. **Photo/video library** is available for use in marketing activities. Collection and management is an ongoing process, plus coding and cataloging older photos/videos for access when needed.
10. **Agri-tourism development** highlights farm- and ranch-related experiences throughout the region.
11. **Travel and trade shows** promote the region directly to consumers and/or trade representatives.
12. **Database management** includes maintenance/updating lists of hundreds of regional tourism-related businesses, attractions, organizations, and services, in addition to Board members, Region/CVB and Brand MT contacts, city/county officials, photographers, contractors, and visitor contact lists.
13. **Co-op advertising program** provides CMT funding to support marketing of local events and festivals.
14. **Tourism research** uses Brand MT, Destination Analysts, and ITRR data and reports to better understand visitor profiles, interests, and motivations, and to keep abreast of state and national tourism trends.
15. **Educational activities** connect CMT and partners to the broader tourism universe, including Tourism Advisory Council, Region/CVB meetings, Brand MT webinars, Governor's Conference, regional workshops, etc.

Additionally, the CMT Executive Director networks with regional economic development staff, local/state/tribal representatives, and others. He provides weekly updates to the Board, shares information about resources to help businesses and communities, monitors legislative and public policy issues impacting tourism/recreation, etc.



CMT Advertising Emphasizes Online Media

The CMT budget for paid advertising in FY23 (July 2022-June 2023) was \$257,081. The table at right shows how the budget was allocated by season (upper section) and by media placement type (lower section).

The majority of CMT's advertising budget in FY23 was spent promoting the Warm/Summer Season (57%). About one-third of the budget was spent on Autumn Season (35%), and only 3% on Winter Season.

All paid advertising was digital/online except a print ad in the *National Park Journal—Yellowstone*, which is a quarterly magazine with a distribution of 250,000 sold at newsstands and online. The ad comes with a newsletter feature and Facebook post, and provides 10,000+ leads from people interested in a Yellowstone-to-Glacier trip, which are forwarded to CMT monthly. CMT sends them a monthly eNewsletter.

Digital ads with video outperformed those without video. Facebook and Instagram ads performed well, particularly ads targeting Montana markets. In-state and out-of-state audiences both responded well to the Dark Skies theme. Google AdWords and online videos were above benchmarks. A new tactic was Lyft/Uber video placements in Seattle and Minneapolis markets, which were recommended to continue in FY24. HTML emails generally performed well, with above average open/click-through rates.

Fall ad placements ran early September to early November. Spring/Summer placements ran mid-January to late June. Google AdWords ran early November to mid-January and April 1 to June 30. No digital, social, or video ads ran from mid-November to early January (a prime vacation planning time when families gather).

CMT Organic Social Media Primarily Targets Montanans

CMT has ~64,000 Facebook followers (Sept 2023). Most followers reside (in order of frequency) in Billings, Helena, Missoula, Bozeman, Calgary, Kalispell, Spokane, and Edmonton. CMT's 15,400+ Instagram followers also primarily reside in Billings, Helena, Bozeman, and Missoula. About one quarter of Facebook followers, and nearly half of Instagram followers (47%) are Millennials (age 27-42).

CMT Website Captures Traffic from a Variety of Sources

From August 2022 through July 2023, the CMT website received about 200,000 unique visitors (average of 16,000+/month, 540/day). 87% were from the U.S., 9% from Canada. Top origins: MT, CO, WA, IL, AZ, VA, CA, MN, OR, TX, and ID. Other countries of note were the UK, Germany, and China, plus a few hundred each from France, Australia, Mexico, Russia, and India.

Traffic mainly comes from organic searches, social media, and direct links, followed by display ads, paid searches (Google AdWords), direct referrals from other websites, and links from the eNews emails. The top referral source was VisitMT.com (6,300 links), with a few hundred each from Historycollection.com, Discoveringmontana.com, RVlife.com, and GlacierMT.com.

The pages viewed most frequently were the Home page, Stargazing, Order a Travel Planner, Events Calendar, Map, Scenic Byways, Agri-tourism, Communities, Family, and Recreation/Adventure, some driven by CMT's efforts to promote Astro-tourism, Agri-tourism, events, etc.

However, there appears to be a disconnect between 180,000 click-throughs from the ad campaign and 80,300 ad-driven visits to the website. Increased focus on collaboration between the CMT advertising and website agencies could enhance the "pitch and catch" effectiveness and increase overall website traffic.

CMT FY23 Media Campaign

Season	Dates	Budget	% of Ttl
Warm	Jan-Mar '23	\$135,498	53%
Summer	Apr-Jun '23	10,000	4%
Autumn	Sept-Oct '22	90,964	35%
Winter	Sept-Oct '22	8,000	3%
YNP Journal	Annual	12,619	5%
		\$257,081	100%

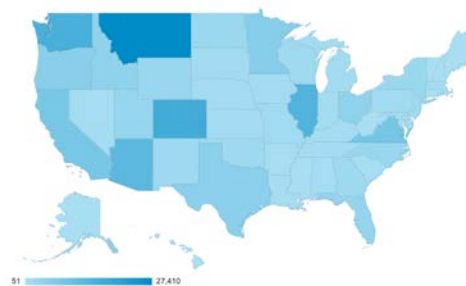
Media	Budget	% of Ttl
Google Ad Words	\$ 48,859	19%
Facebook/Instagram	45,500	18%
CTV/OTT (Apple TV/Roku)	44,532	17%
Digital Ads (html, banners)	33,375	13%
Online Video/Digital Video	31,126	12%
YouTube video ads (:15, :30)	17,376	7%
Emails/Newsletters (digital)	14,419	6%
Print (YNP Journal + Leads)	12,619	5%
Native Content	9,275	4%
	\$257,081	100%



Current CMT Target Markets are Very Broad

The target markets defined in CMT's recent Marketing Plans are very broad:

- **Geographic:** Nonresident travelers in 9 western and mid-western states (AZ, CO, ID, ND, OR, WA, WY, IL, MN), plus two Canadian provinces (ALB, SAS).
- **Demographic:**
 - Leisure travelers age 35+ with household incomes of \$75,000+, with or without children.
 - People who enjoy historic and cultural attractions, dining, and/or outdoor recreation (hiking, biking, fishing, wildlife viewing, skiing, snowmobiling, etc.).
 - People who value local businesses, foods/beverages, scenic landscapes, and access to public lands.
 - Emerging markets include visitors who enjoy star gazing (astro-tourism) and agri-tourism experiences.



These target markets represent 10+ million potential travelers. With CMT's small marketing budget, it is not possible to penetrate the geographic markets deeply. A narrower focus is recommended, while continuing to leverage partnerships to effectively penetrate fewer targets.

Suggested Target Markets for 2024-2028 are Narrower, Deeper

The following are suggested refinements for FY24-28 targets:

- **Geographic:**
 - Nonresident travelers in 5 adjacent/nearby states (WA, ID, WY, ND, SD), plus 2 provinces (ALB, SAS).
 - Nearby metro areas (MSAs) or those with nonstop air service to Great Falls: Spokane/Coeur d'Alene, Calgary, Boise, Minneapolis, Seattle, Salt Lake, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, perhaps Chicago/Milwaukee.
 - Add in-state MSAs (Helena, Butte, Bozeman, Billings, Missoula, Kalispell) to attract long-time residents and "new Montanans" wishing to explore less crowded areas and/or entertain friends and family.
 - Visitors seeking Glacier-to-Yellowstone or YNP-to-GNP driving routes through Central MT.
- **Demographic:**
 - Emphasize **Millennials** (age 26-42) in the Demographic markets listed above (see sidebar at right, and Appendix B).
 - Attract **veterans** within the geographic markets above by highlighting Central Montana's military presence, interesting history, trails, battlefields, sites, monuments, and memorials.

Travel and Social Media Use by Age	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers
Age in 2023	27 - 42	43 - 58	59 - 77
Mean income	\$84,563	\$102,512	\$71,183
Percent of population	22%	20%	21%
Avg # trips per year	5.6	4.0	3.5
1-2 trips per year	31%	33%	37%
3+ trips per year	52%	41%	35%
Avg expenditure per trip	\$4,141	\$5,060	\$6,126
Travel App Popularity			
Google Maps	78%	80%	77%
Google Drive	72%	52%	41%
Google Earth	67%	65%	61%
TripAdvisor	66%	59%	48%
Expedia	58%	48%	45%
Airbnb	54%	41%	35%
Waze	54%	50%	24%
Booking.com	54%	42%	31%
Hotels.com	53%	54%	36%
Hotwire.com	52%	29%	18%
Social Media Use			
Facebook	88%	88%	67%
Instagram	67%	46%	20%
X (Twitter)	62%	24%	31%
YouTube	83%	84%	24%
Snapchat	41%	19%	21%
Not on social media	5-10%	23-24%	18-21%

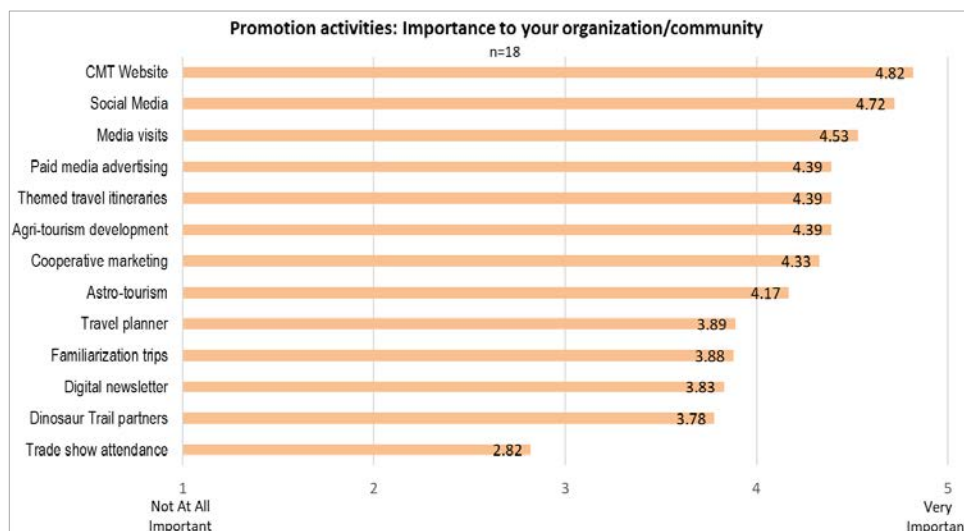
Millennials are a Key Target Market

Millennials are the largest generational group in the U.S. in 2023, at 22% of the total population. They are a *critical* market for tourism destinations for the following reasons:

- They view travel as an *essential* part of life—a *right*.
- They take more trips than Gen Xers or Baby Boomers.
- They seek experiences that are immersive, enriching, and authentic: nature, adventure, rejuvenation.
- 90% of them share photos on social media while on vacation—they like "Instagram-able" destinations.
- They prefer locally-owned businesses, local food and beverages—many will plan an entire trip around a single foodie experience or unique shop they saw online or heard about from friends/family.
- They research, plan, and book their travel using their smart phones.

Survey of Board Members and Partners Rated CMT Marketing Activities

The survey of Board members and other regional partners conducted in May 2023 included a rating question about each of CMT's current marketing activities (see chart below). Strategies rated of highest importance were the website, social media, earned media (media visits), followed by paid advertising and product development (itineraries, agri-tourism, astro-tourism). Lower ratings were given to the travel planner, fam trips, the eNewsletter, and Dinosaur Trail. Trade shows rated poorly.



Additional comments received from survey respondents were the following:

- Focus on digital marketing (planning, in-trip apps), add more traveler info to website, update photos/videos
- Travel planner is expensive, prefer digital version, evaluate ads, process, distribution, print fewer
- Trade shows are low performers, not worth the investment
- Product development issues: Dinosaur Trail stops need improvement, more themed itineraries, feature steakhouses/supper clubs, more shopping
- Community educational outreach is needed: help communities see the value/economic impact of tourism, provide training for small towns, direct engagement via conference/gathering/listening sessions

Agri-Tourism has Significant Potential, More Product Development is Needed

Agri-tourism has strong support at the region and state levels. MSU Extension, Abundant MT, and economic development organizations are working to develop Agri-tourism. CMT wants to encourage Agri-tourism experiences and promote them once they are ready for visitors (NOTE: "Agri-tourism" is jargon—not familiar to visitors).

Agritourism Defined

There is some debate about how to define Agritourism. It can encompass a great number of activities. One definition of "Agritourism activity" is *"any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the public for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities."*

Examples of Agritourism Activities

Outdoor Recreation: Horseback riding, Wildlife viewing & photography, Camping/picnicking, Hunting, Fishing, Wagon/sleigh rides, XC skiing, Game preserve, Clay bird shooting, Off-road vehicles.

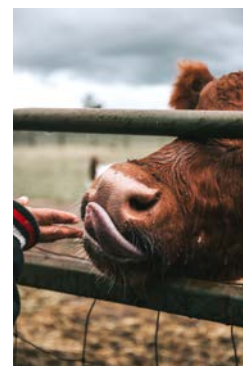
Educational Experiences: Classes or workshops, Tastings and tours (wine, tomatoes, berries), School field trips, Garden/nursery tours, Agricultural technical tours, Historical exhibits or reenactments, Crop sign I.D. program, Micro-brewery tours, Exotic animal farm, Horse pack team.

Direct Agricultural Sales: On-farm sales, Farmers market, Roadside stand, Community-supported agriculture (CSA), Agriculture-related crafts/gifts, U-pick operations.

Accommodations: Bed & Breakfast Inn, Farm/ranch vacations, Guest ranch, Youth exchange, Elderhostel.

Entertainment: Concerts, Theatre, Weddings, Festivals or fairs, Star gazing, Petting zoo, Working dog trials.

The University of Vermont Extension provides an excellent *Agritourism Best Practices Guide*: <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism/agritourism-guides>. See Appendix F for more info/resources.



Summary: General Marketing Recommendations for CMT

The Board Survey results and Marketing Analysis on the previous pages led to the following general reminders and recommendations for CMT marketing efforts:

- A. **In everything be strategic:** base decisions on good research and data analysis, be purposeful in determining how all marketing efforts link together into a cohesive whole. A thorough understanding of the product and visitor target markets leads to good strategy—and effective messaging flows from strategy.
- B. **Clarify Central Montana’s brand:** reflect both the character of the place and images/messaging that appeal to target visitors. Use brand consistently.
- C. **Lead visitors from general awareness → to interest → to trip planning → to booking:** this is the primary goal of advertising, media/PR, and social media.
- D. **Provide an effective “catcher’s mitt”:** the website and travel planner provide detailed information for trip planning. Usability and context are *critical* issues. New designs for FY24 must be intuitive as viewed through the eyes of a first-time visitor (what does s/he need to know? How does s/he travel through and around the region? How does s/he put information in context, e.g., maps?).
- E. **Ensure collaboration between CMT marketing agencies:** avoid "silos", share resources, use consistent "pitch and catch" of themes and cohesive branding across marketing platforms. Connect advertising/social/PR results to website traffic. Put all marketing activities under a single CMT Marketing Committee.
- F. **Use digital tools for trip planning:** digital is king (search, maps, apps, social). CMT can best serve visitors by providing enhanced trip planning resources. Evaluate use of Artificial Intelligence tools (AI)—with caution (see below).
- G. **Incorporate more low-cost guerilla tactics:** share CMT Facebook posts to various MT travel-related Facebook groups (see sidebar). Enhance CMT’s media relations program to include news releases, media kits, influencers, etc.
- H. **Plan a “Ready-Aim-Fire” approach with new product development:** ensure Agri-tourism, Astro-tourism, and new entrepreneurial products are consistent with brand and ready for prime time before pulling the trigger on promotions.
- I. **Emphasize off-peak seasons, visitor dispersion:** target more promotion resources to fall-winter-spring, especially during peak vacation planning time (Thanksgiving to New Years when families gather). Strategically deploy promotions to disperse visitors around the region.

AI in the Travel Industry: Helpful, But Use with Caution

USES: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is all around us. In travel, AI is being used to provide recommendations, booking, forecasting, and creating itineraries, among other things.

BENEFITS: AI can wade through vast amounts of data (customer reviews, websites, articles) very quickly and summarize it briefly.

DRAWBACKS: AI is not always searching the most current data. One source indicated many AI databases do not go beyond 2021. This poses a real problem for planning travel which requires current hours, fees, and services. One tester reported ChatGPT suggested a restaurant that closed in 2018, never mind current flight information.

When AI does not have access to enough information (think remote or rural destinations), it can “hallucinate” or make up facts. Thus, findings should be verified.

Also, geographic searches can be vague: when ChatGPT was asked to recommend “attractions in Central Montana”, the results varied from Going to the Sun Road to Bannack State Park near Dillon. Its response to “attractions in Russell Country” gave better results (Appendix E).

Nothing beats a real person like a reviewer or influencer who is relatable or who can address your specific needs, like your travel agent. And AI cannot tell you which experiences are authentic. For that, you need a real person.

Montana Travel-Related Facebook Groups

- Montana Travels & Adventures
- Yellowstone, Glacier, and Montana Trip Planning
- Historic Montana
- Montana Events
- Hike Wild Montana
- Montana Road and Weather Conditions Reports Updates
- For all who love Montana
- Everything Montana
- MONTANA-tude!
- Move to Montana
- Aurora Borealis Montana
- Montana Aurora
- Montana Horses
- HandMADE Montana
- Montana Wildflowers
- Montana Geology
- Rockhounding and Minerals of Montana
- Rockhounding Montana
- Montana Birding

Popular Apps Used for Travel Planning

Planning & Organizing Trip:

Triplt, RoadTrippers, PackPoint, TripCase

Researching & Booking Trip:

Hopper, Kiwi, Hotel Tonight, Airbnb, TPG App, Kayak

Planning for Activities:

Meetup, TheFork, TripAdvisor, AllTrails, Culture Trip

Camping & Glamping:

Glamping Hub, Harvest Hosts, Hipcamp, Pitchup, Tentr, The Dyrt

Navigating on the Ground:

Google Maps, AllTrails, Waze, iExit, Uber

Social Media for Ideas:

Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest

Other Booking Sites and Online Travel Agents (OTAs):

Travelocity, Expedia, Vrbo, Booking.com, Hotels.com, Hotwire.com, Priceline.com, Orbitz.com

Mission, Vision, Values

The updated Mission, Vision, and Values Statements for CMT are the following:

MISSION (“Why we exist, Who we serve, and Where”)

Central Montana Tourism advances the economic vitality of the 13-county region through effective tourism marketing, destination development, advocacy, and knowledge growth that preserves the region’s unique character, honors residents’ quality of life, addresses visitor needs, and enhances business opportunities.

Central Montana is a special place that deserves both recognition and loving care of its unique landscapes, communities, and cultures. As a DMO with large responsibilities and a small budget, Central Montana Tourism (CMT) works collaboratively with private, public, nonprofit, and tribal partners to achieve our mission.



VISION (“Where we are going”)

Central Montana Tourism is the lead organization for innovative, visionary guidance to achieve sustainable levels of year-round tourism region wide. We listen carefully to our visitors and stakeholders, and work with our community partners to develop strategies that ensure every guest has an unforgettable, authentic experience in Central Montana, they share it with others, and come back again.



VALUES (“What we stand for—our core beliefs or principles”)

Strategic – We are intentional, purposeful, and meaningful in our planning and implementation efforts, basing our actions on solid research and data to make good strategic decisions.

Authentic – We are proud of our Montana heritage and way of life, and true to our identity. We welcome visitors and share with them our special communities and Montana way of life.

Respect – We respect and care for each other and our most valuable tourism assets: the land, the wildlife, the waters, and communities that sustain us. We expect visitors to respect and care for them too.

Intentional – We value our region’s natural and cultural integrity. We seek economic growth at a pace that preserves our way of life while benefitting our future generations.

Fun – We laugh, sometimes in the face of adversity, and often at ourselves, but we especially enjoy social gatherings, events, and outdoor recreation. We invite visitors to join us—just bring your sense of humor.

Resilient – We are independent, self-reliant, and eager to overcome challenges. We embrace knowledge, technology, and new opportunities.

Teamwork – We are a large region of small dynamic communities. Our strength is in our diverse perspectives and expertise: when we work together, share information, and help each other, we all benefit.



Central Montana Tourism Organization

CMT Organization Needs Some Realignment

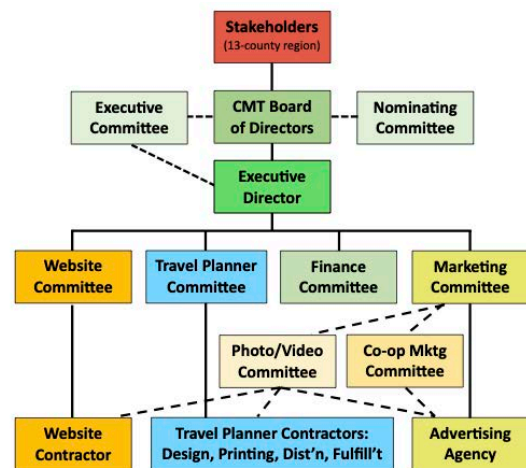
Central Montana Tourism (CMT) is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization serving 13 counties encompassing nearly 33,000 sq. mi. (larger than S. Carolina!). Its mission has been to “Promote economic development through tourism.” The bylaws allow for up to 44 Board members (3 per county = 39, 1 per reservation = 3, 1 per CVB = 2), though 23 seats currently are vacant.

During the pandemic, all Board meetings were virtual. Since the pandemic ended, in-person attendance at Board meetings has averaged only 5 Board members, with an additional 10 on Zoom, for a total of 15. The Board meets monthly, and meetings consist mainly of reports that are (or could be) sent in advance for Board member review, plus verbal updates from Board members.

The organization currently has 8 Committees and 6 contractors (see organization chart, right). There are separate committees for Advertising (Marketing), Website, and Travel Planner, each overseeing their respective contractor(s), which creates “silos” of discussion and decisions, and discourages collaboration and consistent messaging across all promotion efforts and platforms.

There is a full-time Executive Director (the only employee), with an FY24 budget of around \$550,000 from state lodging taxes. CMT is accountable to the State Tourism Office and its private, public, tribal, and nonprofit partners.

Existing CMT Organization Chart

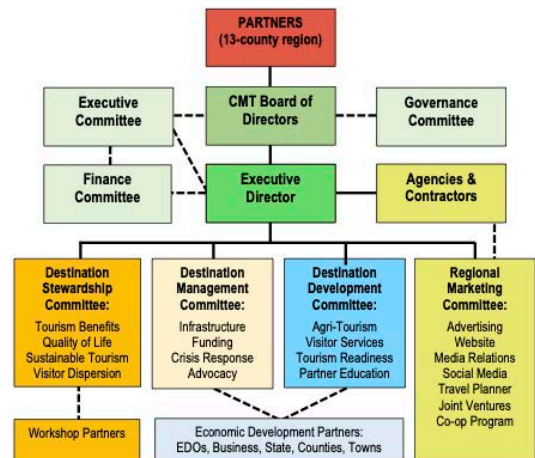


Leaner CMT Organization Improves Effectiveness

The Board member survey included a Board Self-Assessment (see Appendix A). Based on the results, and consultant observations, the following changes are recommended (some require amendments to CMT bylaws):

- Reduce the Board size: 1 per county = 13, 1 per reservation = 3, 1 Little Shell Tribe, up to 5 at-large members, CVB Directors as ex-officio members, for a total of up to 24 (max. of 3 from any county). All Board members serve on at least 1 Committee.
- Reduce the frequency of Board meetings to quarterly or 6/year (e.g., Jan, Mar, May, Jul, Sep, Nov), with Annual Meeting and elections in May (new Board members seated in July).
- Implement an application process for new Board members, a Board Manual, onboarding process, Statements of Commitment/Expectations and Conflict of Interest signed annually.
- Reconfigure the Committee structure (see chart at right):
 - Add a Governance Committee to oversee Board recruitment, vetting, nomination, onboarding, engagement.
 - Consolidate all marketing activities under a single Marketing Committee (advertising, website, travel planner, co-op, Joint Venture, etc.).
 - Add Committees for Destination Development, Destination Management, and Destination Stewardship.
- Consider addition of a part-time bookkeeper supervised by the Treasurer and Executive Director, and a part-time Marketing Assistant to relieve the Executive Director of time-consuming marketing tasks (like re-posting Facebook posts to various MT Facebook groups, organizing/cataloguing photo/video library, board packets, and other administrative tasks).
- Provide all reports in advance for Board packets (Finance, Inquiry, Executive Director, Committees, agencies). Reserve board meeting time for questions, decision-making, strategic discussions of priority issues to meet goals, evaluation of results (see page 29), and educational topics.

Proposed CMT Organization Chart



Strategic Framework

A Strategic Framework is a graphic representation of how a Strategic Plan is organized—a snapshot of its main themes or components.

The Strategic Framework for this CMT Plan has six components:

1. Organization Governance (OG)
2. Regional Marketing (RM)
3. Destination Development (DD)
4. Destination Management (DM)
5. Destination Stewardship (DS)
6. Partners that CMT serves and with whom we collaborate.

The graphic depicts the relationship between each component. The center of the Framework is Organization Governance: an effective CMT organization is necessary to effectively implement the Strategic Plan. Governance includes a dynamic, engaged Board of Directors, active committees, professional staff, strong partnerships, and sufficient funding.

Regional Marketing, Destination Development, Destination Management, and Destination Stewardship are described below. Four of the five definitions come from the *Brand MT DMO Handbook*, the definition of nonprofit Organization Governance comes from *Funding For Good*. Partners listed around the outer ring of the graphic are organizations with whom CMT works to implement the Plan's actions and who benefit from them.



Organization Governance provides the type of consistent oversight, accountability, and checks and balances that can ensure nonprofit organizations both reach their goals and remain sustainable for the long-term. The Board of Directors is responsible for establishing organizational direction, providing oversight of the organization, including the Executive Director, and ensuring resources required to fulfill the organization's mission. With this level of responsibility, ensuring the board is functioning at its best is critical.

Regional Marketing promotes a destination with a purpose to increase the number of visitors. Marketing strategy is based on assessment of the destination and research into potential target markets. Activities include digital marketing, PR, print publications, group sales, etc.

Destination Development is any activity that increases and improves the quality of a visitor's destination. To make tourism a vibrant, healthy, and manageable component of the local economy, communities need to craft and implement tourism management strategies that are local, authentic, and desirable. Every community can benefit from destination development. Destination development improves the visitor experience, leading to increased spending and tax revenues; diversifies and strengthens economies; enhances the recreation and support service infrastructure; and increases support services, capacity, and visitor season.

Destination Management consists of the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a tourism destination. Destination management takes a strategic approach to link-up these sometimes very separate elements for the better management of the destination. Joined up management can help to avoid overlapping functions and duplication of effort with regards to promotion, visitor services, training, business support and identify any management gaps that are not being addressed. Destination management calls for a coalition of many organizations and interests working towards a common goal, ultimately being the assurance of the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism destination. The Destination Management Organization's (DMO) role should be to lead and coordinate activities under a coherent strategy in pursuit of this common goal. Though DMOs have typically undertaken marketing activities, their responsibility is becoming far broader, to become a strategic leader in destination development.

Destination Stewardship is about protecting the very qualities that make a place first and foremost a wonderful place to live, with the added benefit of being a wonderful place to visit. It is defined as "a process by which local communities, governmental agencies, nonprofits, and the tourism industry take a multi-stakeholder approach to maintaining the cultural, environmental, economic, and aesthetic integrity of their country, region, or town."

Strategic Goals and Actions

Strategic Goals Flow from CMT's Mission Statement

Goals are statements of accomplished action. In this Strategic Plan, CMT has identified 17 goals and 84 specific actions to achieve the goals over five years within the 5-point Strategic Framework. The goals are listed below, with actions detailed on the following pages.



Organization Governance Goals

- OG1: The CMT organization has an engaged and inspired Board of Directors with diverse expertise, to effectively lead the implementation of the regional vision and goals.
- OG2: CMT committees gain specialized knowledge and provide strategic recommendations to the CMT Executive Director and Board of Directors.
- OG3: CMT's professional staff works in concert with the Board of Directors and other regional partners to effectively implement the organization's vision and goals.
- OG4: CMT supplements its TAC funding through partners and sponsors for some of its programs.

Regional Marketing Goals

- RM1: Central Montana has a clear and highly recognizable brand identity that is used across all communications and visitor touchpoints throughout the region.
- RM2: CMT marketing tools help visitors plan and experience their travel in Central Montana so their expectations are exceeded.
- RM3: The CMT website is the centerpiece of regional visitor information and marketing, using the regional brand and cutting-edge planning tools to engage potential visitors.
- RM4: CMT promotion campaigns increase awareness and visitation across the region in all four seasons through multi-channel digital advertising, organic social media, travel influencers, and media relations.
- RM5: The CMT Travel Planner is used as a tool in both print and digital formats to reinforce the regional brand identity and help visitors plan their trips.
- RM6: CMT monitors changes in visitation, lodging sales, business sales, jobs, and feedback from visitors about their experiences, to evaluate and refine marketing strategies, and to consider new target markets.

Destination Development Goals

- DD1: Central Montana communities welcome and host visitors with excellent hospitality, wayfinding, interpretation, and visitor information services.
- DD2: Businesses and attractions learn effective techniques to promote their services and facilities through educational workshops offered by CMT and its partners.
- DD3: CMT showcases its agricultural sector and dark skies with Agri-tourism and Astro-tourism experiences.

Destination Management Goals

- DM1: CMT and its partners advocate for infrastructure improvements related to tourism.
- DM2: CMT collaborates with regional emergency and disaster response services to assist with visitor and partner communications in case of crises.

Destination Stewardship Goals

- DS1: CMT and its partners build awareness among residents about the benefits of tourism, while respecting locals' favorite spots and seeking to avoid over-use.
- DS2: CMT and its land management and community partners include stewardship messages in their communications to visitors (Leave No Trace, Pack In-Pack Out, etc.).

ORGANIZATION GOVERNANCE (OG)

Effective Strategic Plan implementation requires a well-functioning organization aligned with the Strategic Framework. Board of Directors, committees, strategic partners, and professional staff use their individual gifts and expertise toward common goals, with sufficient resources to make it happen.

In the tables below, Actions are listed by year of implementation (FY24, FY25, FY26, etc.). Each year also is color-coded, so that FY24 (Year 1) is shaded in yellow, FY25 (Year 2) in green, FY26 (Year 3) in blue, FY27-28 in lavender.

Organization Governance Goals and Actions

Key to Codes: Agcy=Agency, BOD=Board, Ctes=Committees, DD=Destination Development Committee, DS=Destination Stewardship Cte, EC=Executive Cte, ED=Executive Director, EDO=Economic Dev't Organization, FC=Finance Cte, GC=Governance Cte, MC=Mktg Cte.

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
OG1: The CMT organization has an engaged and inspired Board of Directors with diverse expertise, to effectively lead the implementation of the regional vision and goals.				
OG1.1		Reorganize the CMT Board of Directors to include 24 members: one representative from each county (13), one from each reservation and Little Shell Tribe (4), and up to 5 at-large members, with a maximum of 3 members from any one county. Each CVB Director would be an ex-officio Board member. All Board members serve on at least one Committee.	BOD	FY24
OG1.2		Develop an application and review process for prospective board members. Ex: https://semtpartners.com/files/SEMT-Board-Application-2018.pdf	GC	FY25
OG1.3		The Board conducts an annual Board Self-Assessment to measure their own performance and effectiveness as Board members, with results discussed at an annual Board retreat.	GC	FY25
OG1.4		Assess existing board members to determine areas of expertise, occupations, ages, organizations represented, etc. Identify gaps where specific perspectives or greater diversity are needed (e.g., tribal representation, expertise, age, etc.). Recruit to fill gaps.	GC BOD	FY25
OG1.5		Create/update a Board Handbook and onboarding/orientation process for new board members, including a meeting with the Board President and Executive Director.	GC	FY25
OG1.6		Conduct Board Development training at least once a year, perhaps at the annual Board Retreat. Include discussions about DMO best practices, update policies/procedures, and review organization goals, actions, and results.	GC BOD	FY25
OG1.7		Involve Board members in Destinations International for knowledge enhancement.	BOD	FY26
OG2: CMT committees gain specialized knowledge and provide strategic recommendations to the CMT Executive Director and Board of Directors.				
OG2.1		Restructure CMT Committees to align with Strategic Plan: Organization Governance, Regional Marketing, Destination Development, Destination Management, Destination Stewardship, plus Executive Committee and Finance Committee. Appoint Committee Chairs/Co-Chairs.	BOD	FY24
OG2.2		Recruit non-board members to serve on the committees, to gain familiarity with the organization and its work, and possibly as a segue to future board service.	Ctes	FY25
OG2.3		Conduct training for Chairs/Co-Chairs on developing meeting objectives and agendas. Ensure committees understand roles and limits of authority compared to Board and ED.	GC	FY25

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
OG3: CMT's professional staff work in concert with the Board of Directors and other regional partners to effectively implement the organization's vision and goals.				
OG3.1		Refine the Executive Director job description to focus on strategic goals and actions.	EC	FY24
OG3.2		Consider hiring/contracting a part-time bookkeeper supervised by the Executive Director and Treasurer to separate fiscal responsibilities according to Best Practices.	EC ED	FY24
OG3.3		Identify a mentor and/or coach to assist the Executive Director with the transition to the realigned organization and Strategic Plan implementation.	ED BOD	FY24
OG3.4		Manage and update the database of regional partners, Board members, other Region/CVB contacts, MT Dept. of Commerce staff, TAC members, etc. The database is used by the Executive Director to communicate with all regional partners.	ED	FY24
OG3.5		Communicate monthly with all regional partners (businesses, chambers, attractions, cities, counties, tribes, EDOs, etc.) via a CMT "Tourism Update" eNews, listing CMT activities, resources for partners, upcoming events/trainings of interest, etc.	ED	FY24
OG3.6		Expand Board section of website to "CMT Partner & Board Resources". Besides Board meeting agendas and minutes, add project updates from Committees, links to Resources, and a password-protected section for financial reports, agency reports, co-op advertising program information/application, TAC presentations, etc.	Agcy ED	FY25
OG3.7		Consider hiring/contracting a part-time Marketing Assistant to help with tasks like responses to inquiries, meeting logistics, photo library curation/management, travel planner distribution, meeting minutes, sharing FB posts to groups, tracking and reporting visitation and grant funding data, etc., so the ED can focus on strategic leadership, networking, marketing, destination development, and partnerships.	EC ED	FY25
OG3.8		Join Destinations International and encourage Executive Director to participate in conferences, trainings, webinars, and possibly pursue CDME certification.	EC ED	FY25
OG3.9		Implement regional Tourism Awards given at the Annual Meeting to recognize an outstanding business, organization, volunteer, event, project, community leader, and outgoing Board members for their contributions to tourism. Promote CMT and the awards via news releases, social media, eNews.	BOD ED	FY26
OG4: CMT supplements its TAC funding through partners and sponsors for some of its programs.				
OG4.1		Continue to sell advertising in the Travel Planner to off-set production/printing costs. Consider having the agency handle all ad sales.	MC Agcy	FY25
OG4.2		Pursue Brand MT and other grants to support specific projects as appropriate (see Appendix D).	FC	FY25
OG4.3		Recruit corporate and other organization sponsors to support regional Tourism Mini-Summits and Tourism Workshops.	DD ED	FY25
OG4.4		Partner with regional economic development partners to pursue funding for tourism-related community improvements (tourism assessments, downtown revitalization, infrastructure, signage).	DD EDO	FY26

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REGIONAL MARKETING (RM)

Tourism marketing has been the primary mission of CMT since its inception, focused on advertising, printed travel planner, and website. With the dominance of digital travel planning tools—including social media, apps, and AI—marketing efforts are shifting to younger generations’ preferences of how to plan and experience travel. To cut through the clutter of destination marketing messages, CMT must speak with a single clear and consistent voice using a refined brand identity to promote its unique destination.

“The Region should have one clear voice with goals that spill into everything they do.”

- CMT Survey Respondent

Regional Marketing Goals and Actions

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Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
RM1: Central Montana has a clear and highly recognizable brand identity that is used across all communications and visitor touchpoints throughout the region.				
RM1.1		Create a refined Central Montana brand identity that articulates the region’s intrinsic character—its “Place DNA®” (see Appendix C)—that speaks to and about its residents, personality, and target audiences. Engage community partners to develop the brand. Involve CMT’s three marketing agencies, board members, and other partners.	MC Agcy	FY24
RM1.2		Use brand identity consistently across all communications, marketing platforms, and visitor touchpoints (digital, print, broadcast, social, wayfinding, on-site). Encourage regional businesses and attractions to incorporate the brand identity into their own marketing.	MC Agcy ED	FY24
RM1.3		Continue monthly email to potential visitors who have requested information, using seasonal themes to highlight activities, events, hidden gems, etc. Coordinate email with paid HTML email campaigns targeting purchased lists.	ED Agcy	FY24
RM1.4		Enlist volunteer or paid assistance to inventory, evaluate, cull, and catalog photos/videos in CMT library. Identify gaps. Ensure photo/video assets are acquired with authority to use them across all CMT marketing platforms for more consistent branding.	ED MC Agcy	FY24
RM1.5		Evaluate Co-op Advertising application parameters to ensure that funds are awarded for projects consistent with CMT’s vision, goals, target markets, and brand.	MC	FY25
RM1.6		Manage marketing efforts to maximize effectiveness and efficiency. Evaluate partnership and agency contracts, and refine the CMT RFP process, to make best use of marketing dollars and CMT staff and volunteer time.	MC BOD	FY25
RM2: CMT marketing tools help visitors plan and experience their travel in Central Montana so their expectations are exceeded.				
RM2.1		Enhance regional presence on popular digital travel planning apps (e.g., Google Maps) and social media used by visitors. Encourage businesses and attractions to update their days/hours of operation, services available, location, directions, and contact information.	MC Agcy	FY24
RM2.2		Create itineraries to help travelers plan and find activities of interest. Ex. https://itineraryplanner.newfoundlandlabrador.com/ Work with regional partners to link attractions/activities/communities based on themes, corridors, and “hub-and-spoke” trips in varying lengths (1-14 days). Obtain facts, stories, history, anecdotes, local lore, suggestions for stops and side trips, travel conditions, etc.	Agcy MC	FY24
RM2.3		Develop podcasts and blogs that coincide with themed itineraries and corridors to offer visitors a richer experience with stories and facts about the area (history/geology/etc.), and to provide entertainment during long drives. Use a contracted CMT influencer podcast host.	Agcy MC BOD	FY26

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
RM3: The CMT website is the centerpiece of regional visitor information and marketing, using the regional brand and cutting-edge planning tools to engage potential visitors.				
	RM3.1	Evaluate usability and technical capabilities of top-tier websites for rural destinations, such as www.newfoundlandlabrador.com . Emulate their best features. Use intuitive paths to most-needed and popular information. Include interactive map with clickable layers for activities and attractions, ex. https://abundantmontana.com/search/?show-map=yes .	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM3.2	Enhance the information about getting to and around Central Montana. Ex. https://www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/welcome-desk	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM3.3	Augment itinerary and activity pages with maps, traveler services, and activity summaries. Include itinerary and map download/print capability.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM3.4	Ensure new website is optimized for search and mobile-dominant use (see Appendix C).	Agcy	FY24
	RM3.5	Review potential referral sites that include information/links about Central Montana (e.g., VisitMT.com, L&C Trail, etc.). Check for accuracy, request edits/updates/additions as appropriate.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM3.6	Upgrade website technology with a custom itinerary-builder. As AI technology improves, evaluate use for itinerary planning. Consider phasing the website upgrade over 2-3 years. Consider fee-based premium listings and vacation packages to enhance the budget.	Agcy MC	FY26
RM4: CMT promotion campaigns increase awareness and visitation across the region in all four seasons through multi-channel digital advertising, organic social media, travel influencers, and media relations.				
	RM4.1	Develop a comprehensive social media strategy and calendar for organic and paid posts to reach CMT's target audiences and drive traffic to the website (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, etc.). Use content that elicits response, including catchy text/questions to encourage interaction, hashtags to facilitate searches, etc. Consider use of agency services for both paid and organic social media.	Agcy ED	FY24
	RM4.2	Share Facebook posts to Montana travel-related Facebook groups used by current/former residents and nonresidents (see list in sidebar, page 16).	ED Agcy	FY24
	RM4.3	Continue paid digital advertising and Google AdWords to reach customers in revised target markets. Compare analytics of ads vs. CMT website traffic to track click-throughs, and links out to CMT partners. Consider conversion research to measure actual resulting visitation.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM4.4	Consider print/digital/social ad packages with Glacier Country and Yellowstone Country Tourism (perhaps a trade for CMT ad space), and continue National Park Journal to attract visitors seeking GNP-to-YNP or YNP-to-GNP routes. Link ads to CMT landing pages.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM4.5	Continue partnering with adjacent regions, Brand MT, and nonprofits to promote themed itineraries: Dinosaur Trail, MT Trail to the Stars, Inspiring Montana Road Trips (with Missouri R. Country), Lewis & Clark Trail, Nez Perce Trail, Montana's Great Wide Open.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM4.6	Develop a robust media relations strategy, story ideas, and budget targeting journalists, publications, and influencers who align with CMT's brand. Pitch stories, including in-state media (Distinctively Montana, TV networks with Montana Moments, Road Trippin', etc.).	Agcy MC	FY25
	RM4.7	Strategically deploy promotions to disperse visitors around the region.	BOD ED	FY25
	RM4.8	Recruit/contract a local authentic influencer to be "the voice" of Central Montana on YouTube and podcasts (an entertaining story-teller to match the brand). Promote the videos on CMT platforms. Feature itineraries, experiences, and local characters to entice visitors.	Agcy MC	FY26

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
RM5: The CMT Travel Planner is used as a tool in both print and digital formats to reinforce the regional brand identity and help visitors plan their trips.				
	RM5.1	Incorporate best practices in traveler usability research for visitor guides. Organize the guide by travel corridors, itineraries, activities. Include maps, what to expect, services available, travel safety, stewardship messages, etc.	Agcy MC	FY24
	RM5.2	Monitor travel planner distribution, adjust strategy accordingly. Enlist CMT board members to assist with distribution to businesses and attractions in their counties.	MC BOD	FY24
	RM5.3	Discontinue CMT participation in consumer travel shows, but offer a small travel stipend to business or attraction partners who attend travel shows and are willing to take travel planners to distribute. Perhaps include method to collect names/emails for CMT eNews.	BOD ED	FY24
	RM5.4	Consider printing the travel planner only every other year to save printing costs. Update the digital version annually. Include ad sales in the agency contract.	Agcy MC	FY25
RM6: CMT monitors changes in visitation, lodging sales, business sales, and feedback from visitors about their experiences, to evaluate and refine marketing strategies, and to consider new target markets.				
	RM6.1	Encourage visitors to sign up for eNews on CMT website and social media channels. Conduct traveler feedback surveys 2-3 times/year to obtain information about visitor experiences, trip planning tools.	MC ED	FY24
	RM6.2	Monitor traveler feedback sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, etc. to gauge feedback and trends.	MC	FY24
	RM6.3	Monitor lodging tax collections, jobs reports, and other relevant data collected by state agencies. Collaborate with CVBs, businesses, and attractions to gain insights about visitors, sales, occupancy, seasonality, etc. Create a dashboard to share quarterly data, YTD, and year-over-year trends with partners via CMT meetings, monthly eNews, and Partners section on website.	ED MC	FY25
	RM6.4	Use social and website analytics to measure responses and viewer behaviors/interests. Evaluate links out to attractions, businesses, and itineraries, and compare with visitation.	Agcy MC	FY25
	RM6.5	Work with Brand MT and ITRR to obtain more granular data about C. Montana resident and nonresident visitors, particularly off-peak season visitors and Canadian visitors.	MC	FY26
	RM6.6	Work with Brand MT Film Office to connect with film industry in response to inquiries.	ED	FY26
	RM6.7	Evaluate participation in Rocky Mountain International (RMI) program to target international visitors seeking unique Montana/Native American experiences (Lewis & Clark, Parks, guest ranches, pow wows, buffalo jumps, museums, Nez Perce Trail, APR, star-gazing, Agri-tourism experiences, etc.).	MC ED	FY27

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DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT (DD)

Central Montana is an authentic, high-quality destination. Destination Development goals and actions are designed to improve the visitor's experience by improving visitor services, resulting in longer stays and increased spending.

Destination Development Goals and Actions

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
DD1: Central Montana communities welcome and host visitors with excellent hospitality, wayfinding, interpretation, and visitor information services.				
DD1.1		Plan, promote, and conduct fun Tourism Mini-Summits in 4 regional locations in Spring 2024 to share CMT's mission, role, Strategic Plan, economic value of tourism, and marketing activity updates. Listen to ideas, challenges, and concerns; provide suggestions about hospitality, wayfinding, visitor services, marketing. Collect information for partner database. Use insights for follow up in eNews, workshops, marketing campaigns, etc.	DD ED BOD	FY24
DD1.2		Develop a regional map that can be printed in large quantities in a tear-off pad or Z-card format (https://www.zcardna.com/) to distribute to regional locations where visitors seek information and directions (visitor centers, museums, hotels, etc.).	Agcy DD	FY25
DD1.3		Sponsor 1-day trainings/mini-fam tours for front-liners in several locations each spring. Build awareness of CMT efforts, conduct hospitality training, and encourage networking and cross-promotion. Include overview of regional history/facts/highlights. Use sponsors and TAC funds for speakers, materials, transportation, lunch, snacks, etc.	DD ED	FY25
DD1.4		Provide CMT regional branding "swag" (stickers, etc.) to partners. Encourage them to display and incorporate the regional brand and distribute visitor information.	DD Agcy	FY26
DD1.5		Partner with EDOs to help communities conduct Tourism Readiness Assessments (examples listed in Appendix C). Identify gaps and areas for improvement (wayfinding, interpretation, museum capacity, services, restrooms, beautification, etc.), pursue grants for upgrades and training.	DD EDO	FY26
DD1.6		Seek grant funding to conduct an inventory and assessment of regional wayfinding and interpretive assets where needed. Identify themes, gaps, needs for additions/replacements, recommended priorities, and costs. Connect to resources for implementation.	DD ED	FY27
DD2: Businesses and attractions learn effective techniques to promote their services and facilities through educational workshops offered by CMT and its partners.				
DD2.1		Share information with businesses/attractions via eNews and workshops about how and where to post/update their information on travel planning apps (Google Maps, TripAdvisor, etc.), and do effective search engine optimization (SEO), AdWords, etc.	DD Agcy	FY24
DD2.2		Provide Zoom workshops and eNews articles for regional partners about effective social media strategies, low-cost marketing techniques, media strategies, how to evaluate/optimize/enhance their websites, etc.	DD Agcy	FY25
DD2.3		Share information with businesses and attractions about the MDT TODS sign program for those that qualify (see Appendix C).	DD	FY25
DD2.4		Encourage businesses and attractions to add new visitor services (tours, packages, equipment rentals), and to cooperate with each other to enhance visitor experiences.	DD	FY26
DD3: CMT showcases its agricultural sector and dark skies with Agri-tourism and Astro-tourism experiences.				
DD3.1		Partner with Agri-tourism and Astro-tourism committees to educate farmers and ranchers about opportunities for additional income from new Agri- and Astro-tourism experiences (see Appendix F). Help link their products/experiences to CMT promotions.	DD Agcy	FY25
DD3.2		Coordinate with Brand MT, Abundant MT, Starry Skies MT, and MSU Extension on Agri-tourism and Astro-tourism promotion.	DD Ctes	FY25

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

Coordination among regional communities and partners is essential to provide a cohesive experience for visitors. CMT plays a key role in “connecting the dots” and “connecting the networks” to make things happen, even if the CMT organization itself is not in the lead role to implement projects like infrastructure upgrades, etc.

Destination Management Goals and Actions

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
DM1: CMT and its partners advocate for infrastructure improvements related to tourism.				
	DM1.1	Based on results of DD1.5 and DD1.6 (tourism assessments), work with EDOs and elected officials to communicate regional needs and advocate for implementation funding.	DD	FY25
	DM1.2	Push for more local and state resources for rural museums. Support museums in seeking grants and expertise for assessments and upgrades.	DD BOD	FY25
	DM1.3	Refer community and tribal representatives to Dept. of Commerce and other resources (grants, etc.) to help fund local priorities, see Appendices C and D.	DD ED	FY25
DM2: CMT collaborates with regional emergency and disaster response services to assist with visitor and partner communications in case of crises.				
	DM2.1	Network with regional EMS contacts (city, county, state/federal), so they’re aware of CMT and its capabilities to contact front-line businesses and visitors if needed. Develop a Crisis Communications Plan to share with partners. Ex. Glacier Country Tourism: https://partners.glaciermt.com/wildland-fire-smoke-communications	DM ED	FY25
	DM2.2	In case of crises, use partner contact database to help communicate updates from disaster response officials, needs for lodging, meals, and other services.	DM ED	FY28
	DM2.3	Use CMT social media, website, and eNews lists to provide updates about road/area closures, shelter locations, links to wildfire update sites, etc.	ED Agcy	FY28

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DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

The quality of life for Central Montana residents is a priority concern for CMT. An important aspect of tourism planning and implementation is protecting special places and activities from overuse.

Destination Stewardship Goals and Actions

Goal	Action	Description	Lead	Year
DS1: CMT and its partners build awareness among residents about the benefits of tourism, while respecting locals' favorite spots and seeking to avoid over-use.				
DS1.1		Communicate benefits of tourism and expectations for visitors (respectful visitation, responsible recreation) to regional residents via partner eNews, social media, talking points on CTM website, Board members, and press releases to regional media.	DS ED BOD	FY25
DS1.2		Obtain input via social media and regional outreach meetings about sensitive sites/areas. Avoid promotion of sensitive areas and activities out of respect for locals and land/water.	DS ED	FY25
DS1.3		Communicate with C. MT tribes about protocols for visitors seeking cultural experiences and sites. Incorporate cultural respect messages into overall stewardship materials.	DS ED	FY25
DS1.4		Develop resources/training to build community awareness about the value of tourism and ways to be a Montana Superhost; promote as part of annual mini-summits.	DS	FY25
DS2: CMT and its land management and community partners include stewardship messages in their communications to visitors (Leave No Trace, Tread Lightly, Pack In-Pack Out).				
DS2.1		Communicate expectations to visitors about how to visit with respect. Include stewardship messaging in travel planner, map, website, social media, etc. Use Facebook and Instagram and direct emails to emphasize Tread Lightly, Pack In-Pack Out messaging. Link to specific content that educates visitors about how to visit, what to expect, be respectful, be prepared (weather, roads, cell service, bears), etc. Example: Whitefish CVB's "Friend of the Fish" landing page and video, https://explorewhitefish.com/fotf	Agcy	FY24
DS2.2		Work with land management agencies to obtain messaging materials for visitors.	DS	FY25
DS2.3		Provide visitor stewardship messaging for partners' use in their own promotion efforts. Encourage businesses to do so. Ex. https://partners.glaciermt.com/recreate-responsibly	DS ED	FY25
DS2.4		Inform regional media about CMT efforts to promote responsible tourism.	ED	FY25
DS2.5		Support protection/maintenance of historic/cultural sites, encourage visitors to help.	DS Agcy	FY26

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Measuring Results

Strategic Plan implementation results are measured in a variety of ways, both qualitative and quantitative.

Completion of a specific action is one form of measurement, e.g., a full complement of members serving on the Board, additions to CMT staff to reduce Executive Director time spent on tactical administrative tasks and more time spent on strategic issues.

Some measures of results are subjective: Self-guided committees with effective co-chairs who accomplish their assigned tasks efficiently.

Other measures are more specific, but may or may not be wholly a direct result of CMT marketing efforts:

- **Increase lodging tax collections by 10% from FY23 to FY24.**

Lodging tax collection increases/declines can be misleading, since they can reflect a higher number of rooms sold (more visitors), or higher prices, or both. More visitors can result from CMT promotions, but price hikes are a result of many factors (supplies cost inflation, increased labor costs, higher demand). Nationally, hotel room prices were up 12% in August 2023, and up 19% in March 2023, compared to pre-pandemic levels: <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/travel/travel-price-tracker>

- **Increase average regional hotel occupancy 2% from 2023 to 2025.**

In 2023, national average occupancy is expected to be 63.8%, nearly reaching 2019 occupancy of 65.9%. Higher room rates (and inflation overall, especially fuel prices) can reduce demand and occupancy, despite effective promotion efforts. <https://www.ahla.com/news/report-hotels-continue-recover-2023-industry-begins-new-era-operations>

- **Increase visitation to regional museums by 10% from 2023 to 2028.**

CMT promotion efforts certainly can help spur visitation, though other factors also influence it.

Marketing strategies often are measured in terms of inquiries received, “Likes” and “Clicks” on social media and digital advertising, page views and time spent on a website, etc. These measures are very useful to gauge general interest, and to evaluate which messages/images resonate well with intended target audiences. Digital strategies also can capture demographic and geographic information about the respondents so that actual users can be compared to intended target users.

However, digital “counts” of clicks, views, Likes, etc. do not necessarily translate to visitors. It is important to close the loop through actual visitor surveys, conversion research, and other means to determine how and why visitors learned about the destination, and what motivated them to decide to visit.

Some data more directly indicates the linkages between marketing strategies and action taken on the part of potential visitors:

- **Add an itinerary builder to the website, track the number and types of itineraries, activity interests, and visitor demographics. Adjust website content as necessary.**

Itinerary builders can assist visitors to plan their trips, though some of them are cumbersome to use. An example of a quality itinerary planner is <https://itineraryplanner.newfoundlandlabrador.com/>

- **Increase the amount of outbound traffic from the CMT website to regional businesses, attractions, events.**

Marketing efforts are designed to generate interest, drive traffic to the website to obtain more information and planning assistance, and refer visitors to the websites of local suppliers to book lodging, guided trips, etc. This outbound exit traffic should be tracked at least quarterly/seasonally and compared to marketing themes, to link marketing objectives and targets to actual planning and bookings.

Other measures of results for strategies listed in this Plan might include the number of new wayfinding and interpretive signs installed, the number of new tourism businesses and jobs created, increases in business sales, and amount of grant funding obtained by regional communities and organizations for tourism-related projects: <https://commerce.mt.gov/About/Funded-Projects>

The CMT Board and Committees will need to discuss and decide how they will measure the results of the Actions completed in the Strategic Plan, from “Done! Check that one off.” to more nuanced discussions of general trends and the factors that impact them.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: Board Survey & Planning Retreat Results

Survey Methodology

An online survey of CMT Board members and other stakeholders was conducted from April 24 to May 5, 2023, to obtain insights prior to the all-day Strategic Planning Retreat held on May 25, 2023. The survey was accessed by a link provided in an email invitation. A total of eighteen surveys were completed—fourteen from CMT Board members, and four from other stakeholders. There were 1-3 surveys from 11 of the 13 counties (none from Judith Basin or Wheatland Counties).



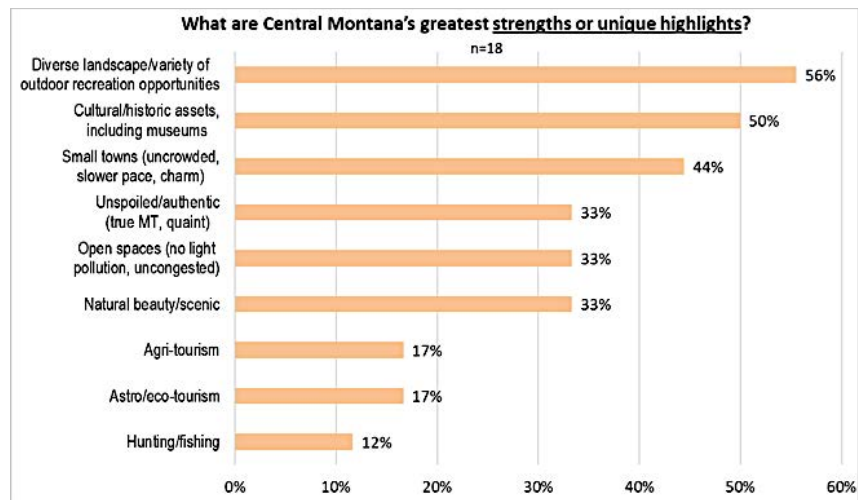
Survey Respondents Represented a Variety of Organizations

What kind of organization(s) do you represent?	
Lodging	39%
Community Organization	37%
Attraction	16%
Event / Entertainment	11%
Media / Marketing	11%
Restaurant / Beverage	5%
Retail	5%
Outfitter / Guide	5%
Professional Services	5%

Survey Results, Part 1: SWOT, Marketing Activity Ratings

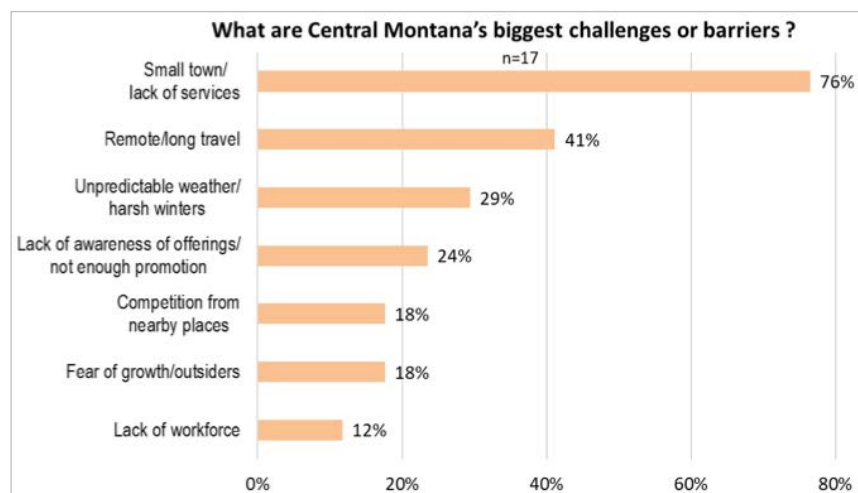
Central Montana Strengths

Half the respondents indicated that diverse landscapes, outdoor recreation opportunities, and cultural/historic assets are the greatest strengths.



Central Montana Challenges

Small towns were listed as both a strength and a challenge, due to lack of tourist services in many small towns. Remoteness and travel distances were cited by two-in-ten respondents.



Central Montana Opportunities

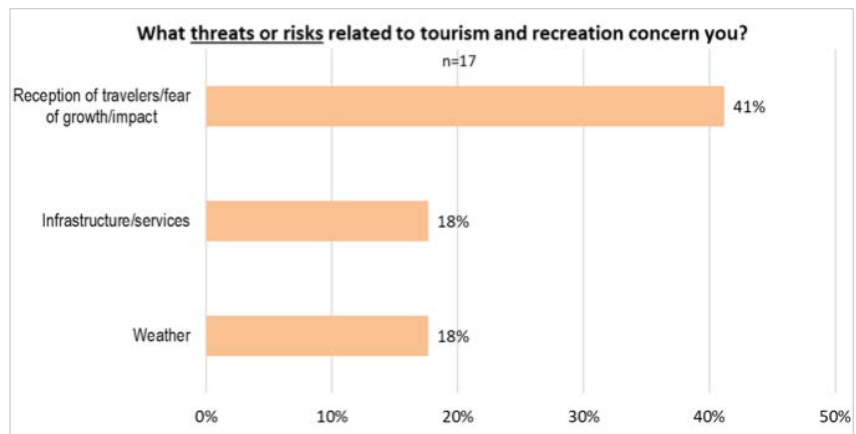
- Agri-tourism (56% of respondents)
- Astro-tourism (13%)
- Tribal communities/sites (13%)
- Other opportunities mentioned:
 - ◆ Arts/culture: art exhibits, theater, concerts, military history, outdoor music, State Fair, street dances, rodeos, small town history
 - ◆ Marketing strategies: multi-attraction loop, resources for identifying public recreation opportunities
 - ◆ Outdoors: camping, motorcycle/bicycle touring, day hiking trails, eco-tourism, golf, Missouri River recreation, Great Falls of the Missouri, Rocky Mountain Front communities/trailheads, Smith River area, floats, lakes, water park, wildlife, winter recreation, rentals (bikes, boats, horses).

Central Montana Threats

Perceived threats or risks to tourism cited most frequently were resident fear of growth/impact of visitors and reception of them, local infrastructure and services, and weather.

Other threats mentioned:

- GNP reservation system
- Inflation/rising prices
- Limited public land, remote access
- Threats to funding (lodging tax)
- Farmers/ranchers too busy for agri-tourism, lack of developed experiences
- Housing, low workforce



Things that Should and Should Not Change Related to Tourism

What Should Change	What Should NOT Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agri-tourism support, product development • Target Markets: younger demographic, Millennials, vanlifers • Marketing strategies: better online content, influencers, cooperative projects, increase visitors' engagement with Montanans, increase overnight visitation • Product development: develop itineraries, tourism training for workers/businesses, more state parks • Focus regionwide, big picture; disperse travelers to small towns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The essence of the place; the identity • Showcase stunning attributes, unspoiled nature, cultural/historic attractions, small towns • Promoting "secret gems", off the beaten path places, unique businesses • Promoting tourism, growth at a healthy rate • Teamwork, creativity, thinking ahead, continuous improvement

Importance of CMT Marketing Efforts

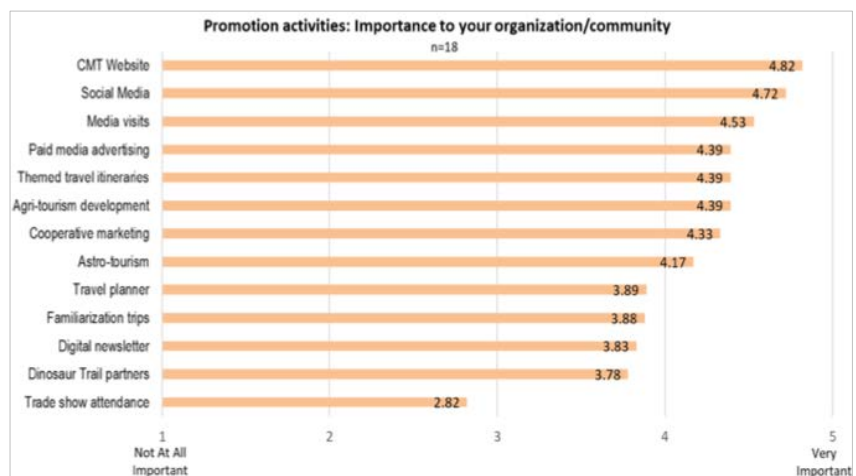
The chart at right shows the average ratings of each CMT marketing activity, where 1 = Not At All Important and 5 = Very Important.

Respondents rated the CMT website as most important, closely followed by social media marketing and media relations.

Lowest scoring were trade shows, with several respondents commenting that CMT should drop them.

Other comments related to CMT marketing efforts were the following:

- *Product development*: Dinosaur Trail stops need improvements, themed itineraries, additional shopping, feature steakhouses/supper clubs
- *Travel planner*: expensive, prefer digital version, ads necessary?, print fewer, need help selling ads
- *Digital*: more good info on website needed, update photos/videos, more digital campaigns/apps (less print)
- *Trade Shows*: not worth investment, low performers
- *Capacity building*: educational outreach, help communities see value of tourism/economic impact, training for small towns (marketing on a shoestring budget), direct engagement via workshops/gathering/listening sessions



General Comments about Central Montana Tourism

- *CMT Organization*: CMT organization realignment, follow best practices, increase board engagement, look at committee structure
- *Planning*: plan 1+ year out, more niche/guerilla-style marketing, out of the box, cohesive message across marketing efforts and platforms, be more effective and efficient, planned rotation of featured areas/activities/businesses on social media & newsletters, market 'affordable' without *saying* affordable
- *Research*: leverage current hotel guests (reasons for being here), room demand/occupancy, target groups

Consulting Team Observations based on Survey Results, Part 1

- Authenticity: YOU BE YOU!
- Product development opportunities: corridors, loops, themed itineraries, agri-tourism experiences, Astro-tourism, enhanced history/culture routes
- Community education & readiness ("catcher's mitt")
- Focus on digital marketing (planning and in-trip)
- Agency collaboration: avoid "silos", share resources, consistent "pitch & catch" of themes & branding
- Conduct advertising conversion research
- Evaluate Travel Planner process, distribution
- Limited resources – develop partnerships, generate revenue other than lodging tax (grants, workshop/training registrations, etc.)

Main Themes from Strategic Planning Retreat Discussion

The following themes and sub-themes emerged during discussions throughout the retreat. These themes created the framework for the Strategic Plan as it was developed.

Marketing: data/research-driven, new vision and brand, podcasts, digital/social media, in-state traveler markets, search/SEO, interactive maps, younger targets, use AI, intuitive planning help

Product Development: tours, activity maps, experiences, itineraries, corridors/loops, Agri-tourism, Astro-tourism, linkages between communities/businesses/arts/history/activities

Education: awareness among residents, elected officials, and front-line workers about benefits of tourism, product offerings, capacity-building for businesses/attractions/communities to foster more product development, effective hosting of visitors, and marketing

Collaboration: more collaboration among CMT partners (communities, attractions, etc.), elected officials, neighboring regions, and cross-promotion between locations, businesses, museums, etc.

Infrastructure: enhance wayfinding, interpretation, community entrances, cell service, roads, housing, workforce, etc. to support increased tourism

Authenticity: continue to be welcoming/friendly, true to ourselves, emphasize love for Montana, pride, connection to the land, respect for land/way of life, variety of ways to have fun!

Organization Development: board size/participation, streamline processes, leadership in regional collaboration and education efforts, forward-thinking, dynamic, strategic, more advocacy, youth involvement, focus on metrics and measurement of outcomes, increased funding, partnerships with economic development organizations, prioritize board member passion/commitment.

Survey Results, Part 2: CMT Board Member Self-Assessment

Part 1 of the survey (Questions 1-12) was answered by all respondents. Part 2 was for CMT Board members only. It contained six open-ended questions and 36 Board Self-Assessment rating questions. Below are the responses.

Q13. Why is the Central Montana Tourism organization important to *you personally*?

- CMT conducts marketing for the region that can't be done at the local level—it leverages local dollars and provides opportunities that we couldn't afford to do with local resources. It gives us a voice.
- Pride in and passion for my community and the Central Montana region—want to see it thrive, share our hidden gems with visitors, help create positive change.
- Ensure that our community/area is represented well and appropriately.
- Keeps us on the map—builds awareness of Central Montana among potential visitors to Montana.
- It helps my business to see increased visitation, and to collaborate with others.
- CMT is an advocate for lesser-known communities and counties, helps connect us to the region.

Q14. What aspect of Central Montana Tourism's work most interests or motivates you as a board member?

- Collaboration: learning about other counties, working with other communities, ideas and perspectives from other board members, working as a team. All of it!
- Development of new infrastructure and tourism products.
- Education of elected leaders (local, county, state) about the importance of tourism to us.
- Visitor awareness and leveraging dollars to achieve our goals.

Q15. What assets, skills, or expertise do you personally bring to the table to help the organization?

- Creativity, ideas, knowledge of the area, interest in history
- Ability to help develop new "big picture" ideas
- Good organizational and logistics skills
- Hospitality perspective
- Many years working with local volunteer organizations and businesses—familiar with the local area, tourists who visit, and residents
- Background in business, economic development
- Experience with grants and regional promotion

Q16-21. Board Self-Assessment: Mission and Purpose, Board Policy and Governance, Board Membership, Board Meetings, Board Committees, and Board-Staff Relationship.

Rate the CMT Board's activities on the following scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.
The graphs on the next two pages show the average scores in order from highest score to lowest score for all answers in the Self-Assessment items.

Q22. As a board member, how do you believe the effectiveness of the board meetings or organization can be improved?

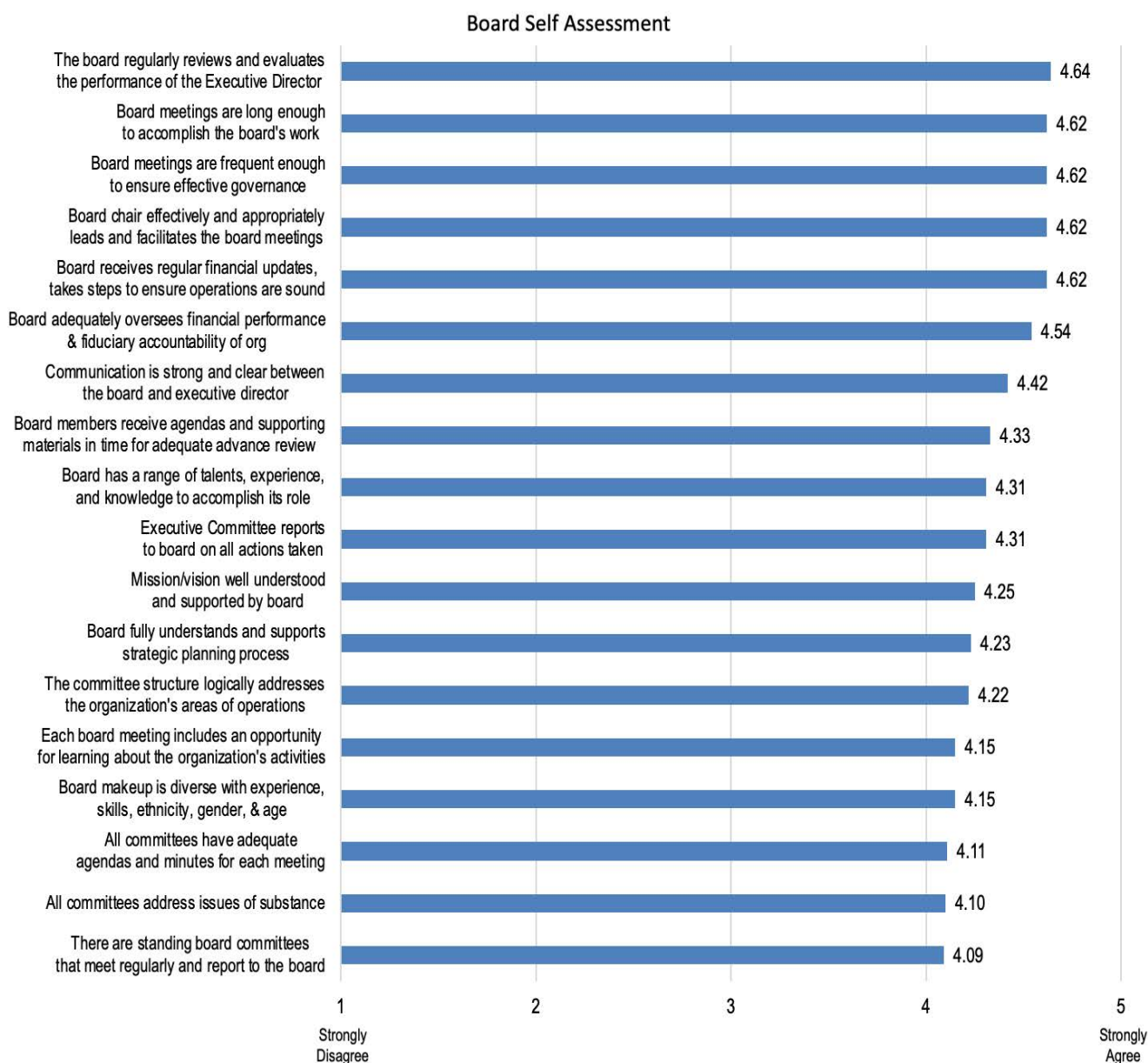
- More "big picture" discussions about product development, new tourism infrastructure. Less focus on local events that are not designed to draw tourists.
- More discussion about how local communities/counties/businesses can incorporate marketing material or themes in our respective areas.
- We need better metrics on the success/outcomes of our marketing efforts and projects.
- Zoom meetings are necessary, but they result in lower participation and clarity.
- Send all board meeting materials (including agency reports and community updates) in advance, then only discuss them if there are questions or decisions to make—unnecessary to discuss what we already have received and read in advance.
- More engagement from board members, and better attendance.
- Meeting agendas with more structure: specific details about discussion topics, decisions to be made.
- Meeting minutes need to capture only essential information: topics discussed, decisions, actions taken.
- Use contractors for administrative tasks: bookkeeping, ad sales.
- Streamline bill payment process and other operations.
- Make more use of technology: Doodle polls, calendar invites, etc.
- More tourism business representatives on the board (lodging, guides, attractions, transportation).
- Incorporate more nonprofit Best Practices into the organization.
- Consider joining Destinations International and allow Executive Director to take CDME training.

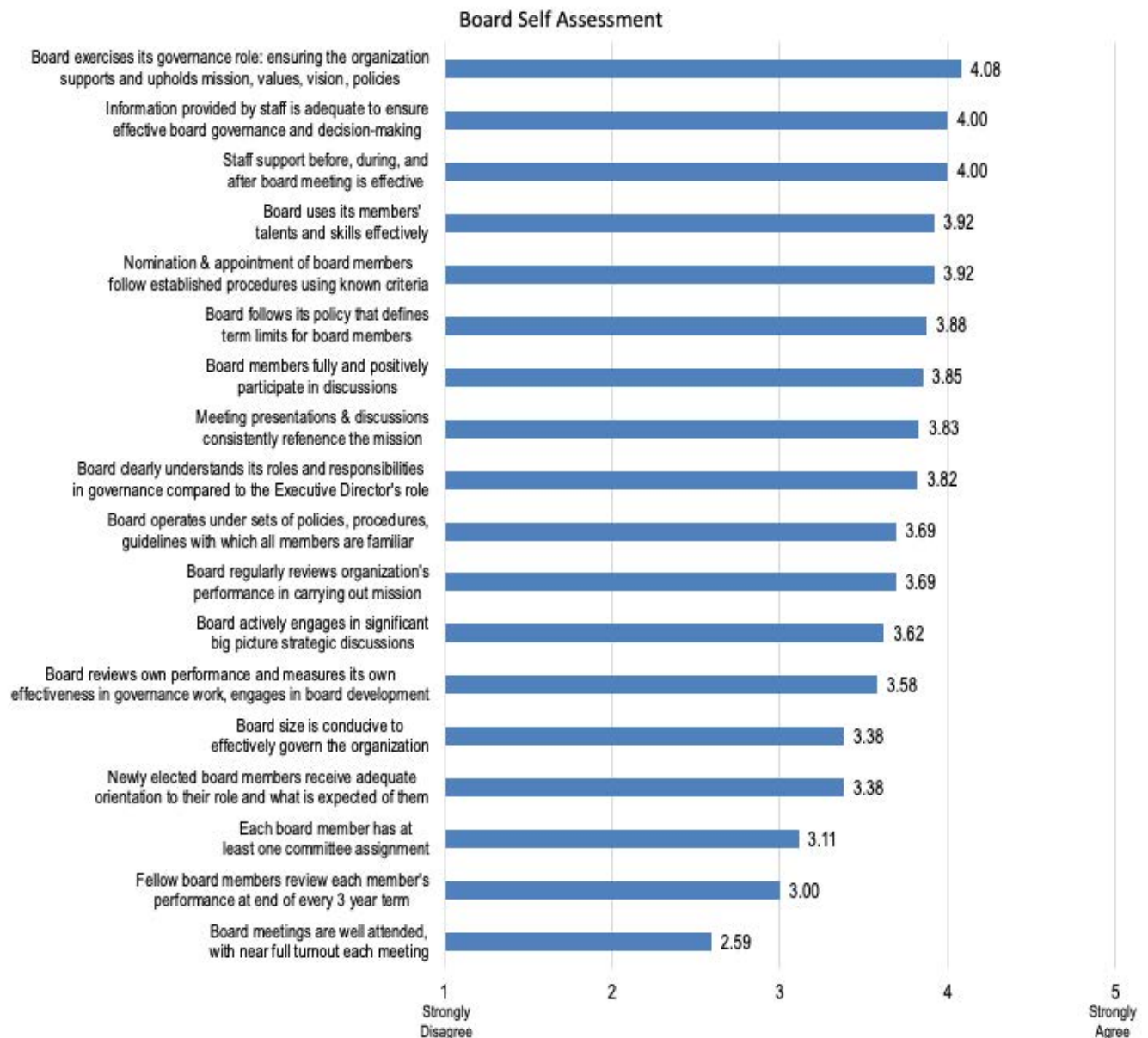
Q23. How can board members best support the organization and Executive Director?

- Attend meetings, respond to emails, speak up with ideas and opinions.
- Volunteer for committees.
- Participate actively—provide ideas and information for our marketing efforts, share new tourism activities or attractions, grant opportunities, noticeable trends, potential issues, changes in services/facilities, etc.
- Understand that some local activities/events are not tourism-related.
- Reduce the size of the board, “bless and release” board members who don’t attend or participate.

Q24. What other comments or suggestions would you like to share about Central Montana Tourism?

- Realign CMT organization to be more efficient, look at committee structure, follow best practices
- Consider membership fees
- CMT is moving in a good direction, with cool projects—need more board engagement, recruitment
- The CMT organization has a lot of value to the region, promotions have done well
- Need more content integration between the website, travel planner, advertising, and social media
- Evaluate Travel Planner format: ads needed? Have others help sell them?
- Focus more on measurable results, e.g., hotel room occupancy, demand, visitation numbers, etc.
- Look at additional target market possibilities such as groups





Consultant Observations and Recommendations

The Strategic Plan provides information and recommendations about board governance, best practices, roles of board vs. Executive Director, and preventing Director burnout. In summary:

- A smaller Board with all seats occupied by committed, engaged members is desirable
- Board meetings can be more productive by providing all reports in advance and focusing on “big picture” strategic discussions and actions to move the regional tourism industry forward
- The roles and responsibilities of Board members, Executive Director, and committees should be evaluated in the context of nonprofit Best Practices
- The CMT organization structure can be realigned to streamline processes and increase effectiveness
- Administrative functions should be performed by contractors so the Executive Director can focus on strategic marketing and product development initiatives, regional collaboration, education efforts, etc.
- Marketing efforts need to be more integrated, and results evaluated in terms of measurable gains in visitation, hotel occupancy, spending, etc.
- The Travel Planner policies, content, and production process can be streamlined to be less costly and burdensome for everyone involved
- Funding sources in addition to lodging taxes can help the CMT organization better meet regional needs.

APPENDIX B: Millennials

Millennials are 27 to 42 years old in 2023 (born 1981 to 1996). This Appendix provides an overview of who they are and how they travel.

PERCENT OF POPULATION: *This age group of young adults now dominates the global workforce.* Millennials represent the world's most important generation for consumer spending growth and general economic prospects. Millennials are now the largest generation in the U.S. at 71.1 million, or 22% of the total population. They make up 31.5% of the world's population.

Travel is a top priority for them.

TRAVEL VALUES/PERCEPTIONS: Millennials see travel as a right rather than a privilege and consider their travel experiences to be a part of their identity rather than just a check on a bucket list. Unforgettable memories and compelling experiences are more valuable to them than material goods. 72% of Millennials, along with Gen Zs, want to spend on travel experiences rather than physical possessions. They value "the idea of vacationing over adding a few more dollars to their savings," according to a one travel report.

Millennials are willing to give up things like coffee, new clothes, and Netflix so they can spend more money on travel. They are "way out in front of other generations" in deeming vacations to be very or extremely important to them.

Travel is the apex of experience, and thanks to social media, experience is the new social currency. For Millennials who might not be able to afford a fancy car, designer clothes, or house, status gets displayed in other ways. Now, "who cares if you don't have the latest 'it' bag if you just got back from learning to make ravioli with a local chef in Tuscany, with plenty of pics to prove it."

AFFLUENCE: Nearly half (43%) of Millennials across the world are considered affluent, earning \$75,000+ per year. Over the next ten years, increased Millennial spending on leisure and travel will be powered by Asia in particular, specifically from the lower middle classes of India, China, and Indonesia.

TRAVEL RATES/FREQUENCY: Research into the U.S. tourism industry shows that *Millennials travel more than other generations*. When it comes to nearly all travel behaviors, Millennials are the generation most likely to engage — and they do so often. Millennials took 5.6 trips per year, compared with 4.4 for Gen-Z, 4.0 for Gen X, and 3.5 for Boomers.

TRAVEL SPENDING: The average budget of Millennials is slightly below the annual travel spend of Generation X or Baby Boomers. The average spending per trip (from travel insurance policies sold for trips departing between 2020 and 2023):

Baby Boomers	\$6,126
Gen Xers	\$5,060
Millennials	\$4,141
Gen Zs	\$2,788

Their willingness is to spend, but not necessarily splurge, on travel. Millennials are more likely than other generations to pay more for flights, but only one in five say they look for top-of-the-line options when traveling. Finding the lowest price for a trip is critical to these travelers, to get more travel out of their budget.

TRAVEL PREFERENCE/MOTIVATION: Millennials' number one reason for travel is seeing friends and family. A 2022 survey showed most Millennials travel to see family and friends. Second to that, Millennials travel for a mental health boost, followed by visiting new U.S. cities, international trips, cheap deals, and fulfilling bucket list items.

Millennials take a 'you-only-live-once' attitude toward travel. They are open-minded and keen to explore, interact, and experience the world. They seek trips that focus on mental health and relaxation. Compared to older generations, Millennials and Gen Zs prioritize trips that focus on personal wellness (61% vs. 48%) and staying in hotels with spas and wellness services (60% vs. 43%).

Solo travelers account for 18% of all global bookings. Solo travel is an increasingly popular trend across generations, but especially amongst female Millennials and female Baby Boomers. 58% of Millennials stated they would solo travel, and 26% already have.

Many Millennials are now parents and are traveling with their children. 44% of Millennials with children have traveled together, of which 62% did so with children under five years old.

ENGAGING WITH THEIR DESTINATION: 86% of Millennials travel for experience and culture, immersing themselves into their destination, staying clear of tourist traps. 60% rank authentic culture as the essential part of their trip. 79% of Gen-Z & Millennials would love to partake in a day in the life of locals in the destination they are visiting. 78% want their travel to be educational and learn something. They want to see a destination like a hip, in-the-know local rather than a tourist passing through on a bus. 47% of Millennials say they have planned an entire trip around visiting a specific restaurant, 45% planned a trip to attend a food festival.

TRAVEL PLANNING: Millennials are plugged into their devices 24/7, they love using technology to make their life easier and smoother – especially when it comes to traveling. They use their smartphones and tablets to conduct research, make selections and finalize bookings.

50% use social networks, friends, and family to consult their travel options. 85% will check more than one site for exclusive deals before confirming their booking. 52% consult user-generated content including review websites, travel forums, and blogs to research and validate potential options. Often these travelers book on their mobile devices. This is a generation that is used to completing their tasks on the go, and they have perfected the art of multi-tasking.

However, itinerary creation through Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) like Travelocity or Expedia has seen a decline from 50% to 25% in recent years. More Millennials plan their own trips—they want to heighten their experience by doing their own planning. And some do little advance planning: 49% regularly take last-minute trips.

Millennials came of age with social media, while Gen Z has never lived without it. It's unsurprising, then, that social media plays an increasing role in the travel planning process. They use social media for everything from finding destination inspiration to uncovering exclusive deals and discount codes. Facebook and Instagram remain the most popular platforms for travel planning, followed by TikTok and Snapchat.

Trending destinations are off the beaten path. Big cities are always in high demand, but more off the beaten path destinations have seen outsized increases in demand compared to pre-pandemic. The popular TV series *Yellowstone* has inspired trips to West Yellowstone and Durango, offering scenic views, access to national parks, and a range of outdoor experiences. 70% of Millennials say they have been inspired to visit a destination after seeing it featured in a TV show, news source, or movie.

BUSINESS TRAVEL: Millennials see business travel as a perk and an opportunity to see new places and have new experiences. A lot of this attitude is fueled by aspirational social media images and the lifestyles of digital nomads. Millennials, more than previous generations, are more likely to want to combine business travel with free time to explore. 62% are likely to lengthen their business trips on the pursuit of culture. About one-third of Hopper app users have traveled or expect to travel for work in the next year, and 77% of those users plan to tack personal travel onto the trip.

MARKETING TO MILLENNIALS: Market to Millennials via their smartphones using social media and the Internet. 87% of Millennials use two or three devices every day. Nine out of ten Millennials make at least one purchase using their phone per month, and three quarters compare prices online. 66% of millennial travelers book their travel using a smartphone. 74% use their smartphone to research their holiday or trip. 75% have installed travel apps on their smartphone, compared with other generations at 47%.

A responsive website design is a must. Websites need to adapt to the device that the person is using at the time, giving them the appropriate display and information that they need. Millennials will ditch a website quickly if it requires them to pinch, zoom and drag around the screen in order to get the information they want. In addition, sites need to be fast. If it takes more than a couple seconds to load, users won't stay on the page.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Seventy-one percent of Millennials engage with social media on a daily basis. The vast majority share their travel experiences on social media, with 2 in 3 posting once a day. Such posts act like a trigger for those who read their posts to go in search of an adventure.

The majority of Millennials (70%) use **Facebook** every day (except in China where it is banned) and 63% use **YouTube** every day and nearly half use their smartphone camera every day.

Platforms such as **TikTok** are becoming increasingly important for younger Millennials and Generation Z.

87% use Facebook to inspire their booking, and over 50% used **Pinterest** or **X/Twitter**. 46% of Millennials travel to explore a place they've seen on **Instagram**. 61% of Millennials travel to see places that "look great" in photos/videos.

INSTAGRAMMABLE: Forget about cost, food, and sightseeing. What really seems to matter to Millennials is how good their trip will look on social media. More than 40 percent of people under the age of 33 are prioritizing travel destinations based on how “Instagrammable” they are. 70 percent of Instagram’s content is now related to travel.

OPINION OF THEIR PEERS: The number one way to attract Millennials is to offer and execute well on something so unique that people feel compelled to share it on their social media. Millennials respect and rely on the opinion of their peers: if they see something super cool in a friend’s feed, that is way more credible than any ad or sponsored blog post. In an overwhelming online world, the one post we know we can trust is our friend’s.

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<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/27/millennials-are-turning-40-and-theyre-changing-travel-as-we-know-it.html>
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<https://skift.com/2019/12/11/travel-marketing-across-generations-in-2020-reaching-gen-z-gen-x-millennials-and-baby-boomers/>
<https://www.adido-digital.co.uk/blog/generational-social-media-trends-in-travel/>

APPENDIX C: Information Resources

Agri-tourism Resources: See Appendix F.

Astro-tourism Resources:

Montana Trail to the Stars: <https://trailtothestars.com/>

Starry Skies Montana: www.starryskiesmontana.org

DarkSky International: <https://darksky.org/>

AI information (also see Appendix E):

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/ai-travel-dos-donts>

<https://www.makeuseof.com/free-travel-planning-ai-chatgpt-apps/>

<https://time.com/6290940/ai-travel-industry/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/travel/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-travel-vacation.html>

<https://www.today.com/video/how-to-use-new-ai-technology-to-plan-your-next-vacation-186981957770>

<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/27/can-chatgpt-help-plan-a-vacation-heres-what-it-can-and-cant-do.html>

Marketing Resources:

Branding—Place DNA: <https://destinationthink.com/blog/why-destination-marketers-understand-place-dna/>

Dinosaur Trail itinerary: <https://mtdinotrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MTDinosaurTrailItinerary.pdf>

Itinerary examples: <https://itineraryplanner.newfoundlandlabrador.com/>

and <https://mtdinotrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MTDinosaurTrailItinerary.pdf>

Map example with clickable layers: <https://abundantmontana.com/search/?show-map=yes>

SEO (Search Engine Optimization) information: https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/seo-starter-guide?visit_id=638268526532763494-1404007595&rd=1

and <https://searchengineland.com/guide/what-is-seo>

and <https://moz.com/learn/seo/what-is-seo>

Tear-off map example: <https://visityellowstonecountry.com/assets/scenic-road-map.pdf>

Website Trip Planning Resources Example: <https://www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/welcome-desk>

Stewardship Resources:

Crisis Communications Plan, Glacier Country: <https://partners.glaciermt.com/wildland-fire-smoke-communications>

Recreate Responsibly Campaign/Materials (Glacier Country): <https://partners.glaciermt.com/recreate-responsibly>

Whitefish “Friend of the Fish” Campaign: <https://explorewhitefish.com/fotf>

Tourism Readiness Assessments:

Coastal Tourism Business Resilience Self-Assessment: <https://sites.wp.odu.edu/businessresilienceselfassessment/>

U. of MN Extension Tourism Assessment: <https://extension.umn.edu/research-communities/tourism-assessment-program>

MI State Univ. Extension First Impressions Tourism (FIT) Assessment: https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/

George Washington Univ. Tourism Assessment Process Manual:

https://www2.gwu.edu/~iits/Sustainable_Tourism_Online_Learning/Gutierrez/Tourism_Assessment_Process_Manual.pdf

W. Rural Dev’t Center Community Tourism Assessment Handbook: https://www.scribd.com/document/321805766/Community-tourism-assessment-handbook-pdf?doc_id=321805766&download=true&order=615662896#

Tourist-Oriented Directional Signs (TODS):

Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD): <https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/index.htm>

MDT Sign Information: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/oac/sign-exemptions.aspx>

Sign Manufacturing: <https://montanatods.interstatelogos.com/state/>

TODS Business and Attraction Signs: <https://rules.mt.gov/gateway/RuleNo.asp?RN=18%2E6%2E420>

APPENDIX D: Funding Resources

Montana Tourism Grant Program

<https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Office-Of-Tourism/Tourism-Grant-Program>

The Tourism Grant Program is funded by the 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax; commonly known as the “Bed Tax.” Enacted by the 1987 Legislature, the Bed Tax is collected from guests of hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, guest ranches, resorts, short-term vacation rentals, and campgrounds. Distribution of the 4% collected funds is determined by statute and can be found on the [Montana Tourism Fast Facts Tourism Funding and Revenue](#) guide. The Tourism Grant Program awards funds to tourism and recreation projects and events that have the potential to increase out-of-area visitation, increase expenditures in a community, and lend to overnight stays.

Community Development Grants

<https://comdev.mt.gov/>

The Community MT Division helps Montana communities offer safe, efficient, and quality public facilities, including streets, water and sewer services, schools, excellent health care facilities and social services, a vibrant economy, and job opportunities. The Community MT Division has resources, including financial and technical assistance, to help your community attain its goals.

The **Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP)** provides professional planning assistance to communities across Montana in support of sound land use and development decisions, economic revitalization, and overall community resilience. Technical assistance is provided through workshops and trainings, direct assistance by phone or email, collaboration with local, state, and federal partners, the creation of model documents, and guidance on planning best practices. **Areas of Expertise:** Long range community planning, Subdivision regulations and review, Zoning regulations and administration, Drinking water and wastewater treatment systems, Transportation: bridges, streets/roads, multi-modal, Stormwater management, Planning best practices and tools of the trade, Exemption review and certificates of survey.

Planning Grants: Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) planning grants are available to eligible counties, cities, and towns. Local governments may apply on behalf of special purpose districts (such as water or sewer districts), unincorporated areas, or on behalf of non-profit organizations. Counties may also apply for planning grants on behalf of tribal utility authorities. CDBG planning grants may be used for the preparation of plans, studies, training or research in any of these areas: Growth Policies, Comprehensive Capital Improvement Plans (CCIP), Subdivision Regulations, Zoning Regulations, Regional or Neighborhood Plans, Downtown Revitalization or Master Plans, Housing Plans, Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), Tax Increment Finance District (TIFD) and Targeted Economic Development District (TEDD), Historic and Architectural Preservation Studies, ADA Self-Assessment Plans, Brownfield Redevelopment Plans, Preliminary Architectural Reports (PAR), Preliminary Engineering Reports (PER), Site-Specific Development Plans, Business Plans.

Montana Main Street Program

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Montana-Main-Street-Program/>

The Montana Main Street Program, established in 2005 and currently serving thirty-seven communities across the state, is a collaborative effort between the Community MT Division and the Montana Office of Tourism at the Montana Department of Commerce. The program helps communities strengthen and preserve their historic downtown commercial districts by focusing on economic development, urban revitalization, and historic preservation through long-range planning, organization, design, and promotion.

Applications for the Montana Main Street annual **Planning & Project Grant** will be accepted for Montana Main Street member communities in the fall. Planning and Project Grants should focus on planning and projects directly related to downtown revitalization, economic development, and historic preservation.

Applications for the Montana Main Street **Impact Grant** are accepted for Montana Main Street member communities in the fall. Impact Grants will support Montana Main Street Program member community efforts to implement high impact projects that activate spaces and execute concrete ideas for downtown revitalization. Impact grant funds can be used to activate public spaces, downtown retail spaces, and upstairs housing.

Economic Development Grants

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Community-Development-Block-Grant-Program/Economic-Development>

Montana's CDBG Economic Development program is designed to stimulate economic development activity by assisting Montana's private sector to create or retain jobs for low- to moderate-income Montanans, specifically, this includes individuals earning less than 80% of the area median income. **Eligible Projects:**

Job Creation/Retention: The CDBG-ED Program is designed to stimulate economic development activity by assisting the private sector to create or retain jobs for low and moderate-income persons primarily through loans to businesses. The program is designed to assist businesses by making fixed-rate financing available to them at reasonable interest rates, given the risk of the project, and to provide public improvements in support of economic development activities.

Customized Employee Training: Employee training is a stand-alone project activity for new and expanding businesses creating additional jobs. The intent is to assist businesses in providing needed skills and better paying jobs for their workers.

Public Service: Funds may be distributed to qualified community colleges that provide job training targeted to developing specific employee skills needed by an aggregate of companies.

EDA: MDOC has a separate pool of funds originating from the U.S. Economic Development Administration. The CDBG-EDA Program is designed to stimulate economic development activity by assisting the private sector to create or retain jobs for low and moderate-income persons primarily through loans to businesses. The program rules and regulations are based on the CDBG-ED program with a few minor changes.

Montana Historic Preservation Grant Program

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Montana-Historic-Preservation-Grant>

The Montana Historic Preservation Grant (MHPG) Program is a state-funded program, providing grants of up to \$500,000 with a 20% match requirement. The MHPG Program is designed to support public or private entities with the preservation of historic sites, historical societies, or history museums through grant funding.

The MHPG Program provides the opportunity to stimulate economic development, community revitalization, and statewide tourism through increased investment, job creation or retention, business expansion, and local tax base growth. Combined with such return on investment, the MHPG Program supports the preservation of Montana's historic structures, sites, societies, and museums, contributing to the maintenance and demonstrating the economic impact of historical resources throughout the state.

The MHPG Program coordinates with wider historic preservation technical assistance available and utilizes the diversity of funds to address both the financial and preservation gaps of projects. MHPG funds invest in the critical point to help projects move forward, catalyzing local revitalization and economic growth.

Historic sites will be considered eligible if one of the below criteria is met:

- Structure or site is listed on National, State, or Local Historic Registry
- Structure or site contributes to a historic district
- A structure 50+ years old and has documented significance to the history of a Montana community or region

Public and Community Facilities Grants

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Community-Development-Block-Grant-Program/Public-and-Community-Facilities>

Montana's CDBG Public and Community Facilities grants help local governments fund construction or rehabilitation of infrastructure and facilities that primarily benefit low- to moderate-income (LMI) Montanans, i.e. individuals earning less than 80% of the area median income. Certain projects such as senior centers, food banks, homeless shelters, youth homes, or head start centers are presumed to serve a "Limited Clientele" that is primarily LMI.

Other projects, such as a wastewater improvements project or water treatment improvements provide benefits to the entire community and are considered to have "area-wide benefit" because both LMI and non-LMI residents are served. Therefore, applicants must document at least 51% of the project's beneficiaries qualify as LMI for projects considered to have an area-wide benefit.

Montana Coal Endowment Program

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Montana-Coal-Endowment-Program/>

The Montana Coal Endowment Program (MCEP) is a state-funded program that is designed to help address the "affordability" of local infrastructure projects by providing grants to lower the cost of constructing public facilities such as water lines, wastewater treatment, bridges, etc.

Montana Indian Country Economic Development Programs

<https://business.mt.gov/Business-Assistance/Indian-Country-Programs/>

The Office of Indian Country Economic Development (OICED) programs provide all of the business resources available to Native American businesses and Tribal governments in Montana under one office.

Program Funding: In a commitment to fostering economic growth and empowerment within tribal communities, the Montana Department of Commerce offers four grant programs aimed at bolstering tribal business development and strengthening indigenous entrepreneurship in Montana.

In recognition of the significance of tribal culture and heritage in promoting tourism, the [Tribal Tourism Grant \(TTG\)](#) was established to support tribal initiatives that enhance tourism offerings and showcase the rich traditions of indigenous communities. The grant funding empowers tribes to share their stories and attract visitors, ultimately contributing to economic growth and cultural exchange.

Small business owners who are enrolled members of Montana's tribal nations can apply for the [Indian Equity Fund \(IEF\) Small Business Grant](#), a dynamic initiative aimed at fortifying the growth of small-scale enterprises. The grant serves as a catalyst for expanding the scope of indigenous entrepreneurship and enhancing local economic vitality.

The [Native American Business Advisor \(NABA\)](#) grant presents a valuable opportunity for aspiring indigenous entrepreneurs to access expert guidance, mentorship and resources to kickstart their business ventures. The program is designed to provide a solid foundation for success and sustainability in the competitive business landscape.

The [Tribal Business Development Grant \(TBDG\)](#) offers tribal governments or tribally owned businesses a unique opportunity to secure funding for shovel-ready projects that will drive economic prosperity and sustainability. This grant empowers Montana's tribally owned, for-profit business enterprises to expand, diversify, flourish and ultimately contribute to the overall progress of tribal communities.

USDA Rural Development – Montana

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/mt>

USDA Rural Development supports rural prosperity in Montana by investing in modern infrastructure such as high-speed internet and water and waste treatment systems. We help eligible rural Montanans buy or rent affordable housing, and we can partner with you to build or improve essential community facilities such as hospitals, libraries, and schools. We boost rural economic development by funding technical assistance for small business owners and entrepreneurs, helping them design robust business plans, find new markets, and promote their goods and services. We also help eligible businesses and manufacturers expand or improve, and we support energy programs that finance renewable systems for agriculture and industry.

APPENDIX E: “A Chat with ChatGPT”

The consulting team decided to give AI a test run using ChatGPT. Kara typed: “**planning a trip to central Montana, want to see the natural beauty**”. This is what ChatGPT gave her:

Central Montana is a great destination for nature lovers, as it offers a variety of natural attractions to explore and enjoy. Here are some suggestions for your trip:

- *If you are interested in caves, you should visit [Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park](#)¹, which is a 620-acre park in Helena that encompasses Mount Helena. You can take a guided tour of the limestone caverns and see the amazing formations and colors. The park also has hiking trails, picnic areas, and a visitor center.*
- *If you are looking for a scenic drive, you should check out the [Going-to-the-Sun Road](#)², which is a 50-mile route that crosses Glacier National Park. You will see stunning views of mountains, glaciers, lakes, and waterfalls along the way. The road is open from late June to mid-October, depending on the weather conditions.*
- *If you are into history and culture, you should stop by the [Montana Historical Society Museum](#)³ in Helena, which offers a wide variety of books, gifts, jewelry, and more related to Montana history, Western history, Native American history, Western art, and Charlie Russell. You can also learn about the state’s heritage through exhibits, programs, and events.*
- *If you are looking for some outdoor adventure, you should head to [Bannack State Park](#)² in Dillon, which is a well-preserved ghost town that was founded in 1862 after the first major gold discovery in Montana. You can explore over 60 structures, camp, fish, hike, bike, pan for gold, and join ghost walks.*
- *If you are a fan of waterfalls, you should not miss [Morrell Falls](#)⁴, which are located in the Lolo National Forest near Seeley Lake. The falls are about 90 feet high and surrounded by lush forest. You can reach them by hiking a 2.7-mile trail that follows Morrell Creek.*

I hope these suggestions help you plan your trip to Central Montana. Have fun and stay safe! 😊

Not exactly what we were hoping for. She tried again. This time, she typed: “**I want to plan a vacation to Russell Country in Montana, what should I see and do?**” And she got this answer:

Russell Country is a beautiful region in Montana that offers a variety of attractions and activities for visitors. Here are some suggestions for your vacation:

- *If you are interested in art and history, you should visit the [C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls](#)¹²³. This museum complex showcases the works of Charles M. Russell, a famous painter and sculptor of the American West. You can also see his original home and studio, as well as exhibits on firearms, Native American artifacts, and letters. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except on major holidays. Admission is \$14 for adults, \$10 for seniors and students, and free for children under 5.*
- *If you want to learn more about the Lewis and Clark Expedition, you should stop by the [Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center](#)²³. This center is located on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, where the explorers camped in 1805 and 1806. You can watch films, view exhibits, and participate in ranger-led activities that tell the story of their journey and their interactions with the Native Americans. The center also has hiking trails, an amphitheater, a gift store, and a living-history area. The center is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., except on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$5 for seniors and students, and free for children under 15.*
- *If you are looking for a unique natural attraction, you should check out the [First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park](#)²⁴. This park is the site of one of the largest prehistoric buffalo jumps in North America, where Native Americans drove herds of bison over the cliffs for thousands of years. You can visit the visitor center, where you can see exhibits on the buffalo culture and history, as well as a prairie dog town. You can also walk or drive to the cliff site, where you can enjoy panoramic views and interpretive signs. The park is open daily from 8 a.m. to sunset, except on major holidays. Admission is free.*
- *If you are a wildlife lover, you should explore the [Benton Lake Wildlife Refuge](#)². This refuge is home to more than 240 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. You can observe them in their native habitats of shortgrass prairie and seasonal wetlands. You can also hike on trails, fish in ponds, picnic in shelters, and join guided tours. The refuge is open daily from sunrise to sunset. Admission is free.*

These are just some of the many things you can see and do in Russell Country. I hope you have a wonderful time there!

APPENDIX F: Agritourism Resources

Best comprehensive guide (80+ pages): <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism/agritourism-guides>

- Great resource for those contemplating an agritourism business (i.e., how to evaluate whether it is right for you) as well as details for conducting business once you decide to move forward.
- Getting into the details, financial planning list of good resources: <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism/financial-planning>
- Good jumping off point, several links to quality resources for getting started: <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/vtagritourism/getting-started-agritourism>

What is agritourism? https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/What_is_Agritourism/

Most common government definition: "Agritourism can be defined as a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining and/or educating the visitors while generating income for the farm, ranch, or business owner."

A more practical definition: "Agritourism activity" means any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public, for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions. An activity is an agritourism activity whether or not the participant paid to participate in the activity."

Examples of Agritourism Enterprises:

Outdoor Recreation:

- Horseback riding
- Wildlife viewing & photography
- Fee fishing
- Camping/picnicking (combined)
- Fee hunting
- Wagon/sleigh rides
- Cross-country skiing
- Game preserve
- Clay bird shooting
- Off-road vehicles

Educational Experiences:

- School tours
- Garden/nursery tours
- Winery tours
- Agricultural technical tours
- Historical agriculture exhibits
- Crop sign I.D. program
- Micro-brewery tours
- Exotic animal farm

Direct Agricultural Sales:

- On-farm sales
- Roadside stand
- Agriculture-related crafts/gifts
- U-pick operations

Accommodations:

- Bed & breakfast inn
- Farm/ranch vacations
- Guest ranch
- Youth exchange
- Elder hostel

Entertainment:

- Concerts or special events
- Festivals or fairs
- Petting zoo
- Hunting/working dog trials/training

Miscellaneous:

- Guide/outfitter operation
- Farmers' market
- Horse pack team

Agri-tourists:

2017 survey of agri-tourists: <https://agritourism.localfoodeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Quick-Facts-traveler.pdf>

There is very little data or information that profiles agri-tourists. There is a thesis by a student in Mississippi from 2022, 110 pages long. This would be a good research project for ITRR to pursue.