

Application Summary

Application: FY25 DMO Plan

Applicant: Explore Whitefish

Funding opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Application Responses

Funding Opportunity: FY25 DMO Plan

Amount Requested: 266,000

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:

1A. About Explore Whitefish:

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 you 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 are continuing to build on 2 rather ambitious new cultural campaigns: For the Love of Great Food and For the Love of the Arts to complement 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 be building protocols with partner/member organizations to work more effectively in Group, Meeting, and Event space. Currently all group travel is focused on leisure tours - we feel there could be tremendous growth by focusing on social events, corporate wellness/innovation -think tanks, retreats, and the incentive market.

Larch Season/Fall - expanded awareness around leaf/larch peeping, scenic drives, hiking and GNP accessibility. Our Fall Season is a hidden gem and remains an opportunity for further visitation growth.

Stewardship - Explore Whitefish has finally started to gain ground in quieting our residential anti-visitation sentiment through aggressive stewardship programs. Unfortunately, in FY24 the anti-visitation sentiment from our residents did result in historic member and private revenue loss. It may take us years to build revenues back up to where we were - however... by creating impactful partnership with Housing Whitefish, affordable workforce housing non-profit we have stabilized our member loss. Growing awareness around our role in stewardship and keeping our focus on one or two primary areas will help educate our community and ideally build support for the efforts of Explore Whitefish and our members.

Explain outdoor recreation sporting events to drive non-summer visitation - partner with WMR, Whitefish Legacy Partners to promote, market and build greater awareness of events held during non-summer months. Big opportunity to message for our Whitefish Trailblazer Run which is a 50K mountain/trail run in October. We will be working with the media and WLP to grow national and international presence for this event.

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 causing revenue and member loss, which has limited our ability to message for our entire destination experience.

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

GNP Vehicle Reservation System - we have seen a steady decrease in visitor spending, is this due to more drive-in visitors rather than fly-in visitors. The economic impact of fly-in visitors is significantly higher than regional or drive-in visitors.

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

Describe your brand and how it aligns with Destination MT's marketing and strategic goals.

Explore Whitefish embraces Montana/Destination MT brand and pillars.

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

About Whitefish:

Whitefish, Montana is a small mountain community filled with outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy living peacefully and embracing local culture and flavors. We are located in one of the most desirable areas in the northern Rockies. Whitefish offers world-class skiing, amazing lake-life, and a cool mountain town vibe that visitors and residents are happy to embrace. We are often referred to as the gateway community to Glacier National Park. While our town has tremendous desirability and access to some of the most sought-after outdoor recreation assets, we do not view ourselves as, nor do we want to become, a resort community.

Explore Whitefish Positioning Overview:

We focus and work to foster beneficial tourism through inspiration and engaging storytelling. Our mission is based in building a viable and sustainable year-round visitor economy which preserves our authentic and socio-economic diversity as a community.

We provide our visitors with the most accurate and appropriate comprehensive destination information. We believe the more accurate, the more inspiring and engaging our storytelling, the better equipped our members will be in exceeding visitor expectations. It is the responsibility of Explore Whitefish to provide our visitors with advanced, easily accessible destination resources and information to customize their overall experience to their personal interests.

Additionally, we work to educate and inform our visitors that they are visiting a special place with a close-knit community that happens to be located in one of the most desirable locations on the planet. We strive to communicate the importance of protecting our community and our outdoor wild spaces. We ask visitors to appreciate The Love of the Wild and the need to recreate responsibly, leave no trace and to ***Be a Friend of the Fish.***

Destination MT Pillars and Strategic Goals:

More spectacular unspoiled nature than anywhere else in the lower 48

Explore Whitefish's Campaign, *For the Love of the Wild*, speaks directly to unspoiled nature by showcasing inspiring, highly desirable, and beautiful high-resolution photographs and videos. We focus our messaging/storytelling to build interest in our incredible and unspoiled wild spaces. We additionally speak to the fragile nature of our wild spaces, and importance of preserving and protecting our Love of Wild through recreating responsibility, leaving no trace, and how to Be a Friend of the Fish. *For the Love of the Wild* campaign is directed at our targeted audience and markets as outlined below in 3a.

It is vital Explore Whitefish offers updated images and engaging messaging to continue to drive new interest to our vibrant and charming small town. Whitefish is blessed to have residents and business owners with the foresight to protect and preserve our downtown. Our iconic downtown is critical in our messaging and storytelling. Visitors are attracted to our authentic downtown, feel the warmth of our small-town community due to vibrant local arts, entertainment and dining scenes. Our downtown is an important differentiator when looking at other mountain communities - our store fronts are historic, primarily locally owned and operated.

Breathtaking experiences by day and relaxing hospitality at night

While the incredible scenic and wild landscapes that surround Whitefish are a key and compelling inspiration to travel to our small mountain town, these landscapes are placed in the context of hospitality. The 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 cohesive and encompassing experiences to create demand and appreciation for their visit.

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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):

Target Audience: 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.

Demographics/Visitor Characteristics: (source ITRR)

Average age 53

Gender: 52% Female; 48% Male

Income:

25% - 100K - 150K

22% - 50K - 75K

19% - 200K +

14% - 74K - 100K

11% - 150-200K

9% - Less than 50K

Group Size:

56% - 2 People

17% - 4 People

15% - 1 Person

10% - 3 People

2% - 5+ People

Psychographics of the Geo-Traveler: (source ITRR)

High-value, low-impact, as described previously in this document.

Values: creative, curious, connected, engaged, adventurous, independent, mindful

Attitudes: immerse oneself in local culture, explore off the beaten path, get out of traditional comfort zone, spontaneity, risk taker, attention to detail, decisive - Additionally: Seek authenticity in travel experiences, seek opportunities that are locally unique, travel is “lifestyle” choice, will spend a disproportionate amount of their income on travel, aware of their own footprint, impact both environmentally and on a community.

High-value, low-impact, as described previously in this document.

Global geotourism market size is expected to be worth US\$ 737 billion by 2023. In the long-term, geotourism is estimated to reach around US\$ 1,258.9 billion by 2033. The market would exhibit a CAGR of 5.5% from 2023 to 2033. Source: Future Markets Insights

Target Markets:

Annual Top Producing Markets: (Source Visa Destination Insights/VDI)

1. Seattle, Tacoma, Bellevue
2. Los Angeles, Long Beach
3. Missoula
4. Phoenix, Mesa-Chandler
5. Dallas, Fort Worth, Arlington

Seasonal Target Markets: (Source Visa Destination Insights/VDI)

Locations outlined below are high performing for Whitefish, this is based on historic spend through Zartico and VDI, air availability, drive market, rail accessibility and supplemented with data collected by ITRR. Our target markets focus exclusively on non-summer season:

Winter: (Paid Media Budget Spend: \$5,000)

Air Market: Seattle, Portland, Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles

Drive Market: Spokane, Coeur D'Alene, British Columbia, Alberta, Missoula, NW Montana

Spring: (Paid Media Budget Spend: \$30,000)

Air Market: Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix

Drive Market: Calgary/Southern Alberta, Missoula, Bozeman (Western Montana)

Fall: (Paid Media Budget Spend: \$55,000)

Air Market: Seattle, Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Denver

Drive Market: Missoula, Coeur D'Alene, Spokane

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :

Explore Whitefish has invested significantly in market research and data analytics. We do partner and rely on the support of ITRR in much of the surveyed information.

Hotel Data: AirDNA, Smith Travel Research, Destimetrics

Spending: Zartico and Visa Destination Insights

Public Relations: Meltwater

3c. What are your emerging markets?:

Art and Culture Tourism: *For the Love of Great Food - For the Love of the Art*

During our need/shoulder seasons, (specifically: April, May, Oct, Nov, Early December) it is vital that we build visitation for our member community. Explore Whitefish will invest in producing inspiring content based on dining, arts and entertainment. We are strategically aligning with live event production companies to create non-disruptive events built around food & wine, live music and sporting events in hopes of drawing visitation from 700-mile radius while also focusing on local and drive-in markets.

Group & Event Sales:

Create a group sales program, procedures, and messaging to build awareness to identify Whitefish as a welcoming GROUP destination.

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

Strategic Priorities:

1. Storytelling
2. Leading
3. Advocacy
4. Stewardship

Initiatives to include:

Storytelling: Explore Whitefish will use storytelling (a.k.a. marketing) to narrate, connect and build beneficial visitation

during our non-summer season. Effective and compelling Storytelling will further market our destination to visitors, potential visitors, tour operators, travel planners, meeting planners, and outdoor adventure enthusiasts.

Reinvigorate brand strategy, enhance our website and digital marketing channels, refresh content For the Love of the Wild, develop compelling destination experiences focused on dining, arts and entertainment, develop group sales program, improve local community sentiment towards visitation.

Leading: Effectively manage delicate balance our resident’s desire for an authentic community while leveraging the economic benefits of visitation. The economic benefits of tourism cannot be overlooked to keep Whitefish a thriving economy.

Initiatives to include:

Significant education and outreach, locally and externally, invest in trustworthy reporting and make those reports accessible, grow member engagement, balance resident and business needs via participation and funding of the City of Whitefish’s Sustain Tourism Management Plan and improve visibility of our Be a Friend of the Fish campaign.

Advocacy: Be the voice for our members, partners, and visitor economy

Initiatives to include:

Build tourism advocacy and Ambassador’s program.

Stewardship: Engage private and public sectors to preserve, protect and sustain Explore Whitefish stewardship projects and programs.

Initiative to include:

Funding Affordable Workforce Housing, all funds collected for our stewardship efforts outlined on our attached FY 2025 Strategic Plan are privately funded by members.

5. Define and describe your overall objectives. Objectives are formed from your goals. They are logical, attainable steps to achieve the goals and are able to be measured.:

Objectives/Metrics/Evaluation:

OBJECTIVES	MEASURABLE METRICS FOR SUCCESS	REPORT THE METRIC ACHIEVED	EVALUATION OF SUCCESSFUL METRICS
Storytelling: Responsible Tourism Messaging - Friend of the Fish/FOTF & For the Love of the Wild/FTLOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage participation of no less than 5 hotels to distribute our FOTF/Friend of the Fish literature and Pledge Card in guest room and/or guest confirmations. • Engage no less than 10 member business to display FOTF literature, banners and/or use # in social media messaging • Develop no less than 10 organic and 3 paid META posts/sponsored ad's 		

	<p>focused on Leave No Trace, Recreate Responsibly and FOTF - this content will be focused from May 1 - Sept 30, 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FTLOW - Seasonally update and refresh our non-summer campaign on our website and paid media channels with intent to grow YOY impressions, clicks and book now reservations for our member partners. 		
<p>Storytelling: Arts & Culture Tourism For the Love of Great Food & For the Love of the Arts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build no less than 3 partnerships with our restaurant & bars, special event venue/theaters or art galleries to increase awareness, excitement in building visitation during our non-summer season. • Develop at least 2-paid or non-paid lifestyle media stories featuring the ENTIRE Whitefish experience - outdoor recreation, food and art tourism. 		
<p>Storytelling: Group & Event Program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize a hotel sales & marketing group including our 4 largest hotel partners. Align and outline 4 specific objectives to build group business. Objectives include: 1. Identify Target Markets 2. Set measurable goals 3. Align sales messaging for trade shows/group events • Explore Whitefish develop group & event tab/content & resources on our website • Create and distribute quarterly B2B meeting & group travel newsletter/update focused on meeting and events planners 		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate and start developing database of meeting & event planners • Support through attendance or sponsorship, up to 3 ski council events and at least 1 group and meeting event ie. Connect, MPI, Cvent, IMEX etc. 		
Leading - Education & Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host Annual Meeting of Membership • Produce Annual Report • Host quarterly member "coffee discussions" to build engagement, trust, alignment in strategic planning and deliverables. 		
Destination Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce monthly member Market Reports to include following: Traditional Lodging monthly rate, occupancy; Short-term Rental rate, occupancy; comp city comparisons; Visitor Spending Data; Marketing Results outlining not only impressions, click throughs, book now data but also overview of opportunity campaigns (ie. special seasonal campaigns based on need) and artwork. 		

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DMO Budget:

Explore Whitefish Board of Directors approved a Public Budget from our Lodging Facility Tax at \$266,000 for FY 2025. We do not anticipate any significant roll-over funds at this time from FY 2024.

DMO - Explore Whitefish a.k.a. Whitefish Convention & Visitors Bureau

Allowable Method	Amount Budgeted	% Budgeted	Amend +/-	Upda
Administration	\$53,000.00	19.92%	\$0.00	
Research	\$35,000.00	13.16%	\$0.00	
Agency Services	\$25,000.00	9.40%	\$0.00	
Marketing Resources	\$30,000.00	11.28%	\$0.00	
Education/Outreach	\$10,000.00	3.76%	\$0.00	
Paid Media	\$90,000.00	33.83%	\$0.00	
Opportunity Marketing	\$12,000.00	4.51%	\$0.00	
Travel/Trade Shows	\$11,000.00	4.14%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
	\$0.00	0.00%	\$0.00	
TOTAL BUDGET	\$266,000.00	100.00%	\$0.00	

Revenue Projection	\$266,000.00
Funds not spent during previous fiscal year	\$0.00
Rollover Funds at Commerce	\$0.00
Allocated Following Audit	\$0.00
Budget increase total	\$266,000.00

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Narrative Evaluation: