



## Grant Details

### 118486 - FY23 DMO Plan

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#### 122504 - FY23 Whitefish CVB DMO Plan

#### DOC Office of Tourism

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# **DMO Plan Narrative**

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## **1. Describe Your Destination**

*Describe your destination (who you are, who you wish to attract and why they would come) addressing your strengths, opportunities, and potential challenges.*

### **Whitefish, Montana**

Whitefish, Montana is an authentic mountain town located in the northern Rockies, home to some of the world's most beautiful mountains and spectacular, unspoiled nature. Just 25 miles from Glacier National Park, Whitefish offers close access to the hanging valleys and emerald peaks of this World Heritage Site. The summer season has historically been the busy season for Whitefish, with Glacier National Park as a key draw. Whitefish Lake, at the edge of town, has also been a popular warm season draw. Research also indicates that visitors are attracted to Whitefish because of the distinctive and inviting qualities of the eminently walkable downtown and Central Avenue district.

The world-class ski slopes and facilities of Whitefish Mountain Resort serve as a key driver for winter visitation to Whitefish. The relationship between the mountain resort and the town of Whitefish is symbiotic. As a result, improving and enhancing the connectivity of the mountain and the town experience helps improve the economic outcomes of both and improves the overall visitor experience as well. Whitefish Mountain Resort summer activities have expanded considerably over the last several years, improving the summertime vitality of the mountain resort experience as well as enhancing the overall attraction of Whitefish as the preferred place to base a northwest Montana and Glacier National Park region vacation.

### **About Explore Whitefish & Purpose Of This DMO Plan**

Established by the City of Whitefish, Explore Whitefish is the officially designated organization charged with destination marketing and stewardship of Whitefish, also known as the Whitefish Convention & Visitors Bureau. The organization also provides critical support for visitor information services, travel infrastructure development, market research, community resources, strategic partnerships, crisis communications, and public relations.

The purpose of the Explore Whitefish Marketing Plan is to sustainably grow the economy of Whitefish by emphasizing its desirability as a travel and recreation destination to non-resident visitors who appreciate and respect the character of the place.

### **Key Travel Motivations For Whitefish, Montana**

Summer occupancy is primarily driven by the town's proximity to Glacier National Park. The quality lodging opportunities, dining and nightlife possibilities coupled with the town's distinctive downtown environment have made Whitefish a preferred location to base a vacation to the Glacier National Park region. Summer visitation is also supported by the attractions of Whitefish Lake and the expanding attractions in addition to Glacier National Park including the Whitefish Trail and other recreational opportunities in and around town. The activities available at Whitefish Mountain Resort enhance the downtown shops, restaurants and galleries of the town itself. Many warm season festivals and events support the active and vibrant social environment of the town's core, which serves as a key visitor attraction.

Winter travel is primarily driven by the skiing and snowboarding opportunities at Whitefish Mountain Resort. However, this relationship has become increasingly symbiotic as winter visitors increasingly seek off-slope activities as part of

their vacation. Winter experience in Glacier National Park, including cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and sightseeing are examples of unique off-slope activities increasingly promoted by Explore Whitefish. Furthermore, travel groups may include those who do not ski or snowboard. Good places to eat, active nightlife, shopping, arts and other winter sport activities, attractions, and events have become an increasingly important component of the overall winter vacation product mix.

Specific motivations for spring and fall season travel revolve around active experiences in and around Glacier National Park and Whitefish such as scenic driving, wildlife viewing, hiking, birding, golf, fly-fishing, road and mountain biking, non-motorized water sports, horseback riding, paddling, and hiking. Cultural and culinary experiences such as dining, shopping at local shops, attending performing arts, and community events are also considered primary spring and fall activities for Whitefish. This includes traveling to Whitefish primarily for the purpose of relaxing, strolling the streets and shops and trying out great dining and nightlife options.

### **Preferred Visitors To Whitefish, Montana**

Our preferred visitors are targeted by geographic location, demographic characteristics, and values that distinguish our overall potential visitor as a “high potential visitor” and “winter enthusiast” (as defined by research conducted by Destination Analysts) and our niche visitor as a “geotraveler” (as defined by research conducted by ITRR, the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) and the National Geographic Society). The following section provides information on the distinguishing characteristics of potential visitors defined by Brand Montana along with the core geographic markets for Whitefish.

#### High Potential Visitors For Montana

Brand Montana engaged in a destination brand research study with Destination Analysts in which the characteristics of the most desirable visitors to Montana were defined. The “High Potential Visitor” profile aligns with the demographics and psychographics of the geotraveler that Explore Whitefish has been marketing to and has had significant success.

#### Montana's High Potential Visitor Characteristics

*Source: Destination Analysts, Montana Destination Brand Research, 2016*

- 60% have HHI (Household Income) above \$80,000
- 54% Male, 46% Female
- 68% have college degrees or above
- Average age: 36.4 years old
- Expected Days Spent in Montana: 8.1
- Expected Total Expenditures in Montana: \$1,887
- Frequent travelers who live in urban areas yet are outdoor-oriented travelers and heavy consumers of recreational activities

#### Winter Enthusiasts For Montana

Brand Montana engaged in a destination research study with Destination Analysts in which the characteristics of the most desirable visitors to Montana during the winter season were defined. The “Winter Enthusiasts” profile aligns with

the demographics and psychographics of the geotraveler that Explore Whitefish has been marketing to and has had significant success.

#### Winter Enthusiasts Interested In Traveling To Montana For Winter Recreation

Source: *Destination Analysts, Montana Profile & Study of the Winter Enthusiast, 2018*

- Average Annual HHI (Household Income): \$80,991
- 54% Male, 46% Female
- 61.5% have college degrees or above
- Average age: 39.7 years old
- 75% typically travel for winter recreation with spouse or significant other as travel party
- Spending on 4 day/3 night winter recreation trip: \$3,071
- Three attributes for selecting winter recreation destinations: superior snow quality, outdoor activities other than skiing, exciting atmosphere.
- 46.8% are familiar with Montana as a place for winter recreation
- Months most likely to visit Montana for winter trip: January (16%), February (39.5%), December (38.4%)

#### Whitefish Niche Visitor: Geotravelers

Geotourism is defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographic character of the place being visited including its environment, culture, heritage, landmarks and the well-being of its residents. According to the ITRR study, "Statewide Vacationers to Montana: Are They Geotravelers," the strong geotraveler spent the most money per day while traveling in Montana (\$141.79) followed by the moderate geotraveler (\$134.10) and the non geotraveler vacationer spent (\$133.27). Visitors who agreed with the principles of geotourism spend more money per day while traveling in Montana than non- geotravelers. A 2016 ITRR Study, "The Importance of Traveler Spending on Locally Produced Goods & Services," further examined geotraveler spending. The results of this study showed that visitor groups who purchased "Made in Montana " products, items from local farmers' markets, and who used local guides and outfitters spent \$184.76 more per stay than visitors who did not purchase these products and services.

Geotravelers are low impact, high value visitors who appreciate the unique characteristics and natural values of the places they visit. They place a high value on authentic travel experiences that respect and support the local character of place and its environment, and are less likely to become discouraged in their travel experiences by travel distances, difficulties and variable weather, especially during the shoulder seasons.

Values – Creative, curious, connected, engaged, adventurous, independent, mindful.

Source: Geotraveler Exploratory, Alexis Sanford, 2008.

Attitudes – Immerse yourself in the culture, go off the beaten trail, get out of your comfort zone, allow for spontaneity, take a risk, pay attention, go now.

- A segment of the U.S. total travel market estimated to include over 55 million people.

- They seek authenticity in travel experiences.
- They seek out opportunities to experience businesses and activities that are locally unique.
- Travel is an important part of their “lifestyle” and they often combine learning with travel.
- They spent a disproportionate amount of their income on travel compared to other travelers.
- They are more likely to be aware of their own impact, both environmental and community, on the places they are visiting.

## **Strengths, Challenges, And Opportunities Of Whitefish Relative To Other Destination Mountain Towns**

### **Strengths**

- Whitefish aligns perfectly with the three Montana Brand pillars
  - More spectacular unspoiled nature than anywhere else in the lower 48
  - Vibrant and charming small towns that serve as gateways to our natural wonders
  - Breathtaking experiences by day and relaxing hospitality at night
- Proximity to Glacier National Park — According to the National Park Service, visitors to Glacier National Park spent an estimated \$356 million in local gateway communities during 2019 (+3.5%). An estimated \$146 million of those dollars were spent on lodging, comprising the highest percentage of expenditure at 41% of the total expenditures. Visitors spent an estimated \$57.4 million on restaurants, comprising the second highest percentage of expenditures at 16% of the total expenditures. Visitation to Glacier National Park continued to be very strong with approximately 3 million visitors in 2021. The numerous effects of the pandemic in 2020, including the east side of Glacier National Park being closed during peak season and the entire park being closed in the spring, contributed to park visitation being down approximately 44% in 2020. While visits through the first three months of 2022 are down -16% compared to last winter, visits are up +23% compared to the first three months of 2019 (pre-pandemic). Increased visitation provides us with the opportunity to highlight the many visitor experiences available outside of Glacier National Park, particularly in Whitefish.
- Downtown Whitefish and the alluring character of the town’s built environment — Research indicates that visitors are attracted to the character and scale of Whitefish, especially the town’s Central Avenue district. These are attributes that form the foundation of the town’s appeal to visitors who stay in, or around the community, eat at the town’s various restaurants, and shop at local stores. Additional amenities such as pedestrian friendly sidewalks, miles of trails and ability to see the night’s sky all add to the Whitefish character.
- Access to recreational activities — A wide variety of recreational opportunities in and around Whitefish is a major draw for visitors. These include Whitefish Mountain Resort, the Whitefish Trail, Whitefish Lake Golf Club, Whitefish Lake, and the Whitefish River, as well as the trails, rivers and scenic roadways in and around Glacier National Park.

### **Challenges**

- Short Term Rentals — As of August 30, 2021, AirDNA research, which is paid for by Explore Whitefish in partnership with Brand Montana, shows that there are approximately 487 active rental properties within City Limits and a total of 1,271 active rentals within the Whitefish Zip Code (59937). These numbers are approximate and some redundancies may exist. For perspective, the active listings in town (approximately 487) average 1.8 bedrooms. That equates to roughly 900 guest rooms which is close to the number of traditional lodging guest rooms in town, effectively doubling the overnight lodging capacity within the City of Whitefish. In terms of the Whitefish Zip Code (59937), short term rentals (1,271 active listings including listings within the City) average 2.3 bedrooms which equates to over 2,900 guest rooms. By this calculation, there are twice as many short term rental guest rooms as traditional lodging guest rooms within the full Whitefish Zip Code (approx. 1,400 guest rooms). This impacts our community in a variety of ways: impacts to the inventory of housing for locals residents, illegal rentals and those without business licenses who are not collecting the Whitefish Resort Tax or the Lodging Facility Use Tax, direct competition for Whitefish lodging properties who are directly employing the local workforce, and adding a substantial amount of guest rooms which are now filled during the summer season, which was already at capacity.
- Highly Seasonal Visitation Patterns — Visitation patterns to Whitefish are highly seasonal with the majority of visitation occurring during the high demand months of July and August. This seasonality impacts the operating effectiveness of Whitefish businesses that must accommodate these aforementioned demand swings.
- Limited Transportation Infrastructure — Public transportation options, particularly from the Flathead Valley to Glacier National Park and Glacier Park International Airport are fewer than those provided at competitor destinations.
- Limited Access To The Going-to-the-Sun Road — The Whitefish summer tourism season is directly tied to the opening and closing dates for automobiles on the alpine section of the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park. Early fall closures due to weather or road construction directly impacts visitation to Whitefish during that period.
- Uncertain Weather — During some years, low snow levels in the winter hamper winter visitation and spending while summer fire seasons affect willingness for visitors to travel in summer and fall.
- Market Perception — Research performed by Brand Montana in key destination markets reveals that Montana is perceived to offer lower quality amenities and services to visitors. While Montanans are perceived as being friendly, it should be distinguished that this friendliness does not automatically translate into a guest's perception of a high level of service.
- Lack of Competitive Pricing for Air Access and Limited Seats Outside of Summer Season — When compared to mountain communities with which Whitefish competes for destination visitors, airline seats to Glacier Park International Airport are limited outside of the summer season, with fewer flights, limited markets and are priced higher. Within the state, deboardings at Glacier Park International Airport (409,872 in 2021) accounted for 17% of the total deboardings in the state, basically tied with Missoula (16%) and Billings (16%). Bozeman continues to dominate airport deboardings with 41% of the total share in 2021.
- International Travel — The uncertain climate related to international travel and cross-border travel restrictions to the U.S. as a result of the pandemic has resulted in a decrease of international travelers, particularly Canada.
- COVID-19 — Due to the fluid nature of the current situation, it is still difficult to predict visitation trends to Whitefish.

## Opportunities

- Invest in local infrastructure and build partnerships which have a direct impact on community sustainability.
- Reach peak season visitors with responsible travel messaging during their stay in Whitefish and the surrounding area.
- Collaborate with local stakeholders, Glacier National Park, regional, and state tourism partners to develop and build out support for shoulder season visitation and to communicate with visitors during the peak season.
- Highly seasonal visitation patterns allow for the ability to increase lodging occupancy and visitor expenditures during the shoulder and winter seasons through Explore Whitefish marketing efforts.

## **2. Align with Montana Brand**

***Briefly describe how your destination aligns with the Montana Brand.***

Whitefish aligns perfectly with the Montana Brand pillars. In order to inspire visitors, we serve up beautiful high resolution photos of the scenic beauty and incredible nature that surrounds us. Photos of our iconic downtown are an important part of our collateral. Visitors are very attracted to our downtown and it is a primary economic driver for the town. In addition, we try to counter the preconceived notions that Montana is remote and does not have adequate facilities by showcasing the beautiful lodging and incredible dining that can be found here.

While the incredible scenic and wild landscapes that surround Whitefish are a key and compelling inspiration to travel to Whitefish, these landscapes are placed in the context of hospitality. The broad majority of travelers are intimidated by wildness without the tempering possibility of civilization. Beyond the adventure of wilderness by day, they want a good place to eat and a comfortable place to sleep. We utilize the Montana Brand pillars in unison to create this cohesive and encompassing Whitefish experience which is communicated in our marketing efforts.

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

## **3. What is the strategic role of your DMO?**

***Select all that apply: Destination Marketing, Destination Management, Destination Stewardship, Destination Development).***

Destination Marketing, Destination Stewardship

**Based on the strategic role you serve, provide the following information.**

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

## **Strategic Role: Destination Stewardship**

The Whitefish Sustainable Management Plan Committee was formed in 2018 as a volunteer committee of the City of Whitefish and in partnership with Explore Whitefish. Over the course of the next few years, the committee gathered information from public meetings and worked with consultants and Explore Whitefish to create the Whitefish Sustainable Tourism Management Plan, approved by Whitefish City Council in September 2020.

Explore Whitefish has taken action by identifying specific destination stewardship goals in the FY23 Marketing Plan which came directly from the STMP. These include taking the lead on outreach segments of the STMP to reinforce positive visitor behaviors, build awareness and influence visitor behavior related to recreating responsibly, leave no trace, traveling safely around wildlife and wildfire mitigation, etc. Particular focus is given to the warm season.

## **Target Audience & Core Geographic Market: Destination Stewardship**

Explore Whitefish Destination Stewardship efforts are designed to reach on-the-ground visitors, with particular emphasis on the warm season. However, the message is ultimately designed to inspire and resonate year-round. Destination Stewardship efforts also benefit the local community through impactful partnerships and programs to enhance liveability and protect the natural environment of Whitefish.

## **Strategic Role: Destination Marketing**

Explore Whitefish strives to sustainably maintain the economy of Whitefish by emphasizing its desirability as a travel and recreation destination outside the summer months to non-resident visitors who appreciate and respect the character of the place. This specifically prioritizes increasing the occupancy for lodging facilities during lower occupancy times of the year.

## **Target Audience & Core Geographic Market: Destination Marketing**

Explore Whitefish will focus its attention during this fiscal period on low impact, high value potential visitors who match the geotraveler profile in the following geographic markets. It is possible that opportunities will arise in additional markets in partnership with other tourism organizations, such as Brand Montana. In these instances, Explore Whitefish may extend its efforts beyond these core focus markets.

- Seattle, Washington (Puget Sound Area) – Seattle and the Puget Sound area have been historically strong markets for Whitefish. The existence of the Amtrak train route has made this connection logical, as well as daily direct flights. Explore Whitefish invests in print, digital, and out of home campaigns in this market as well as actively cooperating with Whitefish Mountain Resort (WMR) on multi-channel marketing campaigns. According to the three year average (2019-2021), approximately 7% of visitors surveyed who spent at least one night in Whitefish originated in the state of Washington.
- Portland, Oregon – The existence of the Amtrak train route has made this connection logical, as well as seasonal direct flights and short connecting flights the rest of the year. Explore Whitefish invests in print, digital, and out of home campaigns in this market as well as actively cooperating with Whitefish Mountain Resort (WMR) on multi-channel marketing campaigns. According to the three year average (2019-2021), approximately 4% of visitors surveyed who spent at least one night in Whitefish originated in the state of Oregon.
- Chicagoland (Chicago core and northern suburbs to Madison, Wisconsin) – Explore Whitefish and Whitefish Mountain Resort have collaborated with Glacier AERO since 2014 on direct winter service to Chicago. In the past two years, this service has continued without a Minimum Revenue Guarantee (MRG) which is how shoulder season success of air service is measured by Glacier AERO. A significant expansion of seats for



warm season service have also been added in recent years as well as multiple carriers now flying this route daily direct seasonally. According to the three year average (2019-2021), approximately 3% of visitors surveyed who spent at least one night in Whitefish originated in the state of Illinois.

- Minneapolis, Minnesota – This has been a historically strong market for Whitefish in terms of visitation and ease of travel due to daily direct flights and Amtrak service. According to the three year average (2019-2021), approximately 4% of visitors surveyed who spent at least one night in Whitefish originated in the state of Minnesota.
- California (San Francisco/Oakland & Los Angeles) – Although California consistently ranks as a top market of visitors to Whitefish, the addition of enhanced direct air service has made California a core geographic market for Explore Whitefish. According to the three year average (2019-2021), approximately 6% of visitors surveyed who spent at least one night in Whitefish originated in the state of California.
- Regional Drive-To (including Spokane, Coeur D'Alene, British Columbia) – Explore Whitefish invests in regional drive-to markets as these potential visitors have the ability to travel on short notice, particularly during the shoulder seasons. Although the amount of investment is significantly smaller than the aforementioned core geographic markets, we believe it is important to continue to raise awareness and intent to travel in these regional drive-to markets.

### ***3b. What research supports your DMO strategy?***

#### **Supporting Research: Destination Stewardship**

Destination stewardship is defined by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) as a process by which the public sector, private sector, and the residents of the local community are engaged jointly to preserve, protect, and benefit from visitors to their destination.

The purpose of the Whitefish Sustainable Tourism Management Plan is to promote sustainable community-based tourism development that is beneficial to community members, employees, and visitors. The key pillars of the plan are: community character, livability, and community engagement. The executive summary and full plan is available at [SustainableWhitefish.com](http://SustainableWhitefish.com).

In order for Explore Whitefish to effectively and strategically operate on our identified destination stewardship goals, the organization needs the ability to set aside funds to support these goals. During FY22, Explore Whitefish formalized an updated mission and vision in order to integrate destination stewardship into the foundation of the organization (see below), which paved the way for the Community Sustainability Fund (CSF). In addition, the state rules and procedures for allowable Lodging Facility Use Tax (Bed Tax) expenditures have been updated for FY23 in order to allow for more local investment of these funds.

These two changes allowed the organization to diversify the annual budget across destination stewardship and destination marketing to truly work toward the ultimate goal of sustainable tourism.

#### **Mission**

Fostering sustainable tourism through inspiration, education, and partnerships to enhance, protect and preserve our viable year-round community.

*Previous Version of Mission*

Build a high level of visibility and increase our name recognition as a premier year-round destination

**Vision**

Achieving long-term economic and community sustainability through steadfast destination stewardship.

*Previous Version of Vision*

Enhance the economy of Whitefish by emphasizing its desirability as a travel and recreation destination to visitors who appreciate and respect the character of place.

**Supporting Research: Destination Marketing**

We utilize many sources for our research that validates our marketing plan. The non-resident data collected by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) at the University of Montana is an invaluable tool for determining where our customers come from, what they do, how much they spend, what they like and do not like. We also use data from the US Travel Association (USTA) and Destination Analysts for broad industry indicators as well as Smith Travel Research, AirDNA, and VisaVue for data on lodging occupancy and visitor expenditures.

Whitefish experiences an uneven cycle of visitation with a busy summer season that operates with high lodging occupancy. Deep shoulder seasons include early spring and late autumn, with moderate visitor activity during the winter season. Higher winter activity and occupancy exists during the Christmas holiday period and also during select holiday periods throughout the ski season. Therefore, we focus our marketing efforts on the shoulder and winter season in our stated target markets in order to increase lodging occupancy and visitor expenditures.

Explore Whitefish acquires lodging occupancy and nonresident spending data in order to inform our marketing efforts. Quarterly and yearly information from the last year can be found below.

**WHITEFISH CITY LIMITS AVERAGE LODGING OCCUPANCY BY QUARTER: 2021 VS. 2019**

*Source: SMITH TRAVEL RESEARCH, Calendar Year 2021 Compared to 2019*

- January - March: 43.6% (+2.2%)
- April - June: 63.7% (+8.5%)
- July - September: 79.5% (-2.5%)
- October - December: 47.9% (+8%)
- Calendar Year 2021 Average Lodging Occupancy: 58.7% (+3.3%)

**DOMESTIC NONRESIDENT WHITEFISH EXPENDITURES BY MARKET**

The identified geographic markets for Explore Whitefish are informed by domestic nonresident expenditures acquired through a research cooperative with Brand Montana and VisaVue. Below you will find yearly and quarterly numbers for the past year.

**WHITEFISH 2021 VISITOR EXPENDITURES BY MSA: \$65.5 Million**

*Source: VisaVue and other sources, Expenditures include Montana residents who reside outside of Flathead County*

**2021 QUARTER 1 (JANUARY - MARCH) BY MSA: \$12.4 Million**

- 7.3% Seattle
- 4.4% Missoula, MT
- 3.9% Portland, OR
- 3.8% Los Angeles
- 2.8% Minneapolis

**2021 QUARTER 2 (APRIL - JUNE) BY MSA: \$13.4 Million**

- 5% Seattle
- 4.3% Los Angeles
- 3.2% Missoula, MT
- 2.7% Phoenix
- 2.5% San Francisco

**2021 QUARTER 3 (JULY - SEPTEMBER) BY MSA: \$28.3 Million**

- 6.6% Seattle
- 4% Los Angeles
- 2.7% San Francisco
- 2.5% Dallas
- 2.5% San Diego

**2021 QUARTER 4 (OCTOBER - DECEMBER) BY MSA: \$10.1 Million**

- 6.9% Seattle
- 4.2% Missoula, MT
- 4% Los Angeles

- 2.6% Portland, OR
- 2.4% Dallas

### **NONRESIDENT TRAVELER EXPENDITURE BY AIR**

Not all visitors are alike. The same is true of their economic impact. Research by ITRR indicates that nonresidents who travel to the state via air spend more money per day and stay longer than the average nonresident traveler group.

- Average Nonresident Travelers: The statewide average 2019 nonresident traveler group to Montana (2.19 people) spent an average of \$152.54 per day. With an average length of stay of 4.32 nights, this equates to a total trip expenditure of approximately \$659.
- Fly-in Nonresident Travelers: The statewide average 2019 fly-in nonresident traveler group arriving in Montana (2.1 people) spent an average of \$251.54 per day. With an average length of stay of 6.24 nights, this equates to a total trip expenditure of approximately \$1,570.

**Difference: \$911 in additional spending per fly-in statewide nonresident travel group. In addition, all 2019 nonresident traveler groups arriving at Glacier Park International Airport (2.17 people) stayed longer (6.65 nights) and outspent average statewide nonresident travelers by an estimated \$815 per trip (total trip expenditure of \$1,474).**

### **3c. What are your emerging markets?**

#### **Emerging Markets: Destination Stewardship**

As Explore Whitefish is still in the new stages of destination stewardship efforts, our identified target audience and core geographic market can also be considered our emerging market.

#### **Emerging Markets: Destination Marketing**

While new potential markets are reviewed according to VisaVue data and website analytics, Explore Whitefish chooses to continue to focus on core and established geographic markets which have the largest potential for growth in order to concentrate our paid media dollars and not dilute effectiveness. Below is information on an additional established geographic market.

*Missoula, MT:* Missoula has been a historically strong market for Whitefish in terms of visitation and ease of travel due to proximity to Whitefish. The ability to make short shoulder season trips and last minute trips makes this market desirable.

### **4. Define and describe your overall goals.**

*A goal is an idea of the future or desired result that a person or group of people envisions, plans and commits to achieve.*

### **Destination Stewardship Goals**

Explore Whitefish strives to be a leading destination steward dedicated to sustainable tourism, balancing our economic and community sustainability while protecting our natural environment.

The Explore Whitefish Strategic Plan FY22-23 identifies the overarching goal of destination stewardship:

*GOAL: Invest in Whitefish through community engagement and sustainable tourism efforts.*

### **Subset of Destination Stewardship Goals**

*Focus on implementation of the Whitefish Sustainable Tourism Management Plan (STMP) and integration into the Whitefish Brand*

- Build partnerships which have a direct impact on community sustainability.
- Invest in local infrastructure which is beneficial to the local community and visitors.
- Co-lead the implementation of a Whitefish Sustainable Tourism Management Plan (STMP) in conjunction with the Whitefish STMP Committee and City of Whitefish.

### **Destination Marketing Goals**

The Explore Whitefish Strategic Plan FY22-24 identifies the overarching goal of destination marketing:

*GOAL: Raise awareness of Whitefish as a travel destination and drive visitation during the non-peak seasons*

### **Subset of Destination Marketing Goals**

- Support the brand identity and presence of Whitefish, Montana in the marketplace as a destination for active experience-seeking travelers.
- Encourage destination visitation from the core geographic markets.
- Position Whitefish as the basecamp for Glacier National Park visitors with the natural, cultural, and culinary assets of Whitefish.

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

### **Tactics and Projects: Destination Stewardship**

#### **Education and Outreach**

#### ***Warm Season Visitor Education (Be a Friend of The Fish):***

During the summer of 2021 and the extended warm season of 2022 (May 1 - September 30), Explore Whitefish executed a peak summer season on-the-ground outreach campaign called "Be a Friend of The Fish." This included, but was not limited to, downtown banners, airport displays, rack cards, travel guide information, paid owned channel ads (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and streaming ads on Spotify. We plan to continue this campaign during the FY23 warm season.

This peak season-on-the-ground visitor education campaign is firmly rooted in the community values developed during the creation of the initial COVID safety-focused 'Be A Friend Of The Fish' campaign and informed by the STMP plan.

#### Be A Friend Of The Fish: Community Values

##### Take it Slow. Enjoy the Ride

- Slow down and take a deep breath. Enjoy and notice the quiet pace of life in Whitefish and the beauty that surrounds all of us in every moment.
- Walk, ride, or hop on the S.N.O.W bus before you drive.

##### Recreate Responsibly

- Recreate responsibly, be prepared for anything, and have a backup plan.
- Wait for fall, winter or spring to visit. Experience natural beauty with less crowds.

##### Be a Steward of the Land

- Protect public lands, respect private lands, and always give wildlife the right of way.
- Recycle and be responsible with your waste (TP too). Leave No Trace!
- Share your photos responsibly. Preserve the landscape rather than piling up "likes."

##### Show Respect and Kindness

- Ignite inclusive conversations and show mutual respect for locals and visitors.

##### Fuel our Local Businesses

- Fuel up at local businesses. Our merchants, restaurants and hotels rely on your support!

##### Help us Stay Healthy

- Help us all stay healthy by observing local health guidelines.

The campaign can be seen at [FriendofTheFish.com](https://www.friendofthefish.com)

#### ***Voices of Montana Tourism***

On a yearly basis, Explore Whitefish partners with the statewide nonprofit Voices of Montana Tourism to build awareness of the importance of the tourism industry to Montana's economy while instilling respect for the industry and those who work in the tourism industry. Success is measured through the mission and work of Voices of Montana

Tourism, including their local, regional, and statewide presentations to Montana residents, businesses, and elected officials.

## **Product Development**

Explore Whitefish seeks to invest in local infrastructure which is beneficial to visitors and the local community. While this is a newly established allowable expenditure for Lodging Facility Use Tax (Bed Tax), Explore Whitefish has identified the following local infrastructure projects.

Identified projects: Updates and maintenance to the downtown Wifi Network (established by Explore Whitefish in FY19), Visitor Information Kiosks, Webcams, Whitefish Wayfinding Signage.

With that said, there are plenty of potential projects which will be vetted during FY23. This could include, but is certainly not limited to, bear proof trash containers for businesses and/or enhanced bus stops for the SNOW Bus. Explore Whitefish recognizes that one of the biggest challenges we face is limited transportation infrastructure in our region.

## **Research**

In order to better understand trends and gauge the effectiveness of our destination stewardship and destination marketing efforts, Explore Whitefish will take part in research. Explore Whitefish is currently partnering with Smith Travel Research, Sprout Social, and Meltwater. Explore Whitefish will continue to engage in additional cooperative research projects, such as VisaVue and AirDNA with Brand Montana. The research cooperative opportunities offered by Brand Montana, including VisaVue and AirDNA, have been invaluable in helping us to measure visitor spending to Whitefish, particularly within our stated target markets, as well as to closely monitor our seasonal trends and the effects of short term rentals.

## **Tactics and Projects: Destination Marketing**

### **Paid Media**

Our consumer advertising is based around visitation in our shoulder seasons and our strategy is broken out into the following three categories: Larch Season, Winter, and Secret Season. The consumer advertising budget for each strategy is allocated to the seasonal media buying plan. Opportunity Marketing funds are left open as a contingency for reactive media buys throughout the season.

We advertise in our stated target markets as well as through cooperative opportunities with Brand Montana and multi-channel cooperative marketing campaigns with Whitefish Mountain Resort (WMR).

In FY23, online and digital advertising will comprise 100% of our consumer advertising budget. While we have strategically been moving more funds toward online and digital advertising over the past few years, the last year has seen the largest shift. While the pandemic certainly has played a role in this (i.e. meeting potential future travelers where they most likely are - at home and on devices versus out of home placement in train stations and airports), the enhanced ability to track the effectiveness of our advertising campaigns to inspire actionable visits to ExploreWhitefish.com is the foundation for this shift in media buying strategy.

During FY23, our media buying strategy will be broken out into digital placement, media partnerships, and video/audio streaming services

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## Objectives/Metrics/Evaluation

Objectives	Measurable Metrics for Success	Report the Metric Achieved	Evaluation of Measurable Metrics for Success	Add'l Attchmnt
<p>Improve winter visitation by showcasing varied winter vacation experiences in and around Whitefish and Glacier National Park.</p> <p>Improve "Secret Season" visitation by promoting bicycling, wildlife viewing, birding, fly fishing, golf, water sports, horseback riding, performing arts, culinary experiences, and community events.</p> <p>Improve "Larch Season" visitation by promoting fall foliage, wildlife viewing, hiking, birding, golf, fly fishing, bicycling, non-motorized water sports, horseback riding, performing arts, culinary</p>	<p>Successful execution of winter season, secret season, and larch season seasonal campaigns. Success measures are compared to the performance from past seasonal campaigns, including FY20, FY21 and FY22. An increase in performance over past seasonal campaigns is our measurable metric of success.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase Ad click through rates while decreasing Ad cost per click (CTR/CPC)</li> </ul> <p><b>Winter FY22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During FY22, CTR and CPC for winter search were much stronger than the previous year, with CTR at 8.2% and a CPC of \$0.95.</li> <li>Facebook Upper Funnel was strong with a CTR of 1.96% and a CPC of \$0.73</li> <li>Facebook Retargeting saw a CTR of 1.24% and a CPC of \$0.74</li> <li>Programmatic articles saw a CTR of 0.11% and a CPC of \$1.89</li> </ul> <p><b>Spring FY21 (Secret Season)</b></p>	<p>Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.</p>	<p>Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.</p>	



experiences, and community events.

- During FY21, CTR and CPC for spring search were much stronger than the previous year, with CTR at 6.6% and a CPC of \$1.04.
- Facebook Upper Funnel saw a CTR of 0.8% and a CPC of \$0.78
- Facebook Retargeting saw a CTR of 1.21% and a CPC of \$0.87

#### **Fall FY22 (Larch Season)**

- During FY22, CTR and CPC was similar to the previous year, with CTR at 7.5% and a CPC of \$2.89.
- Facebook Upper Funnel was slightly below the previous year with a CTR of 0.87% and a CPC of \$0.66
- Facebook Retargeting was also slightly below the previous year with a CTR of 0.89% and a CPC of \$1.05

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- Increase view rate and impressions for video and streaming ads

#### **Winter FY22**

During FY22, YouTube videos generated a view rate of 48.7% and a cost per view of \$0.05. Both were improvements over the previous year.

Website success measurements are compared to website performance from past seasonal campaigns, including FY22.

- Clicks to book

#### **Winter FY22, Spring FY21, Fall FY22**

Increase clicks to book based upon the winter campaign recording 8,251 clicks to book (6,811 previous year), the spring campaign recording 9,525 clicks to book (compared to 3,182 in FY20), and the fall campaign recording 2,743 clicks to book (1,800 previous year).

- Clicks to reserve (restaurant)

#### **Winter FY22, Spring FY21, Fall FY22**

Increase clicks to reserve based upon the winter campaign recording 4,169 clicks to reserve (4,104 previous year), the spring campaign recording 3,980 clicks to reserve (228 previous year), and the fall campaign recording 1,855 clicks to reserve (1,544 previous year).

- Newsletter sign-ups

#### **Winter FY22, Spring FY21, Fall FY22**

Increase newsletter sign-ups based upon 1,179 sign-ups during the winter campaign (1,154 previous year), 938 sign-ups during the spring campaign (338 previous year), and 417 sign-ups during the fall campaign (450 previous year).

- Travel guide digital views

#### **Winter FY22, Spring FY21, Fall FY22**

Increase travel guide digital views based upon the winter campaign recording 1,058 digital views (1,543 previous year), the spring campaign recording 1,164 digital views (677 previous year), and the fall campaign recording 606 digital views (626 previous year).

- Traffic volume from targeted markets

#### **Winter FY22**

Almost all of our identified target markets (Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, Portland, San Francisco, Portland) showed up in the top ten for website traffic volume. Seattle ranked as the #3 overall market for website traffic volume with 5,032 visits (compared to 5,372 in FY21). The seven target markets mentioned above combined for 21,077 users to visit the website. Increase the number of website users from our target markets.

#### **Spring FY21 (Secret Season)**

Almost all of our identified target markets (Seattle, Portland, Spokane, Missoula, Los Angeles) showed up in the top ten for website traffic volume. Seattle ranked as the top overall market for website traffic volume with 6,875 visits (compared to 1,706 in 2019). The five target markets mentioned above combined for 14,299 users to visit the website. Increase the number of website users from our target markets.

#### **Fall FY22 (Larch Season)**

Almost all of our identified target markets (Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, Portland, Minneapolis) showed up in the top ten for website traffic volume. Seattle ranked as the top overall market for website traffic volume with 3,054 visits (compared to 3,911). The five target markets mentioned above combined for 8,264 users to visit the website. Increase the number of website users from our target markets.

- Increase performance of visitor quality measures (Bounce rate, Length of time spent on site, number of pages viewed) with lower bounce rates, longer times on site, and increased number of page views.

#### **Winter FY22**

There were 269,681 pageviews (240,631 the previous year), an average length of time spent on site of 00:00:59 (compared to 00:00:53 previous year), and a bounce rate of 78% (compared to 79%). Organic traffic was also up 43% year over year.

#### **Spring FY21 (Secret Season)**

Spring website traffic during the campaign saw a large year over year increase in spring with the previous COVID shutdowns. Traffic was still up significantly compared to spring 2019 with users up sessions up almost 100% (104,785 compared to 54,102).

There were 149,246 pageviews (135,981 the previous year), an average length of time spent on site of 00:01:05 (compared to 00:01:51 previous year), and a bounce rate of 77.15% (compared to 62.68%). The overall number of website sessions was 104,785 (compared to 54,102 previous year).

#### **Fall FY22 (Larch Season)**

	There were 93,724 pageviews (80,901 the previous year), an average length of time spent on site of 00:00:56 (compared to 00:00:57 previous year), and a bounce rate of 78% (compared to 78%). Organic traffic was also up 43% year over year.			
Attend all required meetings of the Tourism Advisory Council (TAC) as well as the annual Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation	Explore Whitefish staff reports on new resources, information, research, best practices, and marketing updates which were obtained through the meetings			
Invest in local infrastructure projects which are beneficial to visitors and the local community.	Successfully allocation of product development funds and completion of projects.			
Obtain visitor expenditure and visitation data, social media audience performance, and earned media value which all help to evaluate marketing performance, monitor seasonal visitation expenditures and target markets, and help inform future stewardship and marketing strategies.	<p>Acquire and utilize data through various research platforms such as VisaVue, AirDNA, Smith Travel, Sprout Social, and Meltwater.</p> <p>VisaVue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expenditure data will be used as a benchmark tool to analyze (per season) our target markets for shoulder season campaigns. We will take into account these on-the-ground expenditures, look at year over year comparisons, add them to the Annual DMO Plan, and look to adjust our markets as needed.</li> <li>The Explore Whitefish Marketing Committee will analyze the monthly data on a yearly basis and work with our agency of record to determine if changes to shoulder season target markets need to be adjusted.</li> <li>This information will be presented to the Board of Directors and the Whitefish City Council in order to understand spending trends, particularly as they related to domestic visitors, international visitors, and local spending. This information will be presented on an annual basis to both stakeholder groups.</li> </ul> <p>Smith Travel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monthly lodging reports will be provided to local business members, other stakeholders including the City of Whitefish, and presented at each monthly meeting of the Board of Directors.</li> <li>The Explore Whitefish Marketing Committee will analyze the monthly data on a yearly basis and work with our agency of record to determine if changes to shoulder season campaigns need to be adjusted depending on higher and lower occupancy months during the shoulder seasons.</li> <li>This information will be added to our historical lodging data and updated in the Annual DMO Plan.</li> </ul> <p>Sprout Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monthly reports will be provided to the Board of Directors regarding our social media performance. We will analyze the top performing posts to validate our marketing strategy or to determine how to adjust our strategy to increase engagement while staying on message.</li> </ul>	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	

	<p>Meltwater</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monthly reports will be provided to the Board of Directors regarding Whitefish media mentions through our public relations program. This information is aggregated and utilized as benchmarks for both positive and negative publicity.</li> <li>• This software is also vital to our Crisis Communications Partnership with the City of Whitefish in order to determine the reach of potentially negative or damaging news articles which have the potential to alter the likelihood of visiting Whitefish.</li> </ul>			
Build awareness and influence visitor behavior related to recreating responsibly, leave no trace, traveling safely around wildlife and wildfire mitigation, etc. Particular focus is given to the warm season (May 1 - Sept. 30)	Successfully execute the "Be a Friend of The Fish" campaign. Conduct a perception study for on the ground visitors.	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	
Build awareness of the importance of the tourism industry to Montana's economy while instilling respect for the industry and those who work in the tourism industry	Success is measured through a minimum of one local presentation per year by Voices of Montana where the Explore Whitefish Board of Directors, Staff, Agencies, and members of the public are educated on the important of the tourism industry to Montana's economy.	The Metric Achieved will be reported on at the end of FY23.	The Evaluation of the Measurable Metric of Success will be reported on at the end of FY23.	
Develop a digital asset management (DAM) system for managing photo library	Add 30 photos per quarter with keywords	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	Information will be added after the end of fiscal year 23.	
Acquire compelling photos for use in paid media campaigns, visitor information, social media channels and the website.	Acquire 10 professional photos with usage rights for the fiscal year.			
Examine and act upon new marketing opportunities which present themselves which are in line with the Explore Whitefish Marketing Strategy.	Depending on the opportunity, we measure success in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, the objective measurements outlined in the FY23 DMO Marketing Plan.			

<b>Allowable Methods</b>	<b>Amount Budgeted</b>	<b>% of Budget Allocated</b>	<b>Amount Expended</b>	<b>% of Budget Expended</b>
Education/Outreach	\$43,450.00	17.38	\$0.00	0
Opportunity Marketing	\$50.00	0.02	\$0.00	0
Paid Media	\$79,000.00	31.6	\$0.00	0
Product Development	\$87,500.00	35.0	\$0.00	0
Research	\$40,000.00	16.0	\$0.00	0
	\$250,000.00	100.00	\$0.00	0.00

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## ***Narrative Evaluation***

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## ***Reg/CVB Required Documents***

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<b>Description</b>	<b>File Name</b>	<b>File Size</b>
FY23 Annual Certificate of Compliance	FY23 Cert of Compliance_SIGNED_2 May 2022.pdf	771 KB
Whitefish CVB Board Minutes FY23 Marketing Plan Approval: April 11, 2022	WCVB Board Minutes - April 11, 2022 FY23 MARKETING PLAN APPROVED.pdf	166 KB
Whitefish CVB Board Minutes Public Budget Approval: March 14, 2022	WCVB Board Minutes -14 Mar 2022_SIGNED PUBLIC BUDGET APPROVED.pdf	2.3 MB
Whitefish CVB Bylaws	WCVB By-Laws.pdf	6.4 MB
Whitefish City Council Meeting Minutes FY23 Approval: May 2, 2022	WF City Council 2022-05-02 Minutes.WCVB.pdf	849 KB

