

WALTON COUNTY TOURISM 2022-2025 STRATEGIC PLAN



Facilitated by

ZEITGEIST CONSULTING

DMO
PROZ

DMOproz.com

VISION

For Walton County to enjoy a robust and sustainable Visitor Economy that provides an exceptional Quality of Life for our residents.

MISSION

The Mission of the Walton County Tourism Department is to direct and manage activities that will strengthen the Walton County brand in the tourism marketplace, in order to increase the region's tourism economy.

The Tourism Department will manage and maintain our beaches as a primary attraction and serve as a responsible industry organization to take a leadership role in addressing issues that affect tourism and the quality of life in Walton County.

The Walton County Tourist Development Council (TDC) serves as the primary strategic advisor to the Board of County Commissioners on issues and opportunities facing the community from a tourism perspective. It is for this reason that the TDC embarked upon a strategic planning process during the first quarter of 2022. As the environment in which the TDC and the Tourism Department operate continues to change and evolve, it needs to consistently re-position itself and its programming to continue to build the visitor economy in an increasingly competitive environment.

On the next page, readers will find a compilation of the progress that the Tourism Department achieved on its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, followed by new and continuing Goals, Objectives and potential Tactics of the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan. Background research that formed the foundation for the Plan begins on Page 23.



PROGRESS AGAINST GOALS OF THE 2019-2021 STRATEGIC PLAN

Despite the impacts of the 2020 Pandemic, effects of which are still being experienced in the way customers and clients from around the world travel, the Tourism Department made remarkable strides in the execution of its 2019-2021 Strategic Plan. An overview of those successes follows:

ON THE GOAL:

Improve the Destination's Ability to Enhance the Visitor Experience



OBJECTIVE A:

CONTINUE TO UPGRADE THE BEACH EXPERIENCE

The County has purchased three new beach accesses, adding hundreds of feet of public beach.

Improvements are planned for Grayton Beach parking, additional restrooms in three locations and additional parking in Miramar Beach and along 30A.

Beach Code Enforcement Department consolidated with Land Development Code Enforcement to form Walton County Code Compliance Dept. 17, with the Beach Code staff increasing from 12 to 19 employees.

The Beach Ambassador program expanded from five full-time staff members to three full-time staff members with 21 part-time seasonal staff members, allowing more coverage and contact with the community.



OBJECTIVE B:

WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH TRANSPORTATION INTERESTS AND AGENCIES TO ENHANCE MOBILITY AND PARKING THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

In response to the pandemic, the Tourism Department developed an open-air transportation system for Grayton Beach that was successful in moving 18,000 riders over two months, providing data to support the Planning Department in receiving a grant to expand transportation.

Additional parking for the public was developed, plans of building a parking structure are being considered, and work with the Planning Department on a mobility hub was initiated.

Additional bike path improvements were achieved, including adding more bike racks and bike maintenance stations on the 30A path.

East-West transportation plan is in the design phase.



OBJECTIVE C:

CONTINUE TO SUPPORT SHOULDER SEASON FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

Developed key campaigns to continue awareness of events through digital marketing and attracted new events to apply for support, including events north of Choctawhatchee Bay.



OBJECTIVE D:

ANALYZE OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE THE DESTINATION'S AESTHETICS

Added landscaping and beautification of 331 south to 98 and gateway sections of 98 and 30A.

Initiated plans to develop a Walton County Discovery Center on the southbound west side of 331 to better inform visitors entering the destination, as well as create a community meeting facility.

Plans have been initiated to start an art mural trail that will encompass the entire county, featuring additional statues and the development of an underwater museum of art.



OBJECTIVE E:

ANALYZE OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP ADDITIONAL ENTERTAINMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Partially funded a land acquisition of 220 acres behind Publix on 98 with possible plans to develop an amphitheater/performing arts center and large event space.

Provided free day-use admission to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park Memorial Day through Labor Day to help spread visitation throughout the destination, as well as promote the natural beauty and activities within the state parks.

Developed a Birding Guide to drive additional activities off the beach.

ON THE GOAL:

Increase the Community's Understanding of and Support for a Thoughtfully Planned Visitor Economy



OBJECTIVE A:

CONTINUE TO KEEP RESIDENTS INFORMED OF THE TOURISM DEPARTMENT'S WORK

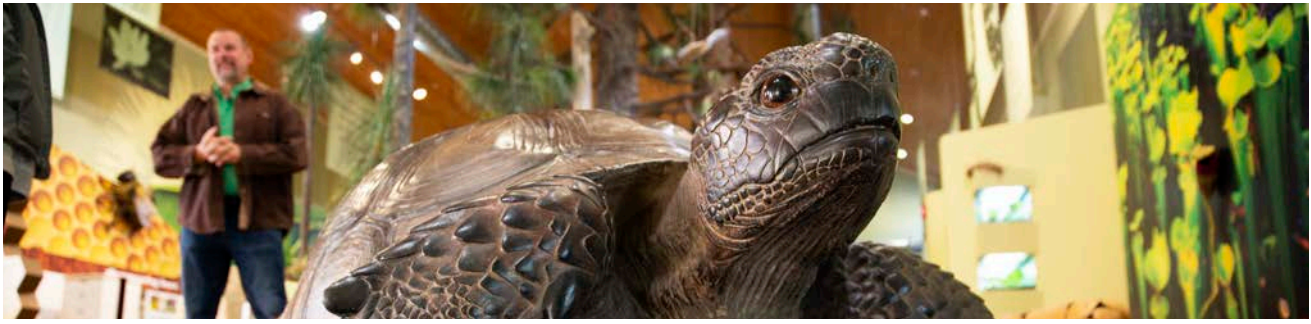
An increased amount of reporting by our research agency, Downs & St. Germain Research, has allowed us to make more informed decisions and better understand the Walton County visitor, especially their impact on our community infrastructure and government services.

Increased reporting on the successful transportation program and future expansion. Working with the Planning Department on programs and hiring a full-time transportation-focused team member.

As part of our newsletter distribution, we continue to provide contact information for residents and our partners to contact us with any questions or concerns they may have.

Created informative videos on TDT, DMO vs. TDC and beach safety.

Launched Walton County Line, a quarterly newsletter for residents, focusing on hospitality and tourism efforts and news, available in print and online.



OBJECTIVE B:

ENGAGE INDUSTRY PARTNERS IN THE EFFORT TO PROTECT THE VISITOR ECONOMY AND DESTINATION BRAND

This Objective was not pursued, as work proceeded to add the area north of the Bay to the Walton County service area.



OBJECTIVE C:

CONTINUE TO FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRY WORKFORCE

Hosted a Hospitality & Tourism Job Fair and expanded the training that is customer and marketing-focused for partners.

OBJECTIVE D:

DEVELOP A CLEAR, COHERENT AND SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION VISION FOR THE COUNTY

Initiated a Strategic Marketing Plan process in early 2022 with the intent to update the Marketing Plan with the addition of North Walton County.



ON THE GOAL:

Continue to Expand the Destination's Capture of New Visitors



OBJECTIVE A:

CONTINUE TO EVOLVE MARKETING TO LEISURE TRAVEL CONSUMERS

We were presented with a Flagler Award for our Virtual Beach Vibes campaign.

Through partnerships with iHeartMedia, the Emeril Lagasse Foundation and Travel and Adventure Shows, we attended multiple in-person events in key markets such as Nashville, Dallas, Birmingham and New Orleans, reminding potential visitors that Walton County was open for business.

Based on research, we continue to identify the markets with the highest potential for visitors and attend high-end events within those markets to promote Walton County.





OBJECTIVE B:

CONTINUE TO ENHANCE EFFORTS TO ATTRACT MORE GROUP BUSINESS TO WALTON COUNTY

Promoted Walton County as a unique and safe location during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting our wide-open spaces and open-air options for meetings and events with the tagline “Meetings Are In Our Nature.”

Identified events and advertising opportunities geared toward Travel Agents and Tour and Travel Operators (North Walton).

Developed a Social Media plan to increase traffic and awareness at industry tradeshows and events at which the Sales Department participates and sponsors.

Doubled the number of tradeshows and sponsorships to reach new meeting planners in new markets.

Actively involved with Film Florida, communicating with surrounding counties' Film Commissioners, and submitted images and video for North and South Walton to be included in a virtual FAM tour that Film Florida is creating.

Promoted flight assistance and room rebate programs for groups that meet certain criteria to drive off-season business.



OBJECTIVE C:

WORK WITH INDUSTRY PARTNERS TO COLLABORATIVELY PROMOTE THE SOUTH WALTON BRAND

Produced a Brand Standards guide for industry partners.

Launched a new year-round Supplemental Co-Op Program allowing partners to participate in affordable digital campaigns whenever they see a period of need in their bookings.



OBJECTIVE D:

CONTINUE TO ANALYZE OPPORTUNITIES TO PROMOTE ATTRACTIONS IN NORTH WALTON TO EXPAND THE DESIRABILITY OF THE DESTINATION

With the new taxing district north of the Bay, a North Walton Tourism Committee has been formed, and research is being conducted into how a North Walton County visitor would respond to marketing. North Walton attractions are being included in our digital Stay Guide, Visitor Guide and Explore Guide.

Developing a brand roadmap to align the current South Walton brand with the newer developing brand of Walton County. Hosted an immersive Walton County tour for ad agency to begin this process.

Developed the Beyond the Beach campaign to remind current and future visitors about all the opportunities to explore all of Walton County.

Worked with shopping, dining and accommodations to create 360 videos to showcase the beauty of all of Walton County, including Beyond the Beach.



2022-2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

In virtually every Strategic Plan, there will be new opportunities to pursue and threats to be mitigated, as well as initiatives that should be continued based on community support and industry need. In this next iteration of the Tourism Department's Plan, new Goals, Objectives and suggested Tactics kick off this section of the document, followed by Goals and Objectives upon which focus should be maintained.

Goals and Objectives that remain from the last Plan may have some tactics that reappear, as they are either evergreen concepts or weren't completed (but are still relevant). However, all such Goals and Objectives include new suggested tactics.



NEW INITIATIVES



GOAL

EXPAND THE MAGNETISM OF THE DESTINATION TO INCREASE AND DIVERSIFY THE VISITOR ECONOMY

OBJECTIVE A:

DEVELOP A NEW BRAND MESSAGE THAT INCORPORATES ALL THE DESTINATION ASSETS AND ADVENTURES OF A WALTON COUNTY EXPERIENCE

Suggested Tactics:

- Commission research to understand the motivations of present visitors that choose experiences north of the Bay
- Develop a county-wide brand that highlights regional, community and neighborhood sub-brands to broaden the destination's appeal
- Work to integrate the northern experience into a destination-wide marketing plan
- Stress the appeal of one of the most diverse eco-systems in the State of Florida
- Schedule regular meetings with organizations and business communities north of the Bay to identify marketing opportunities
- Analyze opportunities to develop a grant program to assist in the development of special events to drive increased visitation
- Consider opportunities to support increased utilization of heritage sites (such as Chautauqua Hall)
- Consider opportunities to enhance and staff a second Visitor Center north of the Bay





OBJECTIVE B: **CONTINUE TO BUILD SHOULDER SEASON VISITATION**

Suggested Tactics:

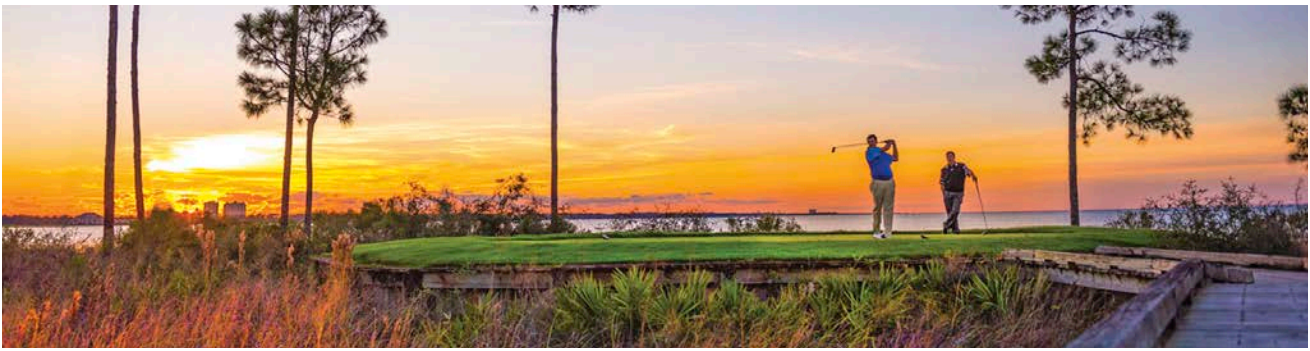
- Increase focus on Shoulder Season promotion to attempt to even out visitors over the year
 - Stress winter activities and the availability of a more laid-back pace
 - Target the high value consumer
 - Those who stay longer and spend more
 - Those who respect our community and environment
 - Identify potential packages and incentives to drive consumers to book a Shoulder Season visit
 - Increase focus on Arts & Culture events
 - Consider opportunities to support those visitors who want to give back and provide outlets for them to volunteer to enhance sustainability of the destination. (i.e., Snowbirds and environmentally conscious travelers)
-



OBJECTIVE C: **ANALYZE OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPAND THE OUTDOOR RECREATION MARKET**

Suggested Tactics:

- Work with the county's State Parks to enhance the visitor experience
- Analyze opportunities to enhance access to trails, bird viewing platforms and bicycling areas
- Support the development of more access points and equipment rental amenities along the county's inland waterways and lakes to develop a "paddle trail"
- Consider opportunities to develop a market for dive and paddleboard enthusiasts

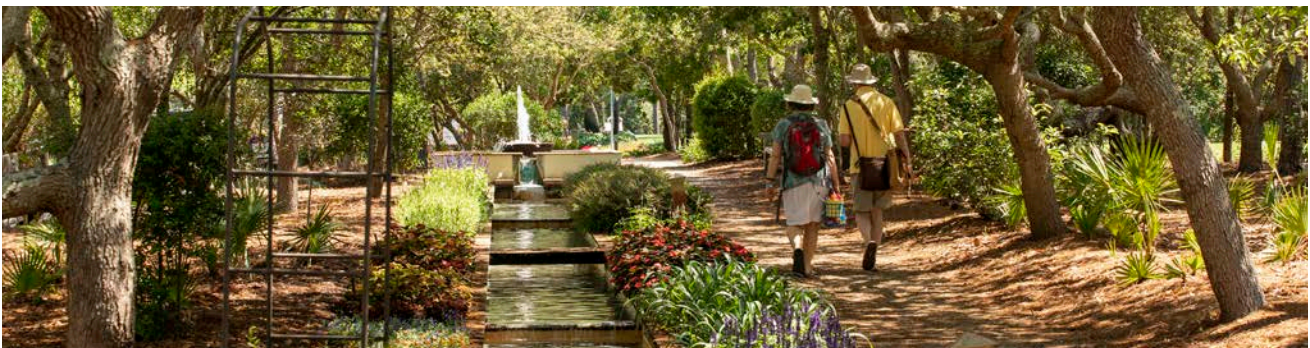


OBJECTIVE D:

ADVOCATE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DESTINATION-ENHANCING ASSETS

Suggested Developments:

- Support opportunities to develop Tournament-grade Sports Complexes
- Support the development of a Performance facility / amphitheater to host concerts and other arts events
- Consider opportunities to develop an Eco-Tourism program in the rural portions of the county
- Support initiatives to enhance wayfinding signage throughout the county
- Continue to advocate for better broadband service throughout the county
- Continue to support the addition of public art and murals around the county
- Work to align the Tourism Department's development goals with those of the County



OBJECTIVE E:

DEVELOP A TOURISM MASTER PLAN FOR WALTON COUNTY

Suggested Tactics:

- Collaborate and participate with the County and its municipalities as comprehensive plans are being developed, identifying projects that are tourism-centric
- Work with other community development agencies (Chambers, Main Streets, Economic Development, Arts Organizations, etc.) to understand their primary interests and needs
- Develop a Tourism Master Plan that includes the most meaningful projects identified by the County and its municipalities, along with initiatives that have been prioritized by the TDC
- Utilize the Tourism Master Plan in providing counsel to the Board of County Commissioners and inspiration for private sector investors

GOAL

COLLABORATIVELY LEAD DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVES

OBJECTIVE A:

ENGAGE OTHER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS TO ADOPT DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP AS PART OF THEIR PROGRAM OF WORK

Suggested Developments:

- Convene meetings of participating organizations to discuss the tenets of Stewardship and Sustainability, which include maintaining the cultural, environmental, economic and aesthetic integrity of a place
- Utilize the successful model of the Beach Safety campaign to encourage both residents and visitors to be respectful of the culture and environment of Walton County
- Work with refuse collection firms to increase pick-up frequency in high-traffic areas to enhance destination aesthetics
- Work with refuse collection firms to endeavor to keep rural areas free of trash
- Continue to work with Keep Walton Beautiful on Stewardship initiatives
- Consider establishing a Stewardship position within the Tourism Department to ensure this initiative is valued and sustainable





OBJECTIVE B:

CONSIDER BECOMING INVOLVED IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVES TO LEARN BEST PRACTICES IN SUSTAINABILITY

Suggested Examples:

- Analyze opportunities to certify professional staff in Sustainable Tourism Destination Management through George Washington University
- The World Travel & Tourism Council has published work on Destination Stewardship
- The Global Sustainable Tourism Council is attempting to create global standards for Sustainability in Tourism and Travel (DMOs in Sonoma, New Smyrna Beach, Asheville & Moab are members)
- The Destination Stewardship Report provides real world examples of addressing Climate Change and Rural Tourism initiatives
- The Center for Responsible Travel hosts virtual events to discuss Stewardship and Sustainability issues
- The Oregon Coast Visitors Association has signed on to the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism



CONTINUING INITIATIVES



GOAL

CONTINUE TO ENHANCE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

OBJECTIVE A:

CONTINUE TO UPGRADE AND PRESERVE THE BEACH EXPERIENCE

Suggested Tactics:

- Continue to acquire property, as available, for public beachfronts
- Support greater access to parking near public beaches
- Continue to identify State, Federal and other financial resources for beach re-nourishment to keep the county's asset competitive and enjoyable
- Work to enhance safety along the shore with an increased presence of lifeguards, police and ambassadors
- Continue to develop disability-friendly beaches





OBJECTIVE B:

CONTINUE TO ENHANCE EFFORTS TO ATTRACT MORE GROUP BUSINESS TO WALTON COUNTY

Suggested Tactics:

- Develop messaging that positions a Walton County meeting as a unique experience for attendees
- Enhance in-market conference services for groups while in the destination to add value to the experience, enticing them to return
- Increase focus on incentive and corporate markets that are utilizing more regional destinations
- Search for opportunities to stage activations in feeder markets that involve both Sales and Marketing Departments for a greater ROI while in market
- Work with the Parks & Recreation Department to land small tournaments as a way to begin developing the youth and amateur sports market
- Should work begin on Tournament-grade Sports Complexes, initiate more aggressive visibility at Sports Trade Shows and events and subscribe to the SCOUT database



OBJECTIVE C:

WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH TRANSPORTATION INTERESTS AND AGENCIES TO ENHANCE MOBILITY AND PARKING THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

Suggested Tactics:

- Support enhanced public transportation systems and networks
- Advocate for more public parking
- Support bike-friendly options and accessibility
- Support expansion of the DeFuniak Springs Municipal Airport

GOAL

CONTINUE TO INCREASE THE COMMUNITY'S UNDERSTANDING OF AND SUPPORT FOR A THOUGHTFULLY PLANNED VISITOR ECONOMY

OBJECTIVE A:

CONTINUE TO KEEP RESIDENTS INFORMED OF THE TOURISM DEPARTMENT'S WORK

Suggested Tactics:

- Increase the frequency of communiques from the Tourism Department to update community stakeholders on:
 - The value of the Visitor Economy
 - The new measures being adopted in Sustainability and Stewardship
 - New rules, regulations and codes
 - The addition of new public beaches and parking
 - Updates on how the Tourism Department is working on Transportation issues
 - Events Calendar
 - How to communicate with the Tourism Department
 - Other topics, as appropriate
- Continue to analyze several communication platforms to ensure widespread reach
 - Social Media
 - Newsletters
 - Print Media
 - Electronic Media
 - Creation of a microsite for Beach Operations to give regular updates on their projects and provide a place for factual information about those projects
 - Regular "Town Hall / Listening Sessions" throughout the county





OBJECTIVE B:

CONTINUE TO FACILITATE THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF A HOSPITALITY WORKFORCE

Suggested Tactics:

- Work with area educational entities to expand hospitality curriculum programs
 - Enhance messaging regarding hospitality jobs that de-stigmatizes them as not being valued positions in the economy
 - Be intentional about efforts to engage a workforce that is diverse and inclusionary
 - Encourage youth and retirees to enter the hospitality workforce
-





RESEARCH & INTELLIGENCE

In preparing this Strategic Plan for the Walton County TDC and the Tourism Department, the DMOProz team deployed both an online survey of industry stakeholders and community leaders and a survey of residents. Personnel also conducted face-to-face interviews and focus groups with stakeholders in February and April of 2022.

78 community leaders and stakeholders completed an online survey, and DMOProz personnel met with another 70± leaders and stakeholders to hear first-hand the thoughts and visions of these individuals. Over 600 residents responded to the opportunity to share their thoughts on the destination and the work of the Tourism Department.

A summary of the intelligence gathered follows....





INDUSTRY PARTNER & COMMUNITY LEADER ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

THE FUTURE OF THE DESTINATION

Over 70 industry partners and community leaders responded to an online survey and suggested ways the Walton County Tourism Department and the TDC could enhance the destination.

Common themes and suggestions were essentially unchanged from a similar survey conducted in 2018:

- The desire for additional public beach accesses
- The need for more / better parking solutions along 30A and at public beaches
- The interest in enhanced public transportation / traffic mitigation
- The development of a large-scale entertainment space / venue

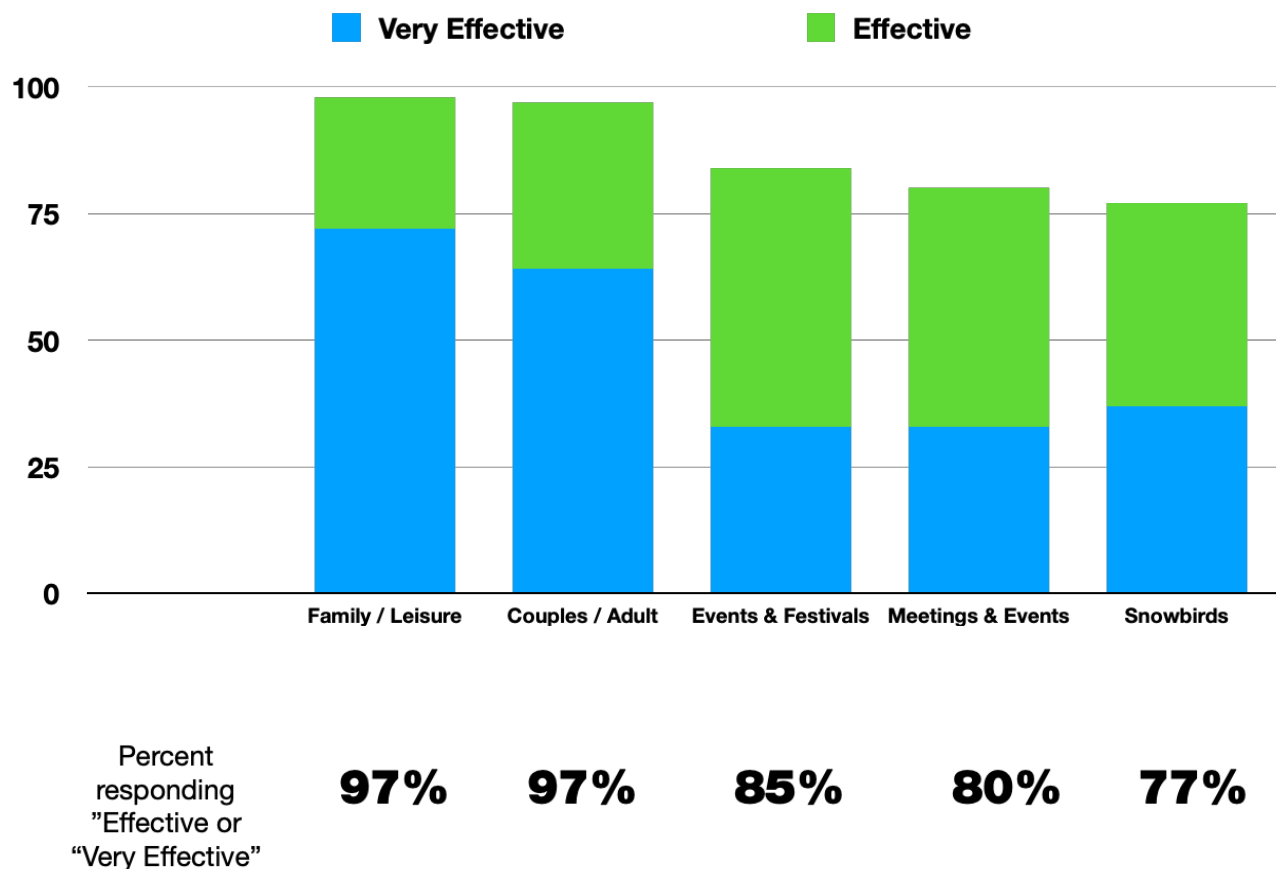
Respondents were also asked to identify new attractions or venues that should be considered as the destination plans its future. Among the most prevalent responses:

- Tournament-grade sports complex(es)
- Larger event venue(s)
- A fishing pier
- World-class water park



THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TDC / WALTON COUNTY TOURISM DEPARTMENT

That same online survey asked stakeholders to rate the effectiveness of the Walton County Tourism Department on a number of marketing fronts:



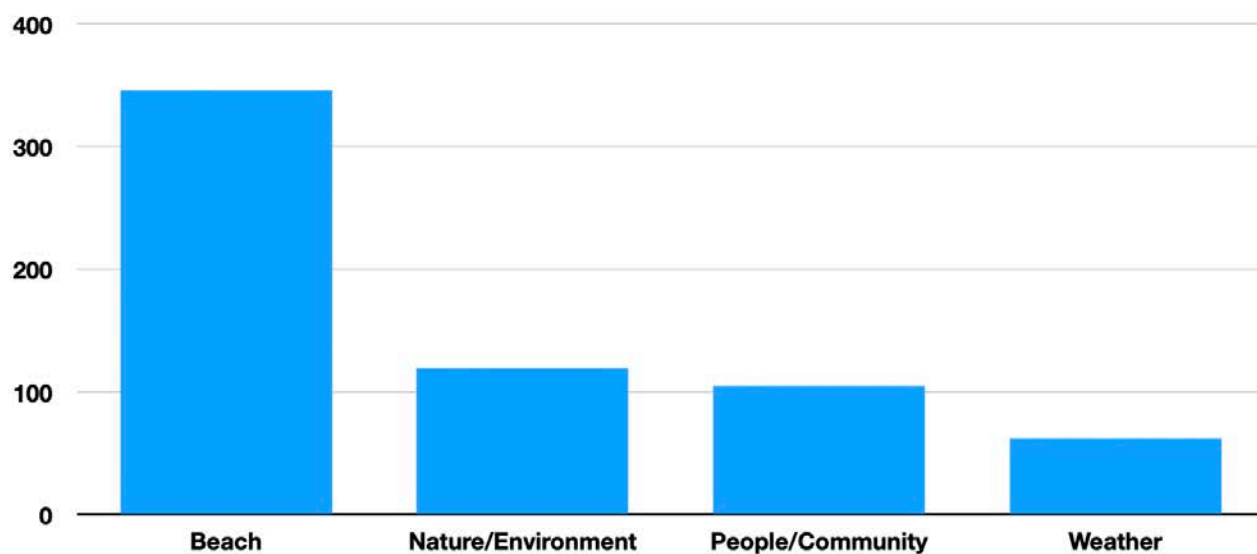
These rankings are essentially identical to the 2018 survey with only Snowbird Marketing falling outside the statistical $\pm 3\%$ allowed variance. Snowbird Marketing effectiveness was deemed to be "Effective" or "Very Effective" by 84% of respondents in 2018 and 77% "Effective" or "Very Effective" in this year's survey.



RESIDENT ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

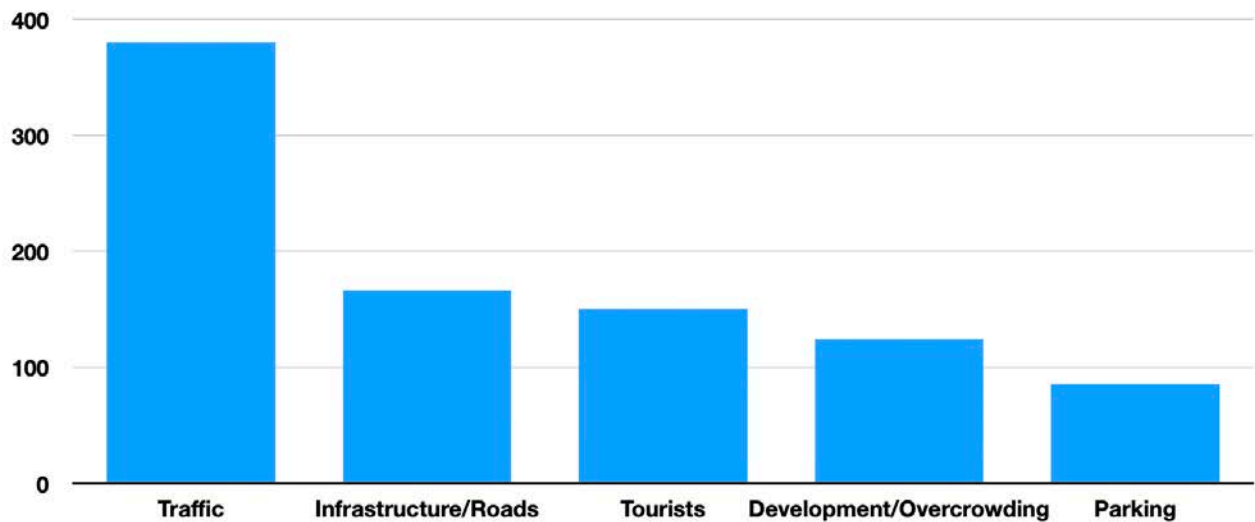
Over 600 county residents responded to the opportunity to share their thoughts on the destination and the work of the Tourism Department, roughly twice the response to our survey four years prior.

THE BEST PART OF WALTON COUNTY



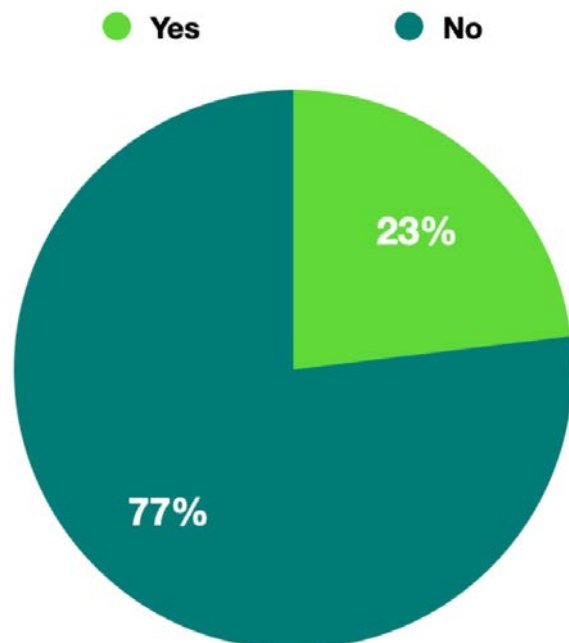


THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF LIVING IN WALTON COUNTY



PUBLIC BEACHES

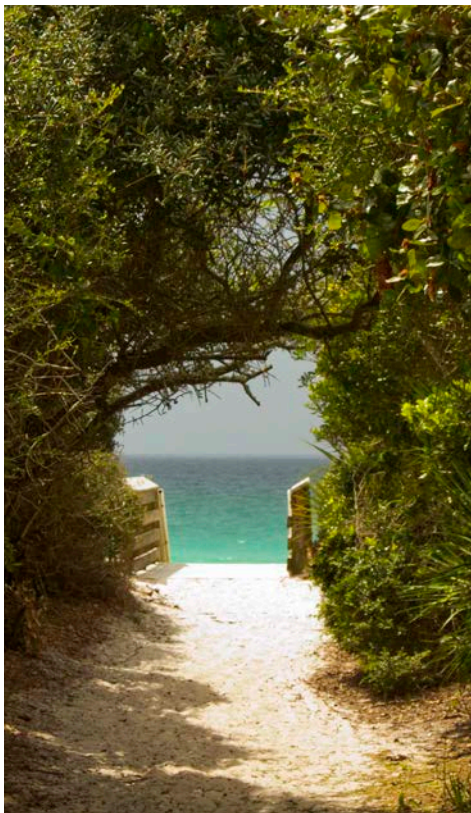
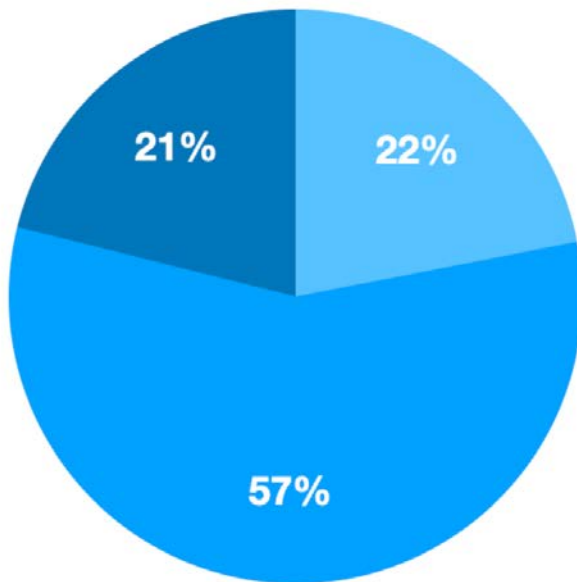
Residents were fairly universal in their belief that there wasn't adequate access to public beaches:



That said, 79% believed that the Tourism Department was either "Very Effective" or "Effective" in efforts to maintain beach accesses and 76% believed the Tourism Department was equally effective in removing beach trash...both rankings higher than resident opinions in 2018.

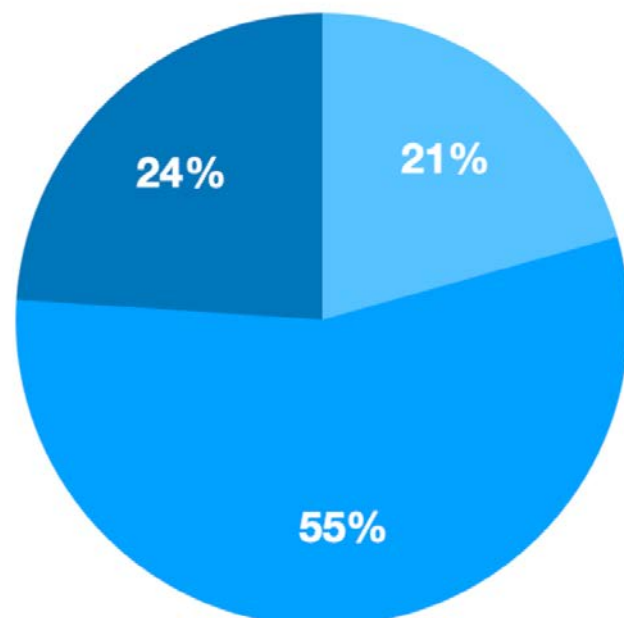
BEACH TRASH

● Very Effective ● Effective ● Not Effective



BEACH ACCESS

● Very Effective ● Effective ● Not Effective





CHALLENGES FACING THE DESTINATION

Residents responded to a separate survey to gain a better idea of their concerns and visions, apart from industry partners. Responses are not listed in any particular order. However, those in bold type were responses that were heard at least 20% of the time.

- **Traffic / Lack of Parking**
- **Overcrowding**
- **Uncontrolled Developments**
- Lack of Affordable Housing
- Low Wages
- Lack of a Diverse Economy
- Cost of Living
- Lack of Public Restrooms



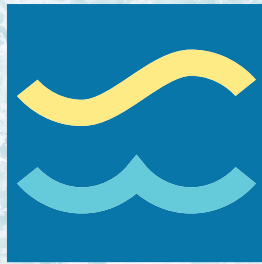


WHAT RESIDENTS WANT

As one could expect, the list is long. Those responses that were recorded in over 20% of the results are in bold type:

- **More Public Beaches**
- **More Parking**
- **Reduce Traffic Congestion**
- Make 30A More Aesthetically Pleasing
- More Marinas
- Affordable Housing
- Limit Unchecked Development and Variances
- More Direct Flights
- Wider Bike Lanes / More Bike Access
- Better Trash Collection
- Better Wayfinding Signage
- Beachfront Restaurants
- An Art Center
- More Public Transportation / Taxi Service
- Trailhead Parking at Lakes
- A Retreat / Spa
- Shuttles
- Large-Scale Entertainment Space
- More Healthcare Facilities (especially in the North County)
- Restore Customary Use of the Beaches
- Develop an Eco-Tourism Program





WALTON COUNTY TOURISM 2022-2025 STRATEGIC PLAN



Facilitated by

ZEITGEIST CONSULTING

**DMO
PROZ**

DMOproz.com