

Application Summary

Application: FY25 DMO Plan

Applicant:

Funding opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Application Responses

Organization Name: Visit Southeast Montana

First Name: Brenda

Last Name: Maas

Street Address 1: 815 S. 27th St.

Street Address 2: PO Box 31177

City: Billings

State: MT

Zip: 59107

Funding Opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Amount Requested: 957,378

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:

WHO WE ARE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Originally called "Custer Country," Visit Southeast Montana began in 1984 as an organization charged with helping bring tourists to the region. It was named for one of its most famous attractions, the Little Bighorn Battlefield. In 1987 the Montana Legislature enacted a 4 percent Lodging Facility Use Tax to fund tourism promotion organizations. At that time, Custer Country became one of six state-funded tourism regions in the state. This organization continued to market the 13 counties and two Indian Reservations of Southeast Montana until 2010. The Billings Chamber of Commerce received the contract from the Montana Department of Commerce to manage the region and the organization moved from Forsyth to Billings. In 2012, the Custer Country Board of Directors voted to change the name of the region to "Visit Southeast Montana."

THE ORGANIZATION

Visit Southeast Montana is a nonprofit organization managed by the Billings Chamber of Commerce. We serve as a voice for Southeast Montana's tourism and hospitality industries, seeking to promote the region's many attractions, events and communities while ensuring that tourism is recognized as one of the region's top economic drivers, especially when changes to local and state-wide legislation are considered. Visit Southeast Montana consists of two full-time staff members under contract with the Montana Department of Commerce and is directed by a board consisting of no more than 21 members from across the region. Visit Southeast Montana partners with the region's three Convention & Visitors Bureaus (Billings, Miles City and Glendive) along with hoteliers, chambers of commerce and other tourism-related entities including state parks, county and federal organizations, plus private businesses ranging from coffee shops and restaurants to guide services, art galleries and private tour operators. The stakeholders and tourism partners of Southeast Montana provide the essence, flavor, identity and unique character of the region.

MISSION OF VISIT SOUTHEAST MONTANA:

The mission of Visit Southeast Montana is to increase tourism to Southeast Montana by increasing the awareness of our region, showcasing our cultural heritage, developing memorable experiences and educating our residents about the economic benefits of tourism.

VISIT SOUTHEAST MONTANA'S VISION:

Visit Southeast Montana will become the trusted source for free-spirited travelers to achieve their legendary life experiences.

What is Visit Southeast Montana?

WE'RE BIG OUT HERE

That is what a visit to Southeast Montana promises. Wide-open spaces. Historical stories. Deeply-rooted traditions. And, adventures as varied as stars in the vast night skies.

Out here, Big Sky meets big adventure. It's the kind of place to slow down and fall in love with Montana. It's the kind of place where cowboys still ride horses across the open plains. It's the kind of place where dinosaur fossils are waiting to be discovered and history is rooted in the land. It's the kind of place where visitors can steep in the myriad colors of a prairie sunset and feel the drum beat that nourished the indigenous tribes for generations.

NOWHERE BETTER

Some might say Southeast Montana is nowhere near anything else. We say, when NOWHERE is full of awe-inspiring sights of beauty, history, culture and adventure, there's NOWHERE BETTER to discover the real Montana.

1b. Strengths:

This vast region, which is blessed with a diversity of people, landscapes and cultures, prides itself on connecting with visitors who enjoy our very distinctive characteristics based on our foundational pillars, or strengths:

- Outdoor Recreation;
- Historical Significance;
- Western Authenticity;
- Dinosaur Adventures; and
- Crow & Northern Cheyenne Culture.

1c. Opportunities:

This vast region, which is blessed with a diversity of people, landscapes and cultures, prides itself on connecting with visitors who enjoy our very distinctive characteristics including these strengths (first five are regional pillars)

These strengths naturally combine to create opportunities:

- Interstates I-90 & I-94 funnel road-trippers into the region, which is "on the way" to YNP, GNP, Mount Rushmore National Monument and Theodore Roosevelt National Monument with Bighorn Battlefield National Monument a

desired NPS stop;

- Billings – Montana’s largest city;
- The region has not yet reached tourism capacity and has room to grow;
- Wide-open spaces and plethora of public lands;
- Alignment with Brand MT, which has stated effort to divert visitor traffic away from national parks into all areas of Montana;
- Signature Events – Bucking Horse Sale; Crow Fair; RIDE; Dino Shin Dig – plus new events;
- Destination Development projects that are gaining momentum, such as Southeast Montana Burger Trail; Montana’s Trail to the Stars; (new) Montana’s Great Wide Open; and existing Montana Dinosaur Trail.

1d. Potential Challenges:

At the same time, Visit Southeast Montana faces very real challenges, including:

- Perception that Montana is far away and difficult to travel to;
- We don't have mountains/perception that Montana is only mountains;
- Distance between services/remote areas;
- Irregular mobile phone coverage/technical infrastructure;
- Regions are confusing and not applicable for travelers; and
- Underdeveloped tourism product(s), i.e. not many formal tours/tour operators.

Additionally, starting in late summer of 2024, the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (LBBNM) will undergo a major renovation in which the existing Visitor's Center (VC) will be demolished and a new one constructed in its place. A major road project will be completed at that same time. This means there will be limited access at the LBBNM in 2024-2026. The NPS is targeting June 25, 2026 for a completion date and renovation celebration -- this coincides with the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn. As with all construction projects, we must expect delays and interruptions at the region's number one attraction.

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

Visit Southeast Montana closely aligns with the Montana Brand pillars, specifically:

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; and
3. Breathtaking experiences by day, and relaxing hospitality at night.

Visit Southeast Montana aligns with the Montana Brand in a plethora of ways. Makoshika State Park, Terry Badlands Wilderness Study Area and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area boast **spectacular, unspoiled nature**. These vast and stunning public lands are complemented with the wide-open spaces where the mountains roll out to meet the prairies and the Yellowstone River freely flows. In addition, Southeast Montana holds **historical beauty** in the Little Bighorn Battlefield and lesser-know historical locations and monuments like Rosebud Battlefield State Park, Tongue River Reservoir State Park and Four Dances Recreation Area.

We offer **vibrant and evolving small towns** – from Roundup to Baker, Forsyth to Hardin and Miles City to Baker – each with its own unique charm. Glendive is not only the gateway to Makoshika State Park, it and Wibaux, are the gateways to Montana. Crow Agency, Fort Smith and Hardin also welcome visitors to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Bighorn Canyon. And, of course, we are the home of Billings, Montana’s Trailhead – the state’s largest, incredibly progressive city.

With all these options of **breathtaking experiences by day**, our visitors deserve **relaxing hospitality at night** – including the newly-launched and awarded Montana Trail to the Stars. In Southeast Montana relaxing lodging options range from the luxurious Northern Hotel in Billings to the rustic, historic (and haunted) Kempton Hotel in Terry – the longest continually operating lodging facility in the state. We recently launched the Southeast Montana Burger Trail passport, with more than 20 locations in communities across the region, and two businesses – Veronika’s Bakery and The Backporch in Roundup – were nominees for the prestigious James Beard Awards. Southeast Montana contains all amazing the ingredients necessary for **relaxing hospitality, Montana-style**.

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Destination Marketing:

Destination Management:

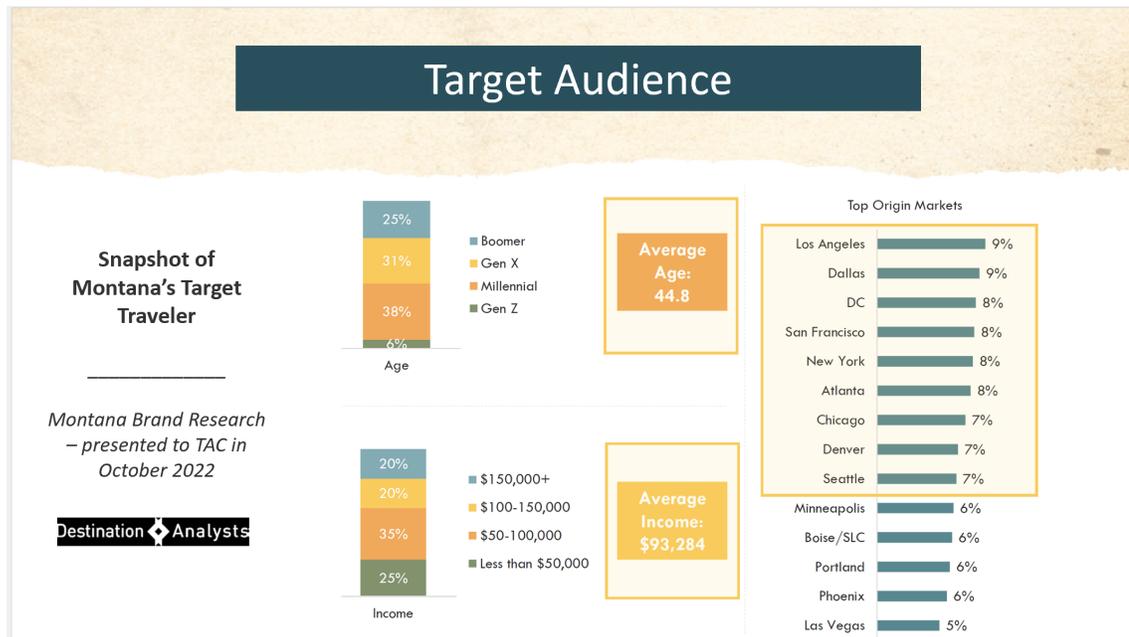
Destination Stewardship:

Destination Development:

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

Visit Southeast Montana parallels the **Target Market** identified by Brand MT, as identified here:



However, Visit SEMT will narrow the **geographic locations** to include:

- Regional travelers - within 10-to-12-hour drive radius of Miles City (center of region) – and Midwestern Roadtrippers

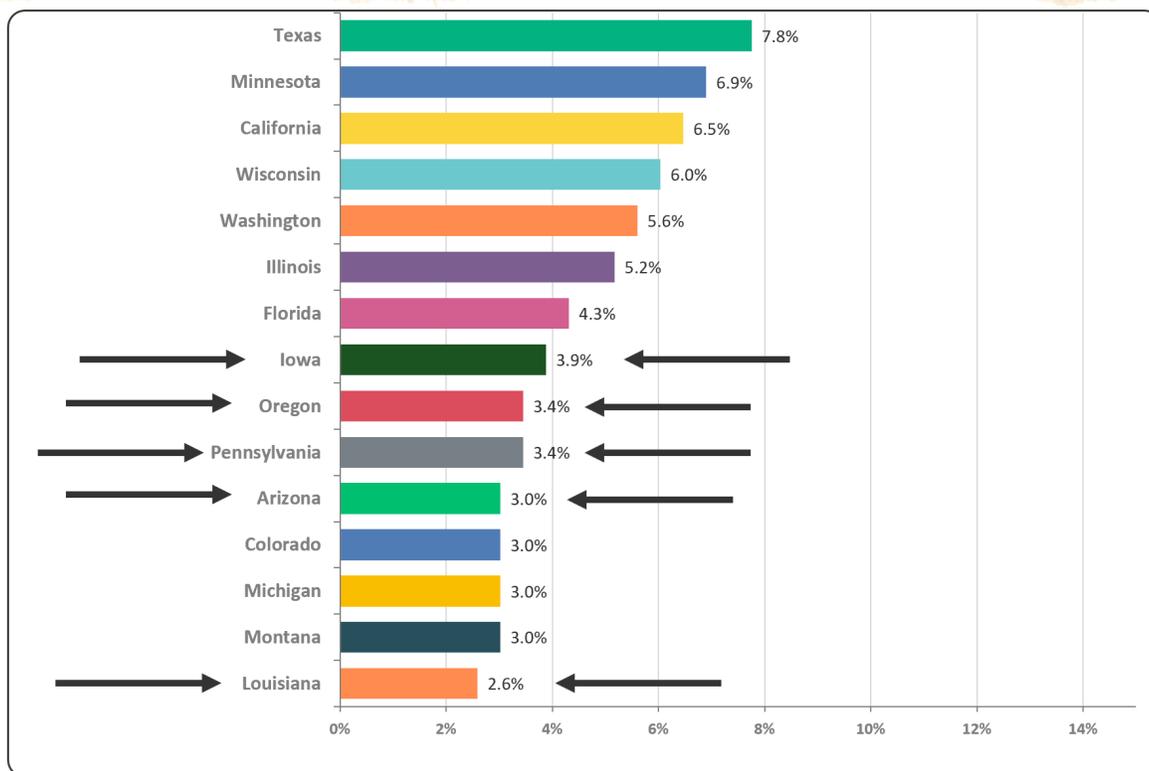
- Travelers on way to/from Yellowstone and/or Glacier National Parks
- Western Montanans, especially outdoor adventurers
- Direct fly markets to BIL

Visit Southeast Montana’s Call Center tracks both Top States of Origin and Top Areas of Interest, as shown here:

Top 5 States	Top 5 Interests
1 Wisconsin	1 Scenic Driving
2 Minnesota	2 History
3 Michigan	3 Wildlife
4 Pennsylvania	4 Little Bighorn Battlefield
5 Illinois	5 Lewis and Clark Trail

Note, Texas is typically in the top 5-10 states, too. Additionally, Visit SEMT’s annual survey asks the same question of its participants, with similar results and a few emerging markets, as noted by the arrows on the figure below.

Q21: In which state do you reside? (Top 15)



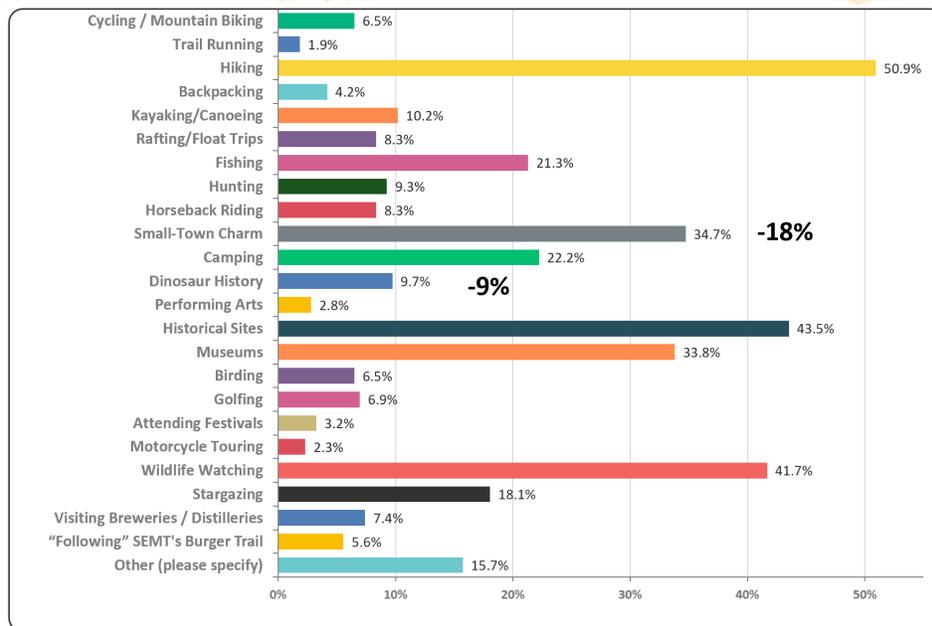
While both ITRR and Visit SEMT’s Survey data indicate that most travelers to the region are over age 45, with 56 being the average age, there is a large opportunity to reach targets under age 45. Coupled with data from American Express Travel Research, which notes that 75% of those planning trips use social media as a primary influencer, we will plan to

also that age group, but will use a different strategy.

Additionally, we will target those whose behavior matches both Montana’s Brand and Visit Southeast Montana’s pillars and available activities such as:

- Scenic driving;
- Visiting historic sites, including Little Bighorn Battlefield and Lewis & Clark sites;
- Wildlife watching and/or photography;
- Visiting small town, and
- Outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, biking, kayaking/canoeing; stargazing; camping; and fishing.

Q23: Which of the following recreational activities interest you? Check all that apply.



We also note that according to American Express Travel Research, 89% of those surveyed are looking for a “first-time” destination and 68% are focused on finding lesser-known destinations. Both descriptions fit the Southeast Montana region and will play into website and key word optimization strategies.

Lastly, our annual survey also showed that off-peak travel, specifically September, increased 17% from 2022 to 2023. We anticipated that shift and added a fall photo/video shoot to the FY24 strategy, using “empty nest” models; that content will come into play in FY25.

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :

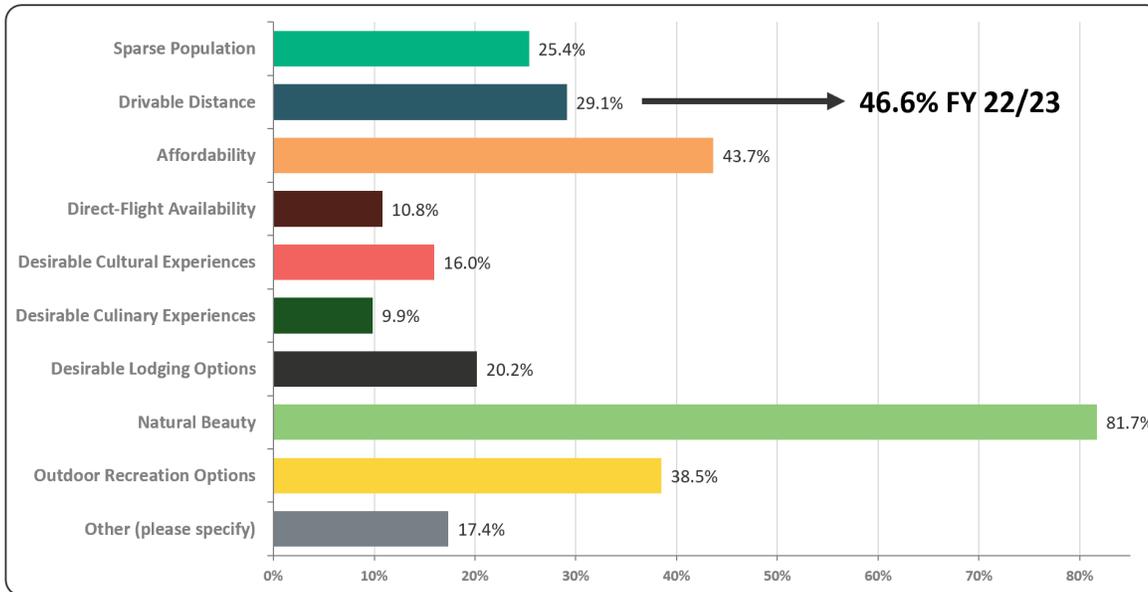
Research from ITRR’s 2023 Nonresident Visitor Surveys, Visit Southeast Montana’s 2023 Visitor’s Survey, and data from Visit Southeast Montana’s Call Center all support Visit Southeast Montana’s strategy as noted in 3a/above.

We also found some interesting responses during Visit Southeast Montana’s 2023 Visitor’s Survey, specifically 92% stated that they would visit the region again and nearly 76% are “very likely” to recommend the region to a friend. This indicates that re-targeting previous visitors is a strategy to consider.

Those who decided to not travel to the region cited “destinations were too far apart” and “cost of travel” as reasons for their decisions. Lastly, knowing what factors into the decision-making process is helpful and, with two of the top three –

natural beauty and outdoor recreation options – aligning with the Southeast Montana region as shown below.

Q22: Which of the following would factor into your decision on where to take your next vacation? Check all that apply.



Lastly, the same Visitor Survey asked “What surprised you the most about Southeast Montana.” We found the varied responses interesting and somewhat entertaining and enlightening – it helps to get inside the mind of our audience.

Q13: What surprised you about Southeast Montana?

- Beautiful scenery and drives
- No sales tax
- Stargazing
- Such a variety of landscapes; not just flat
- Vastness and beauty
- How beautiful it was—hard to believe God made those formations
- How kind the people are
- Rattlesnake signs
- More modern
- Distances between locations
- Breathtaking views
- How much we loved it
- Much better pub selections than we expected
- So spread out, historic and beautiful mountains

3c. What are your emerging markets?:

We continue to pursue previously identified emerging markets of:

- Outdoor Recreationists:
 - Specifically, water sports like kayaking and rafting
 - Lower Yellowstone River water-based trail (FWP is continuing to build out)
- Night Sky Observers/Astrotourism (as its own niche, outside of Outdoor Recreation), and
- Culinary Travelers interested in the Southeast Montana Burger Trail (and digital passport program) along with Visit Billings' Brew Trail and Trailhead Treats.

In addition, we will watch for the “skip gen” market, in which grandparents travel with grandchildren. This market specifically matches products like the Montana Dinosaur Trail and the outdoor recreation pillar, including RV travel.

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

What is the strategic role of Visit Southeast Montana as a DMO?

Visit Southeast Montana is primarily a **Destination Marketing Organization** (~75%), with basis in promoting regional visitation. At the same time, we are also a **Destination Development Organization** (~25%).

As we have evolved into this dual identity, we intertwine the destination development projects into the overall marketing campaign, specifically:

- Montana Dinosaur Trail (since 2005);
- Montana's Trail to the Stars;
- Southeast Montana's Burger Trail (new passport in FY24);
- Visit Billings' Brew Trail and Tasty Treats Trail (passports); and
- Montana's Great Wide Open: Badlands to Breaks to Beartooths (May 2024 launch).

Using this integrated approach when we host a blogger/influencer, for example, we will have them stop at one or more Burger Trail locations, include a Dino Trail experience or a Trail to the Stars experience, and/or other products they fit. We will also directly support each product with paid advertising.

This combination allows us – and our tourism partners - to identify, grow and promote “products” that are unique to this corner of Montana – a state with unique natural features from north to south, east to west—that target roadtrippers and fly/drive markets.

As we move into the FY25 marketing plan, we will add Destination Management to the list with expansion into a region-wide Tourism Ambassador program. The Board does not see Destination Stewardship as a top priority at this time; however, that could shift in the future.

Overall Marketing Strategy

Visit Southeast Montana strives to increase awareness of and visitation to the Visit Southeast Montana region as a destination for outdoor recreation, historical significance and dinosaur adventures along with Western authenticity plus Crow and Northern Cheyenne culture, as desired by each tribe.

We will follow the Montana Brand while elevating Visit SEMT's pillars and destination development projects to targeted audience, while simultaneously working with tourism partners within the region to grow regional pride and identity, tourism products and awareness.

We will continue to support our regional partners, functioning as the conduit between Brand MT and all the communities of Visit Southeast Montana region. Lastly, we will again survey visitors and potential visitors in the fall of 2024 to glean insights and trends specific to the Visit Southeast Montana region.

In FY25, Visit Southeast Montana will focus on building out from strategic goals, such as creating and sustaining a tourism ambassador program across the region, and to support tourism partners and events, specifically communities and events that receive grants from the Department of Commerce, while also elevating specific products like the Montana Dinosaur Trail and the Southeast Montana Burger Trail. We will execute the FY25 Marketing Plan with these strategic objectives and goals:

Strategic Goal #1:

In FY24 and into FY25 the Department of Commerce is offering event grants. Visit Southeast Montana desires to leverage event grant recipients – and all regional events – and promote these events to those outside the Visit SEMT region.

#1 - Elevate regional events, especially those with capacity to grow (not “signature” events).

Objective 1: Determine how to quickly, efficiently and effectively identify, gather content/assets and list regional events.

Objective 2: Identify, in partnership with our AOR, how to elevate events and increase attendance.

Metrics: Increasing visitation to the Events section of southeastmontana.com by 20% from FY24 to FY25 will make this method a success.

Events, from the Makoshika Youth Basketball Tournament in Glendive to Rockin' the Corner in Terry, drive visitation. Following the State's lead on elevating tourism events, we will collaborate with event organizers and develop a strategy for Visit Southeast Montana to help promote events outside of the region. We believe that lack of content may be an obstacle, so we will plan ahead for beyond FY25, too.

Strategic Goal #2:

As identified via the Resiliency Plan and at the FY24 Board Retreat, Visit Southeast Montana wishes to launch a regional tourism ambassador program to serve partners across the region.

Objective 1: Secure an industry partner with whom to develop a regional tourism ambassador program.

Objective 2: Utilize staff, potentially new personnel, to develop and execute the program across the region.

Metrics: If we secure a partner, develop the program and execute it, sharing with at least 3 communities/10 tourism partners in FY25, we will consider this objective a success.

To implement this goal, Visit Southeast Montana Board has approved adding staff to execute the Tourism Ambassador program (utilizing an industry partner). This is a big step that resulted from multiple Board discussions, the Board Retreat and the Resiliency Plan, along with shifting funds from cooperative marketing grants and VIC grants to better serve all communities across the region rather than the three VIC gateways. We anticipate this may take longer than a year to implement and that the content created with useful--and shared with -- all communities and State Tourism.

Strategic Goal #3

In late FY24, *southeastmontana.com* will undergo a renovation. In FY25, we will continue to add content to the website while advancing advertising to work more around “Plan Your Trip” and sequential steps, including increased digital re-targeting efforts.

Objective 1: Identify content areas on *southeastmontana.com* that need to be enhanced; craft more content.

Objective 2: Maximize paid media budget to target and re-target this audience to drive more traffic to *southeastmontana.com* with the goal to increase traffic and time-on-site.

Metrics: Increasing traffic to “Plan Your Trip” section of website by 15% and time-on-site by 10% from FY24 to FY25

will be defined as success for this method.

As a foundational marketing tool, southeastmontana.com continues to evolve and will incorporate more video (as this is what viewers want) and new content. In FY24 to date, we have increased page visitors by 90% from 2023 and page views by 135%, topping 1M in March. We will continue this forward progress.

Strategic Goal #4

Continue to build content and marketing around Destination Development Projects: Montana Dino Trail; Southeast Montana Burger Trail; Montana’s Trail to the Stars and Montana’s Great Wide Open: Badlands to Breaks to Beartooths.

Objective 1: Dedicate portion of paid media budget to each DD project.

Objective 2: Include DD projects on fams, blogs, content gathering and all other marketing methods.

Objective 3: Invite appropriate Dept. of Commerce personnel and/or AOR content personnel to experience the Southeast Montana region to personally experience DD products.

Metrics: Issuing an invitation to DOC and increasing traffic to each DD website/landing page by 10% from FY24 to FY25 will be considered a success.

Destination Development has been vital to the region's growth. Most surprising has been the positive reception of the Southeast Montana Burger Trail, not just for visitors but for regional and community pride. While the region has much space in which to grow product, creative products like this help move the dial and require continued support both from the region and the state level.

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
<p>Based on Strategic Goal #1: In FY24 and into FY25 the Department of Commerce is offering event grants. Visit Southeast Montana desires to leverage event grant recipients – and all regional events – and promote these events to those outside the Visit SEMT region.</p> <p>Objective 1: Determine how to quickly, efficiently and effectively identify, gather content/assets and list regional events.</p> <p>Objective 2: Identify, in partnership with our AOR,</p>	<p>Increasing visitation to the Events section of southeastmontana.com by 20% from FY24 to FY25 will make this method a success.</p>		

<p>how to elevate events and increase attendance.</p> <p><i>Events, from the Makoshika Youth Basketball Tournament in Glendive to Rockin' the Corner in Terry, drive visitation. Following the State's lead on elevating tourism events, we will collaborate with event organizers and develop a strategy for Visit Southeast Montana to help promote events outside of the region. We believe that lack of content may be an obstacle, so we will plan ahead for beyond FY25, too.</i></p>			
<p>Based on Strategic Goal #2: As identified via the Resiliency Plan and at the FY24 Board Retreat, Visit Southeast Montana wishes to launch a regional tourism ambassador program to serve partners across the region.</p> <p>Objective 1: Secure an industry partner with whom to develop a regional tourism ambassador program.</p> <p>Objective 2: Utilize staff, potentially new personnel, to develop and execute the program across the region.</p> <p><i>To implement this goal, Visit Southeast Montana Board has approved adding staff to execute the Tourism Ambassador program (utilizing an industry partner) and for additional marketing support. This is a big step that resulted from multiple Board discussions, the Board Retreat and the Resiliency</i></p>	<p>If we secure a partner, develop the program and execute it, sharing with at least 3 communities/10 tourism partners in FY25, we will consider this objective a success.</p>		

<p><i>Plan, along with shifting funds from cooperative marketing grants and VIC grants to better serve all communities across the region rather than the three VIC gateways. We anticipate this may take longer than a year to implement and that the content created will be useful--and shared with -- all communities and State Tourism.</i></p>			
<p>Based on Strategic Goal #3: In late FY24, <i>southeastmontana.com</i> will undergo a renovation. In FY25, we will continue to add content to the website while advancing advertising to work more around “Plan Your Trip” and sequential steps, including increased digital re-targeting efforts.</p> <p>Objective 1: Identify content areas on <i>southeastmontana.com</i> that need to be enhanced; craft more content.</p> <p>Objective 2: Maximize paid media budget to target and re-target this audience to drive more traffic to <i>southeastmontana.com</i> with the goal to increase traffic and time-on-site.</p> <p><i>As a foundational marketing tool, southeastmontana.com continues to evolve and will incorporate more video (as this is what viewers want) and new content. We will also explore options for a comprehensive dashboard to encompass more reporting metrics. In FY24 to date, we have increased page visitors by 90% from 2023 and page</i></p>	<p>Increasing traffic to “Plan Your Trip” section of website by 15% and time-on-site by 10% from FY24 to FY25 will be defined as success for this method.</p>		

<p>views by 135%, topping 1M in March. We will continue this forward progress.</p>			
<p>Based on Strategic Goal #4: Continue to build content and marketing around Destination Development Projects: Montana Dino Trail; Southeast Montana Burger Trail; Montana's Trail to the Stars and Montana's Great Wide Open: Badlands to Breaks to Beartooths.</p> <p>Objective 1: Dedicate portion of paid media budget to each DD project.</p> <p>Objective 2: Include DD projects on fams, blogs, content gathering and all other marketing methods.</p> <p>Objective 3: Invite appropriate Dept. of Commerce personnel and/or AOR content personnel to experience the Southeast Montana region to personally experience DD products.</p> <p><i>Destination Development has been vital to the region's growth. Most surprising has been the positive reception of the Southeast Montana Burger Trail, not just for visitors but for regional and community pride. While the region has much space in which to grow product, creative products like this help move the dial and require continued support both from the region and the state level.</i></p>	<p>Issuing an invitation to DOC and increasing traffic to each DD website/landing page by 10% from FY24 to FY25 will be considered a success.</p>		

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DMO Budget:

Visit Southeast Montana regional DMO

Allowable Method	Amount Budgeted	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Updated Budget	% Budgeted
Administration	\$155,476.00	16.24%	\$0.00	\$155,476.00	16.24%
Joint Ventures	\$50,000.00	5.22%	\$0.00	\$50,000.00	5.22%
Opportunity Marketing	\$25,000.00	2.61%	\$0.00	\$25,000.00	2.61%
Marketing Personnel	\$175,000.00	18.28%	\$0.00	\$175,000.00	18.28%
Agency Services	\$110,000.00	11.49%	\$0.00	\$110,000.00	11.49%
Marketing Resources	\$7,000.00	0.73%	\$0.00	\$7,000.00	0.73%
Paid Media	\$216,702.00	22.63%	\$0.00	\$216,702.00	22.63%
Earned Media/Tourism Sales	\$25,100.00	2.62%	\$0.00	\$25,100.00	2.62%
Website Development (Online, Website, Mobile)	\$47,500.00	4.96%	\$0.00	\$47,500.00	4.96%
Education/Outreach	\$32,500.00	3.39%	\$0.00	\$32,500.00	3.39%
Travel/Trade Shows	\$3,100.00	0.32%	\$0.00	\$3,100.00	0.32%
Research	\$13,500.00	1.41%	\$0.00	\$13,500.00	1.41%
Product Development	\$10,000.00	1.04%	\$0.00	\$10,000.00	1.04%
Visitor Services	\$86,500.00	9.04%	\$0.00	\$86,500.00	9.04%
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
TOTAL BUDGET	\$957,378.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$957,378.00	100.00%

Revenue Projection	\$777,378.00
Funds not spent during previous fiscal year	\$180,000.00
Rollover Funds at Commerce	\$0.00
Allocated Following Audit	\$0.00
Budget increase total	\$957,378.00

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Narrative Evaluation:

To be completed after FY25 is finalized.