

# Application Summary

**Application:** FY25 DMO Plan

**Applicant:**

**Funding opportunity:** FY25 DMO Plan

## Application Responses

**Organization Name:** Visit Billings (Billings CVB)

**First Name:** Alex

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**City:** Billings

**State:** Montana

**Zip:** 59101

**Funding Opportunity:** FY25 DMO Plan

**Amount Requested:** 536,190

## General Description Information

**1. Describe your destination (who you are, who you wish to attract and why would they come) addressing your strengths, opportunities, and potential challenges.:**

**1a. Destination:**

### ABOUT BILLINGS

Billings, population 120,000, is the county seat of Yellowstone County (pop. 170,000) and the largest city in the state. The city was named after Frederick H. Billings who was a president of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The city's nickname is the "Magic City" due to the rapid growth experienced from being a railroad town in the 1880's. Today, Billings is also known as Montana's Trailhead as it's the region's economic hub. Tourism is a major economic driver for Billings along with agriculture, energy, healthcare, finance, and education.

Popular attractions include the Rimrocks which surround much of the city offering incredible views of the region. The Rimrocks, or Rims, run north and east of the downtown core and rise 500-800 feet tall depending on where you stand. Four Dances National Recreation Area, Swords-Rimrock Park, the Skyline Trail, and Zimmerman Park offer vantage points of the city and the South Hills, as well as the Bighorn, Pryor, and Beartooth Mountains. On clear days, in the right spots along the Rims, you can also see the Crazy, Big Snowy, and Bull Mountains. The elevation of Billings is 3,126 feet above sea level.

Conveniently positioned in southeast Montana as the largest city between Calgary and Denver, Spokane and Minneapolis, Billings proudly serves a trade area of more than 500,000 people. Unparalleled access to some of the most scenic and historic places in the United States including Yellowstone National Park, Bighorn Canyon, national monuments, and the Beartooth Scenic Byway, help make Billings an idyllic destination for connecting to the best that Montana and parts of the west offer.

## **ABOUT VISIT BILLINGS**

### **VISIT BILLINGS**

Visit Billings is the brand that represents the Billings Tourism Business Improvement District (BTBID) and the Billings Convention and Visitors Bureau (BCVB). Both organizations are managed by the Billings Chamber of Commerce. The Visit Billings team is committed to growing visitation at Montana's Trailhead through sales and marketing initiatives. The Visit Billings' mission is to generate room nights for lodging facilities in the city of Billings by effectively marketing the region as a preferred travel destination. Visit Billings is the DLO for Billings, Montana.

### **WHAT IS A DLO?**

As a destination leadership organization (DLO), Visit Billings is the backbone of the tourism industry for Billings. A DLO protects and fosters the local visitor economy through promotion, marketing, destination management, cautious strategies, and long-term initiatives like air service development. DLOs exist to promote destinations, grow visitation to a place, and are also responsible for attracting or supporting events, large and small, that increase visitation to a city. For Billings, the Visit Billings staff is considered an extension of its stakeholders (lodging partners) working to provide sales, services, and marketing support to the local hospitality industry and tourism partners.

Visit Billings works domestically and internationally to enhance tourism for the city in the leisure, meetings, group tour, and sporting events markets. A DLO, like Visit Billings, does this by increasing awareness of the destination and by engaging with meeting and conference planners, sports events owners and promoters, the media, consumers in both the drive and flight markets, and tour operators. Under leadership of the BTBID and Chamber/CVB boards, as well as the State of Montana and the City of Billings, the Visit Billings team executes priorities with research-driven marketing and sales programs. Strategies highlight outdoor adventures, incredible landscapes, arts and culture, culinary and nightlife offerings, proximity to national points of interest like the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, the Beartooth Scenic Byway, and Yellowstone National Park, as well as the community's meeting and sports facilities which foster certain markets.

Additionally, 89% of non-Montana residents plan to return to the state in the next 24 months (ITRR, 2022). This repeat visitation component is key to continued economic growth, too. Repeat visitation is a priority for Visit Billings and is fostered by ensuring a positive visitor experience. Focusing on in-market customer service training efforts like the Certified Tourism Ambassador Program (CTA), championing Certified Autism Destination (CAD) and accessibility support, celebrating human differences, and elevating the power of tourism to residents, all assist with this priority.

In some parts of Montana, over-visitation overwhelms conversations about the tourism and travel industry. Billings is an amazing travel destination where businesses appreciate the visitor. Visit Billings strategies are welcoming and aim to help support visitors and residents alike.

### **FUNDING**

Visit Billings is funded primarily through the Billings Tourism Business Improvement District (BTBID) and through a portion of the State Lodging Facility Use Tax. The BTBID assesses \$2.00 per occupied room per night on all hotels and motels in the city of Billings with six (6) or more sleeping rooms. The BTBID funds stay local for the marketing and promotion of the city as a destination, to grow

visitation, and support local businesses and stakeholders. In fall of 2023, the BTBID Board of Directors voted to increase the BTBID assessment by \$2.00/occupied room/night for a total assessment amount of \$4.00 per occupied room per night, effective July 1, 2024. This increased amount will be realized in the FY26 budget. A portion of the increased budget will help execute Visit Billings initiatives outlined in the 2024-2027 Visit Billings Strategic Plan. All funds help Billings remain a competitive destination.

Additionally, there are two Montana taxes imposed on users of an overnight lodging facility (such as a hotel, motel, campground, dude ranch, short-term rental, and/or guest ranch), which are collected by the facility and remitted to the Montana Department of Revenue. These two taxes are a 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax and a 4% Lodging Facility Sales Tax, for a combined 8% lodging tax.

### **1b. Strengths:**

The destination boasts a citywide brewery district with much of it experienced in historic downtown, restaurants featuring local flavors and James Beard finalist chefs, Montana's only zoo and botanical park, contemporary and western museums, galleries, several theaters, music venues, outdoor community venues, boutique retail, and annual festivals.

Billings is home to nearly 50 miles of multi-use trails and 24 miles of bike lanes including the newly celebrated Skyline Trail stretching along HWY3 and the Rims. From the Rimrocks to the Yellowstone River, which is the longest free-flowing river in the lower 48, travelers experience the magic of Montana's Trailhead. Billings sits near the intersection of Interstates 90 and 94 and offers a first-class, newly renovated and expanded airport with numerous daily flights to major U.S. cities via Delta, United, American Airlines, Allegiant, Sun Country, and Alaska Airlines. Regional carrier CapeAir also plays an important regional role in air travel and connectivity between Billings and eastern Montana rural communities.

Amazing summer weather and snowy winters with bluebird days offer ample opportunity for outdoor enthusiasts to experience adventures during all four seasons. Nearly 4,500 hotel rooms, flexible meeting space, and sports venues are ready to accommodate any traveler or planner's needs and preferences.

### **1c. Opportunities:**

There are nearly 500 new guest rooms coming on-line in Billings in the next 36 months as several new hotels open in Billings. This capacity is exciting, but equally challenging as visitation to the market will need to grow to sustain room demand and average daily rate (ADR).

What does tourism look like in Billings today? On average, Billings hosts 2.6M visitors annually who travel to the city for business demands, medical needs, and leisure offerings. This can include vacations, weekend getaways, meetings, conferences, appointments, sports events, or tours. Those 2.6M visitors typically spend an average of \$621M in Billings businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, retailers, attractions, campgrounds, outfitters, guides, etc. (Destination Analysts, 2018).

How can tourism grow and strengthen? Well currently, Billings is only playing host to 20.8% of travelers to Montana (ITRR, 2022). In 2022, 12.5M people visited Montana and spent \$5.82B. Billings has the capacity to responsibly host more annual visitors. There are

54 hotels and motels (the most of any Montana city), hundreds of restaurants and retailers, and dozens of attractions open for business along with venues like MetraPark, Alberta Bair Theater, and the Pub Station hosting events weekly for locals and visitors alike.

### **What else is in it for local residents?**

Tourism reduces the average tax burden on every Montana household by more than \$721/year.

-1 in 13 Montana workers is supported by out-of-state travel.

-Non-Montana resident visitors offer \$1.4B in direct employee compensation.

-Non-Montana resident visitors support 44,000 Montana jobs.

-Non-Montana resident visitors contribute \$315M in state and local taxes, much of which goes to the state's General Funds to support budgets for the State of Montana and numerous programs and state agencies.

Tourism's impact on Billings' economy is often understated. But, the work Visit Billings contributes, as laid out in this plan, increases the city's competitive edge against other destinations, creates quality employment options, stimulates economic growth, generally cultivates a vibrant community where people want to visit and live, and builds a tourism brand that can elevate community pride.

*More than ever, we must prioritize the focus on Billings' tourism industry.*

Looking within the destination, and to local residents, Visit Billings will initiate and establish fresh efforts in FY25 that offer a greater understanding of the relevance of tourism to the resident and the business owner which ultimately builds resiliency for the tourism industry, tourism partners, and the local economy.

With strategic and competitive investment of state lodging facility-use tax and tourism business improvement district funds, Visit Billings will continue to lead the destination in marketing and management efforts to foster visitor growth to the city, educate residents and city leaders about the power of tourism, and ensure the industry remains an influential tool in economic growth for the city for decades to come.

### **1d. Potential Challenges:**

Traveler motivations, behaviors, and financial considerations have shifted. This creates new challenges and opportunities for Visit Billings staff and leadership as well as tourism partners and stakeholders.

Previous research has identified challenges to the local tourism industry such as public safety, air service, workforce, and city funding as well as facility offerings compared to the competitive set.

As the destination evolves, entities like Visit Billings, the Billings Chamber of Commerce, Big Sky Economic Development, Downtown Billings Partnership, and elected leadership are engaged in collaborations as to how the city should address critical issues such as product development, workforce development, public safety, housing, and improving the quality of life for Billings residents which in turn impacts visitors.

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**2. Briefly describe how your destination aligns with the Montana brand or describe the Brand**

**strategy for your DMO.:**

**DESTINATION MT & MARKETING MONTANA**

Destination MT is the office of tourism for the State of Montana. Under Department of Commerce leadership, the Destination MT team markets Montana as part of a cohesive Montana brand that also works to sustain and grow Montana’s economy. From marketing strategies including promotional campaigns, and major programs like Made in Montana and the Montana Film Office, the Destination MT staff creates awareness about the state as a place to visit and do business.

Visit Billings appreciates the support from Destination MT and looks forward to more opportunities to partner including air service growth, eastern Montana initiatives, and Visit Billings supporting the State in potential capacities.

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**Destination Marketing:**

**Destination Management:**

**Destination Stewardship:**

**Destination Development:**

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**3a. Define your audience(s) (demographic, geographic and psycho-graphic):**

**FOSTER VISITOR GROWTH**

**INCREASE LEISURE VISITATION**

**GOAL: DRIVE YEAR-ROUND VISITATION BY INCREASING AWARENESS FOR BILLINGS AS AN IDEAL TRAVEL DESTINATION, WITH BIG SKIES AND OUTDOOR ADVENTURE.**

Leisure travel marketing strategies remain a top priority for the organization as leisure visitation supports all Visit Billings stakeholders (hotels, motels, and campgrounds) as well as important tourism partners including restaurants, retailers, attractions, and event owners. Regional and national marketing initiatives are designed to inspire diverse audiences, including road trippers, outdoor enthusiasts, history buffs, arts and culture enthusiasts, and foodies – to name a few. The goal is to showcase itineraries that highlight our destination’s unique identity as well as the broader region, emphasizing events, must-see attractions, and the personalities that make Billings a special place to visit.

Billings’ strength of location along the I-90 and I-94 corridor makes it a pivotal point between the Badlands, Black Hills, and Yellowstone National Park. Facilitating these travelers through Visit Billings national and regional marketing campaigns as well as attending leisure travel shows are important strategies in the overall goal to increase leisure visitation to Montana’s Trailhead.

**ADDITIONAL EFFORTS INCLUDE:**

**ADVANCE SPORTS SALES & SUPPORT**

Visit Billings sports sales and servicing staff are responsible for booking sporting events, assisting owners and organizers in efforts to grow existing events, and ensuring event servicing success. Sports events attract athletes and fans to the city who spend money in hotels, restaurants, retailers, and attractions equating to economic impact. In FY25, sports staff will focus on selling Billings as an

ideal sports destination for the sports categories that appropriately suit the destination's facilities and accommodations best. Through cohesive sales efforts and a high level of customer service, Visit Billings Sports will contribute to the economic vitality of the city and county.

### **RECRUIT MEETINGS & CONFERENCES**

Visit Billings staff strive to be innovative in meeting the needs of meeting planners and incentivizing decision makers to choose Billings as their meeting destination. Staff will work closely with meeting hotel sales staff and managers of offsite venues to inspire and orient meeting professionals with thoughtful sales strategies to book meetings and conferences in Billings for 2025, 2026, and 2027. This segment can continue to have a strong economic impact on the community. Additionally, visitor services are key to helping planners execute meetings successfully once Billings is chosen. Visitor service efforts are a top priority as part of the sales process, and oftentimes, these efforts are the reason planners choose Billings.

### **GROW GROUP TOUR TRAVEL**

Montana is a top destination for domestic or international private and group tours. Top attractions include nearby Little Bighorn Battlefield and Pompeys Pillar National Monuments, as well as the regional proximity to Yellowstone National Park. In 2022, according to the American Bus Association (ABA) Foundation, the overall sales in Yellowstone County for motorcoach tourists totaled \$5.18M. The ABA Foundation's report estimates that Yellowstone County served a total of 150,215 motorcoach group tourists on day trips and an additional 10,418 group tourists on overnight stays. This is a total of 160,633 group tour visitors in 2022 just from the motorcoach industry. This is coming off of the 2020 hit to this industry due to the pandemic. Additionally, international inbound travel was brought to a halt in March 2020. While it has since partially recovered, it is not expected to fully recover until 2025.

In this recovery, Visit Billings is part of the process of making sure tour operators fostering their businesses and clientele see Billings as a not-to-miss destination and part of the Great American Road Trip stretching from Badlands to Yellowstone. While Montana has seen an increase in international travel particularly with fly/drive visitors (visitors who fly into major cities like Salt Lake City or Denver and drive across the region to execute their itineraries), there is much more room to foster this market for Billings, which is an FY25 priority.

### **STRENGTHEN THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE**

Visit Billings leadership and staff always want visitors to have inspiring, enriching experiences during their stay. As a destination, Montana's Trailhead encourages locals to have meaningful interactions and conversations with out-of-town guests. Exceptional service yields repeat visitation, extended stays, and emotional connections to the city.

The Visit Billings team continues to offer valuable programming to stakeholders, tourism partners, and citizens. The Billings Tourism Ambassador Program provides access to a nationally recognized certification (Certified Tourism Ambassador) for customer-facing employees, managers, or anyone with a desire to promote our city as a preferred travel destination. This programming provides a holistic view of the local tourism industry while inspiring personal connections with visitors.

Additionally, Visit Billings is leading destination efforts to offer autism-friendly travel options and accessibility information for visitors who may need additional resources or support during the travel planning process or while they're exploring the sights and

activities they've selected to fill an itinerary. ZooMontana, the Historic Billings Depot, the Boothill Inn & Suites, the Billings Chamber, and the United Way of Yellowstone County have already joined this effort with Visit Billings

### **3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :**

Visit Billings relies on several research partners to ensure proper execution of strategies and priorities. To track and measure campaigns, Visit Billings staff, in partnership with agency of record Sunshine & Bourbon and Goodway Group, monitor the following data insights:

Goodway Group Managed-Service Media and Analytics

Smith Travel Research (STR) for Room Demand, Occupancy, and Average Daily Rate

Zartico - Geolocation Data

Affinity Business Solutions for Spending Trends (partner of Zartico)

Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR)

State Lodging Tax and Tourism Business Improvement District collections

Destinations International Impact Calculators

Future Partners

Some of the Insights for the Warm Season Planning Efforts:

State of the American Traveler, March 2024, from Future Partners

Expectations of a recession happening in the next six months continue to dwindle, according to Future Partners (formerly Destination Analysts). This February 2024 marks the fourth consecutive month of a decrease in the percentage of American travelers who agree or strongly agree that they expect the U.S. will enter an economic recession in the near term (41.8%).

Excitement for travel continues to maintain the high levels we have been seeing over the last year, at 8.0 on a scale from 0-10. American travelers anticipate an average of 3.4 leisure trips in the next 12 months. Nearly two-thirds of Millennial travelers (62.6%) say that leisure travel will be a high or extremely high priority for them in the next three months.

Travel in general being too expensive is the most cited reason Americans did not travel more in the last six months (35.9%). Personal finances dropped down to the second-most cited deterrent at 35.1% of American travelers. Travelers in the West region of the U.S. were notably more likely than other regions to cite travel prices (41.3%) and/or gasoline prices (29.3%) as deterrents to recent travel.

When asked if convention travelers expect their company will be sending people to travel more, the same, or less for business travel in the next year compared to the last 12 months, the majority said they expect that people in their company will travel about the same for business (58.2%), over one-in five (21.8%) expect that they will see more or much more business travel in the next year. Notably, this was higher among Gen Z (31.0%) and Millennial (33.5%) convention

travelers.

Half of Millennial convention travelers (50.1%) say that they decide alone which work-related conventions/conferences they attend, while older generations were more likely to say that their employer makes this decision for them (26.4% of Gen Z, 20.5% of Millennials, 34.3% of Gen X, 30.6% of Baby Boomers). This is key knowledge for destinations looking to attract convention travelers.

Millennials are the most likely generation to reconsider traveling to a destination for a conference or convention due to a destination's political issues. Nearly six in ten (57.2%) of Millennial convention travelers agree or strongly agree that they will only travel to a convention if the destination aligns with their personal/political values.

January 2024 Future Partners research found that 13% of American travelers report having used AI to help plan their trips in the past 12 months, with the top-cited tools being ChatGPT, TripAdvisor's AI-powered assistant and TripPlanner.ai. However, 59% of American travelers predict that AI will be commonly used to plan trips by year's end.

Future Partners February 2024 research found that streaming services and podcasts have surged in popularity among travelers in recent years, with Amazon Prime, Netflix, Disney+, and Hulu the most commonly used with regularity, and platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts serving as primary destinations for podcast consumption. The majority of travelers still engage with traditional media channels, such as magazines and news outlets. People, Travel & Leisure, and AARP are the most commonly reported magazines while television networks like ABC, CBS, Fox, and CNN remain staples in the average traveler's media diet.

When asked about the most effective means of inspiring travel, travelers report email campaigns, search engine marketing, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok reign supreme. As with media consumption habits, offline resources - particularly travel magazines - still play an important role in travel planning, with over 40% reporting using an offline resource to plan a recent trip. Additionally, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO/DLO) served as recent trip planning resources for over 35% of American travelers, led by their websites.

Of the scenarios tested, the most common prediction was "Undiscovered or off-the-beaten-path travel destinations will grow in popularity due to the crowding and high costs of popular destinations" at 65%. Following this, 59% predict "In 2024, visiting dupes (a slang word for destinations that are affordable alternatives to historically more expensive places) will grow in popularity." 55% say "With higher temperatures each year, travelers will try to seek out cooler places."

Trip planning windows continue a pattern of shrinking, according to Future Partners. On average, American travelers report they would plan a week-long domestic trip just 9.8 weeks in advance, down more than 2 weeks from a year ago.

"Set-jetting" is still on the rise - 70% of Gen Z and Millennial respondents have "been inspired to travel to a destination after seeing it featured in a TV show, news source, or movie" like Yellowstone, according to a report by American Express Travel.

### **3c. What are your emerging markets?:**

On the national level, the Visit Billings team is highly focused on working to increase awareness for the direct flights to Billings from Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Portland, Seattle, and Los Angeles.

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## **4. Describe proposed tactics and projects as related to overall goals and controlled by the organization in its financial statements.:**

## **ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION**

### **FY25 GOALS & TACTICS**

GOAL: Drive year-round visitation by increasing awareness for Billings as an ideal travel destination with big skies and outdoor adventure.

#### **TACTICS:**

Consolidate budgets from 3 separate campaigns - "Outsiders," "Events" and "Fall/Winter" - into one comprehensive initiative to ensure a cohesive and sustained presence throughout the year. This approach will enable us to optimize resources, streamline messaging, and achieve overarching campaign objectives more effectively.

Implement a placemaking strategy that begins creating more of an understanding and demand for Billings' individual districts and neighborhoods that include Downtown, the West End, the Heights, and Midtown.

Promote the current and any emerging flight markets through grant opportunities, paid media, as well as through digital and social platforms. Develop a story-making strategy leveraging content like Trail Guides to showcase the locals and their warm, genuine nature, while sharing with visitors locals' perspective on life that is uniquely Montana.

Execute Visit Billings' research-driven, consumer-focused brand platform, Forge Your Own Path, to build marketing campaigns and promotions that showcase rich visuals of the entire destination.

Leverage yearly events while showcasing all the cultural, culinary, and outdoor experiences that can round out a trip to Billings. Encourage people to visit Billings for all aspects of event date ranges including overnight weekend, long weekend, and midweek stay.

Drive media coverage for the destination, through public relations initiatives, that profiles Trailsetters who can share the locals' perspective on how to best enjoy Billings as a destination for adventure-seekers, foodies and cultural enthusiasts.

## **TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA**

### **FY25 GOALS & TACTICS**

GOALS: INCREASE BRAND AWARENESS: Increase awareness for the destination that encourages target audiences to deepen consumer engagement with the destination's brand.

INCREASE DIRECT FLIGHT AWARENESS: Increase awareness for the direct flights to Billings from Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Portland, Seattle, and Los Angeles.

#### **TACTICS:**

Use a multi-channel media strategy approach that utilizes Native / Display, PMAx, Meta, Pinterest, Search, while also increasing investment and expanding geo-targeting to support drive and flight markets.

In drive markets, use channels best for events - search and display - to drive awareness and site traffic.

Engage with local media publications for the promotion of Billings and supporting local businesses.

Prioritize Meta and Display to promote awareness and drive website traffic as social and display consistently perform well, which creates efficiencies in maximizing impressions and leading users to the website to learn more and take a specific action.

Continue with PMAx, introduced in July 2023, utilizing all Google products to drive activities. The PMAx campaign for the 2023 Spring/Summer campaign over-delivered by increasing the conversion volume by 114% in the first month.

In flight markets, leverage channels that have previously driven success for those markets - search, display, and social (Pinterest and Meta).

Strategically place out-of-home billboards within and around Billings to engage local and regional audiences.

Utilize advanced analytics to inform media performance and strategy, while also developing ROI tracking on key advertising/marketing initiatives, that strives to deliver increased impressions through the fiscal year and garners a significant increase in engagements with a click-thru rate that is well above industry average.

Re-introduce CTV to audiences as an awareness tactic to support display and search in driving more conversions.

Place Digital Out-of-Home (DOOH) in key drive and fly markets, capturing new travelers who may not have considered Billings before, providing a powerful way to consistently engage with travelers throughout their day.

For flight markets, increase investment in upper-funnel tactics to drive awareness in markets where Billings is a lesser-known travel destination.

Sponsor content development and niche digital targeting the two-wheel audience.

Optimize audiences and expand targeting tactics within existing channels and test new tactics on new channels.

Harness the power of advanced analytics to inform media performance and strategy.

## **INTERACTIVE AND SOCIAL**

### **INCREASE BRAND INTERACTION**

GOALS: Increase brand interaction with informative and engaging digital content that builds awareness and loyalty, while ultimately motivating consumer travel.

## **GROW SOCIAL**

Grow the audience on Visit Billings' social platforms.

## **GROW EMAIL LIST**

Increase contacts in Visit Billings email database and encourage an open rate of over 20% for email marketing initiatives.

## **INCREASE SITE VISITATION**

Increase website visitation.

## **TACTICS:**

### **SOCIAL MEDIA / EMAIL**

- a. Share the destination's story in a compelling, consistent and editorial manner, with storytelling as the driving characteristic.
- b. Extend the Visit Billings' voice into the online space as a persona – the approachable and lighthearted Billings Trail Guide.
- c. Annually develop an integrated editorial content calendar to consistently plan and prepare content (e.g. copy, photos, videos, etc.), streamlining and integrating social content development efforts across all channels.
- d. Integrate seasonal messaging, key events, new local businesses, etc. across all digital channels.
- e. Increase video content on all owned channels - to also be used in paid and earned channels - which engage a variety of local personalities.
- f. Through Facebook, increase awareness of upcoming events and must-see attractions while also highlighting tourism partners.
- g. On Instagram, curate and utilize consumer-generated photography and video, while also posting editorial photos, videos and engaging "Stories" highlighting destination experiences and offerings.
- h. Promote the #VisitBillings and #MontanasTrailhead hashtags while encouraging visitors and stakeholders to do the same.
- i. Expose travelers to editorial content, blog articles and social content through email marketing.

## **WEBSITE**

- a. Review and audit the existing website for potential redesign and hosting which will help improve navigation and modernize its design to better meet the needs and expectations of users. Aiming to identify and resolve any technical deficiencies, enhance security measures, and align the website with current industry standards, best practices and regulations.
- b. Promote new blog content on the website, featuring experiences that align with the interest-based personas from History Buffs to Foodies and Outdoor Enthusiasts as well as key events throughout the year.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **GOALS:**

### **GENERATE EARNED MEDIA AND INFLUENCER COVERAGE**

Generate earned media and influencer coverage for Billings, positioning the destination as an authentic, welcoming city giving visitors access to modern amenities, outdoor adventure, family fun and exquisite food/beverage options while preserving the Montana spirit they are seeking.

### **INCREASE WEBSITE TRAFFIC**

Increase traffic to the Visit Billings website through earned digital media placements including the destination URL.

### **PLACE EARNED MEDIA**

Place earned media features in target publications with a total audience impressions value of at least 10 million.

### **TACTICS:**

- a. Identify new, cost-effective means to achieve similar ends of traditional travel/tourism media outreach.
- b. Explore offering digital experiences to media and influencers to reach a broader audience.
- c. Update the website pressroom to add more video and photo assets.
- d. Develop earned media tactics that tie directly to paid media efforts to amplify seasonal campaigns, and vice versa.
- e. Leverage evolving industry trends such as multi-generational travel, solo travel and self-improvement trips as a framework for earned media content.
- f. Share brief news and story ideas with greater frequency about Billings events, award nominations and other news with target media and influencers.
- g. Host *RoadRUNNER* magazine on an extensive press tour to support motorcycle tourism.
- h. Explore partnerships with Destination MT and Visit Southeast Montana to share earned media costs.

### **GROW GROUP TOUR TRAVEL**

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, Yellowstone National Park ranks #2 in the “Best U.S. National Parks for 2024.” While millions of people make the 2.2 million-acre park their go-to vacation spot year after year, it’s also a top choice for domestic and international tour operators and their clients. Billings offers great access to both the northeast and north entrances of Yellowstone and isn’t far from the east entrance access either. Additionally, proximity to national monuments, Interstates 90 and 94, as well as dozens of hotels and group-friendly restaurants continue to make Billings a strong consideration for tour operators.

Visit Billings staff work to ensure tour operators who are creating itineraries in the Western United States, know Billings is a fun, economical, and easy-to-access destination for a small group of two international visitors or a 54-passenger domestic motorcoach group, and every scenario in between.

In FY25, Visit Billings staff will cultivate new and maintain existing relationships with international and domestic tour operators who rank sightseeing, fine dining, and national parks/monuments themed tours as major draws for their clients.

### **GOALS:**

#### **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Build relationships with domestic and international tour operators to continue to strengthen Billings as a stopover destination.

#### **NEW PRODUCT INSIGHTS**

Offer insights to operators regarding new products in the destination and refresh itineraries.

#### **ELEVATE BILLINGS**

Elevate Billings as a competitive stopover city for the motorcoach industry and continue to work with tour operators and bus tour companies to elevate Billings as a major western tour destination.

#### **LONGER ITINERARIES**

Work with international market representatives to be quick to assist international visitors with longer itineraries for those who may be on fly/drive trips in the West and request more time in the city to explore more products including the brew trail, food scene, and outdoor recreation.

## **NEW TOUR OPERATORS**

Foster relationships with existing colleagues but build new connections with tour operators to continue to grow the domestic and international tour markets. The incubation period for successful leads and marketing strategies is demanding and important to the Visit Billings team to grow this segment.

Ensure tour operators who are creating itineraries in the Western United States know Billings is a fun, economical, and easy-to-access destination for a small group of two international visitors or a 54-passenger domestic motorcoach group.

### **TACTICS:**

-Attend international events hosted in the U.S. including International Round-Up (2025) and the U.S. Travel Association's IPW (2025).

- a. Attend the American Bus Association (ABA) Marketplace (2025).
- b. Work with Destination MT for 2025 opportunities to host familiarization tours or in the market when applicable.
- c. Elevate Billings in the Great American West (GAW) publications to garner exposure for Billings to the German, French, Italian, Belgium, Denmark, the UK and Australia markets.
- d. Work closely with Destination MT and international Travel and Trade staff at the State of Montana's Department of Commerce to continue to educate staff and stakeholders on this market.
- e. Continue to advocate on a national level to shorten Visa interview wait times with the U.S. Travel Association.
- f. Successfully host NW U.S.A. Spotlight Tour Operator event in summer 2024.
- g. Establish a group sales position to assist with segment success.

## **ADVANCE SPORTS SALES & SUPPORT**

### **GOALS:**

#### **GENERATE NEW ROOM NIGHTS**

Generate new room nights from sports events recruited to the area that will impact room demand and generate economic impact while creating even greater awareness for Billings as a choice sports destination.

#### **PARTNER**

Successfully collaborate with local collegiate partners for NCAA and NAIA event bids.

#### **GROW EVENTS**

Grow or expand existing sports events with current event and tournament owners.

#### **30 EVENTS**

Book and/or support 30 sports events in Billings.

#### **RETAIN EVENTS**

Retain existing sports events.

### **TACTICS:**

a. Attend sporting event trade shows and appointment-based meetings like SportsETA (spring 2025), The Invitational by SPORTS Relationship Conference (summer 2024), and SPORTS Relationship Conference (Fall 2024) to build

relationships, the Visit Billings Sports brand, and create awareness for Billings sports offerings.

b. Generate new leads for sports events by collaborating with IMM to build a Billings sports planning guide/booklet to use as follow-up or leave-behind (digital or print) when booking planner appointments.

c. Develop email templates and e-postcard for sports marketing that helps to build and sustain relationships with sports planners.

d. Focus on Collegiate Sports (RMC/MSUB) and specifically collaborate with the Frontier Conference regarding NAIA bids that will be live mid-2024.

e. Grow and retain sports events that Visit Billings is already assisting with by meeting with local, state, or regional contacts and asking them how you can help them grow a tournament by day(s) or by changing venues (say high school gym to a MetraPark building), etc.

f. Continue to update sports sales toolkit for efficiencies in sales follow-up.

g. Continue with sports marketing to promote Visit Billings Sports.

h. Continue subscription with Destinations International Economic Impact Calculator.

i. Begin planning logistics for a Summer 2025 sports planner familiarization tour in Billings (invite top leads to Billings and host for two days and two nights showcasing Billings as a hosted site inspection).

j. Become an active member of the Midland Roundtable.

k. Successfully execute year two of the Special Olympics of Montana State Summer Games in May 2025 focusing on engaging the community to welcome fans and athletes.

l. Continue to work with key stakeholders on the development of more product development for sports facilities.

i. Subset of priorities per the 2024-2027 Visit Billings Strategic Plan:

-Conduct research on the feasibility and benefits of Billings becoming an IMBA (International Mountain Bike Assoc.) Ride Center.

-Research sports-focused organization or committee options to better understand which practices and structures are most effective for fostering sports tourism growth as a destination leadership organization.

## **RECRUIT MEETINGS & CONFERENCES**

GOALS:

### **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Generate room nights as a result of sales initiatives to raise awareness of Billings as a choice meeting destination and by providing meeting planners with the knowledge and logistical support they need to make meetings in Billings successful.

### **BOOK MEETINGS OR CONFERENCES**

Book, support, and/or retain 30 meetings or conferences in Billings.

### **CONFERENCE SERVICES**

Service 20 meetings, conferences, or events in Billings.

### **ELEVATE BILLINGS**

Generate new room nights from meetings or conferences that will impact room demand and increase revenue while creating a stronger “Meet Me in Billings” and “Big Skies Mean Big Attendance” in Billings.

### **STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT**

Support Billings’ five meeting hotels in an effort to recruit new and retain existing meetings and conferences. Where applicable, highlight new meeting space, meeting space expansions, or renovations at meeting hotels or offsite venues to meeting planners and in industry print and digital publications.

## **TACTICS:**

Attend meeting and convention appointment-based national and regional events to build new and foster existing relationships with meeting planners including Connect events and *Small Market Meetings*.

Look at ways to contract multi-year conferences with state associations and organizations with local sales teams.

Generate new leads for meetings by collaborating with Integrated Media Marketing (IMM) and fostering relationships with new leads.

Continue to develop and fine-tune digital and printed sales materials for the meeting recruitment toolkit.

Establish a group sales position that will lead to additional success in the segment.

Maintain efforts on Cvent and other platforms to better accommodate meeting planners looking to book in small market meeting destinations.

Use e-communications like e-postcards to build relationships with state, regional, and national meeting planners.

Consider sponsorship opportunities with associations or organizations to offer more of an impact for attendees.

Provide planners services to better facilitate attendees including visitor guidebooks, brew trail maps, off-agenda options, etc.

Promote “Meet Me in Billings” and “Big Skies Mean Big Attendance” campaigns in industry-focused print and digital publications and directories.

Prepare to host the 2025 National Association of County Agricultural Agents (NACAA) and subset meetings that will help drive attendance to the June 2025 national convention.

Better communicate customer service offerings and general conference servicing options for meeting planners to ensure successful execution of meetings booked in Billings.

Continue to partner with national associations like HelmsBriscoe and ConferenceDirect to elevate Billings as a West-region meeting destination for their clients.

Plan for a warm season 2025 meeting planner familiarization tour.

## **STRENGTHEN THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE**

### **GOALS:**

#### **RAISE AWARENESS**

Grow the Visit Billings Certified Tourism Ambassador Program to help elevate the value of tourism throughout the community, and support stakeholders and front-line staff by providing tourism education.

#### **SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Participate in initiatives that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion for the community and the destination. Commitments include Visit Billings support of Destinations International’s social inclusion efforts which aim to cultivate a tourism industry that celebrates a broad range of human differences in communities and destinations, while embracing what people may also have in common.

#### **CELEBRATE EXCEPTIONAL PARTNERS**

Promote the businesses, organizations, and tourism experiences that have actively engaged with Visit Billings’ education efforts.

#### **CUSTOMER SERVICE CONSISTENCY**

Support Billings visitor-facing workforce, so they have the tools to build positive encounters with travelers on a day-to-day basis.

**TACTICS:**

- a. Encourage stakeholders within key industry segments such as dining, shopping, attractions, and interactive educational venues to engage with the certification programs Visit Billings offers (Certified Tourism Ambassador Program, Tourism Ambassador Institute, Certified Autism Organizations, International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards).
- b. Champion the community’s diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to support a welcoming environment for all travelers and visitors.
- c. Align the Visit Billings Certified Tourism Ambassador educational content with Trail Guides communications to more readily celebrate the community partners who are experts in their domain and consistently provide memorable experiences.
- d. Continue to grow the organization’s presence at popular events to provide information to visitors and residents as they are engaging with the wider community.
- e. Contemplate additional avenues to meet the visitors where they are to ensure proper facilitation once they are in-market.

**5. Define and describe your overall objectives. Objectives are formed from your goals. They are logical, attainable steps to achieve the goals and are able to be measured.:**

**Objectives/Metrics/Evaluation:**

OBJECTIVES	MEASURABLE METRICS FOR SUCCESS	REPORT THE METRIC ACHIEVED	EVALUATION OF SUCCESSFUL METRICS
Grow overnight visitation to Billings by increasing room demand at Billings hotels and motels.	Monitoring Smith Travel Research data, grow room demand by an average of 2% the final six months of 2024 and first six months of 2025.		
Advance sports sales and support for Billings sports tourism growth.  Generate new room nights from sports events recruited to the area that will impact room demand, and generate economic impact while creating even greater awareness for Billings as a choice sports destination.	Book and/or support 30 sports events in Billings during FY25.  Attend sporting event trade shows and appointment-based meetings like SportsETA (spring 2025), The Invitational by SPORTS Relationship Conference (summer 2024), and SPORTS Relationship Conference (Fall 2024) to build relationships, the Visit Billings Sports brand, and create awareness for Billings sports offerings.		
Recruit meeting and conventions to Billings.	Book, support, and/or retain 30 meetings or conferences in Billings.		

<p>Generate room nights as a result of sales initiatives to raise awareness of Billings as a choice meeting destination and by providing meeting planners with the knowledge and logistical support they need to make meetings in Billings successful.</p> <p>Generate new room nights from meetings or conferences that will impact room demand and increase revenue while creating a stronger “Meet Me in Billings” and “Big Skies Mean Big Attendance” in Billings.</p>	<p>Service 20 meetings, conferences, or events in Billings with registration information and other types of assistance offered by Visit Billings staff.</p> <p>Support Billings’ five meeting hotels in an effort to recruit new and retain existing meetings and conferences hosting site inspections and helping elevate the industry and Billings during site inspections with meeting planners.</p>		
<p>Attend industry events that allow for fostering relationships on behalf of Billings stakeholders and tourism partners in the domestic and international group tour market segment.</p>	<p>Build relationships with domestic and international tour operators to continue to strengthen Billings as a stopover destination. Do this by attending American Bus Association Marketplace 2025 and American Golf Cup Invitational or ACGI. With Destination MT exiting Rocky Mountain International, GAW and IRU investments will be eliminated. However, ACGI will continue to be a priority and the team will assess options to attend IPW and GoWest as a destination. The international market will continue to be a priority and Visit Billings will monitor other opportunities with Destination MT as they become available in this market.</p>		
<p>Increase awareness of Billings as a travel destination for leisure opportunities to the national and regional audiences while also increasing awareness of the destination that encourages target audiences to deepen consumer engagement with the destination’s brand.</p>	<p>Execute Visit Billings’ research-driven, consumer-focused marketing campaigns that drive the Forge Your Own Path message that showcase rich visuals of the entire destination.</p> <p>Use a multi-channel media strategy approach that utilizes Native / Display, PMAX, Meta, Pinterest, Search, while also increasing investment and</p>		

	expanding geo-targeting to support drive and flight markets.		
	Utilize advanced analytics to inform media performance and strategy, while also developing ROI tracking on key advertising/marketing initiatives, that strives to deliver increased impressions through the fiscal year and garners a significant increase in engagements with a click thru rate that is well above industry average.		

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**Budget Form:** FY25 DMO Budget Form - Visit Billings (CVB).xlsx

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**DMO Budget:**

**Visit Billings - DMO**

Allowable Method	Amount Budgeted	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Updated Budget	% Bud
Paid Media	\$171,500.00	31.98%	\$0.00	\$171,500.00	31
Earned Media/Tourism Sales	\$5,000.00	0.93%	\$0.00	\$5,000.00	0
Joint Ventures	\$20,952.00	3.91%	\$0.00	\$20,952.00	3
Administration	\$107,238.00	20.00%	\$0.00	\$107,238.00	20
Agency Services	\$36,000.00	6.71%	\$0.00	\$36,000.00	6
Marketing Personnel	\$83,500.00	15.57%	\$0.00	\$83,500.00	15
Product Development	\$43,000.00	8.02%	\$0.00	\$43,000.00	8
Visitor Services	\$27,500.00	5.13%	\$0.00	\$27,500.00	5
Education/Outreach	\$3,500.00	0.65%	\$0.00	\$3,500.00	0
Travel/Trade Shows	\$6,000.00	1.12%	\$0.00	\$6,000.00	1
Website Development (Online, Website, Mobile)	\$30,000.00	5.60%	\$0.00	\$30,000.00	5
Opportunity Marketing	\$2,000.00	0.37%	\$0.00	\$2,000.00	0
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0
<b>TOTAL BUDGET</b>	<b>\$536,190.00</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>	<b>\$536,190.00</b>	<b>100</b>

Revenue Projection

\$536,190.00

Funds not spent during previous fiscal year

\$0.00

Rollover Funds at Commerce	\$0.00
Allocated Following Audit	\$0.00
<b>Budget increase total</b>	<u>\$536,190.00</u>

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**Narrative Evaluation:**