

Application Summary

Application: FY26 DMO Plan - Explore Whitefish

Applicant: Explore Whitefish

Funding opportunity: FY26 DMO Plan

Application Responses

Organization Name: Explore Whitefish

First Name: Zak

Last Name: Anderson

Street Address 1: 100 2nd Street East, #305

Street Address 2:

City: Whitefish

State: Montana

Zip: 59937

Funding Opportunity: FY26 DMO Plan

Amount Requested: 270,045

TAC Approved Budget: 270,045

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:

Established by the City of Whitefish, Explore Whitefish is the official visitor organization charged with destination management, visitor education, visitor management, and stewardship of Whitefish. We are also known as the Whitefish Convention and Visitors Bureau. Our organization provides critical support for visitor information services, travel infrastructure, market research, community resources, strategic partnerships, crisis communications and manages branding - public relations for the City.

Who do we wish to attract and why do they come?

Our targeted visitors are identified by geographic location, demographic characteristics, and values that distinguish our overall potential visitors as "high-value, low-impact". It is important to note, high-value does not mean high-revenue. Our targeted visitors who provide high-value, low-impact footprints, are identified as Geo-Travelers. These are our ideal visitors as these visitors will enhance the unique characteristics of Whitefish. They place a high value on authentic experiences, cultures, the environment, and the well-being of residents. They are also less likely to become discouraged in their travel experiences by traveling distances, difficulties, and variable weather which is often uncertain here in Whitefish – especially during our shoulder seasons.

1b. Strengths:

Location:

Glacier National Park - 3M visitors annually. Whitefish is located just 30 minutes from GNP's West Gate.

Whitefish Mountain Resort - Top 10 US-based ski resort; WMR reports over 500,000 skier visits annually with 60% of visitors being from season pass holders. WMR and snow sports are our top visitor attractions during the winter season. Whitefish benefits not only from fly-in visitors coming to ski but our pedestrian traffic for member business thrives when snow levels are high.

Whitefish Lake - Whitefish Lake State Park, Les Mason State Park, City Beach all provide public lake access to our visitors. Whitefish Lake is a draw for camping, hiking - scenic overviews and driving, swimming, water sports, padding, fishing and general beach and lake life. Our largest lodging partner also sits along our shoreline creating visitor experiences unlike others in our area. It's truly a treasure to have an active lake asset in addition to the above assets.

Bob Marshall Wilderness/Flathead National Forest - we added Bob Marshall to our list of assets this year as more than ever our visitors are requesting more information for outdoor recreation outside of GNP. Our neighboring forest land allows visitors to explore over 1.5M acres of forest land - this asset cannot be overlooked.

Accessibility

Air, rail, road, Glacier Park International Airport Expansion

Outdoor Recreation Desirability - Skiing, Hiking, Biking (ample gravel, road, mountain, trail, spring GTTSR), Fishing - River and Lake, Boating/Padding, Scenic Roadways, Golf, Horseback Riding - number of working & guest ranches.

Cool "Authentic" Mountain Town - we've been able to keep most of our business in our downtown corridor locally owned. We also are working hard to continue building awareness around Whitefish being a great dining, arts and entertainment destination town!

1c. Opportunities:

Cultural awareness through additional focus on Arts and Dining experiences - we built 2 rather ambitious new cultural campaigns in FY25: For the Love of Great Food and For the Love of the Arts to compliment our primary outdoor recreation campaign, For the Love of the Wild. These campaigns will focus on paid, organic, and local influencers to drive awareness that Whitefish is a destination that offers it all - come for skiing, stay for dinner and live music. By building awareness and visitor engagement in our entire destination experience, we will drive visitation where we need it by attracting and supporting nationally advertised and recognized signature events focused on dining, arts and entertainment/live music.

Group, Meeting, Event Travel. Explore Whitefish will continue to build our group & meeting assets. We

see as an important opportunity for our organization to add value and visibility to our partner/member organizations that work in the group, tour, meeting and event space. In FY25 we launched our "Plan an Event" landing page and started building a resource guide to make planning easy in our small mountain town.

Based on information collected during recent survey 97% of our non-resident travel is focused on leisure. Developing awareness and resources provides an opportunity to grow business and visitation during our need periods and fill in the weekly lodging gaps due to such a heavy reliance on leisure... essentially focus on building lodging compression Sun-Thursday year-round!

Our **Fall Season** is a hidden gem and remains an opportunity for further visitation growth. Opportunity to grow event partnerships in Fall with Whitefish Songwriters Festival and Whitefish Food & Wine Festival both of which are looking at permanent fall dates.

Stewardship - Continue impactful partnerships in areas of importance to our community and members. Currently our stewardship focus areas in affordable workforce housing, Protect our Winters, Leave no Trace, Whitefish Legacy Partners for enhancing local trail restoration and clean-up.

Expand outdoor recreation messaging and promotions to include sporting events and shoulder season activities including WELLNESS, mountain lifestyle culture, biking, fishing, golf and water recreation.

1d. Potential Challenges:

Air Travel Affordability

Short-term rentals - limited lodging tax funding. We have 3 x the number of STR in Whitefish than traditional hotels with 80% of the STR being outside of the city limit. EW does not receive any lodging tax from these STR yet they are a huge strain and cost item in our management. I'd like to call on the TAC and the Department of Commerce to review the allocation of lodging tax to include the entire zip code for local CVB's. Short-term rentals - supply continues to exceed demand causing disparities in the available long-term rental market for the workforce. Limited public transportation options

Resident anti-visitation sentiment has caused continued revenue and member loss which has limited our ability to message for our entire destination experience. Believe it or not, we have visitor-dependent businesses that have asked us not to include them in our resource guides, maps. We have had to apply private revenues towards educate & outreach to explain our role in managing tourism beneficially for our entire community.

Political and Economic Uncertainty does affect how and where people choose to travel. Additionally global media attention to Park and Forestry Service budget cuts may cause decline in visitors to GNP. We are already seeing slower pace of lodging bookings and GNP has reported a softer opening to their vehicle reservations.

Climate Change - wildfires, variable snowfall, drought - reducing lake and river levels. We actually have

started to see a slight softening in August due to fire/visibility concerns.

GNP Vehicle Reservation System - This summer GNP has added timed entry.

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

About Whitefish

Whitefish is a small mountain community filled with outdoor enthusiasts who embrace peaceful living and local culture. Located in one of the most desirable areas of the northern Rockies, Whitefish offers world-class skiing, lake life, and a vibrant downtown, all while maintaining a cool, authentic mountain town vibe. Often referred to as the gateway to Glacier National Park, Whitefish is committed to remaining a genuine community, not a resort town.

Explore Whitefish Positioning

Explore Whitefish fosters beneficial tourism through inspiration and engaging storytelling, with a mission to build a viable, sustainable, year-round visitor economy that preserves our authentic and socio-economic diversity. We provide accurate, inspiring destination information to visitors, helping them customize their experience while educating them about the special and fragile nature of Whitefish and its outdoor spaces. Our messaging encourages responsible recreation, care for our community, and a deep respect for our wild landscapes through our *For the Love of the Wild* campaign.

Alignment with Montana Brand Pillars and Strategic Goals

- **More Spectacular Unspoiled Nature**

Our *For the Love of the Wild* campaign highlights Whitefish's breathtaking natural beauty through inspiring photography and video, while also educating visitors on preserving these wild places through responsible recreation and Leave No Trace principles. In FY24, non-resident spending made up 58% of every dollar spent in Whitefish, underscoring the vital role tourism plays in sustaining our community.

- **Vibrant and Charming Small Towns**

Whitefish's authentic downtown is a key differentiator, offering historic storefronts, locally owned shops, vibrant arts, entertainment, and dining scenes. Maintaining our charming downtown is critical to our storytelling and visitor appeal.

- **Breathtaking Experiences by Day, Relaxing Hospitality by Night**

While our wild landscapes inspire travel to Whitefish, visitors also seek comfort, dining, and relaxation. Our destination offers the perfect balance between adventure and hospitality, creating memorable, well-rounded experiences that align with the Montana brand's promise.

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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):

Defined Audience

Our targeted visitors are defined by geographic location, demographic characteristics, and shared values. We focus on attracting high-value, low-impact travelers — visitors who enhance the unique character of Whitefish without overwhelming our community or environment.

It is important to note that high-value does not necessarily mean high-revenue. Instead, our ideal visitors are identified as *Geo Travelers*. These are individuals who seek authentic experiences, value local cultures, respect the environment, and prioritize the well-being of residents.

Geo Travelers are more resilient travelers; they are less likely to be deterred by distance, travel logistics, or variable weather, which is especially important during Whitefish's shoulder seasons. These visitors contribute positively to our community by embracing responsible recreation, supporting local businesses, and appreciating the authentic, year-round experience Whitefish offers. Explore Whitefish will be engaging in a complete brand and messaging review in FY26 and the outcome may involve adjusting our target market visitor.

Currently we focus our messaging and branding based on the below demographic, geographic and psychographics:

Demographics / Visitor Characteristics

(Source: Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research - ITRR)

- **Average Age:** 53 years old
- **Gender:** 52% Female | 48% Male

Household Income:

- 25% earn \$100,000 – \$150,000
- 22% earn \$50,000 – \$75,000
- 19% earn \$200,000+
- 14% earn \$75,000 – \$100,000
- 11% earn \$150,000 – \$200,000
- 9% earn less than \$50,000

Group Size When Visiting:

- 56% travel as a group of 2 people
- 17% travel as a group of 4 people
- 15% travel alone
- 10% travel as a group of 3 people
- 2% travel as a group of 5 or more

Geographic Markets

(Source: Visa Destination Insights)

FY2024 Top-Producing Markets:

1. Seattle
2. Los Angeles
3. Missoula
4. Dallas/Fort Worth
5. Phoenix

Seasonal Target Markets:

While the core markets listed below have historically performed well based on data analytics and travel accessibility (air, rail, and drive markets), it is important to note that Explore Whitefish must remain nimble and responsive to short-term changes in market conditions, especially as we plan for FY26 amid uncertain economic and political landscapes.

Our marketing and promotional efforts are strategically tailored by season, aligning with the availability of outdoor recreation activities. In recent years, we have also expanded our focus to lifestyle and cultural experiences to help drive non-resident spending during seasons when outdoor pursuits may be less appealing.

Top Seasonal Markets Include (but are not limited to):

Winter: Seattle, Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Spokane, Missoula, Northwest Montana

Note: We are currently limiting marketing efforts in Canada.

Spring: Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Missoula, Bozeman

Fall (Larch Season): Seattle, Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Dallas, Phoenix, Missoula, Spokane

Summary: Our seasonal marketing strategy ensures targeted, efficient outreach based on visitor behavior, accessibility, and evolving economic conditions. By remaining adaptable, we are able to effectively position Whitefish to attract high-value, low-impact travelers year-round.

Psychographics of the Geo-Traveler (Source: ITRR; Updated for FY26)

Definition: The Geo-Traveler remains Explore Whitefish's primary psychographic target for FY26: a high-value, low-impact visitor who embodies creativity, curiosity, and conscious travel habits.

Core Values: Creative, curious, and connected; Engaged, adventurous, and independent; Mindful,

responsible, and respectful of local communities and the environment

Attitudes and Behaviors

- Seeks immersion in local culture and everyday life
- Ventures off the beaten path, avoiding mass tourism
- Embraces spontaneity, risk-taking, and new challenges
- Displays attention to detail and decisiveness in travel planning
- Prioritizes authentic, locally unique experiences over mass-produced tourism
- Views travel as an integral part of their lifestyle and identity
- Willingly invests a disproportionate share of disposable income on travel
- Actively aware of their environmental and community impact

Strategic Implications for FY26:

- Continue positioning Whitefish as a destination where visitors can live their values through authentic, meaningful, and sustainable experiences.
- Prioritize marketing and visitor information that highlights local culture, arts, food, wellness, and outdoor recreation as integral to the Whitefish experience.
- Promote stewardship and visitor education initiatives that encourage responsible recreation and cultural respect.
- Elevate storytelling around *"The Love of the Wild"* to reinforce a shared commitment between visitors and residents.

Market Outlook - This long-term growth trajectory supports Explore Whitefish's continued focus on cultivating the Geo-Traveler audience to drive sustainable year-round visitation. However in FY2026 as mentioned we will be working with an outside consultant to conduct a deep dive into our branding and marketing strategies to make sure we remain innovative and are adapting our messaging to emerging markets and trends for our destination.

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :

Explore Whitefish invests significantly in research and data analytics to guide our destination management strategies. We utilize a combination of trusted industry resources and local partnerships to ensure our decisions are data-driven, effective, and aligned with evolving visitor trends. Our primary research and data sources include:

- **Visitor Surveys and Trends:** Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR)
- **Lodging and Occupancy Data:** AirDNA, Smith Travel Research (STR) - exclusive to competitive set reporting, Inntopia/Destimetrics
- **Visitor Spending and Market Insights:** Zartico, Visa Destination Insights
- **Air Lift Data:** Glacier Park International Airport provides on-going vital air lift reporting focusing on carrier schedules, enplanements and general relevant air traffic insights.
- **Destination Management & Marketing Technology:** In FY25, we invested in our first-ever

comprehensive CRM system specifically designed for DMO management, Simpleview, and this has enhanced our industry insight into growing trends, website maintenance and digital analytics capabilities.

- **Industry Insights:** We leverage additional research and best practices from engaging in Destinations International and the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) webinars and events.
- **Local Business Intelligence:** We maintain strong partnerships with our largest stakeholders: Averill Hospitality, Pursuit, Glacier Restaurant Group and Whitefish Mountain Resort, comparing our aggregated destination data against their internal performance metrics to better understand visitor behavior, trends and confidence in monthly market reporting.

Together, these resources allow Explore Whitefish to deliver a thoughtful, informed approach to sustainable & beneficial tourism management for our community benefit. In FY25 we enhanced our partner monthly market reports which have now been ranked as one of the most valuable reporting metrics for our stakeholders and local business members.

3c. What are your emerging markets?:

Emerging Markets for Whitefish - FY26 Outlook

As mentioned above, Explore Whitefish through our private funding, will be investing in a comprehensive update of our branding, market analytics, and messaging to make sure we are aligned to our evolving visitor needs. There are several key trends that are emerging and as a destination we want to make sure we are managing these markets effectively and in benefit to our close-knit community. Emerging markets/trends include:

- **Shift Toward Luxury Experiences:** Rising home prices, outside investment, and the arrival of high-end brands like Kemo Sabe, along with James Beard-nominated chefs, reflect a growing demand for luxury accommodations, private excursions, and finer dining experiences.
- **Staying True to Our Authenticity:** While we are seeing more high-touch experiences, it is essential Whitefish remains grounded in its unique -a bit rough around the edges, authentic identity. We are a small mountain town where our community lives and works and while we must look at shifts in our non-resident needs our growth must compliment our long-term character. It is essential that our visitor experience continues to offer a variety of experiences for all visitors, including hotel & restaurant options at every price point as well as a vibrant live music where young artist can come to create and explore their talents.
- **Emerging Geographic Markets on the Rise:** Los Angeles: Increased air service; Dallas/Fort Worth: Direct flights are fueling steady growth
- **Strategic Growth Opportunities:** Off-Season Destination Weddings, Wellness Travel - mindful and restorative experiences, Groups & Corporate Retreats, Adventure Cycling - build off momentum from the highly successful *The Last Best Ride*, Sports Markets and tournaments
- **Evolving Visitor Profile:** Visitors increasingly seek authentic, experiential travel aligned with high-

value, low-impact principles emphasizing meaningful connections to place, culture, and recreation.

Through our FY26 strategy, we aim to balance these emerging opportunities with a strong commitment to sustainable tourism and preserving the spirit of Whitefish.

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

Explore Whitefish will be targeting four (4) primary Strategic Priorities in FY 2026.

- Storytelling – Update Brand Pillars
- Leading - Engage Community
- Advocacy - Build Ambassador Program
- Stewardship - Increase Messaging

Storytelling

Key Initiative: Update Brand Strategy. Explore Whitefish will engage in brand and messaging review. **Tactics** will include work with Stakeholder Engagement, Brand Audit to include review of our brand guidelines, define and/or reconfirm our brand pillars, refresh our visual identity, and make updates to our messaging tone & voice. Roll out updated creative through existing marketing channels e.g. programmatic paid media campaigns.

Leading

Key Initiative: Continue to build credibility as the City of Whitefish's main conduit and voice for the visitor industry and visitor economy. **Tactics:** Host engaging and motivating Annual Meeting of Membership and bi-annual Town Hall meetings in coordination with City of Whitefish to educate stakeholders on our strategic priorities. Begin long-term strategic planning process in conjunction with brand and messaging review. Continue focus on building local awareness and approval of our work to build year-round tourism in benefit of our community and to combat serious anti visitation sentiment.

Advocacy

Key Initiative: Place an importance on our role to advocate for our members, our stakeholders, and the purpose of building low-impact visitor spending in order to protect our community and investment in our fragile wild spaces. **Tactics:** Create ambassador program (via non-profit partnerships and key stakeholders) to continue our tourism related advocacy.

Stewardship

Key Initiative: Continue to build stewardship programs that engage residents and visitors in jointly preserving, protecting our community, close-knit culture in benefit of Whitefish. **Tactics:**

Remain focused on Recreate Responsibly messaging regarding our wild spaces through work with Leave no Trace, Protect our Winters and Whitefish Legacy Partners. Build PR campaign around non-profit partnerships to build increased awareness. Increase resident and visitor messaging through paid media and social media around stewardship messaging.

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

The additional LFST funds are sincerely appreciated. The additional projected \$35,000 in sales tax revenue will directly support Explore Whitefish's mission to build a sustainable, year-round visitor economy. Specifically, these funds will be invested in expanding our paid media efforts to more effectively reach high-value, low-impact travelers to promote our shoulder and off-peak seasons. This targeted approach helps drive visitation when our local businesses need it most, supporting economic stability, sustaining our vibrant community, and helping to ensure year-round employment opportunities for Montana residents.

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
Storytelling: Digital Marketing Strategies	<p>Complete brand audit by July 30.</p> <p>Revised brand guidelines adopted and brand pillars confirmed or edited and adopted by July 30.</p> <p>Visual assets created and approved by July 30 based on refresh our visual identity, and updates to our messaging tone & voice.</p> <p>Develop and distribute (on Meta) 1 inspirational video per month during summer based on brand update.</p> <p>Target appropriate audiences using demographic information from research tools (listed in 3b) that align with seasonal travel theme and responsible recreation messaging to reinforce brand values of stewardship and sustainability.</p> <p>Goal of 10% increase in impressions over 2024 to 1M and gain 500 followers (combined Meta).</p> <p>Increase in engagement with paid media using updated creative with a goal of 10% increase over previous baseline.</p>	

	<p>Inspire visitation during off-peak seasons by developing 1 high quality video that is targeted to high value low impact audience specifically aimed at shoulder season travel. This will be a paid media and social media campaign. Goal of reaching summer video vies level of 150,000</p>	
<p>Storytelling: Mountain Lifestyle Campaigns "For the Love of the Arts" & "For the Love of Great Food:</p>	<p>Grow participation in Whitefish Restaurant Week among local restaurants and non resident visitors by investing in additional paid digital media in additional drive-to-markets (Spokane and Missoula). Goal to increase impressions 10% YOY</p> <p>Create and publish one inspiring seasonal (Fall/Winter) video showcasing Whitefish's thriving live music, theater, and gallery scene. Goal of 10% increase on video views on Meta YOY.</p>	
<p>Leading - Education & Outreach</p>	<p>Produce annual report with KPI's and market data.</p> <p>Host the Annual Meeting of Membership to share updates and engage Stakeholders. Goal to increase turnout from 60 to 100 attendees.</p> <p>Engage with community stakeholders through 2 Town Hall meetings in coordination with City of Whitefish's Sustainable Tourism Management Plan Committee. Goal 100 attendees combined.</p> <p>Foster transparency and community engagement around Whitefish Community and Explore Whitefish's mission by developing a quarterly consumer newsletter. Goal to grow initial newsletter</p>	

	<p>engagement by 15% YOY.</p> <p>Conduct annual survey on tourism and grow positive sentiment by 5% YOY.</p>	
Storytelling: Group & Event Sales	<p>Expand and enhance meeting planning resources for professional event Organizers by joining Cvent platform. Goal of 3+ leads for off season groups.</p> <p>Increase engagement and visibility of the Meeting & Event Resource Guide by investing in professional photography that highlights Whitefish as a premier mountain meeting and incentive destination. Goal: to support goal of Cvent leads mentioned above.</p>	
<p>Leading: Trustworthy Reporting</p> <p>Advocacy:</p>	<p>Invest in accurate, aggregated, and timely data collection tools and platforms to position Explore Whitefish as most trusted source for tourism data (for Monthly Market reports and Annual Report)</p> <p>Expand customized data reporting to support the City of Whitefish's Vision 45 strategic planning Efforts aka City Growth Policy (Monthly Market report and Annual Report)</p> <p>Create and launch ambassador program with non-profits.</p> <p>Recruit and train ambassadors in year 1. Goal: 2 ambassadors.</p> <p>Ambassador attendance at key events and fundraisers. Goal 4+ events per year.</p>	

Stewardship	<p>Increase the number of PR pieces to reinforce awareness of stewardship messaging published. Specifically related to POW support and Recreate Responsibly messaging. Goal of 4+ pieces annually.</p> <p>Increase social media engagement rate on stewardship related content. Goal increase 5%+ over average engagement.</p> <p>Increase paid media impressions focused on stewardship messaging. Goal to increase by 10% YOY.</p>		
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Budget Form: DMO-Budget-Form-LST-LFUT - From Explore Whitefish 4.22.xlsx

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DMO Budget:

See Budget Below:

DMO

Allowable Method	Budget	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Updated Budget	% Budgeted
Lodging Facility USE Tax (LFUT) Budget					
Agency Services	\$25,000.00	8.20%		\$25,000.00	
Paid Media	\$90,000.00	29.50%		\$90,000.00	
Travel/Trade Shows	\$7,000.00	2.29%		\$7,000.00	
Earned Media/Tourism Sales	\$8,825.00	2.89%		\$8,825.00	
Research	\$71,220.00	23.35%		\$71,220.00	

Education/Outreach	\$2,000.00	0.66%		\$2,000.00
Administration	\$54,000.00	17.70%		\$54,000.00
Opportunity Marketing	\$12,000.00	3.93%		\$12,000.00
		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	\$270,045.00	88.53%	\$0.00	\$270,045.00
Lodging Facility SALES Tax (LFST) Budget				
Paid Media	\$35,000.00	11.47%		\$35,000.00
		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 LFST Budget	\$35,000.00	11.47%	\$0.00	\$35,000.00
TOTAL LFUT & LFST BUDGET	\$305,045.00	100.00%	\$0.00	\$305,045.00
LFST Revenue Projection		35,000.00		
LFUT Revenue Projection		270,045.00		
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		305,045.00		

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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.:

