

Application Summary

Application: FY25 DMO Plan

Applicant:

Funding opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Application Responses

Organization Name: Russell Country Inc dba: Central Montana

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Funding Opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Amount Requested: 522,162.00

Application: FY25 DMO Plan- 5.30.24.pdf

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:

Central Montana is where the mountains meet history and the plains come alive. Where sunrise is contagious, and adventure knows no bounds. Where millions of years of history slow down, and connection fills the time. That's Central Montana. It's real and it's raw – connected, yet untamed. It's the soul of Montana, the heart of the West. And hidden between its dancing landscape and star-dusted skies is a bigger story still waiting to be found – yours.

Central Montana is where the views are big, and the experiences are even bigger. Whether a history buff, adventure junkie, avid traveler, or family of four, Central Montana's iconic location paralleled with its rugged past and charming hospitality can only mean one thing – a true Montana experience.

Central Montana doesn't offer ritzy resorts, pampered spas, overpriced cuisine, designer shopping, urban cowboys, theme parks, traffic, and long lines—and doesn't want them! Therefore, this special region appeals to visitors who appreciate its authentic charm, rough edges, and unspoiled beauty.

1b. Strengths:

Trekking after Lewis & Clark, discovering the cowboy artist, casting a line along the Missouri River, grabbing a microbrew, veering into the Milky Way – Central Montana’s best kept secret is that you can have it all!

As the literal centerpiece of Montana exploration and spread across a storied landscape and 86 communities, adventure looms larger, history reaches further, culture runs deeper, and each moment is better than the last. Rooted in unfiltered experiences is a real Montana with less standing in line and more standing in awe.

Central Montana has more than 150 public lands sites offering outdoor recreation with plenty of elbow room (state parks, fishing access sites, rivers, lakes, trailheads, national monuments, wildlife refuges, national forests, and wilderness areas). These spectacular places offer quality experiences absent the crowds in more popular areas of the state.

The region’s location at the junction of major north-south and east-west corridors makes it ideally positioned to capture more tourism. Many visitors traveling between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks travel through the region.

1c. Opportunities:

Third quarter lodging revenue in Central Montana (July-September) is *double* that of the first or fourth quarters, so there is plenty of opportunity for tourism growth in off-peak seasons (October through May).

To accomplish that shoulder season growth, Central Montana offers year-round outdoor recreation (hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing, boating, camping, historic/cultural sites, golf, skiing, hunting, and star gazing). It also boasts lots of indoor experiences: 39 museums and interpretive centers, arts and cultural events, sporting events, breweries, dozens of supper clubs, colorful bars, tours, and unique retail shopping.

Astro-tourism is a growing market for Central Montana. CMT’s FY24 “Dark Skies” campaign significantly overperformed in every target market.

Because of its ruralness, low maintenance visitor information tools are needed, such as wayfinding and interpretive signs, mobile-friendly planning apps, and maps.

A key role for Central Montana Tourism (CMT) as an organization is enhanced communications with regional partners to encourage more collaboration, provide tourism education, and build an effective regional team. Armed with information about visitor trends and demographics, regional partners can better respond to their needs.

1d. Potential Challenges:

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

A 2023 survey of CMT Board members and other regional stakeholders indicated that “small towns” and “lack of services” are the region’s biggest challenge (76%). Another 41% cited “remoteness” and “long travel distances”. About one-quarter of respondents noted “unpredictable weather/harsh winters” (29%) and “lack of awareness/not enough promotion” of the region (24%).

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

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

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

To address these challenges, Central Montana’s FY25 tourism development and marketing efforts are focused on providing visitor information and themed itineraries to guide our guests to locations offering the services and amenities they seek. Many small towns cannot afford staffed visitor centers or Chamber of Commerce offices—especially with workforce challenges, but they can provide outdoor information kiosks with interpretive signs, information at local businesses or museums, and online information. Also critical to success is cooperation and “cross-pollination” between communities, attractions, and businesses to share referrals and keep visitors in the region. Awareness among residents about the value of tourism and ways to assist visitors improves the experience and helps to avoid bad traveler stories.

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2. Briefly describe how your destination aligns with the Montana brand or describe the Brand strategy for your DMO.:

In March 2024, the CMT Board approved a new brand and adopted a new Brand Book, including:

CENTRAL MONTANA’S BRAND IMAGE GOALS

Bold - Confident while staying humble

Modern - Fresh appeal with a foundation of traditional Montana

Inviting - Casual and comfortable

Accessible & Welcoming Simple - Uncomplicated but still unique

Aspirational - Imaginative with realistic tools and resources

Lively - Impactful and full of life

CENTRAL MONTANA'S BRAND VALUES AND EXPRESSIONS

- Centerpiece to experience everything Montana has to offer
- Big region with diverse landscapes, authentic communities, and fresh opportunities for adventure
- Enriching lives through history, culture, and nature
- Experience a rugged history where it happened and where it lives on today
- Connect to something bigger and renew your perspective on the world
- Real Montana – with rough edges, humble charm, and unspoiled beauty
- Enough space and opportunities to explore in whatever direction and style you prefer
- Easy to visit – less people and less money for a true Montana experience
- Where time slows down – Unplug from the everyday and be fully present to discover your story

The Montana Brand consists of three pillars:

1. More **spectacular, unspoiled nature** than anywhere else in the lower 48
2. **Vibrant and charming small towns** that serve as gateways to our natural wonders
3. **Breathtaking experiences by day, and relaxing hospitality at night**

Central Montana is filled with charming small towns that serve as gateways to amazingly vast and diverse natural playgrounds. For visitors wishing to escape the crowds, Central Montana offers many “way off” the beaten path experiences, but we greet visitors with a friendly laid-back vibe, and welcome you as family.

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Destination Marketing:

Destination Management:

Destination Stewardship:

Destination Development:

:

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

Geographic targets include:

- Nonresident travelers in 5 adjacent/nearby states (WA, ID, WY, ND, SD), plus 2 provinces (ALB, SAS).
- Nearby metro areas (MSAs) or those with nonstop air service to Great Falls: Spokane/Coeur d’Alene, Calgary, Boise, Minneapolis, Seattle, Salt Lake, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, perhaps Chicago/Milwaukee.
- In-state MSAs (Helena, Butte, Bozeman, Billings, Missoula, Kalispell) to attract long-time residents and “new Montanans” wishing to explore less crowded areas and/or entertain friends and family.

- Visitors seeking Glacier-to-Yellowstone or YNP-to-GNP driving routes through Central MT.

Demographic targets:

- History buffs, adventure junkies, avid travelers, and families with household incomes of \$100,000+
- Families 35-49, Exploring for Adventure 25-44, Our Time For Travel 55+,

Psychographic targets:

- Visitors who appreciate Central Montana’s authentic charm, rough edges, and unspoiled beauty.
- People who seek local (and locally-owned) experiences—they aren’t looking for chain stores, limousines, contrived communities, valet parking, or cruise directors.
- Visitors who bring their sense of adventure, sense of humor, and flexibility.
- People who appreciate local culture, respect the environment, and understand that unexpected experiences often make the best memories.

CMT’s Destination Marketing role will be ongoing to raise awareness among priority target markets about Central Montana. We will seek to engage regional partners to increase cross-promotion in areas like social media and earned media, and to leverage marketing expenditures of CVBs and public/nonprofit/tribal partners in the region.

Central Montana’s farming and ranching culture is one of self-sufficiency, isolation, and sometimes skepticism about the benefits of tourism in remote communities. CMT’s role is to help raise awareness about the economic and social benefits of tourism, and to help rural and remote communities determine the types of visitor experiences that will be beneficial both to visitors and to local residents. This includes educating visitors about stewardship practices, rural culture and protocols, private lands, etc.

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :

Research that supports our DMO strategy comes from national, statewide, regional, local studies. The most detailed data about Central Montana specifically comes from ITRR, the Coraggio study, and data purchased in 2023 by Young Strategies/Rudloff Solutions for a Great Falls CVB Market Analysis.

ITRR 2022-2023 NONRESIDENT VISITOR ECONOMIC IMPACT

In 2022, nonresident visitors spent \$652 million in Central Montana (11.5% of all visitor spending), boosting sales for businesses year-round (especially fuel, food/beverages, lodging, and retail).

Total economic impact from nonresident visitors in 2022 was more than \$902 million in Central Montana (direct and indirect impact), supporting 7,543 jobs, \$217 million in wages, \$29 million in proprietor income, and \$63 million in state/local taxes.

Of the total spending, an estimated 27% was spent on fuel, 18% on food and beverages, 18% on lodging, 10% on retail goods (other than groceries, including Made in MT), 9% on groceries and snacks, 9% on outfitted/guided services, 3% on licenses/fees, 6% on additional miscellaneous.

ITRR 2023 CENTRAL MONTANA NONRESIDENT VISITOR DEMOGRAPHICS

In 2023, an estimated 3.3 million nonresident visitors traveled to or through Central Montana – a decrease from 3.6 million in 2022.

The top residency origins of nonresident visitors were Alberta (9%), Minnesota (7%), Washington (6%), and 5% each from Florida, Wisconsin, California, Texas, and Colorado. Only 3% each came from Idaho and North Dakota, and only 2% each from Wyoming and South Dakota.

More than two-thirds traveled by car or truck (68%), while about one-in-five traveled with an RV/trailer (19%). Another 8% flew in, and 6% traveled by motorcycle.

The Port of Sweetgrass provides access from Canada via I-15 to about 5% of nonresident visitors. Amtrak runs daily in both directions, with stops in Havre and Shelby. The Great Falls airport is served by 7 flights daily.

More than two-thirds of visitors were repeat visitors (69%). Only 17% of travel parties were all first time visitors, and 14% were mixed repeat/first time visitors.

Average age of nonresident travelers to Central Montana in 2023 was 58, with 56% male and 48% female.

More than half of nonresident travelers were age 65+ (59%), one-third were age 55-64, 13% were approximately GenX (45-54), 20% were Millennials (25-44), 13% were GenZ (11-24), and 11% were Gen Alpha (under age 11).

Just over half of travelers were couples (53%), nearly one-in-four was traveling alone (22%), 17% with family, 2% with friends, and 3% with family and friends.

More than half of travelers earn \$100,000+ annually (53%), while 38% earn \$50k-\$99k, and 10% earn less than \$50k.

ITRR 2023 VISITOR TRIP CHARACTERISTICS

For nearly two-thirds of nonresident visitors, vacation/recreation was the primary reason for their trip (62%). Another 14% primarily were visiting friends/family, 13% were just passing through, 6% were traveling for business, and 5% primarily for other reasons.

The average length of trip for nonresident Central Montana visitors was 6.8 nights (nearly a week), but only 25% of those nights were spent in Central Montana. The rest of the nights were spent in Glacier Country (38%), Yellowstone Country (14%), SW MT (12%), Missouri River Country (7%), and SE MT (5%).

Nearly half of nonresident visitors also visited Glacier National Park (45%), and one-third visited Yellowstone (34%). Other popular destinations were Flathead Lake (9%), the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center (9%), hot springs (8%), Little Bighorn Battlefield (8%), other state parks, the National Bison Range, Fort Peck Lake, CM Russell Museum, and Museum of the Rockies.

More than one-third of visitor nights were spent camping (35%): 18% were in private campgrounds or RV parks, 17% in public campgrounds (state/federal). One-third of nights were in a hotel/motel/B&B (32%), 15% in the home of friends or relatives, 10% of nights in a rented cabin/home/condo/resort unit, 2% at a guest ranch, 2% of nights in their own vacation property, and 4% in other accommodations.

Nearly half of visitors booked directly with the lodging facility (48%), 11% were walk-ins, 10% used an online travel agent site, 6% used Airbnb/Vrbo, and 7% used other means of booking, while 18% stayed at no cost.

The *primary* attractions for visitors on vacation were Glacier Park (41%), open space/uncrowded areas (11%), family/friends and Yellowstone (10% each), and mountains/forests (8%).

However, it is notable that 63% of visitors were interested in mountains/forests, 60% in Glacier Park, nearly half were attracted to open space/uncrowded areas (46%), 45% to Yellowstone Park, 40% to rivers, 38% to wildlife, 32% to lakes, 28% to hiking, 26% to Lewis & Clark history, 25% to camping, 17% to Native American history/culture, 16% to Northern Great Plains/Badlands, 14% to other MT history/culture, and 10% to fishing.

Most popular activities in Central Montana were scenic driving (52%), day hiking (41%), wildlife viewing (35%), car/RV camping (31%), nature photography (30%), shopping (27%), historical sites (21%), Lewis & Clark sites (20%), stargazing (15%), breweries (12%), museums (11%), birding (10%), fishing (9%), Indian Reservations and art exhibits (8% each), dinosaur attractions and events (7% each), farmers markets and river rafting/floating (6% each).

ITRR 2023 TRIP PLANNING METHODS

The most frequent sources of information used for planning their trip were search engines (60% of visitors used search), National Park sources (brochure/book/website used by 28% of visitors), mobile apps (25%), word of mouth from previous other visitors (24%), friend/relative living in MT (16%), Destination MT website (15%), social media and online review sites like TripAdvisor (14% each), and online videos like YouTube (11%). Less than 10% of visitors used regional travel guides, AAA, guidebooks, magazines, online travel agents, state parks materials, billboards, community travel guides, or newspaper articles. Only 1% used advertising campaigns as a source of information.

During their trip, nearly two-thirds of visitors used a map app like Google Maps (64%), more than half used search engines (56%), one-third used National Park materials (34%), about one-in-five used other mobile apps and visitor center staff (19% each), 13% used highway information signs, 12% used information from friends/family, and a smattering used brochure racks, online reviews, state parks materials, the Destination MT website, social media (6-11% each). Only 5% or fewer reported using billboards, guidebooks, magazines, or newspapers during their trip.

ITRR 2023 TRIP SATISFACTION

Nonresident visitors were most satisfied with the following aspects of their trips to Montana:

- Feeling of being welcomed: 94% positive
- Amount of open space: 89% positive (noting that 52% of visitors spent more nights in Glacier Country than in Central MT)
- Wildlife viewing opportunities: 83% positive
- 79% to 74% positive: Main Streets reflecting local culture/heritage, historical roadside information, availability of travel information, restaurants with local products, stewardship of the land, and highway rest areas.

GREAT FALLS VISITOR STUDY

Young Strategies/Rudloff Solutions partnered with VGF to conduct a survey of Great Falls visitors as part of their Travel Market Research for the Great Falls CVB. The data was specific to the Great Falls destination, but since Great Falls serves as the transportation and services hub of Central Montana, and generates 60% of the lodging tax collections, it is relevant for the entire region.

The Study included Montana residents, whereas the ITRR data cited above includes only nonresidents.

The results of the Great Falls Study, completed by 1,541 visitors, differed from the ITRR data in the following ways:

- Average age 39.4 years old (vs. ITRR average age of 58 for Central MT)
- Female 54%, Male 46% (vs. ITRR ratio of Female 48%, Male 56%)
- Education: 74% have at least some college education (ITRR data does not contain education level)
- Ethnicity of Great Falls visitors: white/Caucasian 67%, Hispanic/Latino 18.7%, African-American 13.5% (ITRR does not collect ethnicity data)
- Occupations: Professional, retired, self-employed
- Household Income: 26.4% earn \$100k-\$200k annually (vs. 53% of ITRR respondents earn \$100+k), while 41% of Great Falls visitors earn \$50k-\$99k (vs. 38% of ITRR respondents), again reflecting the all-nonresident nature of the ITRR data (destination visitors)
- Top states of origin (other than MT): ID, OR, WA, AZ, CA, CO, TX, SD (versus ITRR results: ALB, MN, WA, FL, WI, CA, TX, CO, ID, ND, WY, SD)
- Average length of stay in Great Falls: 3.6 nights (vs. 1.7 nights in Central MT among ITRR)

nonresidents)

- Approximately two-thirds of respondents in both studies were repeat visitors
- Top sources of information when planning a getaway: search engine (Google, Bing, Edge, etc.) 56.8%, online travel agency (TripAdvisor, Orbitz, Expedia, Kayak, etc.) 50%, Friends/family 47.7%, Destination website or travel guide 39.1%, Social media 28.2%.
- Top attributes when selecting a destination: nature, beautiful scenery, accessibility, outdoor recreation (hiking, biking, etc.)/parks, arts/culture, museums/heritage activities, evening entertainment, festivals/events, water activities/river adventures/water park, unique shopping, good food/unique dining, family/kid friendly, agriculture tourism, hunting/fishing, sports.

The Study results were similar to the ITRR data in terms of top activities and attractions, trip purpose, length of stay, and visits to Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks.

Notably, Trip Satisfaction scores averaged 4.5 out of 5 (very high), and the Highest Rated Amenities by Great Falls visitors were Variety of outdoor experiences, Unique local dining, and Lodging value.

Great Falls is the only city in the region capable of attracting large conferences and sporting events. The Young Strategies/Rudloff Solutions conducted extensive analyses of these markets and made specific recommendations for the Great Falls CVB. Those groups also benefit the region, but the data is not detailed here for the purpose of the CMT Tourism Region DMO Plan.

GREAT FALLS PLACER.AI NONRESIDENT VISITOR MARKETS

Young Strategies/Rudloff Solutions purchased Placer.ai data to view the visitor origins of top out-of-state markets. The top ten origin cities are Salt Lake, Denver, Seattle-Tacoma, Spokane, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Portland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. YS/RS observations:

- Great Falls is a destination appealing to travelers from all 48 states that serves as a basecamp for MT activities and as a gateway to Glacier National and Yellowstone National Parks. Malmstrom Air Force Base and business/agriculture travelers come from all parts of the United States.
- Major markets like Seattle, Portland, Denver, Colorado Springs, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Minneapolis, Dallas, and Houston appear with sizeable visitation to Great Falls.
- Direct air service to Great Falls International Airport from Seattle (Alaska Airlines), Denver & Las Vegas (United), Phoenix (Allegiant) Salt Lake City & Minneapolis (Delta) brings travelers who connect through major hub airports.

GREAT FALLS STR LODGING MARKET ANALYSIS

Young Strategies/Rudloff Solutions also used STR data from 21 hotels in the Great Falls market, representing 85% of lodging rooms (excluding short-term rentals like Vrbo/Airbnb).

- Great Falls hotel/motel lodging supply (32 hotels, 2,375 rooms) has increased 14.5% in the past 8

years, while demand has outpaced supply slightly faster (16.3%).

- 2022 Great Falls occupancy rate was 61.2% compared to national 62.7%.
- Great Falls lodging pandemic recovery was faster-paced than the national average and now trails the national average by only 1.5%.
- Both mid-week and weekend periods show solid occupancies of over 60%.
- Highest monthly occupancy usually occurs in June - September. November-December have the lowest occupancies, along with January, February, and April. The Western Art Week provides a nice boost to March showing the power of events during slow periods.

CORAGGIO TOURISM RESEARCH

The following are findings from the Coraggio Resiliency Report for Central Montana:

- The region has several small cities/towns where the region's destination product is concentrated. It is home to seven state parks. The region's geography is a mix of plains and mountain ranges.
- Great Falls is the largest population center of the region. It holds historic significance as a stop on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Its position along the Missouri River also affords visitors access to the river and other outdoor activities. The city is adjacent to Malmstrom AFB (Montana's only military base).
- Lewistown is the second-largest population center in the region and the geographic center of the state. The city is near Missouri River tributaries for fishing and other outdoor recreation opportunities.
- The Regional Assessment & Inventory filters the different types of destination product against the type of visitor that would be attracted to visiting the region.
 - Outdoor Recreation Enthusiasts
 - Arts/Culture/History Seekers
 - Family Travelers
- It also plots the hospitality and civil infrastructure in place to service those visitors and enhance their experience.
- Great Falls is the largest population center in the region and is home to approximately 40% of the region's population. Great Falls is the third-largest city in the state, with the US Census estimating a population of roughly 60,420 in 2023. Other population centers in the region are Livingston and Havre (each contains roughly 6% of the region's population). Each of the three cities has a municipal airport. Great Falls International Airport is the largest of the three and serves as the main point of air access to the region.
- Interstate 15 connects the region to Canadian destinations and is on the western edge of the region. State Highways 2, 89, and 87 provide additional access throughout the region.
- Within the region, there are two reservations: Rocky Boy's Reservation and Fort Belknap.
- Tourism in Central Montana is an increasingly important economic driver for the region. Like visitors to Montana as a whole, visitors to Central Montana are highly motivated by being outside and trying

new things. They are also conservation-minded and want to benefit the local economy; they are more likely than visitors to other regions to focus on minimizing their carbon footprint and choosing experiences that focus on sustainability, as well as prioritize hiring a local guide and supporting minority-owned businesses.

- Because family and general leisure travelers look to a variety of experiences and amenities when planning a trip, the region's product was assessed to understand the destination's ability to service those visitors.
- The dispersion of attractions throughout the region complicates the creation of family-specific itineraries within a 2-hour drive window.
- Outside the urban areas, hotel lodging product and shopping amenities are limited.
- In terms of specific attractions, visitors to Central Montana are motivated by visiting National Parks, visiting friends or relatives, visiting historic sites, and participating in specific activities like fishing and skiing. Their top activities are local dining, visiting National Parks, shopping at boutiques and local artisans, shopping at malls and national brands (35%) and visiting State Parks.
- While Central Montana grows as a destination, residents of the region want to maintain their quality of life and culture. Residents and visitors alike want a thoughtful plan for how to best utilize and protect the beautiful land and resources that make Central Montana a beautiful place to explore.

LONGWOODS INTERNATIONAL AND MILES PARTNERSHIP TRAVEL SENTIMENT STUDY WAVE 75 (July 2023)

- Approximately 90% of travelers surveyed already have travel plans in the next 6 months
- 10-12% said Coronavirus would greatly impact their decision to travel in the next 6 months (Feb-Jun 2023)—a decrease from 24%-34% in Jan-Feb 2022.
- Approximately one-in-four travelers indicated that concerns about their personal financial situation would greatly impact their decision to travel in the next 6 months: 24% said the impact of inflation would "Greatly Impact" their decisions, and another 27% indicated inflation would definitely impact their decisions. These results indicate a potential benefit to Central Montana since it is more affordable than other destinations.
- One-third of travelers are reducing the amount they spend on entertainment and recreation (32%) and retail purchases (31%). More than one quarter are reducing the number of trips they take (27%) and the amount spent on food and beverages (26%). 26% are choosing destinations closer to home. One in five is reducing the amount spent on lodging (21%) and choosing to drive instead of fly (21%). 8% are choosing not to travel at all, and 4% are cancelling trips already planned.
- Only 24% of travelers said that their financial situation is not impacting their travel plans.
- Approximately one-in-five travelers indicated that transportation costs would greatly impact their decision to travel in the next 6 months: 21% said gas prices would "Greatly Impact" their decisions, and another 23% indicated gas prices would definitely impact their decisions. Moreover, 24% said airfare prices would "Greatly Impact" their decisions, and another 26% said airfare prices would definitely impact their decisions. These results reinforce CMT's strategy to focus on geographically nearby markets and those with direct airline service into Great Falls.

- A majority of travelers (58%) expect at least the same level of service from tourism and hospitality businesses as they received before the pandemic, and more than one quarter (28%) expect a higher level of service.
- AI adoption for travel planning is still weak: only 14% used Chat GPT to help plan their trip, 57% did not, and 30% do not know what Chat GPT is. However, it is notable that many of the apps used by travelers DO use AI for search and other functions, so they are using AI whether they know it or not.

MILLENNIALS

CMT's new Tourism Strategic Plan reviewed research from sixteen different sources regarding Millennial travel trends and preferences (listed below).

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

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

Sources:

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- <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/27/millennials-are-turning-40-and-theyre-changing-travel-as-we-know-it.html>
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GREAT FALLS AIRPORT

The airport is served by seven daily flights and two weekly flights from Seattle, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Salt Lake, Denver, Minneapolis, and Chicago. According to ITRR, 14% of visitors fly to the region.

From 2022 to 2023, Great Falls saw a 20.3% increase in inbound travelers, from 142,066 to 180,025.

LEWIS & CLARK INTERPRETIVE CENTER

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

MT STATE PARKS

After a dip in visitation from 2018 to 2019, State Parks in Central Montana saw a jump of more than 100,000 visitors in 2020 because of the pandemic. The growth continued in 2021—up 200,000 visitors from 2019, straining park facilities and staff. Visits dropped by nearly 60,000 in 2022—still an overall increase of 15% since 2018, but then increased again by 14.1% in 2023 to a total of 906,685 visitors. Giant Springs has the most visitation of any MT State Park, with 584,810 visitors in 2023 (up from 465,000+ visitors in 2022). Spring Meadow saw 169,348 visitors (-6.9% from 2022), Black Sandy 43,966 visitors (+1.6%), First Peoples Buffalo Jump 34,195 visitors (+20.6%), Sluice Boxes 31,498 visitors (+7.6%), and Ackley Lake 27,428 visitors (-7.7%).

3c. What are your emerging markets?:

FY24 CMT marketing campaigns targeting stargazers outperformed expectations in every media. CMT is a premier destination for stargazing and will continue to target this emerging market.

“New Montanans” who have moved to urban areas in the state over the past five years increasingly seek to explore more rural areas—especially when family and friends from out of state come to visit. These nearby markets are easier to reach (and less costly) for CMT, and the word-of-mouth promotion via social media is invaluable for our limited budget. CMT does not have the resources to effectively penetrate many out-of-state MSAs, but we can target younger Montanans and new residents seeking to explore their backyard and then share those experiences with friends and family around the world.

Millennials seek the authentic natural and cultural experiences, outdoor adventures, locally owned businesses, and quirky charm that Central Montana has in spades. We continue to seek effective ways to reach this market via digital marketing, social media, influencers, and AI.

Indian Country continues to attract the interest of both domestic and international visitors. With a large tribal presence in Central Montana, CMT seeks to establish closer relationships with our tribal counterparts, understand ways that CMT can work use its resources to help achieve tribal objectives for tourism, and communicate messages to visitors about Indian Country experiences and protocols. The Sesquicentennial (150th) commemoration of the Nez Perce War takes place in 2027. The 1877 events took place from Lewistown to the Bears Paw and across the Canadian border. We will work with the National Park Service, tribal representatives, museums in Lewistown and Chinook, Appaloosa Horse Club, and others involved in planning for this commemoration.

Another emerging market is veterans, as Central Montana has a large military presence, along with historic military forts, installations, excursions (Lewis & Clark), battlefields, and monuments. These sites and stories are of interest to veterans (and active-duty military) and are found in places far removed from stressful urban areas.

Agri-tourism has strong support at the region and state levels. MSU Extension, Abundant MT, and economic development organizations are working to develop Agri-tourism. CMT will encourage Agri-tourism experiences and promote them once they are ready for visitors.

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

CMT's new 2024-2028 Tourism Strategic Plan identified 17 Goals and 84 Actions (Tactics and Projects) to implement over five years. A number of the FY24 Actions already have been completed. Selected Goals are listed below, with a summary of the Tactics and Projects scheduled for implementation in FY25.

Organization Governance Goals

OG1: The CMT organization has an engaged and inspired Board of Directors with diverse expertise, to effectively lead the implementation of the regional vision and goals.

- In FY24, new Bylaws were adopted reducing the number of CMT Board members from 44 to 24. In FY25, the Board will conduct a Board Self-Assessment, targeted recruitment to fill gaps in expertise and representation, create a Board Handbook and onboarding/orientation process, and Board Development training re. best practices, policies/procedures, and review goals, actions, and results.

OG3: CMT's professional staff works in concert with the Board of Directors and other regional partners to effectively implement the organization's vision and goals.

- A database of regional partners and stakeholders will be developed to facilitate communications and awareness-building across the region via a monthly Central Montana Tourism eNewsletter. The newly redesigned website will include a Tourism Partners section with CMT reports, upcoming trainings, program information, and other resources for partners.

OG4: CMT supplements its TAC funding through partners and sponsors for some of its programs.

- CMT will pursue additional funding grants as appropriate to implement priority projects and recruit corporate/organization sponsors to help support regional Tourism Mini-Summits, Ambassador/Host Training, and Tourism Workshops to raise capacity among regional communities and partners.

Regional Marketing Goals

RM1: Central Montana has a clear and highly recognizable brand identity that is used across all

communications and visitor touchpoints throughout the region.

- CMT's new brand will be implemented across all marketing platforms and campaigns, including a redesigned website, travel planner, and social media channels. The photo/video library will be culled and catalogued consistent with the brand. Cooperative Marketing applicants will be encouraged to use funds for events that are consistent with CMT's goals, targets, and branding.

RM2: CMT marketing tools help visitors plan and experience their travel in Central Montana, so their expectations are exceeded.

- CMT will enhance the region's presence on popular digital travel planning apps (TripAdvisor, Google, Yelp, etc.), and encourage tourism partners to update their information. New themed itineraries will be added to the CMT website and travel planner to aid travelers in planning their trips.

RM3: The CMT website is the centerpiece of regional visitor information and marketing, using the regional brand and cutting-edge planning tools to engage potential visitors.

- New features will be added to the website to aid visitor planning, including an interactive layered map, enhanced activity pages, itineraries, videos, enhanced community information, and custom landing pages for paid media advertising response.

RM4: CMT promotion campaigns increase awareness and visitation across the region in all four seasons through multi-channel digital advertising, organic social media, travel influencers, and media relations.

- Maintain Organic social media campaigns, including cross-promotion with regional partners. Multi-region partnerships will continue for the Dinosaur Trail, Trail to the Stars, Great Wide Open, etc.

DS2: CMT and its land management and community partners include stewardship messages in their communications to visitors (Leave No Trace, Pack In-Pack Out, etc.).

- CMT's website, travel planner, social media, and PR efforts will emphasize stewardship messaging for responsible tourism.

RM5: The CMT Travel Planner is used as a tool in both print and digital formats to reinforce the regional brand identity and help visitors plan their trips.

- The travel planner will be redesigned consistent with the new CMT brand. Distribution will be re-evaluated to maximize its effectiveness and efficiency as a planning tool.

DD3: CMT showcases its agricultural sector and dark skies with Agri-tourism and Astro-tourism experiences.

- CMT will continue to participate in astro- and agri-tourism programs, and to encourage development of new or enhanced experiences for visitors.

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
Full complement of Board members and committees who are trained, with policies for effective organization operations.	24 board members, including tribal representatives, and four committees with established work plans to achieve annually. Completion of Board Self-Assessment and Handbook.		
Increased awareness of CMT and its efforts among regional partners. Connect community and tribal partners to opportunities that support local tourism development.	Database of 5-10+ regional private, public, nonprofit, and tribal partner contacts in each county. Send CMT eNewsletter to database at least quarterly, including opportunities to support local tourism efforts.		
Additional funding from grants and sponsors to host regional tourism workshops or mini-summits to build awareness about tourism trends and CMT efforts.	\$2,000-\$10,000 in grants and/or sponsorships obtained to supplement TAC funding in order to build regional tourism knowledge and capacity.		

<p>Implementation of new regional brand by CMT and its regional partners.</p>	<p>Brand use across all CMT marketing platforms, including paid and owned media, along with co-branding by 10-20 regional partners (Chambers, CVBs, attractions).</p>		
<p>Co-op Marketing partners promote events consistent with CMT's goals, targets, and branding.</p>	<p>3-5 communities receive co-op funds for use in events. Encourage use of ITRR event participant surveys to gather visitor data.</p>		
<p>Enhanced regional presence on digital travel planning apps.</p>	<p>Use of CMT eNewsletters to encourage regional partners (lodging, attractions, dining, etc.) to list on travel planning apps, including "how to" information.</p>		
<p>New themed itineraries on CMT website and in Travel Planner (print/digital).</p>	<p>Completion of 5 new itineraries and showcasing them on CMT's website and Travel Planner.</p>		
<p>Addition of new features to CMT's website to enhance visitor trip planning.</p>	<p>Addition of interactive map, itineraries, enhanced activity and community pages, and videos.</p>		
<p>Continue advertising and social media efforts to promote Central Montana in priority target markets, including Millennials, families, empty-nesters, star-gazers, and veterans/military.</p>	<p>Grow owned media channels by 2%, maintain/grow click-through rate of 1.5%, increase room demand by 2% and will use ADR for reference on our growth in the region. Continued participation in multi-region efforts (Dinosaur Trail, Trail to the Stars, Great Wide Open). Track media campaign results</p>		

	using geographic and demographic data of respondents.		
Include stewardship messaging in communications with visitors.	Presence of stewardship messages in CMT social media posts, Travel Planner, and on CMT website.		
Redesign CMT Travel Planner, evaluate distribution channels and quantities.	Completed redesign and streamlining of Travel Planner using new regional brand. Updated distribution plan based on evaluation with Certified Folder and regional partners.		
Continue to grow astro-tourism and agri-tourism as emerging markets for CMT.	Increase by 2% results from paid media and organic social media for star-gazing campaigns. Work with agri-tourism partners to add 1-3 agri-tourism experiences to website and media promotions.		

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Budget Form: Central Montana FY25 budget.xlsx

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DMO Budget:

DMO- Central Montana

Allowable Method	Amount Budgeted	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Updated Budget	% Budgeted
Administration	\$104,432.00	20.00%	\$0.00	\$104,432.00	20.00%
Marketing Personnel	\$19,825.00	3.80%	\$0.00	\$19,825.00	3.80%
Agency Services	\$46,300.00	8.87%	\$0.00	\$46,300.00	8.87%
Cooperative Marketing	\$5,000.00	0.96%	\$0.00	\$5,000.00	0.96%
Education/Outreach	\$12,633.00	2.42%	\$0.00	\$12,633.00	2.42%
Joint Ventures	\$14,902.00	2.85%	\$0.00	\$14,902.00	2.85%

Marketing Resources	\$3,800.00	0.73%	\$0.00	\$3,800.00	0.73%
Opportunity Marketing	\$1,000.00	0.19%	\$0.00	\$1,000.00	0.19%
Paid Media	\$142,800.00	27.35%	\$0.00	\$142,800.00	27.35%
Travel/Trade Shows	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
Visitor Services	\$95,850.00	18.36%	\$0.00	\$95,850.00	18.36%
Website Development (Online, Website, Mobile)	\$75,620.00	14.48%	\$0.00	\$75,620.00	14.48%
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
TOTAL BUDGET	\$522,162.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$522,162.00	100.00%

Revenue Projection	\$522,162.00
Funds not spent during previous fiscal year	\$0.00
Rollover Funds at Commerce	\$0.00
Allocated Following Audit	\$0.00
Budget increase total	\$522,162.00

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Narrative Evaluation: