



A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR GROWING TOURISM IN PUTNAM COUNTY, FLORIDA

YOUR SECRET SPOT | 8:20 A.M.

2026

PALATKA | WELAKA | INTERLACHEN | CRESCENT CITY | POMONA PARK

OLD FLORIDA'S INLAND ESCAPE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dear Community Stakeholders, Partners, and Supporters,

We are thrilled to share with you our new Strategic Plan for growing tourism in Putnam County. This past 18 months has been a time of transition for Putnam County tourism. During this time, we have tried to listen and recalibrate the direction of tourism from the ground up, starting with a new Mission Statement, and new branding that leverages our strongest tourism asset and claim to St. Johns River.

PUTNAM COUNTY TOURISM MISSION STATEMENT

To drive economic revenue for all of Putnam County as a must-visit 'Old Florida' destination.

This Mission sets the direction and course for how we serve Putnam County.

Our strategic plan that follows, included vast amounts of qualitative and quantitative research data. Most importantly we heard from our visitors and input from Putnam County community stakeholders like you.

At the heart of our new strategic plan are five big priorities:

- Building a strong destination brand around Putnam County's St. Johns River and its wonderful communities.
- Building a community culture of hospitality through partnerships, education and leadership.
- Building experiences that leverage our unique assets and expand the enjoyment for visitors and residents.
- Growing the tourism economy for Putnam County through marketing efforts that attract outside guests and keep them coming back.

Tourism already delivers big results here, driving an economic impact of over \$91 million! But with smart investment, meaningful storytelling, and aligned vision, we have the power to grow this impact, attracting visitors year-round, celebrating what makes our communities unique, and reinvesting in the places that matter most.

This plan is not carved in tablets. It's a living document to guide our work, measure our progress, and inspire new ideas. With your continued partnership, we will ensure Putnam County, the St. Johns River, is not only a place people visit, but a place people fall in love with, come back to, invest in, and tell their friends about.

Thank you for believing in the power of tourism and the future of our destination.

Leota Wilkinson, Chair,
Putnam County Board of County Commissioners

Benjie Bates, Chair,
Putnam County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors

BACKGROUND

Putnam County's tourism story is deeply connected to the waters, landscapes, and authentic character of Florida's historic interior. Anchored by the iconic St. Johns River, the county has long welcomed visitors seeking world-class bass fishing, scenic recreation, small-town charm, and a slower pace rooted in "Old Florida" experiences. Today, tourism efforts are led through St. Johns River Tourism in association with the [Putnam County Chamber of Commerce](#), creating a more coordinated focus on growing the visitor economy while supporting the communities and businesses that make Putnam County unique.

Visitors are drawn to destinations such as Ravine Gardens State Park, the St. Johns River, local conservation lands, springs, trails, and recreation areas that showcase the county's natural beauty and outdoor lifestyle. Communities including Palatka, Crescent City, Interlachen, Pomona Park, Melrose and Welaka each contribute to the visitor experience through authentic hospitality, local dining, fishing culture, river and waterway access, and popular events such as the Blue Crab Festival, Florida Azalea Festival, and Catfish Festival. Together, these assets create a destination experience centered around outdoor recreation, heritage, and the enduring character of inland Florida.

This Strategic Plan serves to build on that momentum by identifying clear priorities, organizing strategic goals, and outlining actionable steps to guide tourism marketing and destination development over the next three to five years. The planning process included stakeholder interviews, tourism assessments, visitor research, and collaboration with local partners and community leaders to help shape a roadmap that strengthens Putnam County's competitiveness while supporting smart, sustainable tourism growth.



THE ROLE OF PUTNAM COUNTY TOURISM

DESTINATION LEADERSHIP

Bring partners together under a shared vision and destination strategy.



DESTINATION MARKETING

Be the voice for inspiring visitors to come to Putnam County.



DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

Positively influence how Putnam County can always be appealing to visitors and support sustainable development.



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Putnam County Tourism is seeking a strategic plan that will provide a roadmap to help maintain, enhance, and inspire Putnam County's competitive positioning relative to the destination's markets. The plan needs to establish clear goals and objectives as they relate to the mission of the office, which is - to drive economic revenue for all of Putnam County as a must-visit 'Old Florida' destination.

PURPOSE

Putnam County Tourism commissioned a comprehensive research initiative to guide the creation of a 5-year strategic plan aimed at enhancing the county's competitive positioning, strengthening destination awareness, and increasing visitor stays and spending. Combined, these studies provide a comprehensive view of the county's tourism economy from both the visitor and business perspectives.

WORK COMPLETED

The research process included both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a holistic view of Putnam County's tourism landscape:

- Inventory & Asset Research – Comprehensive review of attractions, amenities, and tourism infrastructure.
- Stakeholder input: 27 one-on-one interviews with local businesses and elected officials.
- Stakeholder input: 2 focus groups (7 total people).
- Outsider Perception Study 320 surveys completed (online).
- Lodging Survey (18 participants)
- Restaurant, Retail, and Attraction Survey (17 participants)
- Digital audit of websites, social media, search and reviews.
- SWOT Analysis – Identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. The St. Johns River is Putnam County's Defining Tourism Asset

- The St. Johns River consistently emerged as the county's strongest tourism asset, most recognizable image, and primary brand driver.
- It fuels awareness, visitation, overnight stays, and tourism spending.
- Major bass fishing tournaments are the single largest driver of overnight visitation and tourism revenue.
- The "St. Johns River" name carries significantly stronger tourism appeal than "Putnam County."

2. "Old Florida" is a Powerful and Differentiating Position

- Visitors and stakeholders consistently describe Putnam County as:
 - Authentic
 - Nature-rich
 - Peaceful
 - Historic
 - Slow-paced
- The destination's small towns, fish camps, historic districts, state parks, and natural landscapes create an increasingly rare "Old Florida" experience.



3. Tourism Potential Exceeds Current Performance

- Stakeholders believe tourism is not yet living up to its potential.
- Tourism remains heavily dependent on fishing tournaments, festivals, and special events.
- The county lacks a unified tourism identity and clear destination story.
- Assets exist, but they are not being packaged, promoted, or connected effectively.

4. Most Visitors Pass Through Rather Than Stay

- Nearly three-quarters of surveyed travelers indicated Putnam County was not their final destination.
- Most visits last less than half a day.
- Visiting friends/family and simply passing through are the leading reasons for visitation.
- Converting pass-through traffic into overnight stays represents one of the county's largest opportunities.



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

5. Downtown Palatka is the Key Growth Opportunity

- Palatka is the most recognized community in the county.
- It serves as the primary visitor hub for dining, shopping, riverfront experiences, and events.
- However, vacant buildings, blight, limited retail, and inconsistent activity reduce its tourism impact.
- Stakeholders see downtown revitalization as critical to increasing overnight visitation and visitor spending.

6. Lack of Lodging is the Largest Barrier to Growth

- Insufficient lodging capacity limits:
 - Overnight visitation
 - Group travel
 - Event growth
 - Economic impact
- Stakeholders specifically identified demand for:
 - Riverfront lodging
 - Downtown lodging
 - Camping and glamping
 - Nature-based accommodations
- More beds directly translate into more visitor spending.

7. Visitor Experiences Exceed Expectations

- Visitors generally rate their actual experience more positively than their pre-visit perception.
- Scenic beauty and outdoor recreation received the highest performance ratings.
- When perceptions changed after visiting, they overwhelmingly changed for the better.



8. Outdoor Recreation is a Strong Expansion Opportunity

- Beyond fishing, respondents identified strong opportunities in:
 - Kayaking
 - Paddling
 - Birding
 - Hiking
 - Biking
 - Ecotourism
- Putnam County possesses the assets but has not fully activated or packaged them into visitor experiences.



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

9. Tourism is Economically Important to Local Businesses

- Tourism is considered essential to many restaurants, retailers, and attractions.
- Roughly one-third of customers at participating businesses come from outside the county.
- Many businesses reported they could not survive without visitor spending.
- Tourism activity is heavily concentrated on weekends and in fall/winter seasons.

10. Marketing and Tourism Organization Awareness Need Improvement

- The tourism organization lacks strong visibility and understanding among stakeholders.
- Confusion exists between the roles of tourism and the Chamber.
- Digital presence, search visibility, storytelling, and social media engagement lag behind competing destinations.
- Research strongly supports building a distinct tourism identity and stronger destination marketing effort.

See the appendix for executive summaries.



SWOT ANALYSIS



STRENGTHS

- Bass fishing reputation – destination
- St. Johns name + notoriety
- Early steam momentum into downtown Palatka
 - hotels
 - restaurants
 - riverfront
 - historic bones
- Splattering of well-known, popular local dining
 - Corky Bells
 - 3 Bananas
 - Angels Dining Car (oldest Diner in FL)
 - The Fillin' Station
- Strong volume of fish camp destinations (Renegade's and Crescent Fish Camp)
- Industry fills hotel rooms
- Beautiful and plenty of outdoors:
 - State Forests, Conservation Lands & Trails: Florida Trail, Cross Florida Greenway, Rice Creek Conservation Area
 - St. Johns River
 - Ravine Gardens State Park
 - Dunns Creek State Park
 - Ocala National Forest
- Obtainable, ownable claim to **St. Johns River**
- A few marquee events in the County: Blue Crab Festival (<https://www.palatkablu crab.com/>) + Florida Azalea Festival; Crescent City Catfish Festival
- A few strong marketers attractions
 - God's Country Outfitters – Hog Waller – Renegade's – Visit Palatka

WEAKNESSES

- Few hotels & lodging
- Downtown Palatka entertainment / dining / shopping vacancies
- Downtowns worn look in areas: Crescent City / Interlachen / Palatka (in places) not visually appealing
- Past negative perception of Putnam tourism organization
- Lack of outdoor access and amenities
 - Few rental opportunities (paddle or boats)
 - access to federal lands / forests
- Not a lot of food options – shopping options
- Very limited meeting space
- Not a strong tourism culture
 - knowledge / respect
 - not strong collaborative tourism partnerships
- Negative Palatka reputation
 - needs change / PR = "pitch story"
- Most visitors are drive-through / day-trippers
- Confusion on role of tourism and how it's different from Chamber activities-functions.



SWOT ANALYSIS

OPPORTUNITIES

- Visit Palatka passion for promoting tourism and building community economy
- Interest in creating tourism seems to be building among stakeholders
- Fish camp off-season leaves availability
- High population within 2 hours in all directions
- Florida is cemented as a beach destination
- Floridians (and Southern Georgia markets) desire more than beaches
- Ecotourism product-experience seems a good fit for Putnam and growing popularity
- As great as the river-water is for Putnam County, it could be leveraged much more.



THREATS

- Environmental (eco) issues could happen and hurt fishing
- Smaller communities are at high risk of distressed deterioration beyond quick fixes

STRATEGIC GOALS

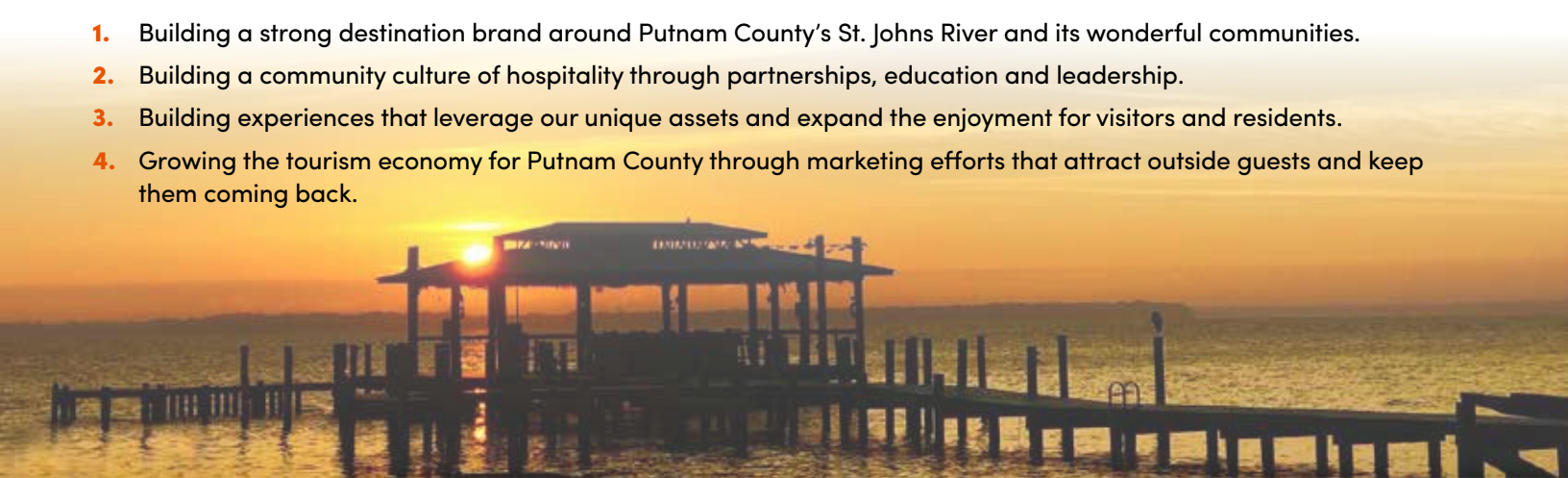
Ultimately, the goal of tourism is to create an economic stimulant for the community in direct visitor spending. Specific measurable goals for this plan are:

- Increase visitor spending by XX% in three years, as reported by the state.
- Maintain stakeholder/community support above XX% through stakeholder participation measurements.

KEY INITIATIVES

Listed below are the key initiatives to help achieve the strategic goals:

1. Building a strong destination brand around Putnam County's St. Johns River and its wonderful communities.
2. Building a community culture of hospitality through partnerships, education and leadership.
3. Building experiences that leverage our unique assets and expand the enjoyment for visitors and residents.
4. Growing the tourism economy for Putnam County through marketing efforts that attract outside guests and keep them coming back.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

Building a strong destination brand around Putnam County's St. Johns River and its wonderful communities.

1.1 Brand Integration

Integrating Tourism Branding Into Your Foundation

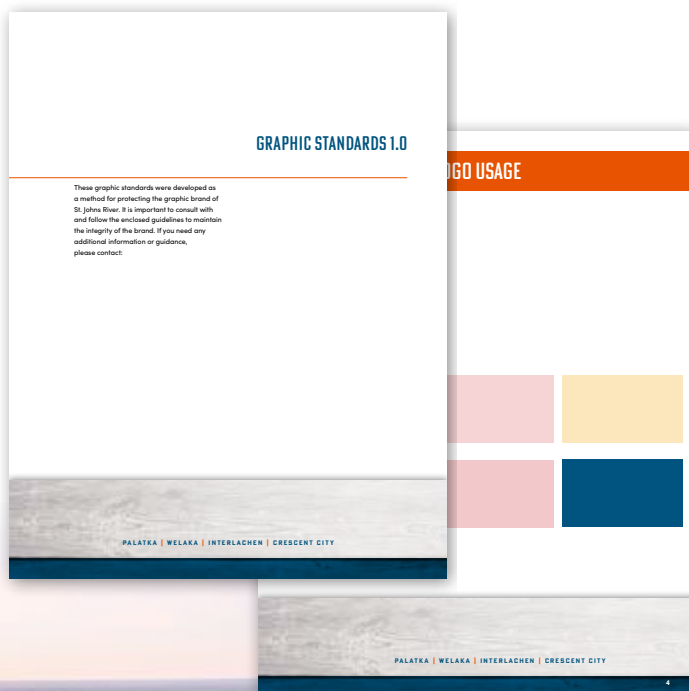
Implementation of the branding into St. Johns River Tourism communication will require a lot of effort but don't let it seem overwhelming. It doesn't have to be. Take one step at a time and follow the direction below.

Think about branding as a Brand Voice

St. Johns River Tourism has a voice, a specific tone. What you look like, talk about, how you present yourself – all of those things should reflect your brand voice. We have developed a Brand Story for you that portrays that voice. Use this. Moving forward, apply it to your communication and presentations. This is who you are.

Use your Brand identity to create consistency and familiarity

Now that you have a logo and color scheme, everything and everyone involved in the tourism organization should follow that direction. Your brand identity is only as strong as you make it. Consistency makes a strong identity.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

Audit and organize your communication tools

Everyone has an arsenal of marketing tools. Evaluate your entire communication mix by first conducting an audit of your current efforts. Your list may look similar to the one below.

Employees	Publications	Emails	Exhibits
Newsletters	Public Affairs	Voicemails	Social Media Posts
Word of Mouth	Websites	Social Media	Sales Promotions
Business Forms	Member Experiences	Volunteer	Luncheons
Telephone	Packaging	Mailing Lists	Maps
Products	Sponsors	Presentations	Buttons/Pins
Stationery Package	Website Links	Gifts	Billboards
Public Relations	Environment	Decals/Magnets	Networking
Services	Signage	Marketing & Ads	Posters/Banners
Proposals	Facilities	Vehicles	Direct Mail

Create a checklist of communication items which need a new design or can incorporate branding. Prioritize and set goals and allocate resources to get this done. Telling the tourism story is easier when the power of the St. Johns River brand and its compelling messaging is coupled with a checklist of “Communication Touch Points.” Using the checklist above to identify all your “storytelling” channels and vehicles is a convenient way to coordinate and optimize your resources.

Once you’ve created your communications list, challenge your tourism team (maybe even your board) to identify ways the tourism branding direction can be applied. Yes, even answering the phone says something about your brand. Consider incorporating a branding story element into the way you greet others.

This can be fun and get branding into everyone’s job beyond the marketing team!



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

Embed the brand

Below are priority items that will deliver consistency vital to the brand mission (and as of this document being prepared many of them have already been completed):

- **Brand Business Cards** – Tourism business cards must reflect a singular focus on tourism brand building.
- **Brand Email Signatures** – Customize tourism's email signatures with the brand logo and the tagline.
- **Organizational building brand signage** – This is a very easy and high-profile way to seed the brand locally. Ensure all new signage includes the new brand and logo. This is a big one Tourism since your location is also the Chamber and a very visible structure. Yes, the tourism logo should be on the building as well!
- **Wrap your vehicles** – Should you choose to have a tourism vehicle, wrap it. Work with a local car dealership to secure a tourism vehicle, then wrap it in your branding.

Protect your logo (and lines) through proper legal application

Upon adopting tourism branding elements, be sure to go through the proper legal channels for protecting your intellectual property. You will want to register your logo. Securing related web addresses have proven to help in protecting copyrights.

Give a new look to the destination website and social media

The tourism website is more important than the brick-and-mortar visitor center. Give it the attention it deserves and work the branding into its voice where applicable. This is already in progress! **The launch of your new branding on your website should be the date you launch it throughout all of your marketing.**

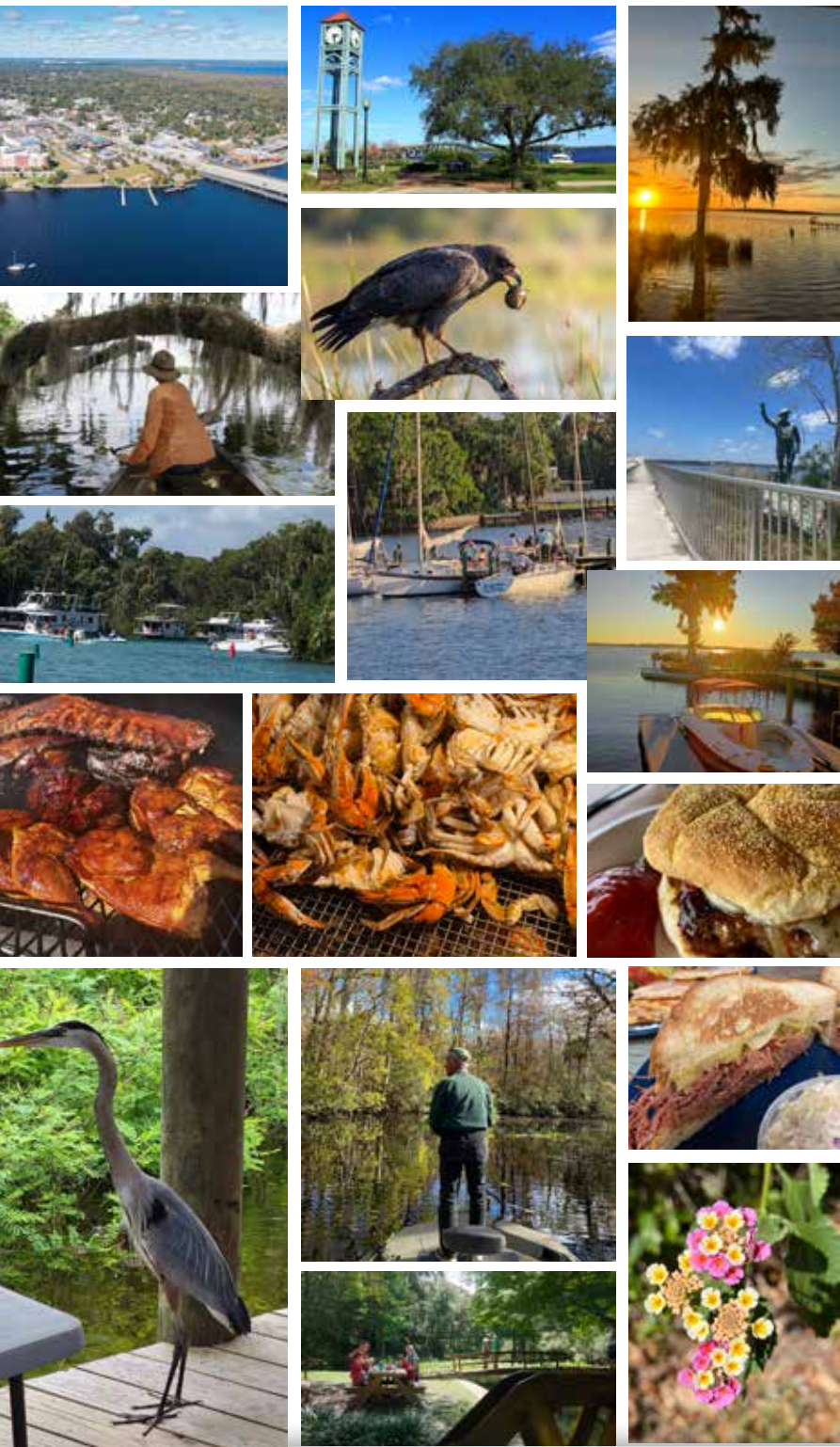
Brand Beyond the Logo - tell the branding story using the five senses

Now that you've identified where you can apply the branding messaging, you've got to decide how to do it. A reminder that a memorable destination with a strong identity delivers great experiences. One way to emphasize the experience is to ignite the five senses. Collect these senses and emphasize them in your marketing. They also could be made into great social media content such as Top 10 lists or Bingo cards.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND



SEE

"Crossing the bridge into Palatka, with the St. Johns River stretching beneath a rising or setting sun."

SOUNDS

"Birdsong, river breeze, and distant boat motors - quiet, peaceful, and unmistakably Old Florida."

FEEL

"Get on the water. Boat, paddle, fish, or float and experience Old Florida the way it was meant to be seen."

TASTE

"Old Florida comfort - fresh seafood, Southern cooking, and local farm flavors, seasoned with multicultural warmth."

SMELL-FRAGRANCE

"Fresh river air and pine - clean, open, and earthy with hints of water grass and Old Florida nature."

Staking your claim to the St. Johns River!

Remember, a big part of the tagline, Old Florida's Inland Escape, is to take claim of it. Use it purposefully in future marketing and social media efforts so it becomes a part of the voice for St. Johns River Tourism.

Look at ways to incorporate Old Florida's Inland Escape messaging in programs, trails and more.

KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

1.2 Develop Branded Content & Storytelling

It is important to be intentional about communication to other tourism “insiders” on and to those you depend on for creating a strong tourism story and experience. We suggest layering your communications to those on the inside first, then sharing with tourism and community stakeholders second.

A. First Priority Sharing – Tourism Organization: Staff, board members, volunteers local and regional partners

1) Train new employees, board members and volunteers with cultural emersion

Your ground floor personnel should be your best brand ambassadors.

- Create a Tourism 101 playbook and brand guide. Keep it simple but cover the Who/What/When/Where/Why tourism.
- Provide a modified version of your final brand presentation so they hear the brand story and understand the rationale of the branding.
- Create a new staff/board member orientation program with 1-day tour of St Johns River AND REQUIRE they take it. A first-hand experience on Old Florida’s Inland Escape!

2) Office aesthetics

Consider branding in your office aesthetics. Yes, take over the Chamber office if you need to. This allows all Chamber of Commerce guests to learn the Old Florida’s Inland Escape story.

- Add new photos of St. Johns River assets and your people within the design of the branding design.
- Display a new sign inside the Tourism office.



3) Coach the Brand to Tourism Stakeholders (this is not an unveiling)

You’ve already introduced the new branding to some invited stakeholders. But do not assume the assignment has been completed. Be tenacious with your closest stakeholders so it creates enthusiasm and understanding. The brand’s reach and potential depend on the tourism brand team to understand, embrace and articulate the brand’s implications, brand promise, internal and external applications and how to interpret them in daily activity.

- Host a half-day marketing retreat as an opportunity to focus on the brand platform, positioning statement, messaging and other opportunities.
- Make it fun. Send the participants a set of trivia questions about tourism in advance that will highlight the information discovered during the branding process.
- Provide tourism brand swag. Provide participants with brand swag, like lapel pins, t-shirts, pens, hats, or other branded merchandise. Get a jump start on building brand awareness visually through brand advocates.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

4) Create a Tourism brand image video

Storytelling is done in a number of ways, but none more compelling than when words, brand promise and an experience are brought to life on video. Videos can showcase the collaborative attitude and friendly, neighborly character that defines St. Johns River. A series of short videos (less than one minute if possible – no more than two minutes at maximum) can become the heartbeat of the brand story in the community. A strong destination video can include and engage the tourism stakeholders. Show tourism leaders from all over the county such as Three Bananas, Hog Waller, God's Country Outfitters and of course, some fish camps. The St. Johns River Tourism brand story is one direction for creating a video script, or at least getting it started.

5) Take your brand on tour

Educate others within the region about the new tourism branding. Head to Tallahassee and meet with state tourism leaders on your direction. Give them a reason to start thinking (and including) St. Johns River. Same goes for your neighbors in Jacksonville, Gainesville and Orlando.

B. Targeting the St. Johns River Community with Branding

The best way to engage the broader community is to expose them to the tourism story and provide easy ways to participate. Make your local community a target of visitor-centered advertising so they see some of your messaging. Billboards are a high profile and high frequency media to consider. Same for some digital targeting. A reminder, residents see the politics. They often are not educated in how tourism is funded and are skeptical of what they don't know. So, when criticism on branding occurs, listen to them. But don't let it deter you. You've done research that led to the insights that helped create this branding direction. When the time is right, local press release bragging about your positive results is what they care about.

C. Telling your story to visitors

We've learned a few things about St. Johns River the destination. Here are a few things to consider for growing and expanding tourism.

- High impact video for social media and website
- St. Johns River blog. The world doesn't need anything blog. But you want the content, so get creative on how to use this space for capturing AI generated searches around the St. Johns River and Old Florida get aways. Sounds like a good task for your agency.
- Influencers. For now, this is still providing high impact impressions on social media and website traffic. You're out of the ordinary experiences are great for new unique content (Hog Waller, God's Country Outfitters and fish camps).



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

1.3 PR & Media Outreach

Pitch Old Florida's Inland Escape to Travel Writers!

Nothing creates a story that sticks better than your name in headlines. This often creates evergreen content you can use over and over. Engage with your PR partner to pitch Putnam County's St. Johns River story. There are plenty of angles to create strong interests:

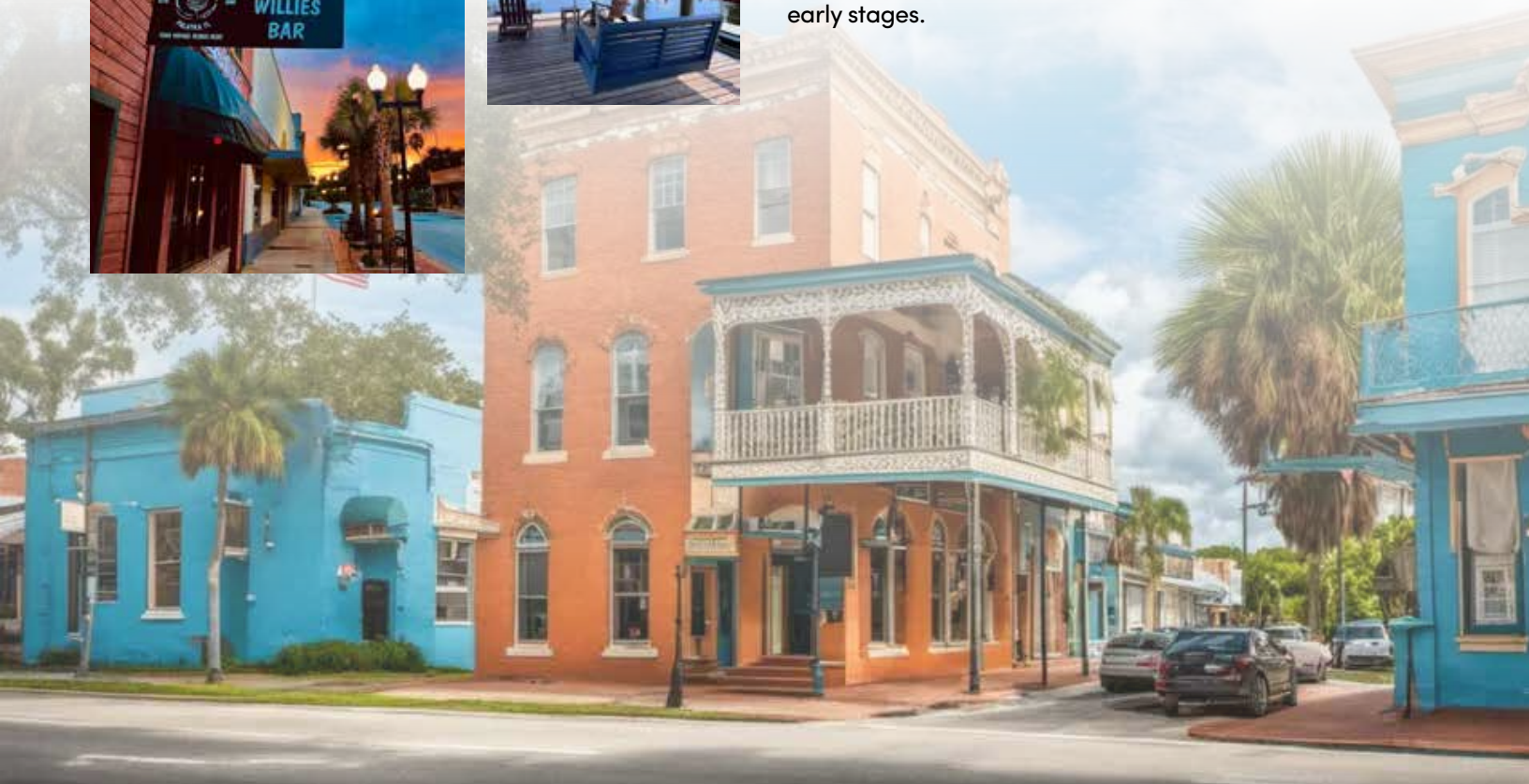
- "Old Florida Still Exists — Here's Where to Find It"
- "One of Florida's Best Outdoor Escapes Is Hidden Between Orlando and Jacksonville"
- "The Festivals Keeping Small-Town Florida Alive"
- "The Last Great Fish Camps of Florida"



1.4 Co-op Marketing Program

Create a cooperative marketing program that provides local tourism partners with affordable opportunities for participation, visibility, and shared promotion — especially for smaller businesses and organizations that may not have the resources to market independently. Structure the program in a way that fosters collaboration, strengthens industry relationships, and reinforces the idea that tourism stakeholders are working together to build a more dynamic and competitive destination. Begin modestly and expand the program strategically over time.

A digital-first approach may offer the greatest flexibility, scalability, and ease of management during the program's early stages.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

1.5 Brand Adoption Toolkit

A strong stakeholder brand toolkit helps local partners consistently communicate the destination story while creating broader community buy-in and brand adoption.

Elements to consider for a Stakeholder Brand Toolkit

- **Brand Story & Positioning** – A concise explanation of the destination’s identity, personality, and promise. This helps stakeholders understand the “why” behind the brand and communicate it consistently.
- **Mission, Vision & Core Values** – The guiding principles and long-term direction of the tourism organization.
- **Logo Files Usage Guidelines** – Approved logos, file formats, spacing rules, color variations, and incorrect usage examples.
- **Color Palette & Typography** – Official colors and fonts used in branded materials.
- **Photography & Video Style Guide** – Examples of preferred imagery, tone, subject matter, and storytelling style.
- **Messaging Guide** – Suggested headlines, descriptions, taglines, tone of voice, and key phrases.
- **Social Media Toolkit** – Sample captions, hashtags, post templates, and tagging guidance.
- **FAQs & Destination Talking Points** – Quick-reference answers and “best of” recommendations for visitors. This helps front-line staff become better ambassadors for the destination.
- **Co-Op Marketing Program** – Information on advertising partnerships, campaign participation, or shared promotions.
- **Merchandise & Signage Guidance** – Examples of branded merchandise, storefront decals, banners, or wayfinding applications.
- **Media & PR Guidelines** – How stakeholders can coordinate story ideas, travel writer visits, and media outreach.
- **Tourism Education Section** – Basic information about the economic value of tourism and how stakeholders contribute.
- **Brand Partnership / Ambassador Program** – Information on how businesses and organizations can officially participate in the brand effort.
- **Contact & Support Information** – Tourism office contacts, submission forms, asset downloads, and collaboration requests.



KEY INITIATIVE 1

BUILD THE BRAND

1.6 Use Pole Banners and Billboards to Create a Sense of Place

Pole banners placed in your downtowns can help create a presence of St. Johns. Placed in key corridors, this offers a highly visible and cost-effective way to establish a strong sense of place and reinforce Tourism's new Old Florida's Inland Escape brand.

Banners can feature brand colors, logo elements, taglines, or even community storytelling – creating visual energy and signaling that something special is happening in this district.

Strategically placed banners:

- Define district boundaries
- Create a welcoming atmosphere
- Reinforce community pride
- Promote special events or seasonal campaigns
- Talk about the great TASTES, SIGHTS and SOUNDS of Old Florida's Inland Escape.

Over time, this consistent visual language helps residents and visitors instantly recognize they've arrived in a vibrant, branded destination.

Billboards can be viewed as unofficial "Welcome Signs" entering the county.



1.7 Capture Strong Destination Photography & Video Assets

Building a stronger tourism brand for Putnam County requires high-quality photography and video assets that visually communicate the destination's identity and experiences. Research consistently showed visitors associate Putnam County with the St. Johns River, outdoor recreation, scenic beauty, fishing culture, and authentic "Old Florida" charm. Tourism should prioritize creating a professional visual asset library that captures these experiences in a compelling and emotionally engaging way.

Priority Visual Content Areas:

- St. Johns River and waterfront experiences
- Fishing and outdoor recreation
- Ravine Gardens State Park and natural areas
- Downtown Palatka activity and riverfront scenes
- Local dining and authentic "Old Florida" experiences
- Festivals, events, and live music
- Kayaking, boating, and trails
- Fish camps, cabins, and lodging experiences
- Scenic drone footage and iconic landscapes
- Couples and families enjoying the destination

These assets should be updated regularly and used across marketing campaigns, social media, websites, public relations, stakeholder materials, and tourism recruitment efforts. Over time, a strong and recognizable visual identity can help Putnam County stand apart from more crowded and generic Florida destinations.

KEY INITIATIVE 2

BUILD A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

Building a community culture of hospitality through partnerships, education and leadership.

2.1 Create Routine Tourism Stakeholder Gatherings

Strengthen relationships and foster deeper collaboration through structured engagement, shared resources, and consistent communication with tourism partners – driving collective success and alignment across the county.



A. Create a Tourism Summit

Reintroduce a consistent, in-person gathering that brings together key tourism stakeholders, business owners, and community leaders to align around goals and celebrate progress.

- **Annual Tourism Summit:** Focus on sharing and listening. Topics might include upcoming campaigns, tourism trends, key visitor data, and new marketing or grant opportunities. Feature success stories, tourism awards, partner recognitions, and skill-building workshops.

Deliverable: Branded, well-promoted events with strong attendance meaningful networking, and cross-sector engagement.

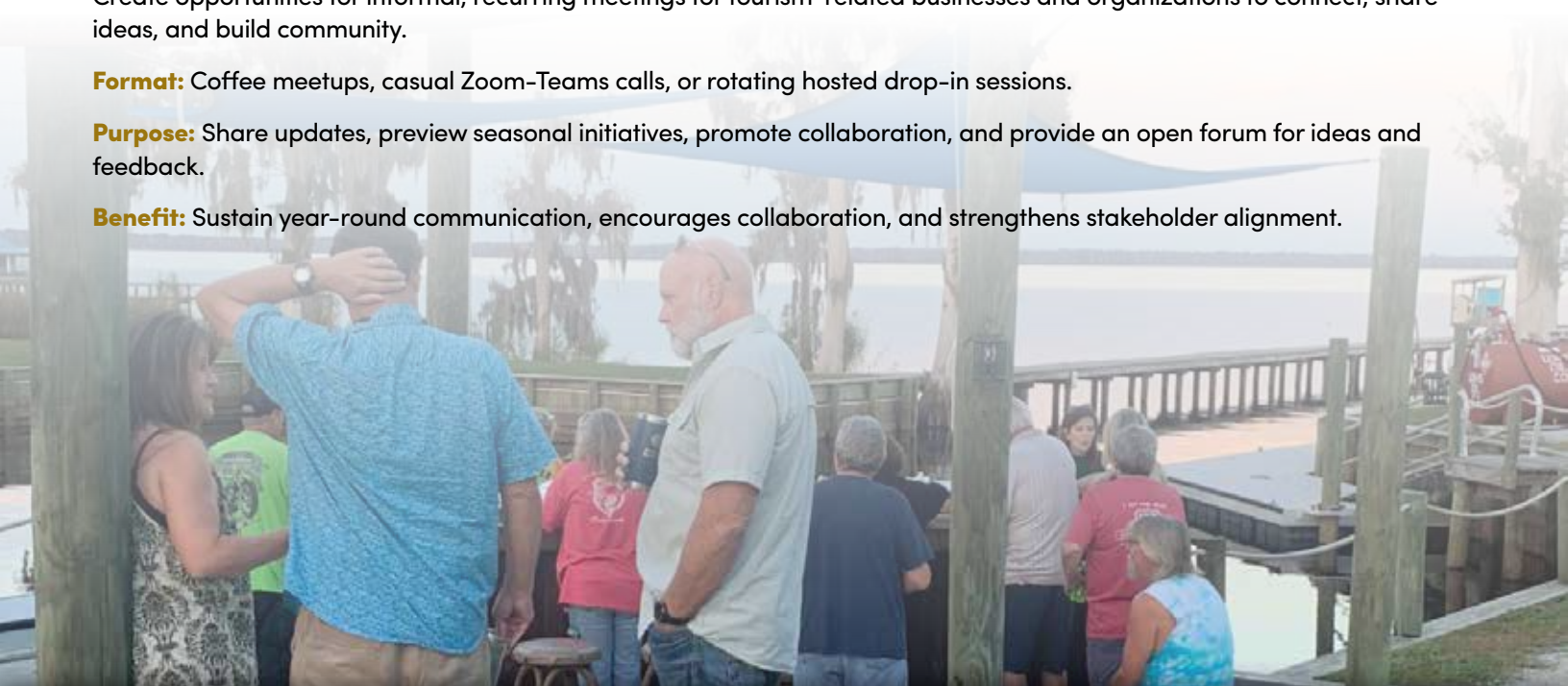
B. Host “Open Mic” Partner Meetings

Create opportunities for informal, recurring meetings for tourism-related businesses and organizations to connect, share ideas, and build community.

Format: Coffee meetups, casual Zoom-Teams calls, or rotating hosted drop-in sessions.

Purpose: Share updates, preview seasonal initiatives, promote collaboration, and provide an open forum for ideas and feedback.

Benefit: Sustain year-round communication, encourages collaboration, and strengthens stakeholder alignment.



KEY INITIATIVE 2

BUILD A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

C. Host Tourism Partner Roundtables

Facilitate in-person discussions to strengthen partnerships, feedback, and maintain county-wide representation.

- **Format:** Rotate meeting locations to spotlight different parts of the county.
- **Topics:** campaign performance, collaborative initiatives, seasonal planning (events) and upcoming tourism priorities.

This encourages open dialogue, strengthens geographic inclusivity, and gives partners a meaningful role in tourism strategy.

D. Launch a “Tourism Champions” recognition program

Celebrate outstanding partners or contributors who go above and beyond in supporting local tourism efforts.

- Present awards during National Travel & Tourism Week or at a Fall Tourism Summit.
- Possible Categories could include: Hospitality Hero, Innovative Campaign, Partnership Excellence, and Volunteer of the Year.

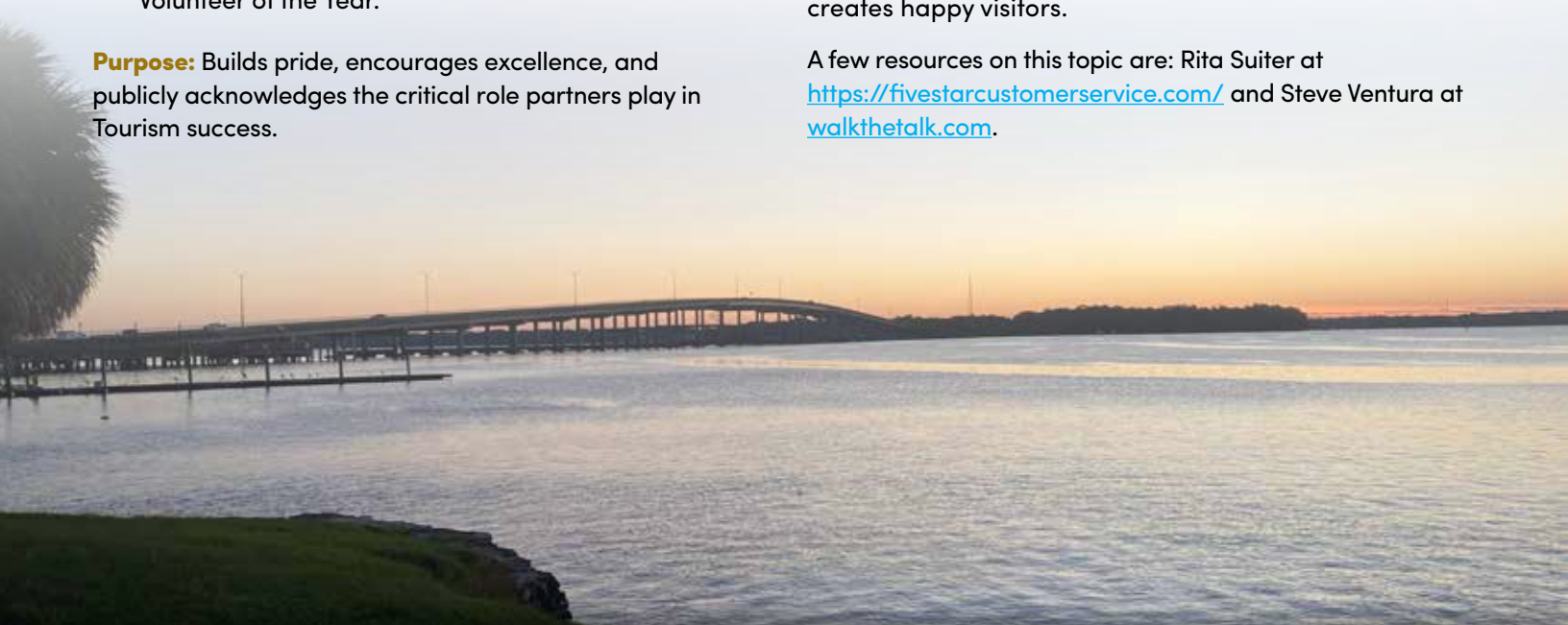
Purpose: Builds pride, encourages excellence, and publicly acknowledges the critical role partners play in Tourism success.



2.2 Develop a Hospitality Training Program for creating destination driving tourism professionals

Knowledgeable tourism professionals do not just happen. It requires training. Develop an ongoing St. Johns River Hospitality program that trains ongoing front-line workers and more. This type of program can educate on local things to do and help create smiles, which in turn creates happy visitors.

A few resources on this topic are: Rita Suiter at <https://fivestarcustomerservice.com/> and Steve Ventura at walkthetalk.com.



KEY INITIATIVE 2

BUILD A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY



2.3 Create a local tourism education campaign

A successful tourism destination is not built by marketing alone, it is built by a community that understands, values, and supports the visitor economy. Tourism should lead an ongoing tourism education and awareness campaign designed to help residents, businesses, elected officials, and stakeholders better understand the positive impact tourism has on Putnam County's economy and quality of life. This effort should regularly communicate how tourism supports local jobs, generates tax revenue, fills restaurants and lodging, drives downtown momentum, and helps sustain the places and experiences residents themselves enjoy. Just as importantly, the campaign should help create a stronger culture of hospitality and community pride by reinforcing that everyone plays a role in shaping the visitor experience and telling the story of "Old Florida's Inland Escape."

A few tactical ideas could include:

- Quarterly "Tourism Impact Reports" shared publicly highlighting visitor spending, hotel occupancy, event attendance, and economic impact.
- "Tourism Matters" social media and local newspaper campaigns spotlighting how tourism benefits local businesses and jobs.
- Hospitality workshops or ambassador training for frontline employees, volunteers, and local businesses.
- Presentations to civic groups, schools, city councils, and community organizations explaining the role of tourism in the local economy.
- A stakeholder e-newsletter sharing wins, upcoming events, visitor trends, and partnership opportunities.
- "Faces of Tourism" storytelling campaigns featuring local business owners, fish camps, restaurants, guides, and attractions impacted by tourism.
- Visible community signage or decals recognizing businesses as proud tourism partners.
- Annual tourism summits or stakeholder gatherings that celebrate progress, share data, and strengthen collaboration across Putnam County communities.



KEY INITIATIVE 2

BUILD A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

2.4 Create a Tourism Ambassador program

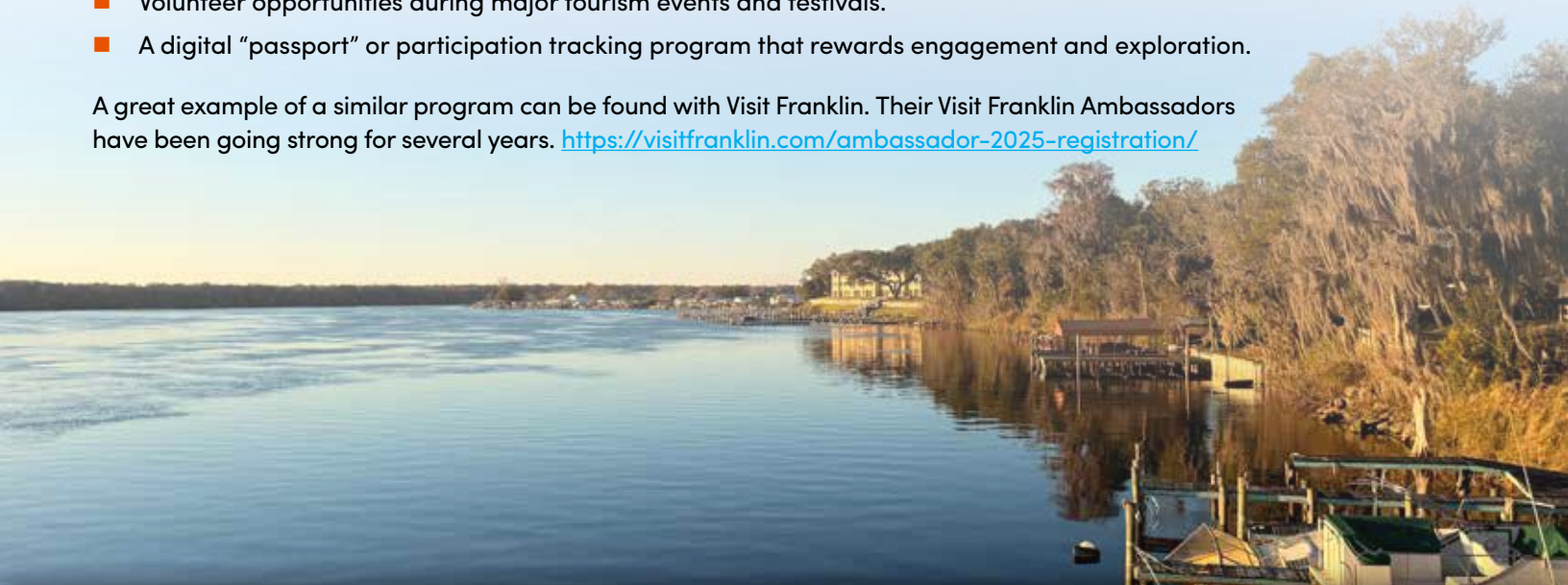
A Tourism Ambassador Program would help create a stronger connection between residents, local businesses, and the visitor experience by developing a network of passionate local “insiders” who actively engage with and promote the destination. Participants would receive firsthand exposure to the area’s attractions, restaurants, events, outdoor experiences, fish camps, and hidden gems through curated experiences and educational opportunities. The goal is to help locals better understand the tourism assets around them while building stronger community pride and a culture of hospitality throughout Putnam County.

In return, ambassadors would become informed storytellers and advocates for the destination — sharing recommendations, welcoming visitors, supporting local tourism businesses, and helping amplify the identity of Tourism and “Old Florida’s Inland Escape.” Graduates of the program could receive special recognition as official tourism ambassadors, along with occasional insider perks and exclusive experiences that keep them engaged and connected to the local tourism community.

Possible program elements could include:

- Guided “insider tours” of attractions, downtowns, fish camps, trails, and outdoor recreation areas.
- Hosted tastings and restaurant experiences featuring local dining favorites.
- Behind-the-scenes access to events, festivals, attractions, or tourism businesses.
- Ambassador badges, certificates, branded apparel, or recognition signage.
- Exclusive invitations to previews, launches, or tourism networking events.
- Periodic partner discounts or “locals perks” from participating businesses.
- Social media storytelling opportunities that encourage ambassadors to share their experiences.
- Quarterly gatherings or educational sessions to continue building tourism knowledge and community connections.
- Volunteer opportunities during major tourism events and festivals.
- A digital “passport” or participation tracking program that rewards engagement and exploration.

A great example of a similar program can be found with Visit Franklin. Their Visit Franklin Ambassadors have been going strong for several years. <https://visitfranklin.com/ambassador-2025-registration/>



KEY INITIATIVE 2

BUILD A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY

2.5 Develop ongoing tourism stakeholder communications platforms

Tourism should be intentional and consistent in how it communicates with local stakeholders, tourism partners, elected officials, and the broader community. Building a successful tourism economy requires ongoing collaboration, transparency, and education – not just marketing to visitors. Regular communication helps strengthen partnerships, build trust, reinforce the value of tourism, and ensure stakeholders feel informed, connected, and invested in the destination's growth. Establishing clear communication platforms and routines will help position tourism as the leading convener and voice for the visitor economy throughout Putnam County.

A strong stakeholder communication strategy should include a recurring e-newsletter that shares tourism updates, upcoming events, partnership opportunities, visitor trends, marketing highlights, and success stories from around the county. In addition, routine reporting should become a standard practice, helping communicate measurable tourism impact such as visitor spending, lodging performance, event attendance, website traffic, social media engagement, and economic contributions to the community. These consistent touch points not only keep tourism top-of-mind, but also help build stronger advocacy, alignment, and momentum among local leaders, businesses, and residents.

Possible communication tools and tactics could include:

- Monthly or quarterly stakeholder e-newsletters.
- Annual tourism reports and economic impact summaries.
- Tourism dashboards with simple, visual performance metrics.
- Regular presentations to city councils, chambers, civic groups, and community organizations.
- "Tourism wins" social media and PR campaigns celebrating progress and partnerships.
- Dedicated stakeholder sections on the tourism website with resources, updates, and reports.
- Routine updates highlighting upcoming marketing campaigns and visitor initiatives.



KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

Building experiences that leverage our unique assets and expand the enjoyment for visitors and residents.

3.1 Outdoor Recreation Packaging

Tourism should focus on packaging its outdoor recreation assets into marketable visitor experiences that encourage longer stays and stronger visitor spending. While Putnam County already offers exceptional natural resources, including the St. Johns River, world-class fishing, springs, trails, forests, and authentic fish camps, many of these experiences currently operate independently rather than as connected tourism products. By organizing these assets into branded itineraries, themed trails, and guided adventures, the destination can create stronger reasons for visitors to explore multiple communities and experience “Old Florida” in a more immersive way. Key opportunities include the development of branded fishing trails, paddling itineraries, eco-tour experiences, birding and wildlife adventures, river excursions, and bundled “stay and play” packages that connect lodging, dining, guides, outfitters, and attractions into easy-to-promote visitor experiences.

Possible outdoor recreation packaging initiatives could include:

- Branded St. Johns River Fishing Trail itineraries.
- Paddle trail maps with trip durations, launch points, and nearby dining/lodging.
- “Stay & Fish” or “Old Florida Adventure” travel packages.
- Eco-tour partnerships with local guides and outfitters.
- Birding, wildlife, and photography trail development.
- Guided sunset cruises or river storytelling tours.
- Spring-hopping itineraries tied to dining and overnight stays.
- Adventure passports or digital check-in challenges.
- Outdoor recreation event weekends and themed experiences.
- Enhanced visitor-facing maps, signage, and trip-planning content.
- Partnerships with fish camps to elevate and promote authentic lodging experiences.
- Multi-day itineraries connecting Palatka, Welaka, Crescent City, and Interlachen through outdoor recreation experiences.

What to do first? Pick one trail initiative to launch each year (2 if you’re feeling adventurous). Start with the easiest one to get off the ground. The secret to these types of efforts is getting participation by the locations on the trail (food, attraction, lodging, etc.)



KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

3.2 Wayfinding and Signage Plans

St. Johns River Tourism needs wayfinding signage. This can be a political hot button so it requires some sensitive discussions. Start with the Chamber and each of the municipal Mayors. Also seek grant opportunities for securing funding. Coming to the table with a funding source can help creating interest in participation.

Installing a sign or two is one thing, an actual wayfinding plan takes planning and more group input. A proper wayfinding plan across several municipalities also requires great collaboration. A county-wide signage effort does not mean any one city (i.e. Palatka) loses their individual identity. This is what a plan can accomplish.

First, look at some of the state and federal agencies for possible grants. Many are out there. Initially there appears to be grant opportunities from FDOT, and Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program (FRDAP).

A Welcome sign for those entering Putnam County (Welcome to St. Johns River and Putnam County) is a more easily managed start for a signage program.

3.3 Evaluate and create grant programs that encourage tourism product success

Strengthen the Tourism Event Support Program

Events are an important part of Putnam County's tourism economy, generating visitation, supporting local businesses, and creating reasons for visitors to experience the destination. However, tourism funding should be invested strategically to ensure that limited resources are producing measurable economic benefits and advancing the organization's mission of increasing overnight visitation.

Tourism should evolve its current event grant program into a more performance-based Tourism Event Support Program that prioritizes events capable of attracting visitors from outside the county, generating overnight stays, and producing measurable tourism-related economic impact. Funding requests should be supported by clear marketing plans, projected attendance, visitor origin data, lodging impact estimates, and post-event reporting requirements.

The program should also include stronger accountability measures to ensure tourism funds are being used for approved promotional activities and not simply subsidizing event operations. Recipients should provide documentation of marketing expenditures, examples of advertising placements, attendance results, and visitor data whenever possible.



KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

Key enhancements may include:

- Establishing funding criteria that prioritize overnight visitation and out-of-county attendance.
- Creating performance-based funding tiers tied to measurable tourism outcomes.
- Requiring event organizers to submit post-event impact reports.
- Tracking lodging usage, visitor origin markets, and attendance trends.
- Reserving larger investments for events with proven tourism performance.
- Providing coaching and technical assistance to help local events improve their tourism impact and marketing effectiveness.

By strengthening accountability and focusing investments on tourism-generating events, Tourism can maximize the return on its funding, improve decision-making, and ensure event support remains aligned with the long-term goal of growing Putnam County's visitor economy.

Consider making this line item in the budget a not-to-exceed amount, but not required to distribute if events do not qualify.

Tourism Business Development Grant Program

Tourism should establish a Tourism Business Development Grant Program that encourages new tourism-related businesses, visitor experiences, and destination-enhancing products throughout Putnam County. The program should support startups and existing businesses that create experiences capable of attracting visitors, extending stays, and strengthening the local tourism economy.

Eligible projects could include guided tours, outdoor recreation rentals, eco-tourism experiences, agri-tourism, river excursions, festivals, lodging enhancements, culinary experiences, and other visitor-focused concepts aligned with the Tourism brand.

Potential evaluation factors could include:

- Ability to attract out-of-town visitors.
- Creation of new tourism experiences.
- Economic and overnight stay impact.
- Alignment with tourism branding goals.
- Innovation and uniqueness.
- Long-term sustainability.
- Partnerships with local tourism businesses.
- Readiness for implementation.

Grant recipients should also provide follow-up reporting to help measure tourism and economic impact outcomes.

KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

3.4 Downtown Activation Support

Tourism should establish a Downtown Activation Support Program designed to help businesses in Welaka, Crescent City, Palatka, and Interlachen create stronger visitor experiences tied to tourism events, festivals, and seasonal travel opportunities. The program would encourage downtown merchants, restaurants, retailers, and small businesses to become more engaged in the visitor economy by enhancing the atmosphere, energy, and activity surrounding major events and tourism periods. The goal is to create downtown environments that feel more vibrant, welcoming, and experience-driven for both visitors and residents.

The program could provide small grants, matching funds, or support resources for businesses and organizations that develop tourism-focused activations, promotions, beautification efforts, entertainment, themed experiences, extended business hours, outdoor dining, live music, pop-up vendors, or collaborative event programming. By encouraging businesses to participate collectively around events and tourism initiatives, the program can help increase visitor spending, improve downtown energy, and strengthen the identity and appeal of each community center.

Potential support areas and evaluation factors could include:

- Event-related promotions and themed experiences.
- Outdoor dining, music, or entertainment enhancements.
- Storefront beautification and visitor-facing improvements.
- Collaborative downtown business participation.
- Extended hours during festivals and tourism events.
- Pop-up markets, artisan vendors, and local maker experiences.
- Wayfinding, signage, lighting, and pedestrian-friendly activations.
- Visitor engagement ideas that encourage longer stays and spending.
- Alignment with the St. Johns River Tourism brand and visitor audiences.
- Measurable impact on foot traffic, sales activity, and visitor experience.



KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

3.5 Visitor Amenities Experience Enhancements

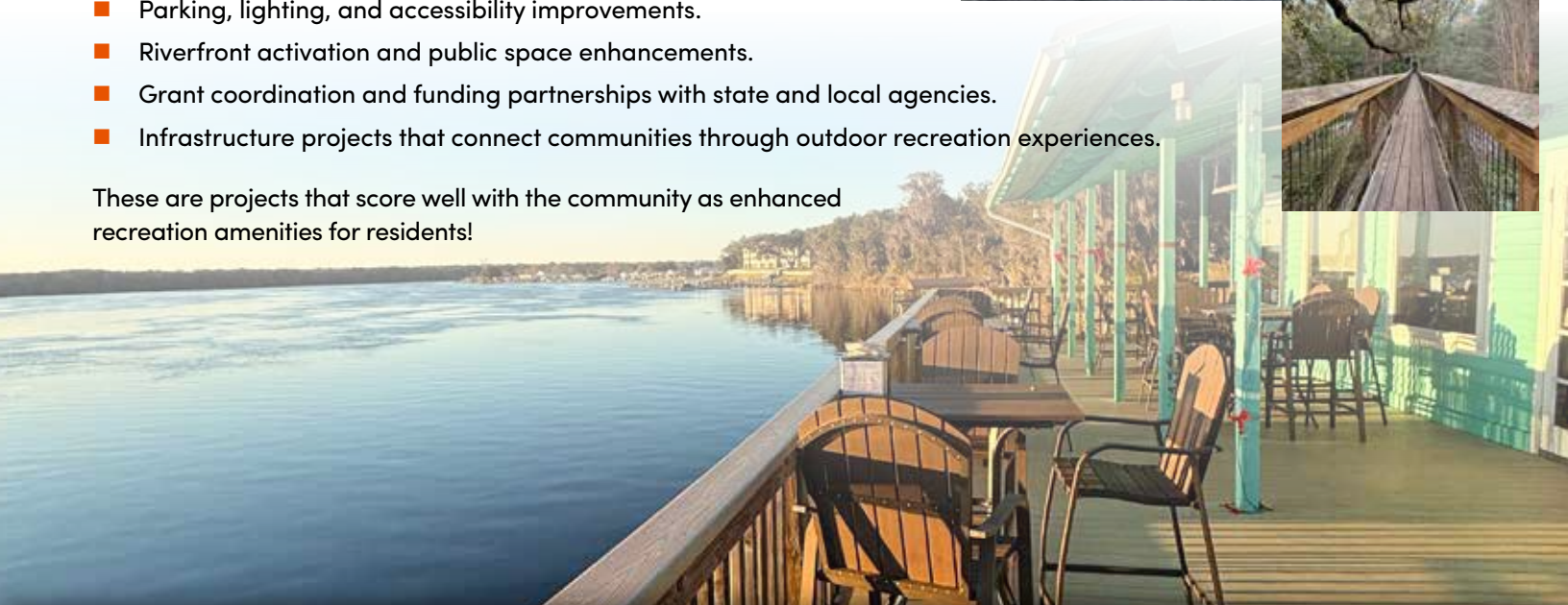
Tourism should advocate for and support the expansion of visitor-facing infrastructure that improves access, comfort, and overall outdoor recreation experiences throughout Putnam County. While the destination possesses exceptional natural assets, many areas would benefit from enhanced amenities that make experiences more accessible, visitor-friendly, and marketable to a broader audience. This effort should focus on building partnerships with local governments, state agencies, parks, conservation organizations, and grant programs to help fund and prioritize tourism-supportive infrastructure improvements that strengthen the visitor economy while also benefiting residents.

Priority projects could include expanded kayak and paddlecraft launches, boat docks, fishing piers, trailheads, restrooms, seating areas, picnic spaces, directional signage, lighting, boardwalks, rentals, parking improvements, waterfront gathering areas, and other outdoor recreation amenities that improve usability and encourage longer visitor stays. Tourism can play an important leadership role by identifying tourism infrastructure gaps, helping coordinate grant applications, supporting project advocacy, and demonstrating the economic impact these investments can create for local communities.

Potential focus areas could include:

- Kayak and canoe launch development.
- Paddlecraft and outdoor recreation rental expansion.
- Improved restrooms and visitor comfort amenities.
- Fishing docks, piers, and waterfront access improvements.
- Seating areas, picnic spaces, and gathering spots.
- Trailhead enhancements and wayfinding signage.
- Beautification and placemaking around recreation areas.
- Parking, lighting, and accessibility improvements.
- Riverfront activation and public space enhancements.
- Grant coordination and funding partnerships with state and local agencies.
- Infrastructure projects that connect communities through outdoor recreation experiences.

These are projects that score well with the community as enhanced recreation amenities for residents!



KEY INITIATIVE 3

BUILD EXPERIENCES

3.6 Creation of a local-visitor sustainable program

This is big for the tourism organizational and destination brand. Lead the development of a sustainable tourism stewardship program focused on protecting and preserving the natural assets that make Putnam County unique. As outdoor recreation and visitation continue to grow, it will be increasingly important to balance tourism promotion with responsible use of the St. Johns River, springs, trails, forests, wildlife areas, and public recreation spaces. This effort should focus on educating both residents and visitors about environmental stewardship, conservation, and respectful recreation practices while reinforcing the idea that protecting these assets is essential to the community's quality of life and long-term tourism economy.

The program should combine education, awareness, partnerships, and visible stewardship initiatives that encourage people to "Leave It Better Than You Found It." Tourism can work collaboratively with local governments, state parks, environmental groups, outfitters, guides, schools, and community organizations to promote responsible outdoor recreation and conservation-minded behaviors. The effort should also reinforce the authentic "Old Florida" identity of Putnam County by emphasizing preservation, respect for nature, and appreciation for the slower-paced outdoor lifestyle that defines the destination.

Potential program initiatives could include:

- Visitor education signage at parks, launches, trails, and recreation areas.
- "Leave No Trace" style awareness campaigns.
- River, trail, and public space clean-up events.
- Sustainable boating, fishing, and paddling education.
- Wildlife and habitat protection messaging.
- Recycling and waste reduction efforts at tourism sites and events.
- Partnerships with schools and youth organizations on stewardship initiatives.
- Volunteer ambassador or outdoor stewardship programs.
- Eco-friendly tourism business recognition programs.
- Conservation-focused storytelling and marketing campaigns.
- Collaboration with state parks, conservation agencies, and environmental organizations.
- Encouraging responsible growth and recreation practices that protect natural assets for future generations.



Do not feel the need to figure out the entire program at once. Consider launching it and growing it in stages.



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY



Growing the tourism economy for Putnam County through marketing efforts that attract outside guests and keep them coming back.

4.1a Target the “Close-to-Home Escape” Markets

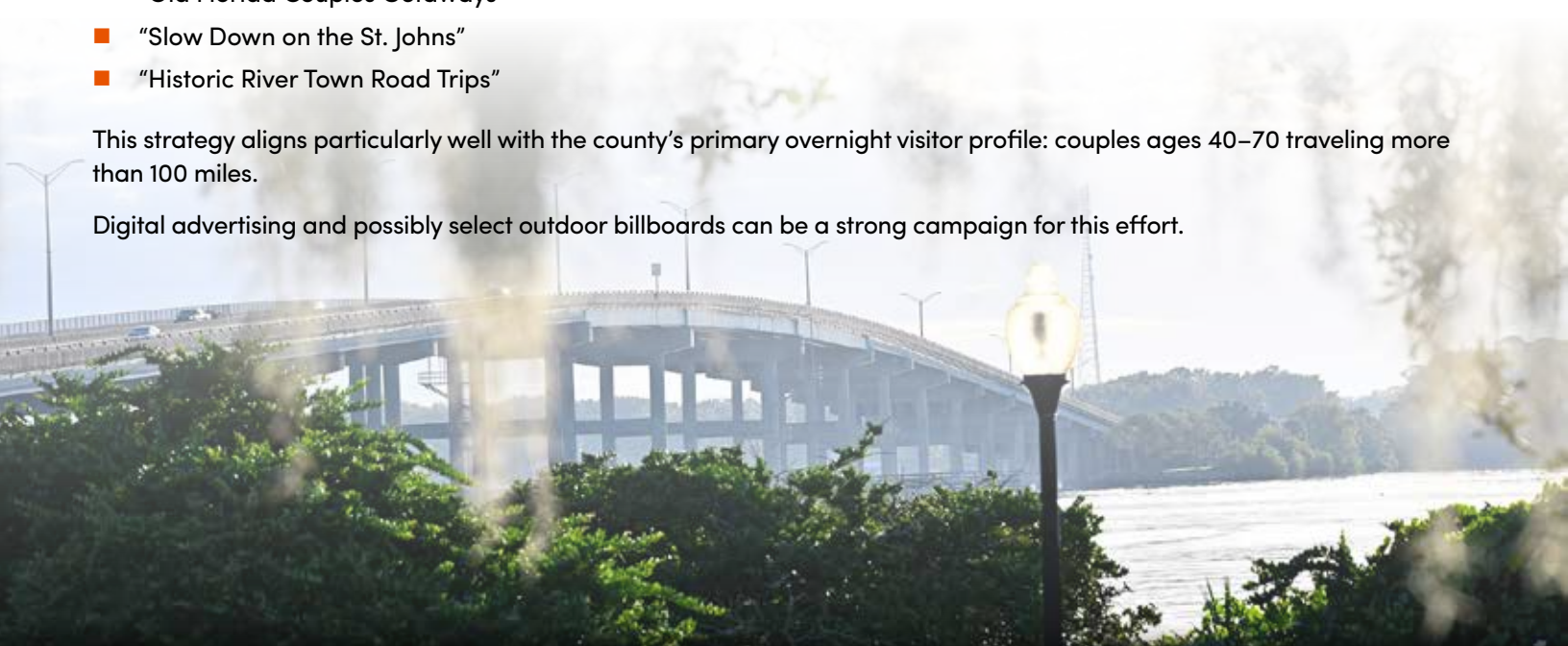
The research clearly shows Putnam County’s strongest visitor markets are Northeast Florida, Georgia, and Central Florida – especially Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Orlando, Tampa, and Atlanta. These are ideal drive markets for short overnight getaways. Marketing should position Putnam County as an easy, peaceful escape from crowded urban Florida, “Old Florida” without the stress, traffic, and commercialization. Messaging should lean heavily into the St. Johns River, scenic beauty, bass fishing, and authentic small-town charm because these are consistently the county’s strongest visitor associations.

Rather than generic destination advertising, campaigns should focus on highly packageable experiences:

- “2-Night River Escape”
- “Fishing & Fish Camp Weekends”
- “Old Florida Couples Getaways”
- “Slow Down on the St. Johns”
- “Historic River Town Road Trips”

This strategy aligns particularly well with the county’s primary overnight visitor profile: couples ages 40–70 traveling more than 100 miles.

Digital advertising and possibly select outdoor billboards can be a strong campaign for this effort.



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

4.1b Convert Pass-Through Traffic into Overnight Visitors

One of the biggest findings in the research is that Putnam County is currently more of a pass-through destination than a final destination. Approximately 73% of surveyed visitors were simply traveling through the area on the way elsewhere. This represents one of the county's greatest tourism growth opportunities.

The strategy should focus on creating reasons to stop and stay:

- Riverfront itineraries and trail systems
- Signature overnight experiences
- Event weekend packages
- Scenic byway promotions
- "Stay and Explore" campaigns tied to Palatka, Welaka, and Crescent City

Visitors already respond positively once they experience the county. In fact, nearly half of respondents said their perception improved after visiting. The challenge is not convincing people to like Putnam County, it is convincing them to stay longer.

Digital advertising and possibly select outdoor billboards can be a strong campaign for this effort.

4.1c Build More Packageable Experiences – And Consider Making Them a Trail

The strongest overnight demand generators already exist:

- Fishing tournaments
- Festivals and events
- Outdoor recreation
- Waterfront experiences
- Downtown Palatka dining and shopping
- Fish camps and resorts

However, many of these assets currently operate independently rather than as coordinated tourism products. Putnam County should work toward bundling experiences into marketable itineraries that encourage multi-night stays. Examples include:

- Fishing + lodging + dining packages
- Kayak trail weekends
- Festival overnight promotions
- "Stay two nights" lodging incentives
- Couples getaway itineraries tied to riverfront dining and local music/events
- Birding, photography, and nature-focused eco-tourism packages

The research also suggests visitors value relaxation, authenticity, and uncrowded nature experiences over high-energy attractions. Putnam County should avoid trying to compete with Florida's beach and entertainment destinations and instead double down on peaceful, nature-based, "Old Florida" overnight experiences.

BOLD goal? Announce a new trail each year for the next five years.

Support your trails-packaged experiences with dedicated focused marketing: website, social media, rack cards and advertising.



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

4.2 Make Research and Reporting an Ongoing Priority

For tourism to grow credibility, guide smart decision-making, and demonstrate return on investment, research and reporting must become an ongoing organizational function, not simply a one-time strategic planning exercise.

Priority tourism reporting can include any of the following:

PRIORITY REPORTING AREAS

Visitor Volume & Travel Trends

Regularly track:

- Visitor volume estimates
- Seasonal travel patterns
- Top origin markets
- Length of stay
- Day-trip vs. overnight visitor ratios
- Repeat visitation trends

Lodging & Occupancy Reporting

Because overnight visitation directly drives tourism revenue, lodging reporting should be a top priority. Metrics should include:

- Hotel occupancy rates
- Average Daily Rate (ADR)
- Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR)
- Campground and fish camp occupancy
- Short-term rental activity
- Event weekend lodging performance

Economic Impact Reporting

Tourism organizations increasingly must show measurable economic value. Annual and quarterly reporting should communicate:

- Visitor spending estimates
- Tourism-generated tax revenue
- Economic impact by sector
- Jobs supported by tourism
- Event-related spending
- Return on marketing investment



Digital Marketing & Campaign Performance

Tourism marketing should be continually evaluated using measurable analytics, including:

- Website traffic and visitor behavior
- Conversion tracking
- Lodging referral clicks
- Social media engagement and reach
- Video performance
- Search engine performance
- Email marketing analytics
- Paid advertising results



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

Visitor Sentiment & Perception Research

Putnam County's research showed perceptions often improve after visitation. This makes ongoing perception tracking especially valuable. Tourism should regularly monitor:

- Visitor satisfaction
- Brand perception
- Experience ratings
- Online reviews and reputation
- Resident sentiment toward tourism
- Visitor likelihood to return or recommend

This research helps identify both strengths to leverage and gaps in the visitor experience. We recommend this type of research be conducted every 2-3 years.

Event Performance Reporting

Because festivals and events are major tourism drivers, event reporting should move beyond attendance counts and focus on economic outcomes:

- Estimated overnight stays generated
- Visitor origin markets
- Lodging utilization
- Spending impact
- Event ROI
- Visitor satisfaction
- Multi-day visitation patterns

This is an opportunity to work with the events themselves, and may be a part of a larger grant application process. Proof of performance should be expected.



Outdoor Recreation & Asset Utilization

Since the county's strongest tourism assets revolve around the St. Johns River, fishing, and outdoor recreation, tourism should begin measuring:

- Boat ramp usage
- Trail counts
- Fishing tournament participation
- Kayak/paddlecraft rentals
- Park visitation
- Eco-tour participation
- River access utilization

Tracking these assets helps demonstrate the importance of outdoor recreation to the county economy and supports future grant opportunities. They will also be a little more challenging to track and may require some creativity. Any type of reporting is better than none at all.

Tourism Dashboard & Stakeholder Communication

Create a simple, recurring "Tourism Dashboard" shared with stakeholders and leadership quarterly or annually. This dashboard should visually summarize:

- Visitor trends
- Lodging performance
- Economic impact
- Campaign results
- Event performance
- Tourism development progress



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

4.3 Explore Niche Group Travel Opportunities

While Putnam County is not currently positioned to compete for large-scale convention or conference business, there is meaningful opportunity to attract smaller, experience-based group travel markets that align naturally with the county's authentic "Old Florida" identity and outdoor recreation assets. The research suggests the destination's strongest appeal centers around the St. Johns River, bass fishing, scenic beauty, outdoor recreation, and small-town charm, all of which are highly attractive to niche affinity groups seeking relaxed, memorable experiences.

Tourism should prioritize group segments that fit the destination rather than attempting to pursue traditional convention business, particularly given the county's current limitations in meeting and event space. Potential target audiences include fishing clubs and tournaments, RV and camping groups, paddling and kayaking organizations, motorcycle touring groups, eco-tour and birding groups, heritage and history tours, car clubs, church retreats, reunions, and small corporate retreats seeking peaceful outdoor settings.

Putnam County lacks some of the large meeting space and lodging assets to compete for large-scale convention business. But it can instead position itself as:

- A relaxed and authentic group getaway
- A hub for outdoor recreation gatherings
- A scenic river destination for clubs and affinity groups
- A peaceful retreat destination within driving distance of major Florida and Georgia markets

To support this effort, Tourism should work with lodging properties, fish camps, outfitters, restaurants, and community partners to create packageable group experiences that encourage overnight stays. Event weekends, fishing tournaments, paddling trails, downtown Palatka experiences, riverfront dining, and outdoor recreation itineraries all provide strong foundations for group travel promotion. Over time, continued investment in boutique gathering spaces, waterfront venues, and group-friendly lodging can further strengthen Putnam County's ability to compete for small-to-mid-sized group visitation markets.

Several group travel opportunities appear highly realistic and strategically aligned with the destination:

- Continue supporting fishing tournaments (and fishing clubs)
- RV and campground groups (i.e. vintage trailer trips)
- Motorcycle touring groups (they love rustic and authentic places)
- Kayak and paddling clubs
- Eco-tour and nature groups
- Birding and photography groups
- Car clubs and scenic driving tours
- Heritage and history motorcoach tours
- Faith-based retreats and church groups
- Small corporate retreats seeking quiet, outdoors-oriented settings
- Reunion and social gatherings
- Outdoor enthusiast groups
- Festival-centered travel packages



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

4.4 Be Active in the Recruitment of Tourism Investment

Tourism must evolve beyond traditional destination marketing and embrace a stronger role in tourism development, investment attraction, and business recruitment. The research clearly shows visitors are drawn to the county's outdoor recreation, "Old Florida" character, scenic beauty, fishing culture, and river experiences – but also reveals gaps in visitor amenities, lodging, recreation access, dining, entertainment, and tourism-supporting infrastructure.

Tourism should position itself as a facilitator and advocate for tourism-related investment opportunities throughout Putnam County. This includes helping identify market gaps, supporting entrepreneurs, building partnerships, promoting available development sites, and actively recruiting businesses that strengthen the visitor experience and encourage overnight stays.

Potential Tourism Investment & Recruitment Targets

- Boutique waterfront lodging
- Fish camp modernization and expansion
- Glamping and eco-lodging concepts
- RV parks and campground enhancements
- Paddlecraft and boat rental operations
- Guided eco-tour and river tour businesses
- Fishing guides and outdoor outfitters
- Riverfront dining and entertainment
- Downtown Palatka restaurants, breweries, and nightlife
- Wellness and retreat-style accommodations
- Boutique inns and bed & breakfast properties
- Event venues and gathering spaces
- Trail-support businesses (bike, kayak, hiking outfitters)
- Marinas and transient boating amenities
- Agritourism and farm experience attractions
- Heritage and cultural tourism experiences

The opportunity is especially strong because Putnam County sits within driving distance of several major population centers including Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, and Atlanta while offering a distinctly different experience from Florida's crowded coastal destinations. The county's positioning around the St. Johns River and authentic "Old Florida" lifestyle provides a differentiated identity that many modern travelers increasingly seek.

To support tourism investment attraction, Tourism should consider:

- Creating a Tourism Development Prospectus
- Identifying priority tourism development zones
- Building relationships with tourism developers and operators
- Supporting grant opportunities for tourism businesses
- Working with municipalities on tourism-friendly zoning and incentives
- Tracking and reporting tourism market data
- Promoting available waterfront and downtown redevelopment opportunities
- Assisting entrepreneurs with tourism market intelligence and connections

Long-term tourism growth will require not only marketing visitors to Putnam County but also helping create the experiences, businesses, and infrastructure that give visitors more reasons to stay longer, spend more, and return again.



KEY INITIATIVE 4

GROWING THE TOURISM ECONOMY – MARKETING TO ATTRACT OUTSIDE DOLLARS TO PUTNAM COUNTY

HOW TO START? START SMALL AND GROW INTO THE ROLE

The idea of tourism investment recruitment can sound intimidating, especially for an organization that has historically focused primarily on marketing and promotion. However, Tourism does not need to become a full-scale economic development organization overnight. Instead, the goal should be to gradually evolve into a stronger convener, connector, and advocate for tourism-related growth opportunities throughout Putnam County.

The first step is not recruiting major developers, it is simply identifying and communicating where opportunities exist. Many tourism businesses and entrepreneurs are already looking for authentic destinations with natural assets, affordable opportunities, and supportive communities. Tourism can begin by helping tell that story more intentionally.

Recommended Early Steps

- Identify obvious tourism gaps and opportunities
- Create a simple “Tourism Opportunity List”
- Meet regularly with local governments and chambers
- Build relationships with existing tourism operators
- Support local entrepreneurs interested in tourism businesses
- Share tourism research and visitor data with stakeholders
- Promote available downtown, waterfront, and redevelopment spaces
- Encourage small pilot projects before large investments

Initially, many wins may come from helping existing businesses expand their tourism focus rather than recruiting entirely new companies. Examples could include:

- A restaurant adding riverfront entertainment
- A fish camp modernizing cabins
- A local outfitter adding kayak rentals
- An entrepreneur opening a small eco-tour business
- A property owner converting historic buildings into boutique lodging

Over time, these smaller improvements begin creating momentum and confidence within the tourism economy. As the destination grows stronger and more organized, St. Johns River Tourism can gradually take a more proactive role in recruitment efforts, partnership building, tourism grant assistance, and investment attraction.

Most importantly, the organization should remember that tourism development is not solely about attracting outside investors. Often, the best tourism growth comes from empowering local people, businesses, and communities to build experiences that naturally fit the authentic character of Putnam County and the St. Johns River region.

