

Application Summary

Application: FY26 DMO Plan - Columbia Falls DMO

Applicant:

Funding opportunity: FY26 DMO Plan

Application Responses

Organization Name: Columbia Falls DMO

First Name: Laura

Last Name: Gadwa

Street Address 1: 233 13TH STREET EAST

Street Address 2:

City: COLUMBIA FALLS

State:

Zip: 59912-0000

Funding Opportunity: FY26 DMO Plan

Amount Requested: 35,579

TAC Approved Budget: 35,579

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:

Columbia Falls, Montana is a vibrant and fast-growing community situated in the heart of Northwest Montana. Home to an estimated 5,723 residents as of the 2023 census, the town is a unique blend of small, locally owned businesses and a handful of larger corporations and manufacturing companies.

Life in Columbia Falls is defined by a strong sense of community and a shared love for the great outdoors. Residents embrace an adventurous, neighborly lifestyle, spending their free time exploring the forests, rivers, and fresh mountain air that surrounds the area. With year-round recreational opportunities, the region offers something for every season.

Though located on the edge of the wilderness, Columbia Falls is far from remote. Locals enjoy a vibrant social scene, including breweries and restaurants, open-air markets, and live music at both indoor and outdoor venues. A growing number of restaurants serve high-quality, locally inspired cuisine. Lodging options include one anchor hotel and a variety of charming cabins, vacation rentals, and campgrounds, which welcome visitors to experience the town's natural beauty and warm hospitality.

1b. Strengths:

- Columbia Falls is ideally situated just ten minutes from Glacier International Airport, the primary air travel hub serving the Flathead Valley and surrounding areas.
- Columbia Falls, located near the west entrance of Glacier National Park (GNP), has experienced steady visitation in recent years due to GNP visitation. In 2023 alone, GNP welcomed 2,933,616 visitors, according to its official statistics page. As the largest city closest to the park's west entrance, Columbia Falls has seen a rise in new restaurants, lodging options, and recreational businesses, reflecting the area's expanding role as a gateway for park visitors.
- Columbia Falls provides abundant opportunities for recreation throughout the year, featuring several city parks within its limits, along with convenient access to state parks and Forest Service public lands—all within a 45-minute drive.
- River Access: The Flathead River flows through Columbia Falls, providing multiple convenient access points for recreational use.

1c. Opportunities:

Columbia Falls experiences higher visitation during the summer months, presenting an opportunity to boost lodging occupancy and increase visitor spending during the fall, spring, and winter seasons through targeted marketing campaigns. Collaborating with local stakeholders and regional and state tourism partners can help expand fall, spring, and winter visitation, alongside a focused effort on direct marketing during these seasons. This expansion of revenue across multiple seasons is crucial for sustainable tourism and supporting the continued growth of local businesses and the community.

Another opportunity lies in marketing recreational areas that are outside of Glacier National Park. One such area is the Cedar Flats trail system, an initiative led by Gateway to Glacier Trails, which is planned to be a 25-mile network of non-motorized, multi-use trails on Flathead National Forest land north of Columbia Falls. More than 15 miles of these trails are already open to the public, with more under construction. Mountain bikers, trail runners, dog walkers, and other outdoor enthusiasts are already enjoying this local system. The continued development of this trail system is important for our area's recreational growth.

Additionally, other attractions within a 45-minute radius include the Hungry Horse Reservoir, Flathead National Forest, and Flathead River. An opportunity exists to create a targeted marketing plan encouraging visitors to use Columbia Falls as a home base, allowing them to explore these attractions outside of Glacier National Park, while returning to Columbia Falls for accommodation, dining, and shopping.

1d. Potential Challenges:

- During the fall and winter seasons, our community can at times be overshadowed by the larger cities in the Flathead Valley.
- Unpredictable weather can create challenges for travelers in determining activities to do in our area.
- Offering opportunities for indoor recreation and family-friendly activities.
- Assisting tourists with information about the status of construction projects, vehicle reservation

systems, and road closures in Glacier National Park.

- Raising awareness about other recreational areas that could serve as potential attractions for tourists.
- Providing education on outdoor safety and promoting responsible recreation practices.
- Supporting sustainable tourism that aligns with the capacity of existing infrastructure.
- Providing awareness and education to travelers who mistakenly assume that, because Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park isn't fully open, our city and local businesses are also closed.

Who We Wish to Attract:

Columbia Falls seeks to attract travelers who respect and appreciate the authenticity of our natural resources, including national forests, national parks, rivers, and local parks. We aim to draw visitors who not only value the beauty of our surroundings, but also seek to engage with the community by dining at local restaurants, attending local events, and supporting the neighborly and friendly lifestyle that helps to define Columbia Falls.

Why Would They Come

Columbia Falls offers plenty of year-round attractions and serves as the perfect home base for exploring our area. Whether you're heading to the nearby Hungry Horse Reservoir for a day of boating, enjoying a scenic drive through the Flathead National Forest, or exploring the Cedar Flats trail system, Columbia Falls is centrally located to help you make the most of your time in the area.

What truly sets Columbia Falls apart is its home-town feel, where the community is close-knit, supportive, and focused on making everyone feel welcome. The small-town vibe is alive in every corner of the town—from the friendly locals to the charming atmosphere. Spend your days exploring the outdoors and your evenings enjoying local music, farmer's markets, trivia and bingo, and events that celebrate the beauty and spirit of our community.

Also, visitors coming here tend to be drawn to the lower population density of Montana, where they can experience the stunning beauty of our mountains, wildlife, forests, and rivers. Columbia Falls has it all!

:

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

The mission of the Columbia Falls Destination Marketing Organization is to drive economic growth, cultural enrichment, and community prosperity by promoting our destination. We aim to attract and educate visitors, serve as responsible stewards of our land, and support local businesses—all while preserving and celebrating our unique heritage and natural resources.

:

Destination Marketing: ☒

Destination Management: ☐

Destination Stewardship: ☒

Destination Development: ☐

:

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

Travelers from across the United States, Canada, and internationally seek our area in large part due to our close proximity to GNP. Columbia Falls is conveniently located only 20 minutes from the West Entrance to Glacier National Park. In addition to GNP, the Flathead River runs through our city and offers ample fishing, rafting, floating and other river activities to travelers. We are also surrounded by the Flathead National Forest, which provides camping, fishing, and additional recreational opportunities, too.

Demographics:

- Based on data from Xanterra, the company that owns Cedar Creek Lodge in Columbia Falls, the top five interest categories for travelers were travel, lifestyle and hobbies, media and entertainment, shopping, and news and politics. The data also revealed that travelers aged 35-44 were the most frequent visitors, followed closely by those aged 45-54. Of the visitors, 53.4% were female, while 46.6% were male.
- Based on Glacier Country Tourism Data traveler demographics are as follows:
 - Individuals – Mid-30s+, Household Income- \$75,000, college graduate, active and affluent, take at least two vacations per year, may be traveling in groups of two or more.
 - Mature geo-traveler couples – 55+, Household Income \$75,000, active, and affluent, high-value low-impact couples, may be traveling as groups with other friends and/or extended family
 - Families – Multigenerational travelers, 1 child under the age of 18, Household Income \$75,000, active and affluent, in-tune with nature.
 - Repeat Montana target traveler – Has previously visited Montana. Very likely to vacation within U.S. in the next 12 months. Average age 50. Household Income \$125k. In-tune with nature.

Geographics:

- Six major airlines —Alaska, Allegiant, American, Delta, Sun Country, and United — serve the Flathead Valley. With service to hubs in Seattle, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, Denver and Las Vegas, these carriers link travelers to limitless national and international destinations. In addition to daily and weekly service through these main hubs, direct seasonal flights with the various carriers are also available to New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Minneapolis / St. Paul, Oakland, Phoenix, San Diego, Burbank, and Portland.
- Top 10 Visitor Markets Based off Zartico Data over the last 4 quarters:

1. Missoula, MT

2. Spokane, WA
3. Seattle-Tacoma, WA
4. Great Falls, MT
5. Billings, MT
6. Denver, CO
7. Butte-Bozeman, MT
8. Portland, OR
9. Salt Lake City, UT
10. Minneapolis/St.Paul, MN

- Canada: Calgary, Edmonton, Alberta, Vancouver, and British Columbia

Psychographics:

- **Stewardship and Responsible Travelers:** Travelers who are respectful of our residents and destination, prioritizing responsible practices and sustainable tourism.
- **Outdoor Recreation and Adventurers:** Experiences for all abilities, including but not limited to snowshoeing, snowmobiling, hiking, biking, river access, rafting, fishing, hunting, sightseeing, camping, and ice climbing.
- **Authentic Experience Seekers:** Travelers seeking genuine local experiences, such as visiting local breweries, distilleries and wineries, enjoying small-town date nights, exploring outdoor recreation, attending local festivals and events, staying at local lodging, campgrounds, renting authentic cabins, and immersing themselves in small-town-feel activities.
- Zartico Data from the last 4 quarters show the types of places our visitors are: Sports 40.9%, Outdoor Recreation 22.9%, Accommodations 22.6%, Attractions 6.4%, Nightlife 4.8%, and Food 2.7%

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :

Based on the 2024 bed tax revenue data, there was a significant disparity in revenue collected between the summer season and the fall, spring, and winter seasons. This highlights a strong concentration of visitation during the summer months and an opportunity for growth in the shoulder and off-peak seasons. Below is a breakdown of the bed tax revenue received for Columbia Falls in 2024:

- 1st Quarter 2024: \$17,954
- 2nd Quarter 2024: \$67,912
- 3rd Quarter 2024: \$215,150
- 4th Quarter 2024: \$29,225

Data from Glacier Park International Airport (GPIA) further supports the need for targeted marketing efforts during the non-summer seasons. Enplanement figures for 2024 show a clear spike in summer travel, with significantly lower numbers in the fall, winter, and spring months. This trend highlights the opportunity to increase off-peak visitation through strategic promotion and outreach. Below is the monthly

enplanement data for GPIA in 2024:

- January: 28,790
 - February: 29,524
 - March: 31,868
 - April: 24,196
 - May: 29,182
 - June: 54,879
 - July: 77,870
 - August: 78,001
 - September: 55,386
 - October: 36,466
 - November: 25,185
 - December: 30,345
- Data gathered during stakeholder meetings held during FY25 indicate that residents and business leaders are strongly advocating for enhanced stewardship of our public lands, parks, and rivers. They also emphasize the need for increased education efforts to ensure visitors understand how to responsibly enjoy and care for these natural resources, helping to protect the integrity and beauty of our community for future generations.

3c. What are your emerging markets?:

Emerging markets for Columbia Falls include both in-state and out-of-state drive markets, as well as direct flight markets. These audiences are being targeted for their potential to visit responsibly, recreate with care, respect the people who live here, value our natural resources, and engage authentically with our community and local lifestyle.

According to data from Zartico, there is growing value in targeting visitors who not only spend, but also participate in our community respectfully. Understanding where these travelers are staying, what activities they're engaging in, and how they are spending their money helps identify and attract market segments that align with our values and contribute positively to the local economy.

:

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

Our first goal is to promote destination stewardship by educating visitors on how to responsibly enjoy Columbia Falls and its surrounding natural resources, including Flathead National Forest, public lands, city parks, our rivers, camping areas, and our community. Through outreach, printed and digital materials, partnerships, and storytelling, we aim to help foster a deeper respect for our environment, encourage Leave No Trace principles, and ensure that both residents and visitors help preserve the beauty,

accessibility, and sustainability of these shared spaces for generations to come.

Our second goal is to grow and strengthen shoulder season visitation in order to support our business community and the tourism industry year-round. By focusing on the shoulder seasons, we aim to increase awareness among both residents and travelers about the diverse opportunities available during these seasons. Key components of the campaign will highlight recreational opportunities outside Glacier National Park and feature authentic storytelling and marketing that captures the spirit of Columbia Falls and the surrounding area.

Destination Marketing:

- Develop, enhance, and promote the Discover Columbia Falls Brand: Over the past two years, we've laid the foundation by creating a logo and launching a website. The next step is to build out a comprehensive brand identity that reflects who we are as a community. This includes refining our messaging and verbiage, implementing a strategic marketing plan, and consistently showcasing the values that define Columbia Falls—its beauty, small-town charm, community-minded spirit, and commitment to stewardship.
- Increase visibility and engagement with target audiences by utilizing a strategic mix of digital and print advertising platforms. This will ensure consistent, wide-reaching promotion of Columbia Falls as a year-round destination while aligning with the values of responsible travel and authentic local experiences.

Destination Stewardship:

- Enhance visitor experiences to meet the needs of today's travelers by leveraging digital tools, printed materials, signage, and community partnerships to deliver clear, accessible messaging focused on safety, responsible recreation, and education about the areas featured in our destination marketing. This approach supports sustainable tourism while enriching the overall visitor journey and strengthening community connections.

Goals:

- Develop and implement marketing strategies across a variety of platforms and media to effectively promote Columbia Falls.
- Develop and refine a strong brand and messaging that authentically represents the values and spirit of our community.
- Develop and promote educational resources that support residents, businesses, and visitors, focusing on responsible recreation and safety.
- Encourage residents and visitors to recreate responsibly and respectfully, aligning educational efforts with the core values of Columbia Falls and our region.

4b. How will the addition of LFST funds enhance your overall goals?:

The use of LFST funds will provide funding that will assist with our Destination Stewardship goals.

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
Develop and implement the Discover Columbia Falls brand by finalizing brand messaging and voice.	By the end of FY26, a brand guide is completed.		
Develop and implement a comprehensive marketing plan that is actionable and usable.	By the end of FY26, the marketing plan template is developed.		
Enhance reach, education, and promotion of area through social media platforms to promote shoulder season visitation, visitor and resident education, and community promotion.	By the end of FY26, Discover Columbia Falls has two active social media platforms.		
Create educational resources that promote responsible and safe recreation for residents and visitors.	By the end of FY26, at least 2 resources are distributed either online or in the community.		

:

Budget Form: Columbia Falls DMO-Budget-Form-LST-LFUT.xlsx

:

DMO Budget:

Columbia Falls DMO

Allowable Method	Budget	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Updated Budget	%
Lodging Facility USE Tax (LFUT) Budget					
Administration	\$7,115.80	20.00%		\$7,115.80	
Education/Outreach	\$4,000.00	11.24%		\$4,000.00	
Cooperative Marketing	\$2,490.53	7.00%		\$2,490.53	
Paid Media	\$7,500.00	21.08%		\$7,500.00	
Visitor Services	\$2,100.00	5.90%		\$2,100.00	

Agency Services	\$12,372.67	34.78%		\$12,372.67
		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%		\$0.00
		0.00%		\$0.00
TOTAL LFUT Budget	\$35,579.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$35,579.00

Lodging Facility SALES Tax (LFST) Budget				
Administration	\$455.40	20.00%		\$455.40
Visitor Services	\$1,821.60	80.00%		\$1,821.60
		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%		\$0.00
TOTAL LFST Budget	\$2,277.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$2,277.00

TOTAL LFUT & LFST BUDGET	\$37,856.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$37,856.00
-------------------------------------	--------------------	----------------	---------------	--------------------

LFST Revenue Projection	2,277.00
LFUT Revenue Projection	35,579.00
Funds not spent during previous fiscal year	0.00
LFST Rollover Funds at Commerce	0.00
LFUT Rollover Funds at Commerce	0.00
Allocated Following Audit	0.00
Budget total	37,856.00

:

The Narrative Evaluation report is used to a) provide a written evaluation of the Objectives and Metrics section and b) provide a written summary of how the LFST Funds were spent and the metric(s) achieved.: