



Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau

109 West Silver Springs Boulevard

Ocala, Florida 34475

352-438-2800

[www.OcalaMarion.com](http://www.OcalaMarion.com)

Operational Plan

Fiscal Year 2024-2028



SCAN ME

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Mission, Vision, Core Values and Guiding Principles .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Ocala/Marion County Tourism Vision 2023.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction and Background .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Tourism is Everybody’s Business.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Purpose .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>History of Ocala/Marion County VCB.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>History Timeline.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Stakeholders.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<b>Tourist Development/Visitors and Convention Bureau Present State.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Current Organizational Charts .....</i>	<i>13</i>
Marion County Board of County Commissioners Current Organization Chart .....	13
Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau.....	14
Current Organizational Chart.....	14
<i>Marion County Tourist Development Council (TDC) Structure .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Tourist Development Tax Revenues .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Revenue History.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<b>SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Unique Selling Propositions (USP): Key Products and Services .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Current USP: To discover Ocala/Marion County is to discover an unexpected Florida. ....</i>	<i>22</i>
Outdoor and Nature Based Recreation .....	22
Equine Activities.....	22
Sports Activities .....	22
Convenient Location .....	22
Communities with Southern Hospitality .....	23
Event Funding .....	23
Visitor Center .....	23
Downtowns Developing as Destinations .....	23
<b>Positioning Ocala/Marion County Tourism for the Future .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>Strategic Goals .....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Implementation Plan.....</i>	<i>24</i>

<b>Key Recommendations</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<i>Research</i> .....	25
<i>Proactive Sales Programming</i> .....	27
<i>Integrated Marketing Communications</i> .....	30
Media Plan .....	30
Public/Industry Relations.....	32
Content Development .....	34
Social Media.....	36
Website/Mobile Application.....	36
<i>Product Development</i> .....	39
<i>Ocala/Marion County Brand Experience &amp; Visitors Center</i> .....	41
<i>Operations and Policies</i> .....	43
<b>Future State</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<i>Revenue Projections</i> .....	45
<i>Proposed Organizational Chart by FY 2028</i> .....	46
<b>Where Do We Go From Here?</b> .....	<b>47</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC)**

Craig Curry, Chairman, District 1

Kathy Bryant, District 2

Jeff Gold, District 3

Carl Zalak, III, District 4

Michelle Stone, Vice Chairman, District 5

### **Tourist Development Council (TDC)**

Rus Adams

Jeff Bailey

Craig Curry, Marion County Commissioner

Victoria Billig

Chris Fernandez

Danny Gaekwad

Ron Livsey, Belleview City Commissioner

Barry Mansfield, City of Ocala Councilmember

Jason Reynolds

### **Marion County Administration**

Mounir Bouyounes, P.E., County Administrator

Angel Roussel, P.E., Assistant County Administrator

### **Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau Staff**

Loretta Shaffer, CPM, CDME, Tourism Development Director

Sky Wheeler, CDME, Tourism Development Manager

Corry Locke, STS, Group Sales Supervisor

Jessica Heller, Marketing and Communications Supervisor

Chelsea Bell, Group Sales Coordinator

Danielle Neron, Brand and Content Coordinator

Stacy Swartout, Visitor Relations Representative

DeeDee Busbee, Tourism Development Specialist

## Mission, Vision, Core Values and Guiding Principles

### **Vision:**

Ocala/Marion County will be recognized as a thriving tourism destination for its natural, picturesque attractions perfect for outdoor recreation.

### **Mission Statement:**

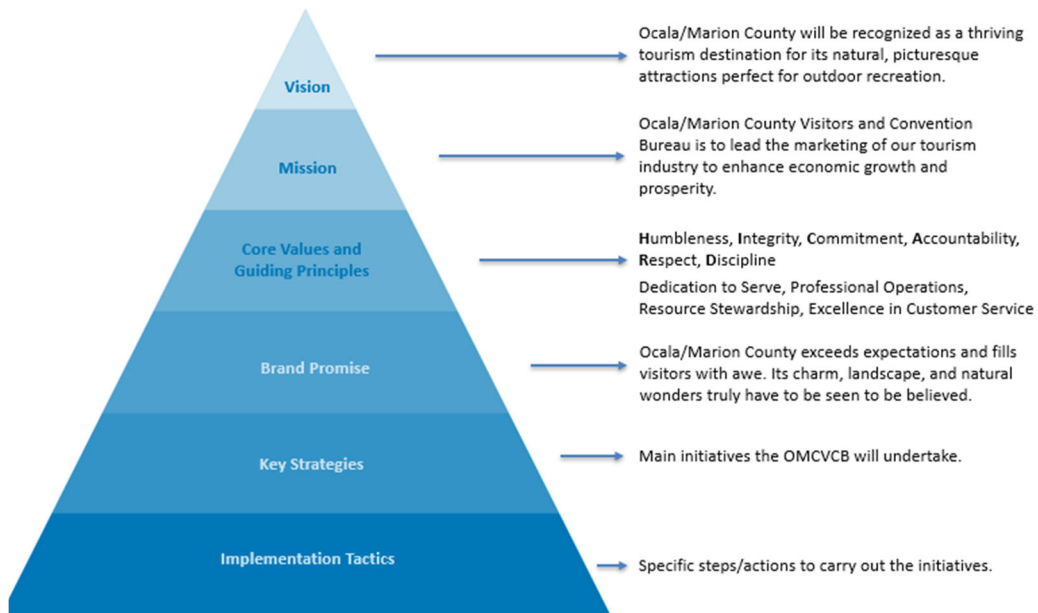
Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau is to lead the marketing of our tourism industry to enhance economic growth and prosperity.

### **Core Values:**

- Humbleness
- Integrity
- Commitment
- Accountability
- Respect
- Discipline

### **Guiding Principles:**

- Dedication to Serve
- Professional Operations
- Resource Stewardship
- Excellence in Customer Service



## **Executive Summary**

The Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau (OMCVCB) will continue to use a structured, research-driven, methodical planning process and disciplined method of execution to benchmark progress and establish efficient and effective operations to generate county-wide economic impact through tourism initiatives.

In alignment with our mission and vision, the OMCVCB focuses on three major purposes for the organization and County:

- Maintain the destination as the primary attraction (Management)
- Take a leadership role in addressing tourism issues (Leadership/Administration)
- Strengthen the position of the Ocala/Marion County brand (Marketing)

The OMCVCB is an enterprise fund under the Board of County Commissioners. Funding is secured through tourist tax collections and therefore paid directly by tourists. State Statute 125.0104 strictly regulates the spending of bed tax funds, ensuring appropriate use and fiduciary responsibility.

The OMCVCB's mission is carefully aligned to State Statute 125.0104 spending guidelines. Therefore, this plan and the day-to-day operations of the Tourist Development Department correspond to appropriate spending guidelines outlined in the State Statute.

The OMCVCB is at a critical juncture. To further explore our future opportunities and areas for economic growth, the OMCVCB is moving forward with a plan that will steer our future initiatives through a methodical and community-centric process. This blueprint will work to advance future goals and strive to achieve even greater economic impact through tourism as we build upon our integrated marketing strategy that leverages our newly evolved brand across all platforms, including website, public relations, social media and all in-market and out-of-market sales strategies.

We will work to benchmark and measure our results in tourism and communicate its long-term economic impact by:

- Conducting appropriate research that measures the direct, indirect and induced impacts from tourism;
- Documenting the relevance of the tourism industry as a whole and the benefits the growing results can bring to Marion County;
- Investigating each of the key market segments that will move us forward as the main drivers in the economy; and
- Stressing the need for continued support from the tourism industry and community to further ensure a pragmatic approach at providing top-quality deliverables that collaboratively can be achieved to meet our long-term business goals so all can prosper and grow for years to come through these innovative opportunities.

## **Ocala/Marion County Tourism Vision 2023**

In 2013, as part of the visioning process for Ocala/Marion County, tourism industry leaders, with the Board of County Commissioners, Tourist Development Council and Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau staff, collaborated to develop Vision 2023, which is outlined below.

*'Ocala/Marion County enjoys year-round tourism and is recognized by visitors as a unique place to experience the vibrancy and nostalgia of the Florida they remember from childhood. Silver Springs has once again become a major attraction both rivaling and joining all other parks as a place to recreate and connect to nature and history. The equine industry plays a major role in assisting Ocala/Marion County tourism to showcase the beautiful farms, horse-related events and attractions that uniquely belong to Marion County. Floridians from all over the state are especially excited about discovering this "different" Florida experience, but the destination has made significant gains in attracting international visitors and those from other states as well.*

*These "discovery" visitors are excited by the opportunity to experience outdoor adventures, for individuals and groups and the well-designed information that helps them plan their visits in advance. Ocala/Marion County is recognized as a highly competitive destination for youth and amateur sporting events. The various arts groups and historical societies are partnered with the tourism industry to actively showcase the many cultural and educational experiences available; and the destination is developing a new loyal base of affluent travelers. As a result, both the County and private sector have more resources to invest in facilities that will help grow the tourism industry. The destination has made great strides by providing attractive "Welcome to Ocala/Marion County" signage on several key entry corridors (I-75, 200, 441, 301, 326, 484, 318, 27 and 40) that further helped build a cohesive destination brand for the community. Investments been made to connect all greenway, bicycle and blueway trails and the media coverage for this work has elevated Ocala/Marion County's brand awareness. The destination has won awards for their coordinated delivery of visitor information through technology and on-site concierge training.*

*Marion County citizens are proud of their reputation as a warm, friendly, and welcoming community that takes pride in protecting their natural, cultural and historic resources. Residents embrace and support the work of the Tourist Development Council and Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau because they clearly see the benefit of making the county a better place to live and work. Citizens know that tourism brings new jobs and visitor tax money that otherwise would go to other counties.'*

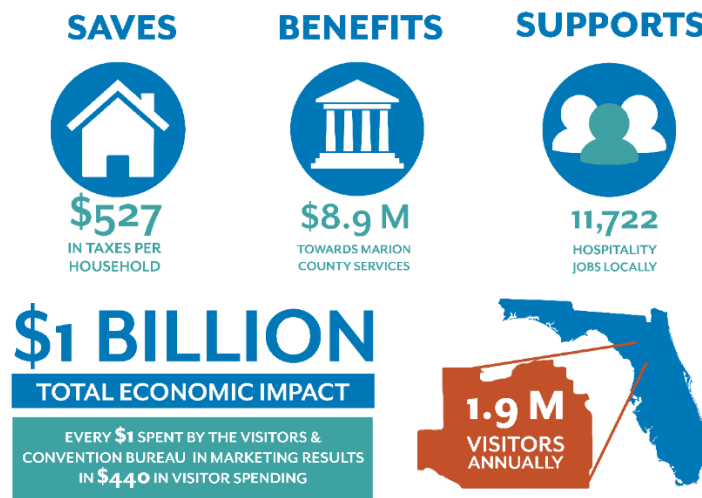
Despite the challenges posed as a result of COVID-19, the destination has experienced tremendous growth and surpassed many expectations created through that visioning process. Now is the time to address, not only the next five years for the destination, but to revisit the conversations with leadership, key tourism stakeholders and the community to take the vision beyond what is identified in this operational plan.

## Introduction and Background

Over the past six (6) months, representative leaders from Ocala/Marion County’s tourism industry have explored the current and future direction of tourism promotion for the entire county. Representatives from several communities within the county have participated in the process. Led by Loretta Shaffer, the OMCVCB team worked to help to define a set of goals and tactics that will take Ocala/Marion County tourism to a new level over the next five years. The collective work of these individuals has culminated in this report.

## Tourism is Everybody’s Business

Travel and tourism make a substantial impact on the Marion County economy. Dollars from group and leisure travelers flow throughout our entire community, supporting thousands of employees in tourism-related businesses. The ongoing infusion of visitor funds into local sales tax collections also supports vital programs that enhance the quality of life for all citizens, which has become even more critically important since the levy of the 1 cent sales tax. It is currently estimated that 12% of the sales tax funds are paid by tourists.



Source: Downs & St. Germain, Economic Impact of Tourism Study 2020-2021



## **Purpose**

The operational plan that follows focuses on the use of the Tourist Development Tax Funds. With a mid-sized staff (8 FTEs), and a small budget, relative to other destinations in the state of Florida, the OMCVCB provides a full-service destination marketing program, that promotes under the brand Ocala/Marion County, FL with the tagline, “Florida’s Natural Wonder”.

Due to the pause in tourism activities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred during the OMCVCB’s FY 2019-2023 strategic plan, some goals from that document were amended and have been brought forward into this iteration of the plan. The operational plan focuses on continued efforts to take a strategic and research-based approach to the work conducted by the OMCVCB in partnership with the BCC, TDC and the tourism industry.



**Executes strategic sales and marketing to increase visitation and create positive economic impact**



**Operates in accordance with State Statute 125.0104 to ensure appropriate use of 4% TDT**



**Works collaboratively with the Board of County Commissioners appointed Tourist Development Council**



**Structured as an enterprise fund and taxes are only collected from stays on short term accommodations**



**Aligns with the Empowering Marion County for Success II plan**

## **History of Ocala/Marion County VCB**

On July 6, 2004, a County Ordinance was adopted that created the 2% Tourist Development Tax (TDT or “bed tax”) on transient accommodations that is used to support and grow the local tourism industry. As part of Florida State Statute 125.0104, the Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) established a nine-member volunteer Tourist Development Council (TDC) to oversee the application of these funds to attract leisure and business travel to our community. Functioning as the TDC’s operational arm, the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau initially had a full-time staff of three professionals until 2012.

Effective on November 1, 2015, an additional 2% TDT levy was enacted, thus enhancing the OMCVCB’s ability to market Marion County as a premier destination. Today, due to the success of county-wide tourism initiatives and funding, the operation has grown to a dedicated staff of eight (8) executing the day-to-day operations.

The OMCVCB was headquartered in an Ocala business park until early 2008, when it moved to Ocala’s historic district. In 2012, the OMCVCB offices and official Visitors Center moved to 112 North Magnolia Avenue in downtown Ocala. Here, the Visitors Center showed growth in visitation that outpaced its accessibility. In 2017, the OMCVCB moved to its current location at 109 W Silver Springs Boulevard. This location has allowed increased visibility and provided a truly interactive guest experience with two front-line staff members providing an abundant amount of literature on a multitude of county-wide tourism assets, helping guests with travel recommendations and serving as the point of welcome for travelers arriving to the area.

The OMCVCB has developed strategic initiatives that fall under the following tenets:

- Be an effective organization for all constituents throughout Ocala/Marion County
- Enhance the local economy by using innovative and efficient methods that attract visitor spending

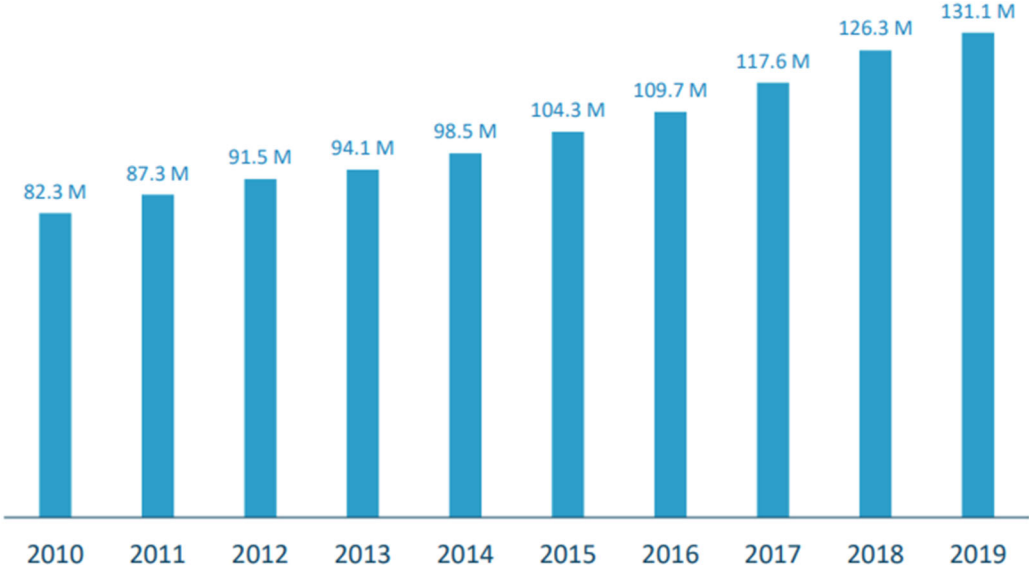
Success is quantified as shown through various data points, including increased year-round visitation, total economic impact, tourist development tax collection, room-nights generated, job supported, wages paid, sales tax collected and hotel occupancy. Another key performance indicator is decreases in property taxes.

The OMCVCB also has a role in shaping a vision for the industry and communicating the ambitions and importance of tourism as it pertains to the community’s economy. In order to act effectively at the county, regional, national and international level, the OMCVCB team must work with local and state industry partners to cohesively maximize the resources and opportunities available.

The OMCVCB and our tourism hospitality partners are part of a network of larger national and statewide organizations charged with growing the economy for Florida and the nation through tourism promotion. Florida benefits significantly from the work of VISIT FLORIDA, Florida Sports Foundation and partnerships with other county destination marketing organizations (DMO) like the OMCVCB.

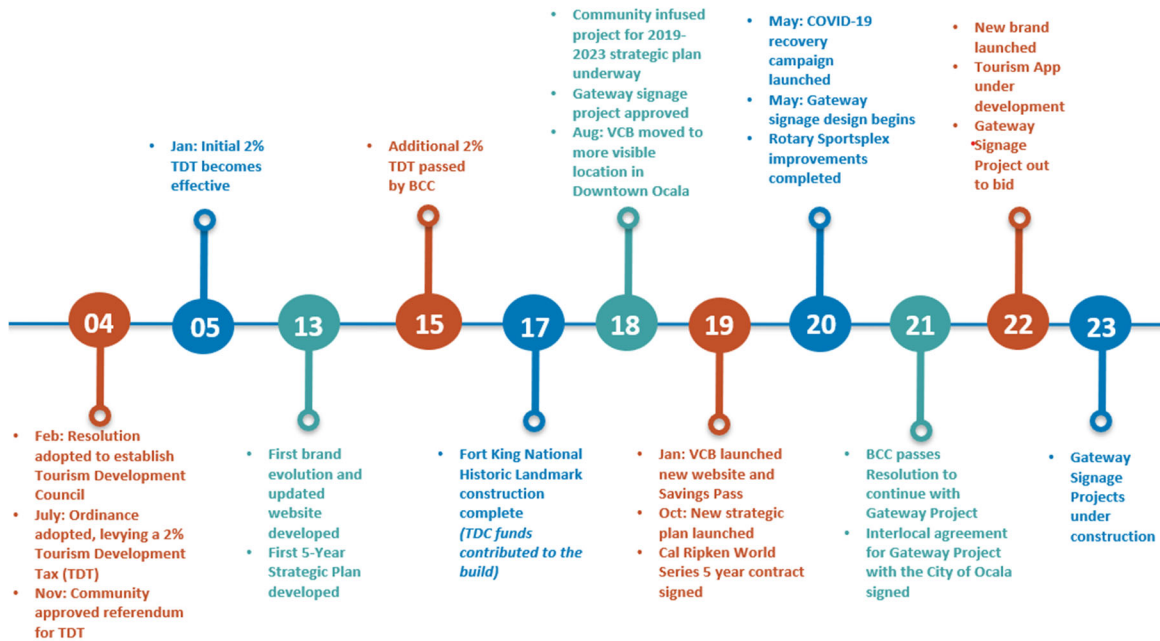
Tourism is one of the largest economic industries in Florida. In 2019, 131.1 million visitors came to the state, marking an 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of growth. As Marion County grows its investment in tourism promotion, our citizens will also continue to benefit from the greater share of this lucrative industry.

### Total Florida Visitation: 2010-2019



Sources: TravelTrak America; D.K. Shifflet; Statistics Canada; X-Border Canada; U.S. Department of Commerce, ITA, Tourism Industries; Visa Travel Insights; Airline Data, Inc; ARC Global Agency Pro

# History Timeline



## Stakeholders

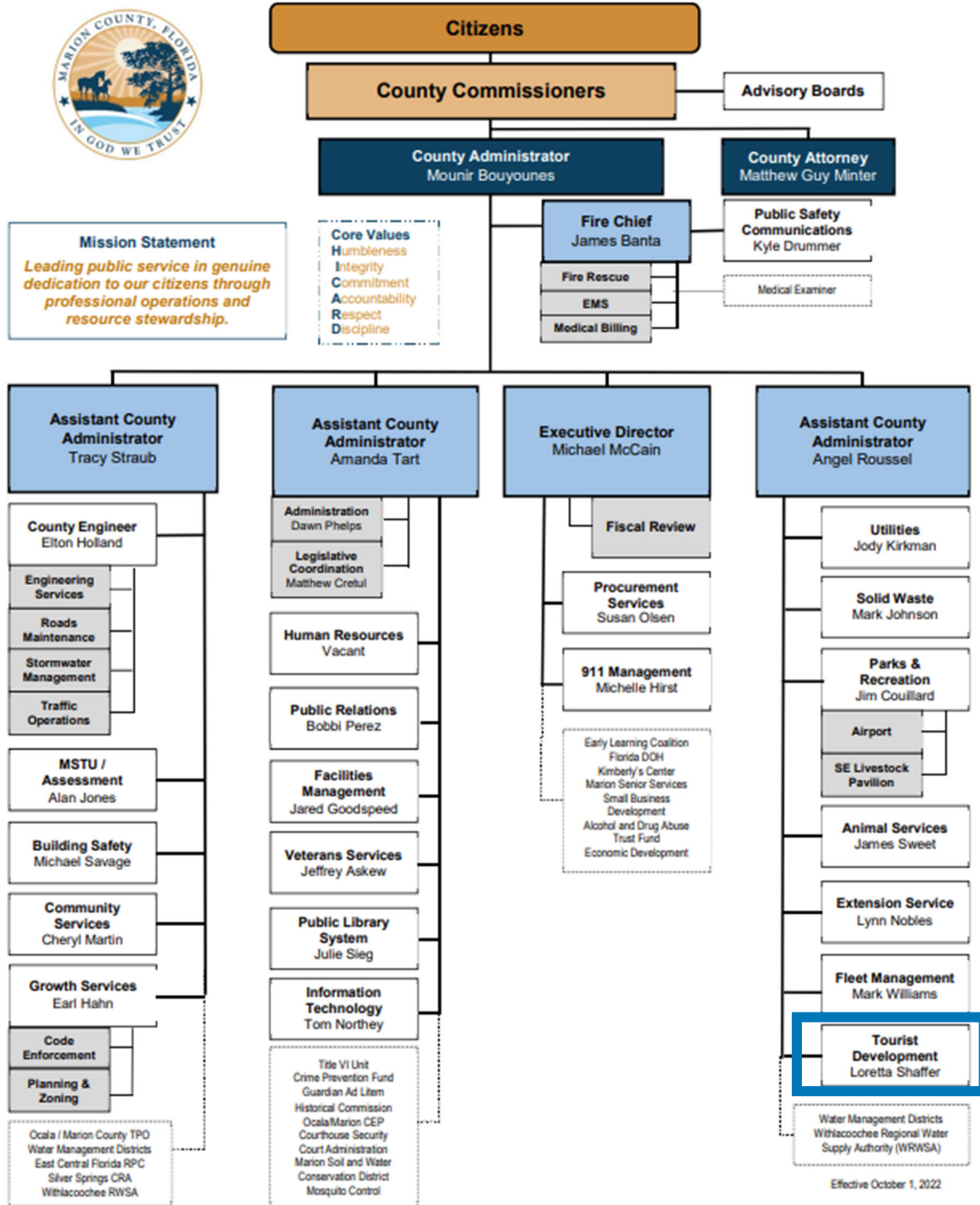
A stakeholder is defined as a person with a strong interest in something important to them. With tourism being everyone’s business, our business and stakeholders are extensive and varied.



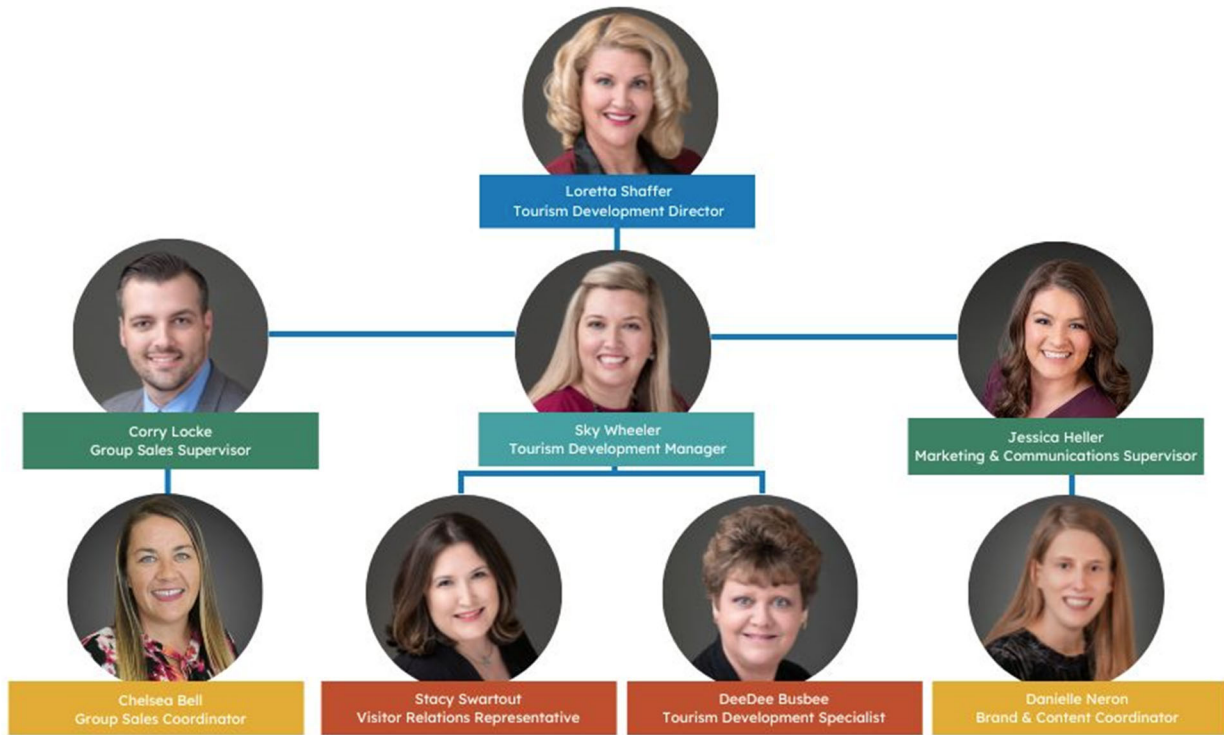
# Tourist Development/Visitors and Convention Bureau Present State

## Current Organizational Charts

### Marion County Board of County Commissioners Current Organization Chart



## Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau Current Organizational Chart



## Marion County Tourist Development Council (TDC) Structure

Consistent with Florida State Statute 125.0104, the TDC is a nine-member council appointed as an advisory committee to the BCC. TDC members oversee the tourist development tax funds, provide direction on programs/budgets and review the expenditures of the OMCVCB to ensure fiduciary responsibility.

The TDC is comprised of:

- 1 County Commissioner
- 2 elected officials representing municipalities (one must be from most populous city)
- 3 owners or operators of accommodations
- 3 at large members interested in the tourism industry

All members of the council must be electors of Marion County. The members of the council serve staggered terms of four (4) years. Members of the council may be reappointed, provided they continue to meet the qualifications of membership. A vacancy on the council not occurring by expiration of term are filled by the BCC by appointment to fill the unexpired term.

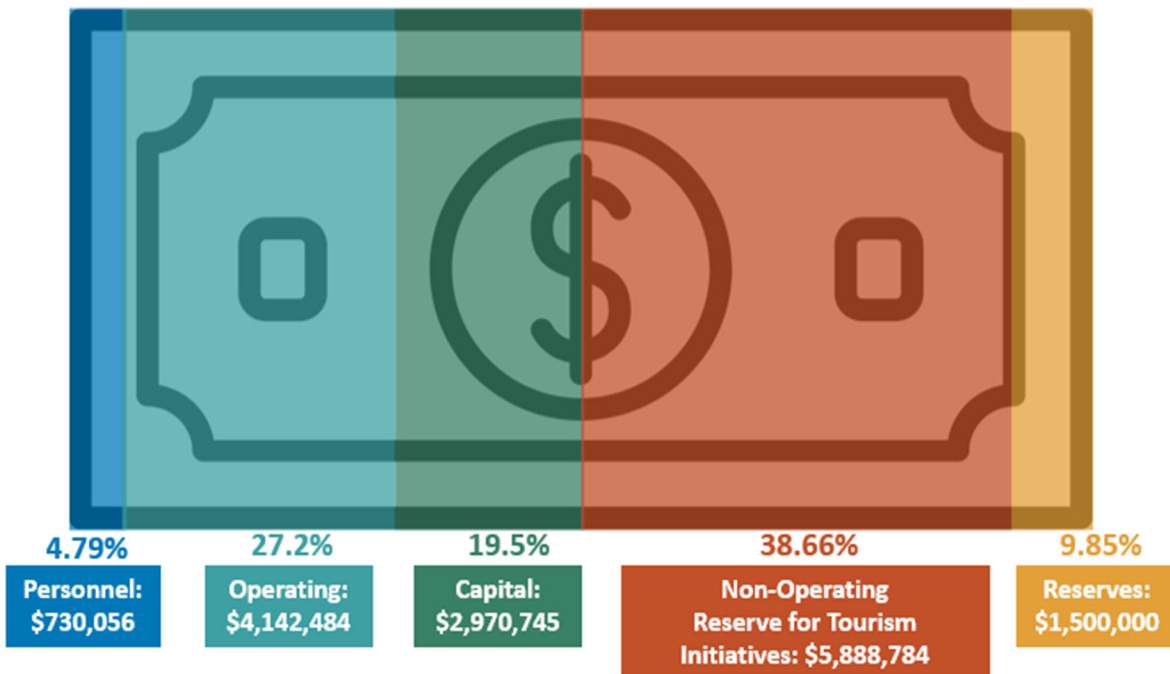
## Tourist Development Tax Revenues

For the most recently completed fiscal year-2022, each penny of the tourist development tax generated approximately \$1,210,000, so therefore the total collected tourist development tax revenue was approximately \$4,840,000 annually.

In addition to Tourist Development Tax revenue, our sales team works diligently to receive event reimbursements from the Florida Sports Foundation for events that meet their grant funding criteria. In Fiscal Year 2022, the OMCVCB realized \$52,768.11 in reimbursements.

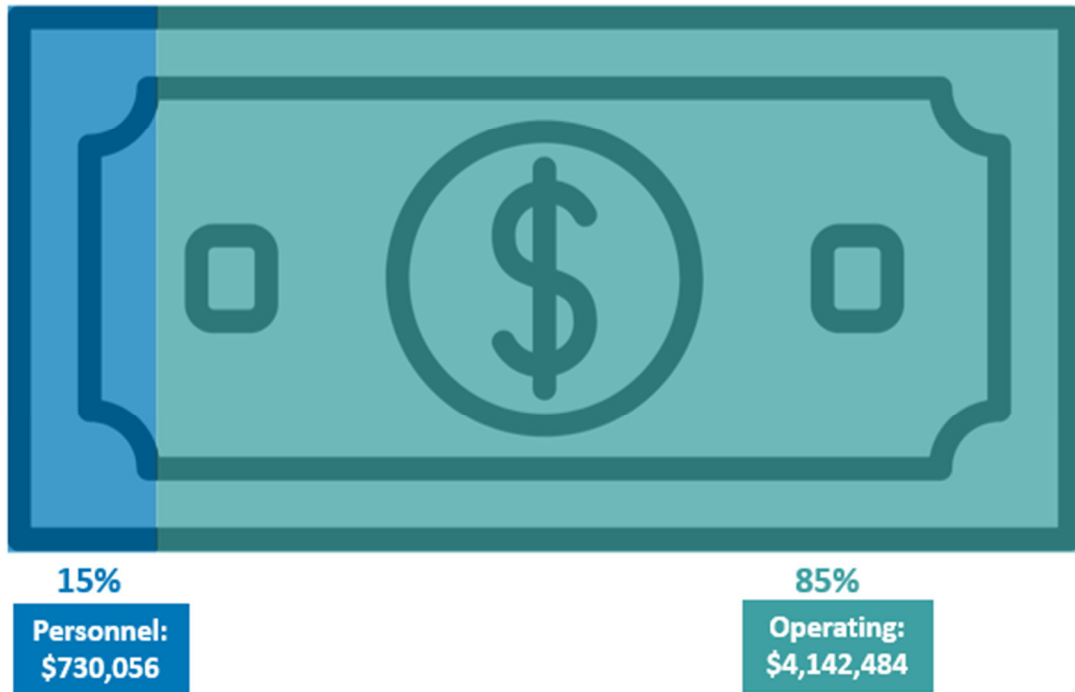
In the current fiscal year-2023, revenue is projected at \$4,844,450 and the total fund is projected at \$15,232,069

### FUND 1074 – Tourist Development Tax Fund Total \$15,232,069



## Current Tourist Development Tax Revenues vs. Expenditures

Tourist Development Tax Revenue \$4,844,450



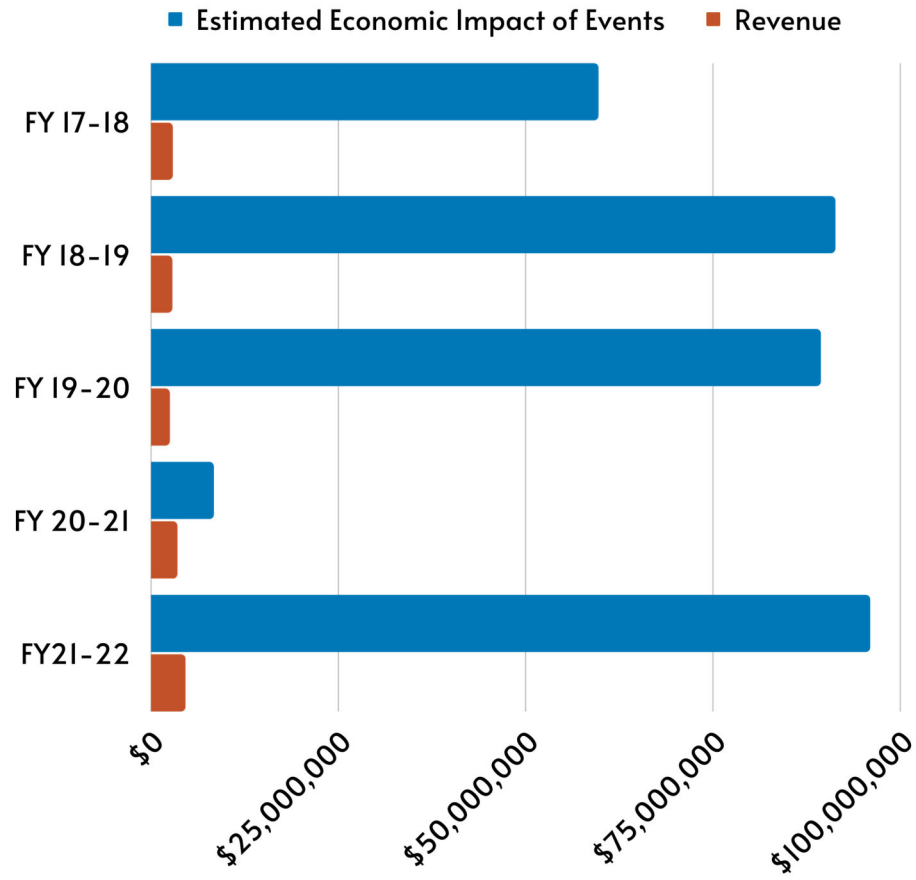
Marion County Ordinance 04-17 amended in 2009, reflects Florida Statute 125.0104 established to assist counties in tourism development and marketing. The Marion County Tourist Development Operational Plan picks up the language of FS 125.0104 allowing for multiple uses under that statute including the current emphasis on strategic target marketing that includes sports, the multitude of meeting groups, as well as the leisure tourism business.

Tourist Development policy also allows for funding events that clearly demonstrate an ability to produce room nights in paid accommodations as a strategy for growing future revenue. The operations of the OMCVCB including, all outsourced services, are 100% funded by the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) revenue.



## Revenue History

Economic Impact of Events versus Revenue Generated



## **SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis**

<b>Strengths (Exploit and Invest: present advantages)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Supportive county leadership on tourism investment and strategic direction</li><li>•Committed and well-respected TDC board</li><li>•Upcoming gateway and destination signage on I-75</li><li>•Strong strategic alliance partners (VISIT FLORIDA, Florida Sports Foundation, Destinations Florida, Destinations International)</li><li>•Positive economic impact driver of direct, indirect and induced tourism dollars</li><li>•Unique natural and beautiful destination</li><li>•Research driven organization focused on return on investment (ROI)</li><li>•Horse Capital of the World<sup>®</sup></li><li>•World Equestrian Center (WEC)</li><li>•Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training (FAST)</li><li>•New and upgraded county-owned assets</li><li>•Ocala National Forest/preserved land</li><li>•Internationally renowned Santos Bike Trails</li><li>•Revitalized downtown cities with unique architecture</li><li>•Central Florida location</li><li>•Fiscally responsible and accountable organization</li><li>•Growth in destination key differentiators</li><li>•Relaxed, welcoming and friendly community</li><li>•Diverse festivals and events</li><li>•Mecca of ecotourism opportunities</li><li>•Developing historical assets (i.e. Fort King)</li><li>•Synergistic and growing arts community (i.e. visual and performing, etc.)</li><li>•Transparency driven county department</li><li>•Measurable destination sales and marketing plan</li><li>•Year-round pleasant climate</li><li>•Strong customer relation management (CRM) partner tool</li><li>•Dedicated and experienced tourism staff</li></ul>

**Weaknesses**  
**(Mitigate: present disadvantages)**

- No commercial air service in-market
- Limited hotel inventory, especially on the west side of the county
- Limited hotel availability during peak times (throughout county)
- Lack of scalable venues (sports, meetings)
- Lack of strong geographical recognition
- Lack of direct booking control on current venues
- Limited transportation between venues/hotels
- Limited indoor activities
- Exit ramps off of I-75 are visually unappealing
- Limited signage for downtown parking
- Difficulty tracking event room nights
- Seasonal nature of outdoor activities (tubing, swimming)
- Budget limitations as compared to other destinations
- Lack of small inns and bed & breakfast properties
- Pedestrian and cyclist safety concerns on roadways

**Opportunities**  
**(Monitor and Capitalize: potential advantages)**

- Community driven long-term strategy/tourism master plan
- Evolved funding program and bid fees
- Technology based tools to enhance venue collaboration on bids for event hosting/bid fee opportunities
- Brand awareness through new I-75 signage projects
- Destination-wide mobile App
- Continued advancement in-market and out-of-market of evolved tourism brand
- Advancement of shoulder season marketing campaigns
- Growing gracefully
- Downtowns developing as destinations within the destination
- Continued collaboration with tourism industry and county leadership
- Research to support future sporting facilities
- Promotion of emerging niche audiences (fishing, hunting, ATV/off-road recreation)
- Promotion of county on main interstates throughout Florida
- Technology-based tourism trails
- Aesthetically appealing county exits and entryways
- Swimming at Silver Springs
- New diverse lodging inventory to meet demand
- Cross Florida Greenway/Florida Trail System
- International growth through familiarization tours (FAMs)
- Increase leisure activities through continued growth in niche segments through tailored itineraries and special interest marketing material
- Upgrades at current county parks that can be used to increase tourism
- Feasibility study to see if a county-owned event venue is needed
- Increase special events as a means to create length of stay
- Local advocacy in promoting staycation to create local brand advocates
- Industry meetings at various tourism locations throughout the county
- Increase in state, national and international PR opportunities
- Marketing to new residents that have relocated to Florida
- Growth in high performing social media platforms
- Film Commission
- Partner with education sector to engage the youth in tourism industry
- Shuttle service for in-destination travel to area hotels, attractions, and downtown Ocala
- Entryway signage at key entry points/Wayfinding signage
- Host state-based conferences, conventions, tradeshow, etc.
- Public art projects
- Continued agricultural tours
- Support for tourism at the state level

### **Threats**

#### **(Prepare for Contingencies: potential disadvantages)**

- Lack of air service with continued increase in tourism venues and assets
- Increases from inflation that cause decrease in expendable income
- U.S. perception on a global scale
- Staffing and lack of labor
- Limited full-service hotels
- Residing effects of the pandemic
- Environmental considerations
- Natural and manmade disasters
- Inconsistent tax compliance for all tourism-based accommodations

## **Unique Selling Propositions (USP): Key Products and Services**

**Current USP: To discover Ocala/Marion County is to discover an unexpected Florida.**

### **Outdoor and Nature Based Recreation**

Nature-based activities and amenities constitute a primary portion of our tourism appeal. As this exciting form of tourism is rising, due to the challenges from COVID-19, there is an opportunity to attract even greater numbers of outdoor enthusiasts to Marion County. Today's vacationers increasingly seek out nature-based activities and gravitate to wide open spaces. With our Ocala National Forest, world-famous first magnitude springs, beautiful rivers and lakes, zip lining and hundreds of hiking trails, we are well poised to take advantage of the rising interest in nature-based tourism.

### **Equine Activities**

We are known as the "Horse Capital of the World®" for good reason, as we have become an international center for equestrian events and activities and have the largest number of diverse breeds of horses in the world. Major events like the Horse Shows in the Sun series (HITS), plus the many competitions held at the World Equestrian Center (WEC), the Florida Horse Park (FHP), Southeastern Livestock Pavilion (SELP) and other venues; in addition to profits from horse sales, draw visitors from across America and around the world that create a solid foundation for the industry. In recent years, the World Equestrian Center (WEC) has created a first of its kind experience for horse enthusiasts and has become a world-renowned attraction. Additionally, Ocala/Marion County is globally known for its abundant horse trails, equine businesses and other venues and activities for the visiting equestrian enthusiast and business advocate.

### **Sports Activities**

Our steady increase in events is placing us prominently on the national stage. With major sporting facilities such as Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training (FAST) and Rotary Sportsplex, Marion County plays host to many key events. In the sports marketing arena, as in most business situations, the axiom holds true that "nothing succeeds like success." Therefore, while we continue to successfully host major events, we are also building our reputation and better positioning ourselves to attract even more sports events to Marion County and grow market share.

### **Convenient Location**

Event planners and vacationers alike love Marion County's convenient location. Interstate 75 and U.S. Highways 27, 41, 301 and 441 each connect to the area, while the Florida Turnpike meets I-75 just to the south. The area is close in proximity to major airports in Orlando, Sanford, Tampa, Jacksonville, as well as the regional airport in Gainesville. The Ocala International Airport provides private, charter and air cargo services with opportunities for expansion.

## **Communities with Southern Hospitality**

The County has a total area of 1,663 square miles, of which 84 square miles are water. Ocala is the County seat and other incorporated cities and towns include Belleview, Dunnellon, McIntosh and Reddick. Unincorporated communities include Fort McCoy, Marion Oaks, Silver Springs Shores and Salt Springs. Each community has its own special features and history awaiting exploration.

## **Event Funding**

The OMCVCB offers a variety of opportunities for event planners to partner through funding opportunities with the Room Night Generating Event Funding Program. Recipients are eligible for \$14 per room night as reimbursement for approved expenses after a successful event.

Additionally, there are opportunities to fund events with bid fees paid in advance of the event for promotion/naming rights.

## **Visitor Center**

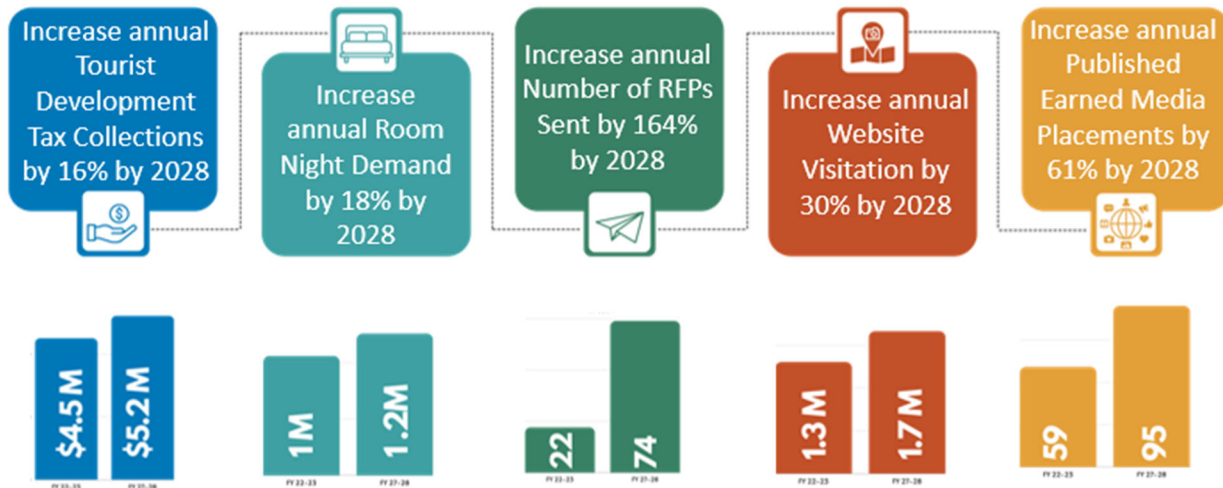
The visitor center is staffed with a team that provides excellence in customer service and provides information and directions to visitors, encouraging first-time and repeat visitation. The center displays and distributes information of potential interest to visitors including accommodations, dining, shopping, outdoor activities and current events and is being revitalized with the evolved Ocala/Marion County tourism brand.

## **Downtowns Developing as Destinations**

Marion County is home to thriving downtowns that are evolving into destinations within the destination. Communities are programming events and incentivizing businesses to work collaboratively to advance culinary and entertainment opportunities, while connecting visitors to multiple experiences throughout the downtowns. Accommodation opportunities are growing in these areas as well.

# Positioning Ocala/Marion County Tourism for the Future

## Strategic Goals



## Implementation Plan

Over the past six (6) months, the TDC and key tourism partners worked with the OMCVCB team and identified key recommendations used to create a set of goals under each of the following six categories:

- Research
- Proactive Sales Programming
- Integrated Marketing Communications
- Product Development
- Operations and Policies
- The Ocala/Marion County Brand Experience/Visitors Center

The goals as presented in this report anticipate a program with initiatives identified that will provide the OMCVCB with a roadmap over the next five (5) years. The plan will accommodate changing economic and market conditions as they should occur and will be evaluated at least once a year and amended as appropriate.

The ensuing pages delineate the strategies, goals and tactics to be used in evaluating and measuring success.

Within the next four to six (4-6) months, the OMCVCB will manage the development of a long-range tourism plan, done in coordination with the Empowering Marion County for Success II Plan and will ensure that strategic efforts are aligned for efficiency and best results.



## Key Recommendations

### Research

Through research, DMOs can have a laser targeted focus and function with a business mindset of gaining a better understanding of visitors and our local tourism market. By diving deep into data and understanding our visitors' preferences and motivations, we can more easily define and solve business problems, set priorities, increase the demand for our services and strengthen profits.

To further advance the cultivation of new and emerging guests, Ocala/Marion County continues to grow its cadre of research to establish and refine benchmarks that will provide critical information about who is currently visiting Ocala/Marion County and why they come. Starting in 2013, the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau began a partnership with Downs & St. Germain research to conduct biannual studies of the economic impact of tourism and visitor tracking. This demographic and psychographic detail continues to help the OMCVCB and industry partners prioritize how to maximize their resources for future years.

However, the current research is only a starting point. Future research will provide a snapshot of the tourism industry in the county and therefore a platform for discussing the rationale for future investment in product development and promotions. In order to further understand the visitor, Ocala/Marion County will continue to invest in the development of more detailed visitor information. Some of the information gathering can be accomplished in-house, through a combination of partnerships with event organizers and college class projects. Using data mined from visitor inquiries driven by both web and print advertising and other sources, the Ocala/Marion VCB will analyze visitor perception about key issues and products on a regular basis.

**GOAL: Coordinate and execute the development of a long-range tourism plan to create an addendum to the Empowering Marion for Success II Plan and set the baseline vision for the future.**

- **Why:** Since its inception, the OMCVCB's purpose has been to grow the tourism economy for the benefit of Marion County citizens. As the needs and expectations of our community have grown, so too have our own organizational capacities and expectations. Increasing demand for our services dictates that we reaffirm our mission and address fundamental questions such as what objectives should we prioritize to make the best use of our skills and resources, what kind of organizational structure best allows us to fulfill our mission, and how should we best craft our identity and messaging to maximize understanding, effectiveness and future growth.
- **How:** To address these core questions, we will partner with a consultant to put forth a long-range tourism plan to help define who we are and where we are going as an organization. In framing our plan, the OMCVCB, county leadership, tourism stakeholders

and the county at large will undergo the exercise of examining the bureau's organizational identity from several aspects. There will be a look at the function of what the historical roles have been, as well as present day expectations. We will identify our primary programmatic initiatives and how they will evolve. We will review the characteristics and needs of the stakeholders we serve. We will examine ways to structure ourselves to better serve our constituents. Finally, we will identify key areas that may require enhancements in order to meet the increasing needs of those that we serve.

**GOAL: Conduct a gap and competitive analysis of key assets and competitors. This will establish the destination against competitors and consider opportunities for growth of the tourism product.**

- **Why:** To explore the feasibility of a facility or differentiator and what will meet the demand of and complement our growing tourism market. This analysis will evaluate tourism attractions as well as local businesses in an effort to showcase what currently makes Ocala/Marion County a destination and how to better leverage current and future assets. The tourism product available in Ocala/Marion County has changed significantly since the last time competitive markets were studied. The purpose of a competitor analysis is to understand our competitors' strengths and weaknesses in comparison to our destination's strengths and weaknesses and to find potential gaps in the market so we can maximize future opportunities.
- **How:** Create a scope and contract with qualified consultant.

**GOAL: Conduct more frequent studies to establish new seasonality trends/peak periods to refine efforts to maximize return on investment (ROI).**

- **Why:** Based on industry partner feedback, there are indications that our market has shifted, but a deeper analysis of data will help when prospecting to fill the sales funnel, as well as placing media.
- **How:** Work with Arrivalist, Miles Partnership and Downs and St. Germain to analyze currently available data and, if needed, amend scopes of work in current contracts.

## Proactive Sales Programming

Destination marketers worldwide know they cannot successfully maximize a community's tourism economy without partnering with a variety of stakeholders to promote the offerings of the destination. By engaging with industry partners and other representative groups, the OMCVCB can provide better and more targeted information about the diverse assets and products available for visitors to Ocala/Marion County. Many of these partnerships are continuous works in progress, having already been initiated. A key component of the proactive sales programming will be strategic partnerships for tradeshow and sponsorship initiatives that will be reviewed annually.

### **GOAL: Streamline current room night generating event funding process.**

- **Why:** Increase/allow flexibility when solidifying contracts to close business quicker.
- **How:** Work with County Attorney's office to refine contract language to ensure agreements for less than \$50,000 can be signed by County Administrator. Refine funding process to allow applicants to receive funds and go to contract without individual event approval at TDC meeting (as long as the events meet all requirements of the program and budgeted funds are available).

### **GOAL: Leverage sports and event sub-branded logo and updated photo/video assets.**

- **Why:** To further emphasize the destination as a groups-friendly location.
- **How:** Use the new photos and video to further the promotions of the sports and events sub-brand in marketing/media when applicable including on the website and at tradeshows/conferences.

### **GOAL: Implement sales co-op program.**

- **Why:** Create sense of professionalism when presenting destination by showing a unified approach to destination marketing. Allows for collaboration with local tourism industry partners to build the destination brand by including all tangible entities.
- **How:** Provide tentative annual sales schedule to local partners and send out a survey asking them to identify co-op opportunities in which they would participate. Provide co-op programming through CRM email database delivery with a first-come, first-served approach with the notion that the OMCVCB can make final determination based on needs/changes. We will include all relevant area partners in outreach, which may vary by opportunity, to ensure a fair and equitable program.

### **GOAL: Facilitate six (6) industry meetings annually with tourism partners.**

- **Why:** To continue building the collaborative community partnership where our local industries come together to focus on efforts that will cultivate increased revenues and economic impact to our destination.
- **How:** Host in-person meetings, with a strategic focus, analyzing different travel periods/markets. These meetings will be established on an annual basis to ensure

attendance. The sales team will use the CRM database to send email campaigns relative to the meeting with an agenda to bolster attendance and track who is receiving and engaging with the content. After meetings, the team will conduct follow-up work to focus short term sales and marketing efforts based on outcomes.

- Focus on seasonal sales needs
- Share industry updates
- Review conference-sales missions
- FAM/Site Tours
- Special events pre/post reports

**GOAL: Create a Sales and Service Position within the Sales Team**

- **Why:** As Ocala/Marion County destination facilities (hotels, attractions) continue to develop we will see growth resulting in increased occupancy year-round. To remain in line with the growth, a position is needed to further service advanced sales efforts. This position will create 36 more hours of opportunity for the sales team each week to work the sales funnel.
- **How:** The newly proposed position would service the event as soon as the planner selects Marion County as the host destination and work with the planner through the contract phase. Additionally, they will ensure that planners are receiving excellent customer service leading up to and during their event. They will also work with planners to ensure that contract deliverables are made and funding is successfully received.

**GOAL: Develop an OMCVCB branded wedding presence that will increase awareness of the destination as a unique wedding event site.**

- **Why:** Consumer behavior has changed after the pandemic and wide-open, outdoor space is highly desired.
- **How:** Enhance a wedding presence through our current website, add designated placement with menu leading to different local vendors.

**GOAL: Develop interactive digital sales collateral.**

- **Why:** The world is moving into digital interaction which provides ease of use when traveling with tradeshow and offers cleaner presentation of information when speaking to customers. Digital collateral is also more easily adaptable for event-specific information.
- **How:** Create digital tool kit and advance technological tools for use at tradeshow/speaking engagements. Purchase workflow management tool to streamline digital and print content needed. Identify vendor to develop 360 virtual tour of main facilities to include venue indoor and outdoor shots.

**GOAL: Leverage availability of Marion County Parks facilities with updated facility availability information.**

- **Why:** Know current up-to-date facility and venue availability which will further the partnership between the OMCVCB and the Marion County Parks and Recreation Department, while creating a streamlined process when selling/speaking to planners.
- **How:** Utilize interactive software that Marion County Parks and Recreation has initiated and hold quarterly partner meetings.

**GOAL: Cultivate additional sport, meeting and event business that will increase occupancy and economic impact through months with low occupancy.**

- **Why:** Smith Travel Research (STR) data shows lower occupancy levels during various months throughout the year, which indicates room for growth in the destination.
- **How:** Prospect with CRM tools that provide research driven data to ensure efforts focus on targeted markets. Research tradeshow opportunities that ensure we are selling to data proven markets based on our destination. Analyze CRM/sales tool reports to determine why past business losses occurred. When selling, continue to leverage and promote our unique experiences and activities within the destination to sell the experience Ocala/Marion County has to offer. (i.e. tourism mobile App). Work with in-house team to create collateral that showcases our destination as a year-round one-of-a-kind experience.

**GOAL: Increase leisure traveler initiatives by establishing partnerships with travel agents who service our target markets.**

- **Why:** Increase visitation and leverage domestic leisure travel to produce new group and transient visitation to the area.
- **How:** Coordinate sales missions, virtual webinars and/or co-ops with hoteliers currently working with travel agents. Use this data to target feeder states and/or partner with AAA to create a destination education program.

## **Integrated Marketing Communications**

Marketing and communications are made up of many components and the reality is that all of the services provided by the OMCVCB are components of marketing. With such a versatile and dynamic staff, each member of the team is engaged in direct customer contact and involved in the delivery of the county's marketing messages, not to mention developing the most effective brand and identity and communicating effectively with leisure tourism and groups/meetings markets.

Developing a vertically integrated marketing program with such limited resources is no small challenge. Staff members must be involved in coordinating the development of packages with local accommodations, attractions, event planners, restaurants and more. They must also see that all tourism assets within the destination are promoted using publicity, advertising and sometimes direct sales.

Marion County has a strong unique selling proposition (USP), as it has abundant park offerings, one national forest, two state parks, subterranean caves, 32,000 acres of lakes, 92 miles of rivers and more than 40 springs. Ocala/Marion County contains some of the most unique and alluring one-of-a-kind outdoor adventures in the world, including Ocala National Forest, Silver Springs State Park, the Rainbow River, the Canyons Zip Lines and Adventure Park, Fort King National Historic Landmark, and the Marjorie Harris-Carr Cross Florida Greenway. Additionally, Marion County is home to three (3) first magnitude springs, the largest concentration for one county or region in the State of Florida, as well as having the distinction of "Horse Capital of the World®".

Once the niche products are inventoried and developed, the tools will be in place to determine the best way to market these to target audiences. The OMCVCB has initiated forward movement with a number of the integrated marketing initiatives during this fiscal year and beyond – as both staff resources and funding permitted and are subdivided into segments. The goals outlined in this plan provide for direction and action planning.

### **Media Plan**

**GOAL: Return on Objective (ROO) Opportunities – Billboards located on main Florida highways and major airport markets.**

- **Why:** Stay top of mind to drive and fly market visitors by maintaining share of voice in highly visible Out-Of-Home (OOH) channels.
- **How:** Work with media agency to evaluate and place OOH advertisements along Florida's main highways, i.e. turnpike, I-75, I-95, I-4 and international airports, as well as evaluate other high-visibility opportunities.

**GOAL: Incorporate QR codes where appropriate for each campaign to help drive inquiry and build brand ambassadors.**

- **Why:** QR codes will help to drive audiences to our website and make trip planning easier. QR codes also provide opportunities to track otherwise untracked forms of media (such as brochures in racks, transparency boards at state welcome centers, etc.)
- **How:** Print, transport and deliver collateral materials to appropriate locations to ensure that as much trackable data as possible is captured.

**GOAL: Survey to industry about media they would like media agency to consider for annual media plan.**

- **Why:** Destination partners often know of niche media opportunities relative to their product offering. Gathering that information and providing it to our media placement agency will allow for a more robust media review annually.
- **How:** Send survey via CRM to tourism industry database.

**GOAL: Create digital/flexible media co-op options.**

- **Why:** Tourism industry partners often have limited budgets or the ability to buy digital media placements at scale.
- **How:** Have media agency develop a co-op program to roll-out after the approved media plan launched each year.

**GOAL: National Geographic and similar large-scale, ecotourism media strategic partnerships.**

- **Why:** Strategic alliances and online hubs such as NationalGeographic.com can work to showcase our area's pristine parks and natural wonders and help to tell the world about our outdoor playground and its offerings. Strategic alliance editorial hubs allow readers to dive into these picturesque offerings by offering insider tips, recommendations of what to see and do, fun facts and unique areas to explore.
- **How:** Explore as potential co-ops. Work with media agency to include in annual media plan as appropriate.

## Public/Industry Relations

**GOAL: Increase the number of travel media professionals hosted on research trips in partnership with the local industry.**

- **Why:** Attracting these third-party experts will help ensure that Ocala/Marion County tourism gets expanded media exposure and is competitively promoted on all platforms (print, electronic and social media) to both the general public and the travel trade.
- **How:** Develop FAM pitches and liaise with appropriate industry conference tradeshows targeted at media to promote. Actively survey industry partners to garner input and support for FAM opportunities.

**GOAL: Maintain regular public relations (PR) activity with trade and national press emphasizing USP's and newsworthy items.**

- **Why:** Using public relations (PR) and social media campaigns to promote travel to Ocala/Marion County Florida will help to capture potential travelers desperate for sunshine and freedom in our wide-open spaces with abundant outdoor activities for all ages.
- **How:** Promote all of the USPs ramping up our winter media and maximizing shoulder season time periods.

**GOAL: Implement Tourism Advocacy Program.**

- **Why:** Tourism growth would not be what it is without the support of our amazing community. Having a robust educational and advocacy campaign makes even stronger emotional and value-based appeal by creating local brand advocates. This will further support our role to generate return on investment for residents in the community as we strive to increase tourism growth, drive job creation, assist with small and large business success, promote community revitalization, help to increase local and state tax revenues and strive to improve quality of life and pride of place.
- **How:** Advanced economic impact/advocacy and leave-behind advocacy piece. Host community/tourism industry leader FAMs to connect the various businesses to one another to strengthen the unified tourism message.



**GOAL: Leverage relationships with media planning and website agencies to support increased need for content/media fulfillment.**

- **Why:** Public relations (PR) offerings have expanded to allow destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to purchase videos, photography and content that goes above and beyond the media story. Adding to our media buying mix, these offerings will afford us additional tools in our toolkit and the advanced analytic-friendly nature of social media will continue to positively translate across all PR initiatives. Having deep data driven analytics allows us to better position future campaigns and improve current ones as social media management and analytic tools continue to play a much larger part in the success of PR. This additional strategy will supplement social media content creation (YouTube/Instagram series), increase publishing and engagement; FAMs and capture live content at sports/events for specific social pages.
- **How:** Partner with media planning and website agencies to ensure that content creators are being targeted for partnership and possible media placement.

**GOAL: Create video tutorials for industry partners to better leverage OMCVCB resources.**

- **Why:** Allows partners to access the most recent and relative content about how to utilize the tools available and take advantage of OMCVCB as a resource.
- **How:** Record training videos for partners that explain how they can leverage their presence through the website/app; work with website agency on what additional educational tools are available or can be developed to maximize partner resources.

**GOAL: Regionalism**

- **Why:** In addition to supplementing the budget to allow more public relations (PR) and sales FAM opportunities, a regional voice helps to further create awareness of the destination's diverse offerings to an international audience and allows us to expand our reach by including key differentiators in which our neighboring destinations have greater strength. Visitors don't know county lines and generating expanded interest works to raise our county profile while helping us to reach more online/offline journalists and media entities, as well as event planners and leisure travelers.
- **How:** Evaluate and partner with regional destinations as appropriate for marketing and sales initiatives, similar to past efforts with neighboring counties, such as Alachua and Citrus.

## Content Development

**GOAL: Ensure the destination is represented as the Horse Capital of the World® (HCOTW) where appropriate.**

- **Why:** Ocala/Marion was officially named the “Horse Capital of the World®” as designated by a trademark held by the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Association. This is a testament to the County’s unique involvement in all things equestrian and its record of producing some of the finest champions in the sport, along with having many diverse breeds. With a beautiful, mild climate all year long and soil rich with limestone calcium for strong bones, Ocala/Marion County is home to more horses than anywhere else in the country.
- **How:** Promoting Ocala through our branded collateral, social media, our website, blogs using the trademark Horse Capital of the World® will allow us to continue sharing the key differentiators with all tourism segments we market and sell to.

**GOAL: Develop a shoulder season campaign with “Discover Your Inner Florida” tagline and second highest tested logo from brand roll out for lower travel season. Market it based on research data related to trip planning cycles to impact low travel periods.**

- **Why:** Ocala/Marion County will advance the shoulder season months that show opportunity for tourism economic impact throughout Ocala/ Marion County.
- **How:** Our destination’s equestrian and outdoor ecotourism drive the majority of our year-round visitation. Through identifying seasonal key markets based on volume, visitation index and visitation opportunity, we will utilize the new brand toolkit. Using the tagline “Discover Your Inner Florida”, creative marketing will be developed to inspire travel in non-traditional and innovative ways to help generate strong year-round visitation.

**GOAL: Develop tool for front desk (at hotels) QR code to website/download App.**

- **Why:** Visitors always want to have front line staff show them maps of the area. Having a laminated map that can be on each tourism partner’s front desk will allow our industry to provide directions and suggestions for places to stay, eat or visit. Embedding QR codes on these maps to the destination App will allow guests to have a quick resource during their stay to find pertinent information for their vacation.
- **How:** Determine information needed to create design, work with vendor to produce and deliver to hotel lobbies. Educate industry on App and map opportunities to advance this business offering.

**GOAL: Implementing destination eNewsletter.**

- **Why:** This would be a powerful resource for future visitors and residents. From 09/21 to 09/22 there were over 2,500 guests sign up for eNewsletters. eNewsletters are a key component to aid in travel planning for new and returning guests. By offering a quarterly eNewsletter, visitors will be made aware of all the events and activities that can be done during their visit. Complete with beautiful images and text that share valuable content and visual appeal with quick accessibility to social media channels, blog information and the opportunity to download the robust and comprehensive destination App, a strong eNewsletter will further ensure that visitors will want to open it again and again and ultimately share it with friends and family.
- **How:** Work with website agency to create eNewsletter distribution process, utilize website newsletter sign-ups.

## Social Media

### **GOAL: Develop YouTube playlist for sporting events.**

- **Why:** Sports venues are an essential part of the marketing mix for Ocala/Marion County. Many event planners need detailed information about past successfully hosted events in order to consider a destination. This playlist would essentially give us a place to post visually appealing closing tools from our destination events.
- **How:** Partner with content creators during sporting events to produce recap videos showcasing the event venues and our varied facilities.

## Website/Mobile Application

### **GOAL: Website enhancement to sports, meetings, events (sales in general).**

- **Why:** Ocala/Marion County offers an abundance of event hosting opportunities and has the potential for regional, state, national and international identity enhancement. An event planner website portal will allow niche audiences to have pages specially designed with information that caters to them.
- **How:** Partner with website agency to create an advanced branded sports and events experience within ocalamarion.com, include appropriate logos on relevant pages, add funding request button/tab to sports page and meetings page, updated sports event photo gallery and videos to show key venues such as Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training (FAST), the World Equestrian Center (WEC), Florida Horse Park (FHP), Rotary, etc.

### **GOAL: Build partner portal to house industry resources.**

- **Why:** Building a partner portal offering a one stop shop for research, hotel data, archived information, FAQs and tutorials will help to share key tools that can help our local business thrive.
- **How:** Work with website agency and CRM developer on design/implementation, with staff providing and managing the content going forward.

### **GOAL: Printer friendly events sheets for distribution to visitors.**

- **Why:** Ocala/Marion County has amazing events year-round that make it the perfect destination to attend events and then explore all the great opportunities that await guests and extend their length of stay. Our tourism research shows that our special events are the number one reason people find us and printer friendly, digital event sheets for our welcome center and to our tourism industry partners will allow us to readily promote our numerous family-friendly events and festivals that take place throughout the year. This will also be useful to send to visitors who request a vacation guide as a response to our eNewsletters. Frontline staff at accommodations and attractions will also have this tool to help them guide visitors to know “what’s happening this week”.
- **How:** Work with website agency to develop template and execute.

**GOAL: Enhance Destination App to create a more robust visitor experience.**

- **Why:** Technology provides an ease of streaming information directly to the public and our future mobile App will allow for flexibility in changing the information being broadcasted as the nature of our business is constantly changing, cuts cost of printing, environmentally friendly. Placing multiple locations (web mapping) of the different points of interest for niche audiences will enhance user experiences with insider content and further allow users to click, pan and zoom for further information about the destination.
- **How:** Destination App is in development, but will continue to grow for opportunities for future enhancements to be reviewed annually as part of the contract.

**GOAL: Develop a photo library for media partners to leverage the brand and photoshoot conducted in FY 2023.**

- **Why:** In addition to the brand toolkit, having robust imagery and videos to share with tourism partners will allow us to further our reach in showcasing the county's best tourism assets to help partners reach their target markets of leisure visitors, meeting planners and sports event planners. By working with our partners to align community messaging and imagery, this will allow us to advance our marketing reach collectively. Tourism industry partners will be able to have access through a web portal that offers a library of images, videos and all our branded marketing tools and assets.
- **How:** Work with website agency on website placement and download processes. Staff will select photos and determine how to ensure proper credit is provided to county by users.

**GOAL: Co-authors for blogs/destinations insiders**

- **Why:** Public relations has evolved and has made a paradigm shift with influencers and destination insiders. These new public relations professionals are a type of microcelebrity who document their lives in exchange for compensation and can help to shape public opinion by interacting directly with destinations. Known in the public relations world as "Influencers" this group of journalists encompass bloggers, adventurers, story tellers, and other social media advanced users who view their followers as fans.
- **How:** By proactively engaging in this new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' our popularity on the web using technologies like video, imagery, blogs, and multiple social media sites will further help us tell the Ocala/Marion County story and reach new levels of visibility to new audiences. Working closely with our media planning agency and local "insiders" to develop content will also improve our SEO rankings.

**GOAL: Revamp FAQ page to be more reflective of guests' needs.**

- **Why:** Having a robust and updated FAQ page on OcalaMarion.com will allow for us to have an organized collection of valuable information related to what our customers ask about various destination products and services. To further improve customer experience, FAQs will help to provide detailed information that can help customers make a purchasing decision 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This resource page will also be of great value to industry partners as their frontline staff will have answers at their fingertips.
- **How:** Update content on existing FAQ page to serve most relevant and frequently requested information for visitors and potential visitors.

**GOAL: Page on OcalaMarion.com for Marion County Fact Sheet.**

- **Why:** This would be very useful information for people who are considering moving to Marion County. OMCVCB receives a lot of inquiries and referrals for relocation information. It would be one more courtesy that the OMCVCB provides, not only to visitors or potential relations, but to our citizens as well. We already have a file for "Relocation" and it would be just need to be digitized and mirrored onto our website.
- **How:** Work with website agency to build out page and appropriate content with links from strategic alliance partners that offer this information as well.

**GOAL: Advance culinary/agritourism tourism through App/website.**

- **Why:** Today's culture of culinary tourism has recently evolved to encompass activities beyond the plate and Ocala/Marion County is home to several farms that offer amazing experiences and food. Advancing key messaging for agritourism and culinary tourism marketing will allow us to reach niche audiences looking for this experience and will help to cultivate community awareness and pride in our local food offerings and traditions.
- **How:** With rich visuals and aesthetics playing a major role in telling this foodie story, using the new and exciting photography and videography captured in FY 2023 is key. These assets can be pushed out on marketing and social media platforms to educate our county's abundant agritourism identity. Our growing culinary experiences will help to advance farm to table and our abundant outdoor exploration of agritourism offerings will serve to further show the heart and soul of our incredible destination. Advance the promotion of culinary experiences like food tours, farm to table dining, food festivals, and farmers markets.

## Product Development

Ocala/Marion County has a successful history with group market segments attracted by equine related activities, amateur sports and small meetings. Leisure tourism visitors are attracted by the diversity of the nature-based product and all related activity, charm and the flourishing and ever-evolving equine experience.

It is clear that while Ocala/Marion County has a multitude of assets that are being promoted to gain market share, more can always be done. The OMCVCB can leverage the newly updated brand to create appropriate new marketing material to present these opportunities, while maintaining current destination offerings and developing opportunities for new attractions, programs and support services.

**GOAL: Work with Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to execute installation of CAF with new diverging-diamond interchange for north gateway.**

- **Why:** Gateway signage will already be implemented at the county-lines and the flyover on I-57. This will create the same sense of place in conjunction with the construction of the new interchange.
- **How:** Continue to work with FDOT and Kimley-Horn to ensure appropriate permits and funding are in place.

**GOAL: Enhance cycling related content specific to trails on destination website.**

- **Why:** Cycling and mountain biking is a niche audience that Ocala/Marion County can build upon the marketing from an ecotourism angle. Niche audiences need content relevant to their interests and the destination website can help to provide that content especially providing a one-stop-shop for what cycling trails are available.
- **How:** Build out more information on the biking page on the website to make trail resources more available that accumulates all the various trail resources as trail maps are sourced from US Forest Service, Marion County, City of Ocala, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and Ocala Mountain Bike Association. Partner with trusted sources and content creators to co-author materials.

**GOAL: Develop and implement assets showcasing cycling opportunities in the destination.**

- **Why:** Advancing key differentiators such as the world-renowned Santos Bike trail and the Cross Florida Greenway trails that navigate all through Marion County will help us to cultivate a cycling community to increase visibility on all other niche travel audiences we strive to reach. There is an opportunity to enhance international travel as biking/cycling is a key global sport. Cycling is an activity for all ages, riders are diverse and travel both with their families and in groups to take advantage of adventure biking, mountain biking clubs, bike races, festivals, and other events that they can participate in around their cycling adventures.
- **How:** Focus on the infrastructure that already exists in Ocala/Marion County to compete with other destinations that claim to be Cycling Capital of the World. Research grant programs to fund signage. This can include low lying trail/biking maps that are state wide and in state welcome centers. Research what our current infrastructure needs to elevate to next level biking/hiking/tri-durance events. Research the opportunity to obtain recertification form the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) as a Bronze Level Trail system at Santos and other applicable parts of Marion County.

**GOAL: Enhance all-terrain vehicle (ATV)/off highway vehicle (OHV) off-roading related content specific to trails and “how-to” guides on the destination website.**

- **Why:** Off-roading is a very niche experience that Ocala/Marion County can market from an ecotourism angle. However, trusted information about how to safely and appropriately experience this exhilarating pastime is hard to find.
- **How:** Build out more information on the website and App to make trail resources more available. Partner with appropriate entities to ensure that requirements are outlined for visitors. Partner with trusted sources and content creators to co-author materials.

**GOAL: Develop a culinary tourism dining days program to augment visitation during need periods.**

- **Why:** Dining is an essential driving tourism component that attracts significant expenditure from tourists. Recent advances in technology have allowed tourists to share their travel dining-related experiences on many online platforms, such as TripAdvisor, Airbnb, and Yelp. Destinations like Orlando and Miami have created great economic impact from similar initiatives that have created year over year success. Implementing a dining experience program for our visitors and residents will allow the OMCVCB to create a celebration showcasing our destination’s delicious and award-winning culinary scene. Our hotel portfolio currently offers a small selection of full-service accommodations, therefore creating awareness of our destination’s culinary options through social and PR initiatives shows consumers Ocala-Marion does offer a culinary experience and raises awareness to travelers looking for a destination with one-of-a-kind cuisine.
- **How:** Develop culinary tourism dining days, through industry meetings to determine future promotions and marketing initiatives.



## Ocala/Marion County Brand Experience & Visitors Center

Providing information and other services to visitors already in the destination helps ensure return visits and that the community is tourism-ready by leading in the development of customer service programs. A visitor's center is often the only tangible experience directly rendered to the visitors by the Tourist Development staff. With that in mind, there are opportunities to create an advanced destination experience as a result of the brick and mortar facility that houses the department.

### **GOAL: Updated exterior to reflect new brand/mural.**

- **Why:** All elements that our tourism related will continue to be updated and refined. From the welcome center located in downtown Ocala to all of the sales, marketing and collateral that the destination uses to sell Marion County. Continued destination branding will strive to identify our communities strongest and most compelling assets in the eyes of our prospective and current visitors and our residents. Continuing the momentum of building on our story that makes us stand out from our competitors and running this consistent narrative through all our marketing, sales and communication will continue to advance us with both ROI and ROO.
- **How:** Partner with Marion County Facilities Maintenance, City of Ocala and related vendors to execute all upgrades (painting, signage, landscaping, hardscaping, etc.)

### **GOAL: Add digital display/kiosks to lobby**

- **Why:** In the tourism industry, digital kiosks continue to increase and play a relevant role with advanced components and functionality. Since these technological evolutions have helped to change consumer behavior they have also worked to revolutionize the way we look at communication, which is now more direct, simple, autonomous and, above all, interactive. To support the rebranding of the building with the evolved Ocala/Marion County logo and to further support all the dynamic features in our tourism App, we will work to further maximize information capacity and contribute to greater productivity, quickness and quality of service with a welcome center digital kiosk. The interactive kiosk will strive to work as an alternative to leaflets and maps, and will provide our visitors with real-time information and the ability to print things if they so choose. This will not only increase our communication and interaction vehicles in the welcome center, but will also help to contribute to sustainability. As the digital kiosk trend grows, we will begin to use this digital information to encourage walk in tourists to have hands on exploration and virtual tour opportunities that will ultimately work to give even more charm to the welcome center as a "must see" place to visit while guests are in town.
- **How:** Partner with Marion County Information Technology on technology and equipment solutions.

**GOAL: Enhance security/line of sight for the benefit of staff safety.**

- **Why:** The front door is an issue of security not being able to see who or what is entering the building until they are through the door already.
- **How:** Explore options, such as, bringing the wall back (by the door leading downstairs) and making a wider opening foyer or utilizing the front door entrance (facing the boulevard) and doing away with the front steps to make it ADA compliant making it handicap accessible. Work with Facilities Management to review options and discuss solutions for budget inclusion. To further ensure safety, work with Risk and Benefits to create and escape route for a potential emergency situation.

**GOAL: Further the promotion of the Bruce Mozart lobby display.**

- **Why:** Creating blogs and press releases will inform future guests that they will have something additional to explore inside the visitor center to complement our abundant information/brochures about the destination. This helps us share the historical voice of our community and to provide historical opportunities to continue to grow in Marion County.
- **How:** Social posts, blogs and press releases.

## Operations and Policies

Working with appropriate county departments to ensure the policies are evaluated and refined to ensure that business decisions are made appropriately. This is especially relevant as the needs of the customers, as well as consumer behavior constantly evolve.

**GOAL: Develop process to debrief key industry partners post sales missions/tradeshows to ensure leads are distributed appropriately and follow-up outreach is conducted.**

- **Why:** Ocala/Marion County benefits from an engaged tourism industry. These industry partners are key in converting leads into closed business, since they are the ones that have the facilities, accommodations, etc., therefore it is important to have a timely and equitable process for reviewing business opportunities when sales staff returns from sales missions/tradeshows.
- **How:** Develop a process that will allow the sales team to quickly share leads to move prospects further through the sales funnel and ultimately close business.

**GOAL: Develop process to debrief key team members post conference to share knowledge.**

- **Why:** The tourism industry is heavily influence by outside factors which means opportunities for continuing education are always available, but not all staff can attend these tradeshow/conferences due to budget and time constraints. Having more information about these opportunities will assist with budget process as well.
- **How:** Develop a simple debrief report format that will be mandatory for staff upon return from these conferences.

**GOAL: Develop vehicle sign out procedure.**

- **Why:** As our staff grows, so does our reliance on the county issued vehicles. It is important to ensure appreciate maintenance and fueling, as well as plan for any “loaner” vehicles as needed.
- **How:** Develop sign-out program that will be housed where keys are kept to ensure compliance.

**GOAL: Refine process for staff meeting note keeping.**

- **Why:** Many departmental roles have overlapping projects where various team members complete part of the project. It is important to have actionable meeting agenda and post meeting notes to ensure everyone is aware and working toward the same goals.
- **How:** Utilize OneNote to gather real time notes.

**GOAL: Develop standard operation guidelines for leave time requests/approvals.**

- **Why:** As our staff grows, so do the demands of time out of the office for travel, as well as planned time off. As a result, it is important to ensure coverage of office so that daily operations can occur as normal without interruptions to visitors or residents. Additionally, adequate staffing minimizes the risk of having too few employees in the building in the event of an emergency.
- **How:** Develop department policy that reflects the Empowering Marion for Success II Plan and meets the needs of the department with consideration for travel and meetings that may occur away from the office.

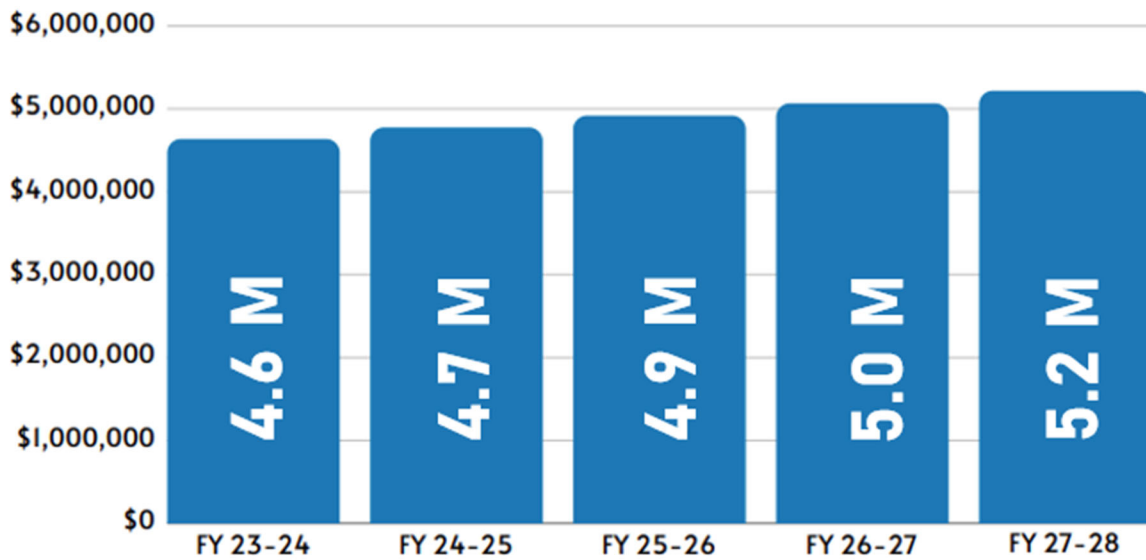
**GOAL: Develop a travel and entertainment policy that allows for a more competitive, marketing organization approach to business and reflects the intent of Florida State Statute 125.0104.**

- **Why:** The most successful VCBs in Florida that operate as county departments, have specific travel and entertainment policies that allow them to function appropriately as marketing organizations. Florida State Statute 125.0104 establishes the authority for counties to allow for expenditures on travel and entertainment that is different than the statutes guiding general government operations.
- **How:** With the future updates to the Procurement Policies and Procedures Manual, work with County Administration, County Legal, Procurement and the Marion County Clerk of the Court to develop an appropriate travel and entertainment policy.

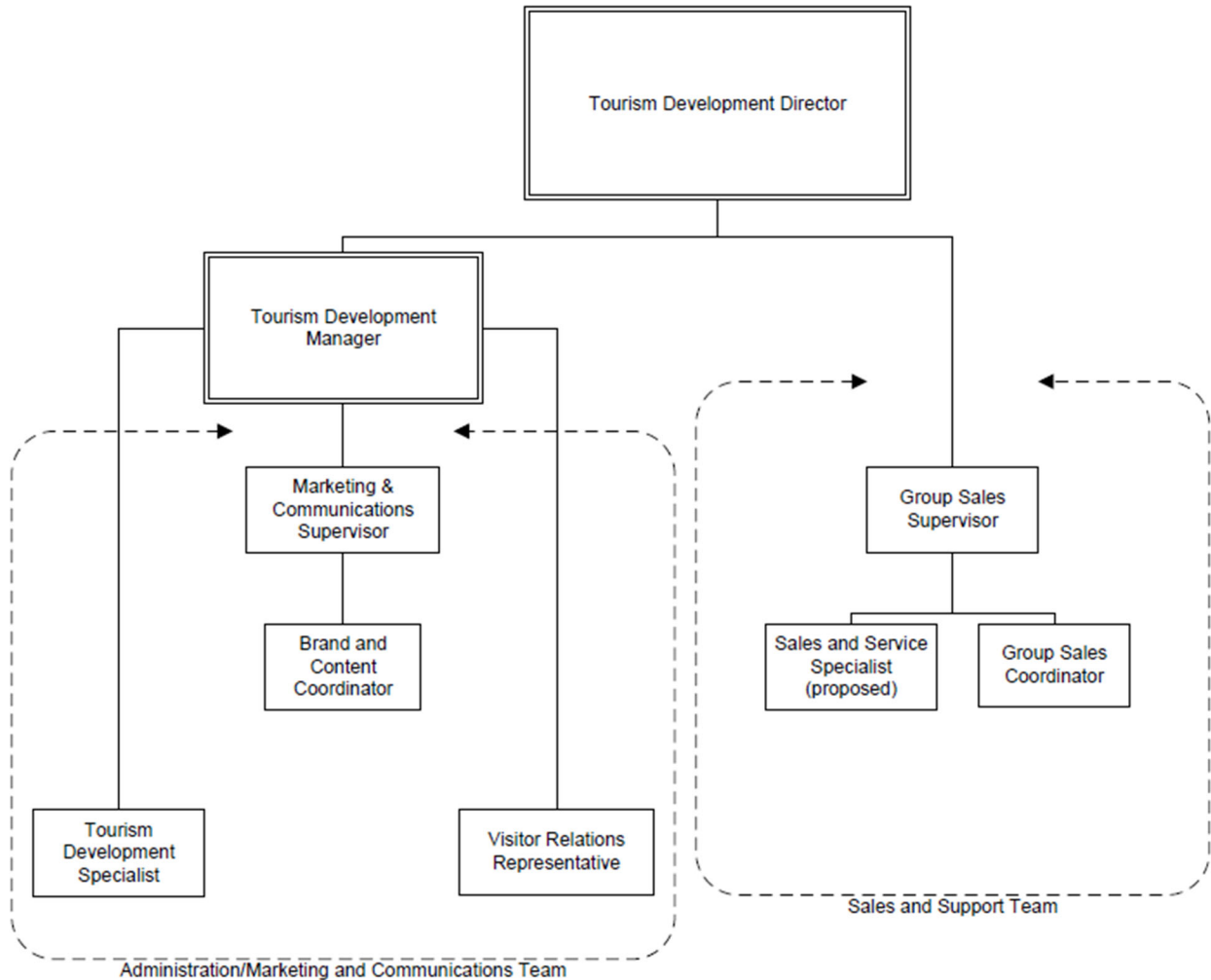
## Future State

### Revenue Projections

Projected Revenue Growth with 3% Year Over Year Growth Pattern  
(less 5% per Budget Guidelines)



## Proposed Organizational Chart by FY 2028



### Sales and Support Team

This functional group would be shifted to be under the direct purview of the Tourism Development Director to further ensure that as the tourism industry shifts, key updates relevant to sales and services are readily implemented.

### Administration/Marketing and Communications Team

This functional group would be combined since outside consultants are managed by the Tourism Development Manager and work heavily with the Marketing and Communications team.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Beyond the six (6) key elements that were identified in the operational plan, the OMCVCB looks toward leadership, the tourism industry and community at-large to ensure the focal points for responsibilities of destination management at the local level are achieved.

This operational plan serves as a framework for the starting point of long-range tourism plan conversations, rather than the end point for discussion of the prioritization of opportunities, resources and efforts to address gaps. Operationally, the OMCVCB staff are poised to move forward with the tasks outlined in this document, additionally the OMCVCB will contract a strategist to further evaluate items that are beyond the scope of the operational plan.

Strategic insights are garnered through the means with which they are gathered. A mix of methods (quantitative and qualitative, primary and secondary) is the best approach to develop a depth of understanding of a destination and its strengths and challenges. The strategist will be able to draw in stakeholders from leadership, our tourism industry and the community through interviews and workshop sessions to develop a detailed understanding of the destination and its nuances. This will lay the groundwork for recommendations that will be the sum of the works of the groups that provide feedback. The overall collective buy-in will drive the creation and realization of those agreed upon goals and objectives.

The development of a long-range tourism strategic plan, done in coordination with the Empowering Marion County for Success II Plan, will further ensure that strategic efforts are aligned for efficiency and best results and will work to take the OMCVCB through the next five (5) years and set the baseline vision for the years beyond.

