

2.1. Highlight Montana's vibrant and charming small towns

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

TAC, MTOT, Regions

- » Collaborate on ways to highlight and assist in the development of Montana's "vibrant and charming small towns."

MTOT, Regions, Tribes

- » Highlight vibrant and charming small towns, their arts, culture, events and amenities in visitor information and identify their location clearly.
- » Assist Montana communities' efforts to "tell their story" (see Strategic Action 2.2.) and use their story (arts, culture, heritage, events, amenities, etc) to attract visitors.
- » Create traveler tips or itinerary ideas that link vibrant and charming small towns together, and link them to the main travel corridors for visitors.
- » Highlight Montana's vibrant and charming small towns, their arts, culture, events and amenities in marketing materials to strengthen the Montana Brand.

Indicators of Success

- » Montana's "vibrant and charming small towns" are highlighted in Montana's visitor information and their location is clearly identified on the Montana map.
- » Images of these towns are used across marketing materials to strengthen the Brand pillar.

Background & Rationale

Research shows the importance of reducing the perceived "riskiness" of a destination by assuring travelers that the amenities, services, and comfort that they seek will be available. Montana's branding research reiterated the importance of providing information to mitigate visitors' perception of the state's remoteness. Visitors need reassurance that the comfort, services, and amenities they seek are available in Montana. The Montana Brand promise of "vibrant and charming small towns" serves this purpose, but that promise must be credible. It is important for the visitor who values very charming small towns to be able to identify those towns, perceive their vibrancy and charm, and find their geographic locations when planning an itinerary.

ITRR data indicate that Montana's non-resident visitors largely undertake *multi-destination* trips, rather than staying in one town. This increases the importance of highlighting a number of towns that could serve as the basis of visitor itineraries. Awareness of these towns could also encourage more travelers to extend their itinerary outside the main travel corridors.

Delivering on the brand promise by helping visitors to find vibrant and charming small towns will improve the visitor experience and visitor satisfaction, contributing to extended stays, return visits, and positive word-of-mouth.

Highlighting the “gems” among Montana’s many charming small towns has the additional benefits of strengthening community pride; building respect by highlighting the benefits of tourism; and encouraging other communities to come together to improve their towns’ vibrancy and charm.

2.2. Highlight the most charming and desirable elements of each community in visitor information

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism marketing efforts, and builds respect for the tourism industry in Montana.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions

- » Ensure that visitor information prominently highlights the most charming and desirable amenities identified in each town.
- » Incorporate any content generated through MTOT-led events such as the community tourism workshops held throughout the state (*"Coming Together to Expand Montana's Tourism Story"*).
- » Work closely with the Montana Main Street program to leverage and coordinate efforts.

CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Identify the most charming and vibrant assets and amenities of the town from the visitor's perspective – things that a visitor might mention in a postcard or post on an online community or review site.
- » Incorporate any content generated through MTOT-led events such as the community tourism workshops held throughout the state (*"Coming Together to Expand Montana's Tourism Story"*).
- » Present the most charming aspects of the town experientially, so that visitors can imagine experiencing and enjoying them.
- » Connect with the potential visitor by telling the unique "story" of the town – drawing on local history, characters, the arts, annual events, etc. Project (i) authenticity, (ii) uniqueness, and (iii) a sense of "relaxing hospitality" and "comfort" for visitors.
- » Use ratings and review sites and other electronic word-of-mouth (e.g., TripAdvisor, online community discussions) to help identify the best amenities and link to reviews to strengthen credibility and reduce risk for the visitor.
- » Include the arts and culture such as performing arts, art galleries and markets, art walks and other cultural activities.
- » Periodically re-evaluate the choice of charming and desirable elements, including consulting online travel review sites for fresh perspective.
- » Make the local community aware of the visitor information and the way it presents the community, to help build and broaden local pride.

Indicators of Success

- » Visitor information presents each town in a way that immediately highlights the best elements from the visitors' perspective. The charm and personality of each town and the most desirable amenities and services for travelers are all easy for visitors to discover.

- » Each town's story and information regarding local events help build a personal connection with potential visitors and meets a growing desire for authenticity.
- » The presentation of each town provides an appealing sense of the experience a visitor will have rather than a list of place names.
- » The visitor can perceive the richness and variety of experiences to be found in the community.
- » Visitors are confident that amenities are available and appealing, and therefore do not perceive Montana to be a "risky" destination. Visitors may be drawn to plan longer trips to include more towns in their multi-destination itineraries or to extend their itinerary beyond the current common travel corridors.
- » Montana's Brand promise of charming towns is more credible, and the state delivers on the promise.

Background & Rationale

Research shows the importance of reducing the perceived "riskiness" of a destination by assuring travelers that the amenities, services, and comfort that they seek are available in Montana's small towns. While a list of hotels and restaurants can assure travelers that there will be a place to eat or sleep, it does not assure visitors of the "comfort" they desire. By highlighting the most "charming" amenities, visitor information can pull in visitors by (i) giving assurance of "comfort", (ii) helping establish a unique and appealing "sense of place", and (iii) helping the visitor build expectations of the *experience* that is offered in the town.

In many community sessions, particularly in less visited areas or areas where most travelers were just passing through, stakeholders expressed a desire to increase tourism marginally – a few more visitors stopping for lunch or a snack or to visit the local museum. Tourism today is highly *experiential*, and even the smallest of towns can offer the traveler a *memorable* short break. It may be a stop on the Montana Dinosaur Trail or stepping into the local soda fountain or diner for the *best* huckleberry milkshake yet (even better than the one they found yesterday). It could be stopping to watch glassblowers in Corvallis to break up the drive or looping along the "Bale Trail" to make getting there half the fun. It could be homemade soup for lunch at the corner cafe or dinner at one of Montana's fabulous restaurants hidden off the beaten track. By highlighting those things that can contribute something special to the visitor's larger vacation experience, these small towns can increase their tourism in an incremental but meaningful way.

The visitor experience can also benefit from the "little things" that offer comfort – welcoming coffee shops or cozy restaurants, nice places to take a stroll or a hike, lodging that makes you want to settle right in, quaint downtowns or interesting architecture. Their charm may derive from physical attributes or from experiential attributes.

Local events – such as farmers' markets, street music, arts festivals, and evening art walks – add charm and help the visitor feel a connection to the town. The arts offer an additional facet to the visitor experience offered by the community, adding richness and diversity.

The Montana Main Street Program, within the Montana Department of Commerce, is a valuable resource for communities seeking to leverage their efforts and coordinate with other small Montana towns. Using review sites and travel blogs to identify the most charming aspects of a town improves the chances

that the selection fits with the *visitors' perspective*. These websites have been shown to provide trusted word-of-mouth recommendations. Linking to such sites and reviews from official tourism information leverages that credibility and offers the visitor “objective” praise to back up the promises of an official tourism site. Many other resources exist to produce the “story” of a town. Tap the knowledge of local volunteers, civic leaders, or amateur historians who have worked to preserve the heritage of the community. Look to existing historical or cultural studies of the town completed by third parties. For example, the BLM’s commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the 1862 Homestead Act has produced stories and images related to a number of towns around the state. Yellowstone Public Radio has produced many narratives on local towns, characters, and history around the state. Many books have been published on the history of small Montana towns. Draw upon these sources and others for inspiration, link to existing materials, or use excerpts from published works (within the bounds of “fair use” guidelines).

Research has shown the power of telling the authentic story of a place. It is cultural differences that give most places their distinctiveness. Stories and anecdotes make a community more meaningful and attractive, helping visitors to form an emotional connection. They can be informative and inspirational.

MTOT’s 2010 study on the visitor’s travel planning process provides confirmation of the importance of conveying excitement rather than simply providing functional information. As one traveler explained, “what I like... [is] a little blurb about why I should go there or see that or what’s worth experiencing. There’s a depth, some perspective and it’s like finding little treasures, little gems.”

Telling the stories of Montana’s towns has the *collective* effect of giving nonresident visitors a richer sense of Montana’s culture and history and adds credibility to the Brand promise of charming small towns. In addition, telling the unique individual stories of each town allows communities to differentiate themselves *within* the Montana Brand. Because Montana’s nonresident visitors tend to take *multi-destination* trips, it is important to remember that this differentiation is not intended to lure visitors away from surrounding towns, but rather allows the visitor to plan a trip that includes stops in your town *and* other towns on their route. This will lead to a better distribution of tourism throughout the state, particularly if it induces travelers to stop along the way rather than traveling quickly and directly to their primary destination.

Resources

“Geo-Travelers and Travel Planning” at <http://www.travelmontana.mt.gov/newsandupdates/mtotpublications2010.pdf>

The Montana Main Street Program at www.mtmainstreet.mt.gov

Travel blogs can help identify the best attributes of a town from a visitor’s perspective. Search for mention of your community at www.blogsearch.google.com using the search terms “travel blog” and the town name

Materials produced by the BLM to commemorate the Homestead Act, found at <http://homesteadingmontana.org/>

Narratives produced by Yellowstone Public Radio, found at www.ypradio.org.

2.3. Evaluate and pursue essential local wayfinding solutions

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions, CVBs

- » Serve as a facilitator for communities and a liaison with the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) in addressing wayfinding and highway signage needs.
- » Explore the possibility of creating a coordinated highway signage program for communities around the state that would use economies of scale to reduce costs, improve consistency, and strengthen the Montana Brand. Communicate closely with CVBs and communities.
- » Provide guidance on signage solutions that (i) meet well-justified needs; (ii) avoid clutter; and (iii) meet MDT regulations.
- » Include success stories in the Resource Library, and encourage their submission.

CVBs, Communities, Tribes, Businesses & Organizations

- » Assess the need for local wayfinding solutions or highway signage. Evaluate the expected benefits critically (e.g., by developing a business case) to determine how significant they could be and how likely the benefits are to materialize. Prioritize needs and seek out affordable, creative solutions.
- » Understand all city, county, state, or federal (highway) codes that regulate the use of signage. Work with the Montana Department of Transportation and MTOT to ensure understanding of state and federal regulations.
- » Work closely with MTOT and other communities to support and adopt a coordinated approach to signage.
- » Share successful approaches to local wayfinding with other communities through MTOT and media coverage.

Indicators of Success

- » Increased visitation to towns, attractions, and amenities due to increased visitor awareness or ability to locate them.
- » Effective and affordable approaches to local wayfinding are devised and shared among communities, including a business case to pursue such efforts.
- » Stakeholders have clear guidance on highway signage regulations and a clear process for pursuing signage.
- » A collective approach to implementing highway signage improvements eliminates frustration, improves the quality and consistency of signage, and reduces signage clutter.

Background & Rationale

Community input sessions during the strategic planning process consistently identified stakeholder desire for improved wayfinding, concern that the cost of local wayfinding is prohibitive, and frustration in regard to regulatory restrictions on highway signage.

A collective approach to highway signage could reduce the time, effort, frustration, and expense for communities. Approaching highway signage as a state-wide effort rather than individually eliminates the need for each community to work its way through unfamiliar MDT regulations. Approaching MDT collectively, with MTOT as a facilitator, will also focus MDT's assistance, will add weight to the request, and will foster ongoing inter-agency collaboration.

Because signs are expensive to design, construct, and install, potential cost savings through coordinated design and production of signs should be fully explored. The collective approach also eliminates the need for each community to “re-invent the wheel” in designing its signs, saving time and effort.

Collective highway signage also provides consistency, which offers benefits for the visitor and for Montana tourism. Firstly, like signage for historic sites or “logo signs”, having community entry signs with a consistent look helps visitors to identify the information provided. Secondly, wayfinding is part of the visitor experience and, as such, should reflect the destination brand (Denton, 2009). Developing a consistent base design for town entry signs can reinforce the Montana Brand, while encouraging a level of customization will allow communities to reflect their own unique character.

Resources

The Project for Public Spaces offers one simple guide for developing and designing a signage system at http://www.pps.org/reference/signage_guide/.

Texas-based wayfinding firm fd2s offers a thoughtful commentary on wayfinding as a part of the visitor experience in its blog at <http://www.fd2s.com/2009/04/municipal-wayfinding-and-the-visitor-experience/>. Florida based communications firm, Axia Creative, provides a comprehensive look at the elements of a wayfinding system, discusses maintenance of the system, and covers other topics in its blog at <http://axiac.com/axiablog/>.

Examples of communities that have used existing surfaces to improve wayfinding without adding clutter:

- » Victoria, British Columbia, wrapped city maps on utility boxes <http://www.canadiandesignresource.ca/officialgallery/graphics/city-maps/>
- » The town of Matthews, NC, plans to use outdoor wall murals as part of an integrated wayfinding system (see http://matthewsnc.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=RclfJyX4_xc%3D&tabid=301) as well as a public art element. For some technical information on the durability of exterior murals see <http://www.findamuralist.com/blog/exterior-mural-paints-how-to-cope-with-fading-colors>.

2.4. Improve the curb appeal of towns

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product development, and builds respect for the tourism industry in Montana.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions

- » Publicize curb appeal projects within the Montana tourism industry to encourage more projects and to build respect for tourism and its benefits.
- » Provide financial and technical assistance to tourism-related projects that fit the guidelines of MTOT's grants and assistance programs.

CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Unite the local tourism (and general) community to lead and support curb appeal improvements.
- » Identify ways to beautify the town, evaluate the resources needed for each, prioritize them, and implement them.
- » Start with small, easily achievable improvements to build momentum.
- » Enlist the support and participation of private sector partners, civic groups, and other entities to provide resources and expertise.
- » Link curb appeal improvement efforts to existing local events, such as festivals, fairs, or parades. Have the primary community work session just prior to these events, so that the improvements can be noticed and celebrated by the community.
- » Acknowledge curb appeal improvements made by individual businesses and organizations.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Carry out projects to improve the curb appeal of your property. Ensure that any improvement efforts you might propose comply with city/county codes and obtain approval from all relevant government agencies.
- » Organize the owners of adjacent properties to improve the curb appeal of the block.
- » Volunteer to "adopt" a street, a local park, or other area, taking responsibility for cleaning up, maintaining physical structures, or otherwise improving its curb appeal.
- » Take the lead in organizing a community-wide curb appeal improvement effort.

Indicators of Success

- » More towns undertake curb appeal improvements.
- » Tourism businesses and organizations make curb appeal improvements and lead community curb appeal efforts.

- » More towns epitomizing the “vibrant and charming small towns” are highlighted in visitor information and marketing materials.
- » Success stories are widely covered by Montana media.

Background & Rationale

The Montana Brand promises “vibrant and charming small towns”. To better deliver on that promise, Montana should continue to improve the appeal of its small towns and expand the list of particularly charming towns that can be highlighted (see Strategic Action 2.1.) throughout the state. Delivering on this Brand promise will improve the visitor experience and visitor satisfaction, contributing to extended stays, return visits, and positive word-of-mouth.

Improving curb appeal also offers beneficial “peer effects”. Improving the facades of one block often leads to improvements on the next block. Raising the appeal of one town encourages other communities to follow the example. This effect is strengthened by shining a spotlight on the efforts – by raising industry awareness of successful efforts that are undertaken and by rewarding the effort through promotion of the most charming small towns to visitors.

In addition, media coverage of successful curb appeal projects – big and small – throughout Montana not only offers positive publicity for the town, but also builds respect in general for tourism and the benefits that it brings. Particularly where the tourism community provides the leadership and support for curb appeal improvements, the projects will demonstrate that improvements designed to attract visitors are also an amenity for local residents and improve the local quality of life.

2.5. Support local and Montana products and businesses to build economically vibrant towns

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product development and marketing efforts, and builds respect for the tourism industry in Montana.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, TAC

- » Ensure that visitor information identifies those businesses and organizations that offer local and Montana products.
- » Collaborate with programs and organizations that offer and promote Montana made and grown products to leverage those efforts.
- » Link to the Made In Montana website (www.madeinmontanausa.com) in visitor information to help visitors find retailers that carry Montana products and to encourage purchase of Montana products before, during, and after visiting the state.
- » Continue to publicize the role of tourism in expanding the market for Montana made and grown products.

Regions, CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Ensure that visitor information identifies those businesses and organizations that offer local and Montana products.
- » At any special events, maximize the availability of products and services that are made or grown locally or in Montana (see Strategic Action 2.7.).
- » Incorporate local producers, craftsmen, artists, and performers into the tourism offerings of the community/region.
- » Link to the Made In Montana website (www.madeinmontanausa.com) in visitor information to help visitors find retailers that carry Montana products and to encourage purchase of Montana products before, during, and after visiting the state.
- » Collaborate with programs and organizations that offer and promote Montana made and grown products to leverage those efforts.
- » Continue to publicize the role of tourism in expanding the market for Montana made and grown products.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Use and sell more local and Montana products.
- » Publicize the use or sale of local and Montana products. Inform MTOT and the Region/CVB so that the information can be included on official tourism websites.

Indicators of Success

- » Local and Montana products sold in more restaurants and shops.
- » Visitors can easily locate restaurants and shops that offer Montana and local products in official tourism information.
- » Local producers, craftsmen, artists, and performers are featured in visitor information, tourism offerings, and special events.
- » Local and Montana producers and growers recognize the role of tourism in expanding their market.

Background & Rationale

Agriculture continues to be the largest sector in the Montana economy and is the economic mainstay for many of the smaller towns in the state. Integrating agricultural production and tourism offers benefits for both sectors. The partnership with agriculture builds support and respect for tourism in the community and contributes to a more holistic and cooperative approach to economic development in communities.

Food is not just a commodity for visitors; it is part of the visitor experience. Local food appeals to the visitor's desire for authenticity and enhances the visitor experience by connecting consumers to the region and its culture and heritage. It also appeals to the recent "slow food" and "locavore" movements.

Greater use of local and Montana products by tourism-related businesses creates a larger market for those products. Research on "slow travel" and on "soft growth" identifies benefits including: keeping a larger share of each tourism dollar in the community and distributing the benefits of tourism more broadly within the community.

Similarly, promoting and selling products produced locally or in Montana benefits both the producers and the tourism industry. It offers another element of authenticity for the visitor while increasing the local economic benefits of tourism for the arts and artists, artisan producers and craftsmen, small manufacturing, and the local economy.

Resources

The Made in Montana website – www.madeinmontanausa.com – offers retail and wholesale sellers of Montana products. The Montana Departments of Commerce and Agriculture, together with the Montana Arts Council, sponsor an annual Made in Montana Marketplace (<http://www.madeinmontanausa.com/tradeshow.asp>) that can be used to help source "Made in Montana", "Grown in Montana", and "Native Made in Montana" products. Additional programs of the Montana Department of Agriculture can be leveraged to promote more local sourcing by the tourism industry. For example, collaboration with the Farm-to-Table program and Restaurant Rewards program could help incentivize more local and Montana sourcing by businesses.

2.6. Develop and sustain special events that tie in with local tourism assets

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product development.

Recommended Tactics

TAC, MTOT

- » Support special events through the Special Event Grant Program (SEGP).
- » Facilitate the sharing of success stories and lessons learned among communities, and foster mentoring and collaboration among event organizers.

Regions

- » Support and promote the coordination of special events within and across regions, to avoid scheduling conflicts among events.
- » Facilitate the sharing of success stories and lessons learned among event organizers.

CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Develop special events that:
 - tie in well with local and regional tourism assets and reinforce the visitor experience offered by the community and region;
 - take place outside of peak season, to reduce seasonal fluctuation in visitor numbers, to reduce competition faced by the event, and to maximize the available local lodging capacity;
 - have minimal requirements for additional infrastructure;
 - are appropriate for their setting, i.e., natural environment/icons will be protected and respected; and
 - appeal to an audience beyond the local population and can attract out-of-market visitors.
- » Evaluate the capacity of the organization and the community to support the proposed event (e.g., infrastructure needs, available volunteer labor, lodging capacity). If nearby communities will benefit from spill-overs (providing extra capacity for lodging, eating, etc.), recruit contributions from those communities (volunteers, promotion, financial support, etc.).
- » Build strong and broad community support and community participation by actively involving the business community, civic organizations, etc.
- » Maximize the economic benefits to the community:
 - when appropriate, promote visitor spending by locating the event in the downtown or other retail area and ensuring that shops will be open on the day(s) of the event;
 - ensure that ample opportunities for visitor spending at the event are available (souvenir stands, food vendors, related crafts or art, etc.); and

- maximize the local content of spending opportunities for visitors (locally produced foods and souvenirs, available local lodging and dining, local paid performers, local paid staffing, etc.).
- » Identify events of all types – regional and statewide – that could be complementary to the event and coordinate with the event(s) or attraction(s) to bolster mutual success.
- » Adopt a recycling plan for the event to improve visitor and resident satisfaction; e.g., make recycling bins widely available at the event, encourage vendors to use recyclable containers, and have a stated goal of zero waste.
- » Seek out other communities and event organizers that can offer insights and/or mentoring.
- » Implement a survey (e.g., ITRR’s “survey in a box”) or other valid method to gauge event satisfaction and economic impact on the community (e.g. survey local businesses regarding changes in product turnover, additional staffing, increased receipts,).
- » Share success stories and lessons learned.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Support the success of the event, e.g. through extended hours, or event promotion.
- » Help maximize the local economic benefits of the event, e.g. by ensuring adequate inventory and staffing, increasing local products/ingredients, or adjusting hours.

Indicators of Success

- » Events tie in well with other local/regional tourism assets and complement other events in the region and state.
- » Events maximize local content to minimize “leakage” of economic benefits.
- » Events are self-sustaining and sustained over multiple years.
- » Events have broad and sustained community support.
- » The Special Event Grant Program helps establish, reinvigorate, or expand successful, self-sustaining events.
- » Scheduling conflicts among events are minimized.
- » Event surveys indicate visitor satisfaction, nonresident attendance, intent to return, or significant positive economic benefits for the community.
- » Success stories and lessons learned are shared, building an important resource for event organizers.

Background & Rationale

Special events are a recognized means for building tourism. They can generate revenue for local businesses, extend the tourism season, draw new visitors to an area, promote community pride and physical improvement of the community, and help to promote tourism in the area more broadly (O’Sullivan & Jackson, 2010).

Research has found that special events held by the most successful rural tourism destinations consistently tie in with existing local tourism attractions and assets, e.g., fishing tournaments for communities that offer outdoor recreation opportunities for visitors and historical festivals for towns that have many historic sites (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). In this way, special events complement and reinforce tourism in the community more broadly.

Events generally require several years to become established, making the Special Event Grant Program an important support mechanism.

Event tourism is highly labor intensive and, particularly in smaller communities, requires a great deal of *volunteer* work. Over time, sustaining the volunteer effort can become challenging, as noted by those involved in the highly successful Montana Folk Festival in Butte. Successful events can also overwhelm the capacity of the host community or face opposition from community members who feel overwhelmed by the influx of visitors (O’Sullivan & Jackson, 2010). Building a broad base of community support is, therefore, very important for the sustained success of an event.

Resources

ITRR offers a “Survey in a Box” service for the collection and analysis of *local* survey data. Examples of case studies that have conducted using this service can be found at http://www.itrr.umt.edu/reports_casestudies.html.

The online “events calculator” provided by the South Dakota Department of Tourism provides useful insights into what factors determine the economic impact of special events. It is available at <http://www.sdvisit.com/tools/research/eventscalculator/index.asp>

2.7. Expand tourism seasons through local coordination

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product development and marketing efforts, and builds respect for the tourism industry in Montana.

Recommended Tactics

Regions, CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Collaborate to identify clear seasonal boundaries based upon availability of local tourism assets and historical tourism flows.
- » Collectively identify tourism assets and/or niche markets that could be strengthened or utilized more extensively to extend the existing season(s).
- » Assess the feasibility, individually and collectively, of extending the opening of amenities to match extended tourism seasons.
- » Coordinate seasonal opening and closing of amenities, matching the availability of tourism assets as closely as possible and ensuring that visitors will have access to all necessary amenities.
- » Publicize local economic gains derived from the extended or consolidated season(s).

Businesses & Organizations

- » Participate in local efforts to coordinate seasonal openings and closings.

Indicators of Success

- » Businesses and organizations in a community have shared expectations regarding the start and end of tourism season(s), supporting reliable expectations that all necessary amenities will be available for their visitors.
- » Income generating seasons are stretched to the fullest extent, within staffing and management constraints.

Background & Rationale

Tourism in Montana is, fundamentally, a seasonal industry. This seasonality poses many challenges for tourism-related businesses and organizations, particularly in regard to staffing and financial viability. The financial challenges of seasonality can be mitigated by extending the stronger season(s). Many stakeholders in community sessions indicated that the fall season (September-October) has grown in recent years or holds potential for growth. Some indicated that the spring season, though more challenging, offers some potential for niche market growth (e.g. wildlife viewing).

The full potential of peak and shoulder seasons is not realized in some cases due to the lack of coordination among the local providers of tourism products and services. Dates of opening and closing are not coordinated and in some cases are not predictable. By coordinating the availability of attractions and amenities, visitors could be assured of access to all the components of a good visitor experience. Visitors will not arrive at an open attraction to find no services in town or book lodging only to find that dining is not sufficiently available.

Better coordination provides predictability for businesses and organizations, allowing them to market to visitors with confidence that the complementary products and services will be available. It significantly reduces the risk of being unable to deliver a good visitor experience due to circumstances beyond their control. Similarly, it benefits the competitiveness of the destination by reducing poor visitor experiences and negative word-of-mouth.

A coordinated approach may also allow the destination as a whole to extend its season, consolidating the recognized potential of the spring and fall seasons.

Extending existing seasons to tap this potential, however, is often constrained by staffing difficulties, as seasonal staffing often draws upon a student population that cannot extend into the spring or fall. Other sources of staffing – such as international workers – pose their own difficulties, including additional administrative burdens for hiring or language difficulties. Managerial constraints also exist, in that some operators prefer a shorter season and will be unwilling to extend their operations. These structural problems must be considered when determining the feasible length of the operating season.

2.8. Address the short- to long-term effects of the Bakken oil boom for tourism

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product development and marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, Regions, CVBs Communities, Tribes, Businesses & Organizations

- » Address the short term accommodations shortages by collaborating to establish a system to help non-resident visitors locate available lodging.
- » Work collaboratively to ensure that tourism-related concerns are considered in the Montana Department of Transportation's (MDT) plans to address the impact of Bakken on transportation infrastructure. Work closely with MDT and ensure that tourism stakeholders are widely aware of MDT reports and information.
- » Collaborate to tap the potential tourism markets that exist in the population attached to the Bakken development by (i) conducting research to understand several segments of that potential market; (ii) packaging local tourism assets into products tailored to these groups; and (iii) devising targeted marketing for promising segments in North Dakota.
- » Where ever possible, highlight the continuing small town nature of affected towns. Promote eastern Montana towns as oases from the oil patch.

Regions, CVBs, Communities, Tribes, Businesses & Organizations

- » Participate in local economic development and growth management discussions and planning to preserve and enhance the charm and vibrancy of affected towns. Offer well-coordinated proposals for building a diversified economic base including tourism, based upon solid research.

Indicators of Success

- » Tourism entities collaborate to develop an immediate solution to the short-term accommodations shortage.
- » Affected communities, businesses, and organizations are well informed regarding Bakken-related transportation impacts and the responses of MDT.
- » Communities, businesses, and organizations tap the Bakken-related populations as a tourism market.
- » Tourism entities participate actively and are a positive force in efforts to harness the economic boom to drive diversified economic development – including sustainable tourism – and to support charming and vibrant towns through the oil cycle.

Background, Rationale & Resources

Community sessions held throughout eastern Montana made clear the level of concern among tourism industry stakeholders regarding the impacts of the Bakken oilfield. Concerns centered upon:

- » The current lack of availability of accommodations for visitors;

- » A perception that visitors are avoiding northeastern Montana as a tourism corridor due to the impacts of the Bakken;
- » Concern that a boom-and-bust cycle will leave affected towns neither vibrant nor charming in the medium- to long-term; and
- » The increased truck traffic making travel more dangerous.

At the same time, stakeholders recognize the potential benefits that the tourism community could reap from the population growth and increase in business travel related to the Bakken oil patch.

Accommodations Shortage and Negative Perceptions

Stakeholders expressed concern that alternate travel routes will become established due to current accommodations shortages, making it very difficult to win travelers back in the future. This raises a long term concern that local economies will become less diversified as tourism and other industries are squeezed out by oil development, leading to economic devastation when the oil cycle goes “bust”.

Reducing uncertainty regarding accommodations will reduce the level of “risk” perceived by travelers and help counter perceptions that the region should be avoided by visitors. Using online or phone-based resources, travelers should be able to locate lodgings 24/7/365 to prevent situations where visitors feel “stranded”. MTOT’s travel counselors, online booking sites, and other existing resources could be examined for their potential to serve this need. Alternatively, eastern Montana hoteliers themselves might develop a simple system for referring travelers to one another when they have no vacancies. Such a system should be publicized in the state-wide tourism sector and in visitor information to maximize the risk-reduction effect it offers. MTOT and Region websites may also wish to highlight lodging facilities that cater specifically or exclusively to travelers (as opposed to residents).

Addressing the situation directly and with a positive perspective – e.g., “Eastern Montana’s economy is booming!...But we’ll make sure you don’t get lost in the bustle.” – will likewise reduce perceived risk and negative perceptions that may exist. Highlighting the number of new lodgings being built will underscore the short-term nature of the problem.

Negative perceptions of communities close to the Bakken can be countered with tourism marketing and promotion that emphasizes the continued small town culture and presents the established communities of eastern Montana as oases from the oil patch in North Dakota.

Transportation Issues

Regions, CVBs, and communities should make themselves aware of relevant MDT information and resources. MDT has contracted a study of the transportation impact of the Bakken development, which is in progress (see <http://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/pave/oil.shtml>). MDT has also developed “Montana Transportation and Land Use Resources for Growing Communities”, an online toolkit to help with transportation planning (see <http://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/toolkit/default.shtml>).

Potential Tourism Markets

The population increases associated with the Bakken development offer a number of potential tourism markets, such as:

- » business travelers who might wish to include leisure and recreation activities in their trip, or business hosts who might wish to entertain their business guests by engaging them in local tourism activities;
- » workers who wish to fill time off (often long stretches, as workers frequently work 15 days on and 15 off, for example);
- » workers who wish to recreate with their visiting family members; and
- » workers' (resident) families who wish to enjoy tourism or recreation activities.

Understanding the potential tourism market and developing suitable tourism products and targeted marketing could help communities to reap short- and long-term benefits from the oil development. Product development can be as simple as developing suggested itineraries for weekend (or longer) trips or developing and promoting packages of accommodations and attractions for Bakken personnel.

Balanced Economic Development

Eastern Montana stakeholders have expressed concerns about what is known as a “resource curse” – a boom in natural resource extraction causes other economic sectors to be neglected, slowing economic growth and development. Research has found that the best means for mitigating the boom-bust cycle of oil extraction and avoiding the “resource curse” include (i) using tax revenues from the resource boom to support a diversified economic base, (ii) ensuring a broad distribution of benefits through public policy, and (iii) coordinating local and regional efforts to manage and moderate boom and bust changes.

The Bakken field is currently in its “development” stage. When the field reaches its “production” stage in 15-20 years, employment is expected to decrease by 90% (Seifert, c.2011), although the “fracking” process may generate some additional continuing employment. A large drop in employment would be expected to cause economic contraction, making development of a diversified economic base over the next two decades an important buffer against the boom-and-bust cycle.

The tourism stakeholders can contribute to building a diversified local economy by exploiting current opportunities, participating actively in local economic planning, and building support (respect) for tourism as a viable and desirable contributor to the local economy. Tourism stakeholders should advocate for policies that ensure development of a balanced economic base, using sound research to support their concerns and proposals.

As community members, tourism stakeholders should inform themselves of the economic cycle of oil production and the economic risks involved in natural resource windfalls. Useful resources include:

- » “Community Responses to Energy Development”, the Fall 2012 issue of the *Montana Policy Review*, published by the Local Government Center of the Montana State University Extension, available at <http://www.msulocalgov.org/publications/MTPolicyReview-Fall2012-WEB.pdf>;
- » “Benefitting from Unconventional Oil: State Fiscal Policy is Unprepared for the Heightened

Community Impacts of Unconventional Oil Plays”, a research paper published by Headwaters Economics (of Bozeman) and Stanford University, and available online at <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/ccv/documents/benefiting-from-unconventional-oil>;

- » “A Basic Analysis of the Bakken Oil Boom: Precautions and Planning”, written by Laura Siefert of the University of Minnesota, and available at http://www.ndoil.org/image/cache/Bakken_Precautions_and_Planning_-_Seifert.pdf; and
- » North Dakota State University’s Center for Community Vitality. Its “Oil and Gas Resources” website, at <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/ccv/oil-and-gas-resources>, offers materials for communities seeking to manage growth, benefits, and problems related to the oil boom in North Dakota, much of which is applicable to Montana towns.