

COAST & COUNTRYSIDE:
NAVIGATING TOURISM'S
FUTURE FOR THE BENEFIT
OF SOUTHERN DELAWARE

2026 Strategic Plan





The work and focus of Southern Delaware Tourism are guided by the organization's Vision, Mission, and unique Core Values (TRIP). These important phrases guide decisions and direction.

Vision

By collaborating with community stakeholders, Southern Delaware Tourism will position Sussex County, Delaware to thrive as a premier travel destination.

Mission

To support and encourage the identification, development, and promotion of sustainable, year-round tourism in Southern Delaware that contributes to economic growth and improves the quality of life.

Core Values

Transparency – Communicate honestly and respectfully, provide consistent messaging, welcome stakeholder scrutiny, and demonstrate integrity, fairness, and trustworthiness.

Relevancy – Stay connected to stakeholder and community values, use data to promote sustainable growth and quality of life, challenge assumptions, foster innovation, and pursue continuous improvement.

Inclusion – Value broad participation and diverse perspectives in decision-making and build support for Southern Delaware as a premier destination through collective insight.

Passion – Generate excitement, nurture ideas, inspire excellence, and overcome obstacles to SDT's growth and prosperity.



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INTRODUCTION

Southern Delaware Tourism is entering this strategic planning period at an important moment for Sussex County. Southern Delaware is already one of the most distinctive and economically significant travel destinations in the Mid-Atlantic. The destination includes nationally recognized beaches, coastal towns, rural landscapes, agricultural assets, culinary experiences, sports venues, parks, trails, waterways, shops, restaurants, events, and a strong local business community.

This strategic plan is important because Southern Delaware is growing, changing, and facing new expectations. Sussex County has become a \$3 billion visitor economy supporting nearly 23,550 jobs. At the same time, the destination is experiencing population growth, rising visitation, pressure on traffic and parking, workforce challenges, housing affordability concerns, infrastructure strain, and a need to spread the benefits of tourism more evenly across all months of the year and over the full geography of the county.

The purpose of this plan is to help Southern Delaware Tourism understand where it stands today, where it can compete most effectively, and what it should do between now and 2030 to strengthen the destination and the organization. The plan includes an assessment of Southern Delaware Tourism's current strategic position, strengths, challenges, and opportunities. The process engaged stakeholders extensively, especially Southern Delaware Tourism board members, to provide evidence-based recommendations for organizational growth, destination competitiveness, partner alignment, funding priorities, and implementation.



BACKGROUND

Southern Delaware Tourism is being asked to play a broader role across the county and communities it serves. Stakeholders described Southern Delaware Tourism as responsive, collaborative, and deeply committed to the destination. They also recognized that the organization has historically been asked to do more than its small staff and funding base could fully support. With new short-term rental tax revenue beginning to flow through the Public Accommodations Tax system, Southern Delaware Tourism has a new opportunity to strengthen marketing, broaden destination development, support seasonality strategies, and increase countywide alignment.

The central idea behind this plan is simple. Southern Delaware Tourism should work to sustain the area's level of visitor volume during the busiest summer periods while placing even greater emphasis on efforts that help the county become a more balanced, higher-value, better-managed, and more widely understood place to visit, live, work, and invest. Success requires clear priorities, shared ownership, practical timelines, and measurable progress. Therefore, this plan is being developed to address the following objectives:

- Diagnose Southern Delaware Tourism's current strategic position, strengths, and challenges.
- Develop evidence-based recommendations for organizational growth and destination competitiveness.
- Produce a clear implementation roadmap with measurable key performance indicators.
- Build understanding, alignment, and ownership of the strategic plan among employees and board members.



SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The situational assessment mapped the current tourism economy, destination assets, infrastructure, competitive position, and future operating environment. It showed that Southern Delaware is a large and resilient visitor economy that is more complex than a simple beach destination label suggests.

The assessment found that Sussex County's visitor economy has matured into a \$3 billion economic engine. It also found that visitor spending creates multiplier effects across the local economy. For every dollar spent directly by a visitor, another estimated dollar and twenty cents is generated in indirect sales throughout the local economy.

The assessment also confirmed that Southern Delaware is a drive destination with a powerful geographic reach. From Rehoboth Beach, major origin markets such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Wilmington, New York City, and Richmond are within practical driving range. This places Southern Delaware within a four-hour drive of over 100 million Americans. This is a major competitive advantage, but it also means that the destination competes for attention against other well-known Mid-Atlantic beach destinations.

DESTINATION PRODUCT AND INFRASTRUCTURE



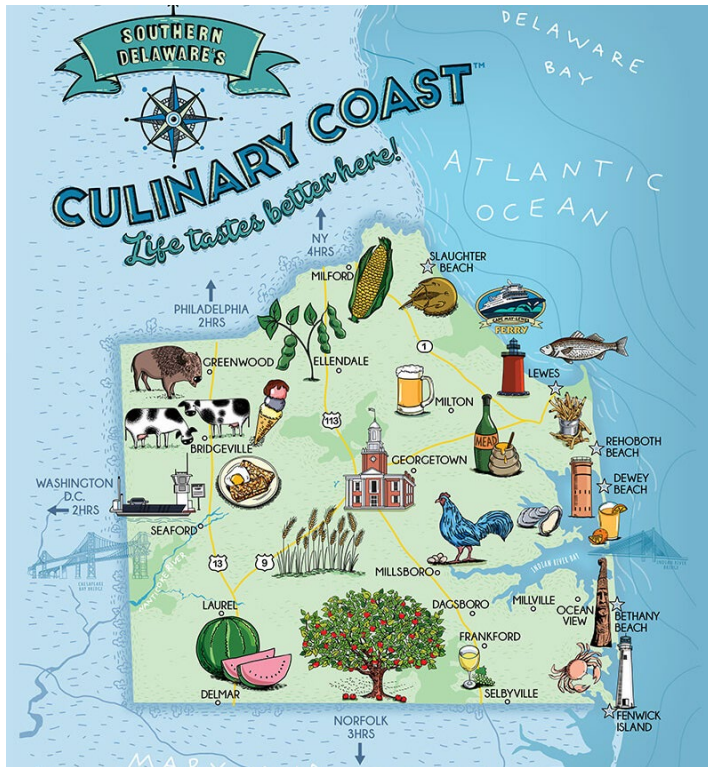
Southern Delaware's visitor product is anchored by more than 25 miles of coastline along the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay. Its beach communities each have distinct visitor appeal. Rehoboth Beach anchors a lively family-friendly visitor experience with a boardwalk, restaurants, shops, and attractions. Dewey Beach has a more active nightlife and beach culture. Lewes offers bay beaches, maritime character, and access to Cape Henlopen State Park. Bethany Beach and Fenwick Island serve the Quiet Resorts corridor and appeal to family-oriented and higher-income repeat visitors.

Inland communities add agri-tourism and craft beverage products to strengthen the area's claim as the Culinary Coast. Sports venues help attract youth and amateur sports tournaments. The hospitality infrastructure of lodging properties, restaurants, and retail helps tourism reach beyond the coast.

The lodging base includes 78 open hotel and lodging properties with about 4,795 documented rooms. Rehoboth Beach accounts for 35 open properties and 2,312 rooms, or nearly 48% of the county's hotel room supply. Coastal communities collectively hold about 82% of the open hotel room base.

Short-term rentals represent one of the most important structural changes to the destination. As of 2026, Sussex County had about 4,680 active short-term rental listings across Airbnb, VRBO, and direct rental platforms. This supply exceeds the traditional hotel room count by roughly 800 units. Rehoboth Beach is the county's largest short-term rental submarket, with about 927 active listings, average annual revenue of nearly \$39,787 per property, an average daily rate of about \$400, and annual occupancy of nearly 39.8%.

DESTINATION PRODUCT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

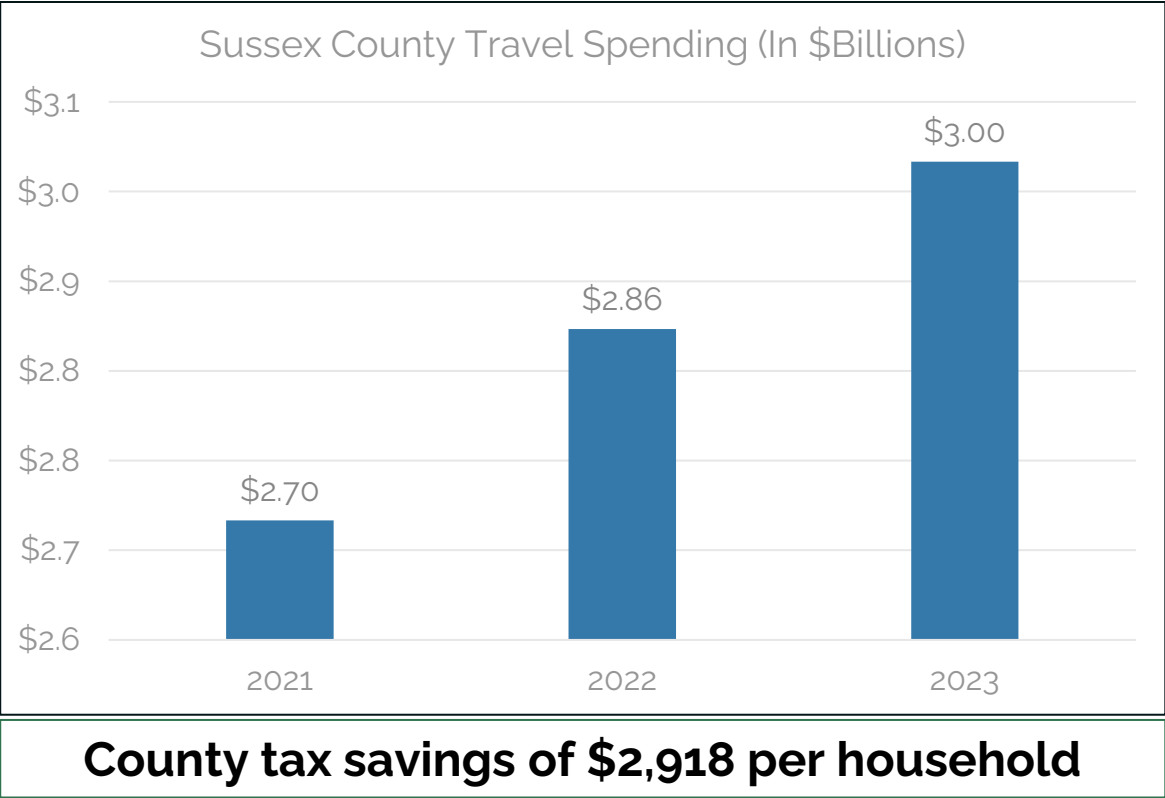


Meeting and group event capacity is present but limited. Properties with documented meeting space provide roughly 68,000 square feet of total meeting space. Distinctive venues such as Nassau Valley Vineyard, Dogfish Head locations, the Rehoboth Beach Convention Center, Georgetown Speedway, and Sports at the Beach add variety. Sports at the Beach can host more than 40 youth baseball tournaments per season. The absence of a significant multi-room conference facility with at least 10,000 square feet limits pursuit of larger association and government meetings.

Restaurants and culinary assets are also central to the destination. Sussex County has 120 existing restaurant properties with about 580,493 square feet of restaurant space. The restaurant supply is heavily concentrated on the coast, with 71 businesses in coastal communities. Rehoboth Beach alone contains 39 restaurant properties and about 194,303 square feet. Agriculture also supports the Culinary Coast brand, since Sussex County accounts for about 75% of Delaware's farm product value.

Retail is another important destination asset. Delaware's zero sales tax gives Southern Delaware a competitive advantage that peer destinations cannot easily copy. Visitors making a \$1,000 shopping purchase can save roughly \$53 to \$80 compared with similar purchases in neighboring states. Tanger Outlets on the Rehoboth-Lewes corridor reinforces this advantage, drawing more than 7.1 million annual visitors and offering more than 100 stores.

DESTINATION PERFORMANCE



Public Accommodations Tax is the organization's primary funding source. In FY 2023, Public Accommodations Tax revenue reached a record high of about \$1.6 million before softening as post-pandemic leisure demand normalized. Since HB 168 created a new 4.5% short-term rental lodging tax, Southern Delaware Tourism receives a portion of the county Convention and Visitors Bureau share of Sussex County short-term rental collections. In the fiscal year ending June 2025, total lodging tax contributions to Southern Delaware Tourism reached about \$1.8 million.

The new short-term rental revenue stream creates an opportunity to grow. It also creates a management responsibility. Southern Delaware Tourism should treat the new resources as a way to strengthen long-term competitiveness, address seasonality, expand countywide impact, and improve transparency around the use of tourism funds.

DESTINATION COMPARISON



The competitive assessment compared Southern Delaware with Ocean City, Maryland; Virginia Beach, Virginia; the Southern New Jersey Shore, principally Cape May County; and the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The comparison showed that Southern Delaware is smaller than many competitors by raw visitor volume and budget, but strong in quality, authenticity, retail advantage, lodging modernization, and culinary identity.

Southern Delaware has a \$3 billion visitor economy, which is competitive with Ocean City and the Outer Banks in general scale, although it is well below Southern New Jersey Shore's \$8.1 billion visitor spending base.

On lodging, Southern Delaware performs well. It has the highest Upscale plus room share among the peer set at 43.9% and the only luxury-classified properties in the peer group. It also has invested more recently in new hotel supply, with 21.7% of rooms added since 2015. This gives Southern Delaware a product quality advantage compared with destinations that have larger but older lodging inventory.

Southern Delaware's short-term rental funding integration is newer than competitor systems. The Outer Banks has used vacation rental lodging tax as a primary funding base for decades. New Jersey and Maryland have taxed short-term rentals since 2018, and Virginia Beach includes short-term rental revenue in its transient occupancy tax base. HB 168 helps correct Southern Delaware's previous funding gap, but it will require ongoing compliance, policy attention, and careful investment.

DESTINATION COMPARISON

Metric	Southern Delaware	Ocean City, MD	Virginia Beach, VA	NJ Shore (Cape May Co.)	Outer Banks, NC
Annual Visitors	~7.6M (2021)	~8M annually	14.3M (2024)	12.1M (2024)	~9M+ (Dare + Currituck)
Direct Visitor Spending	~\$3B (2024)	Est. \$3–4B (Worcester Co.)	\$2.6B (2024)	\$8.1B (2024)	\$2.1B Dare Co. (2024)
Total Economic Impact	~\$3B+	~\$4B+ (est.)	\$3.9B (2024)	Est. \$12B+	Est. \$3B+
Tourism-Supported Jobs	23,550	~15,500+ (statewide est.)	34,076 (2024)	32,501 (2024)	~12,000+ (Dare Co.)
Hotel/STR Tax Rate	4.5% state + local PAT	6% MD state + Worcester County room tax	15% city + state + \$2/night	~11.6% combined (state + county)	12.75% (state + county)
Active STR Listings	~4,680	~4,079	~1,325–1,361	3,000–4,000+ (Cape May Co.)	15,000–20,000+ (Dare+Currituck)
Avg. STR Host Revenue	~\$39K (Rehoboth)	~\$28,531	~\$62K	~\$55K (Cape May)	\$50K–\$62K
STR Funds DMO	Partially — new HB 168 (2025)	STR taxed since 2018; flows to state/county, limited DMO share	Yes — transient occupancy tax funds Visit Virginia Beach	Partially — complex NJ distribution	Yes — 6% occupancy tax directly funds Outer Banks Visitors Bureau
Sales Tax on Shopping	None (0%)	6%	5.3–5.77%	6.625%	4.75–7%
Primary DMO	Southern Delaware Tourism (SDT)	Town of Ocean City Tourism	Visit Virginia Beach	Cape May County Tourism	Outer Banks Visitors Bureau

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DESTINATION COMPARISON

Traditional Lodging

Metric	Southern Delaware	Ocean City, MD	Virginia Beach, VA	NJ Shore (Cape May Co.)	Outer Banks, NC
Open Properties	78	113	114	271	63
Total Rooms	4,795	10,382	12,753	11,343	3,036
Avg. Rooms/Property	61	92	112	42	48
Independent Room Share	51.9%	58.0%	21.7%	97.9%	60.1%
Upscale+ Room Share	43.9%	15.2%	40.5%	0.4%	5.9%
Luxury Properties	4	0	0	0	0
Pre-1990 Room Share	~44%	60.4%	58.7%	91.7%	81.3%
Post-2015 Room Share	21.7%	12.2%	11.9%	1.1%	5.0%

DMO Funding

DMO	Primary Funding Source	Short-Term Rental Integration	Est. Annual Budget
SDT (Southern Delaware)	Delaware PAT (state-level, 12.5% county share)	New (HB 168, 2025)	~\$1.5–2M
Ocean City Tourism (MD)	Municipal budget + Maryland Tourism	Yes, since 2018	~\$5–8M (est.)
Visit Virginia Beach	City transient occupancy tax	Yes	~\$26M
Cape May County Tourism	NJ occupancy tax (complex distribution)	Yes, since 2018	Varies
Outer Banks Visitors Bureau	6% county occupancy tax (hotels + vacation rentals)	Yes, fully integrated for decades	~\$12–15M (est.)

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STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder Engagement was designed to combine breadth with depth. The process consisted of facilitated focus groups, a stakeholder survey, and interviews with board members. Focus groups surfaced shared experiences and community-level priorities; the survey tested the prevalence of key themes across a wider audience; and board member interviews provided governance, organizational, and strategic context. Findings were reviewed together so that recommendations reflect both recurring patterns and informed leadership perspectives.

Stakeholder Engagement helped define how industry leaders, board members, partners, and community voices understand Southern Delaware's strengths and challenges. A consistent theme emerged around Southern Delaware's special sense of place. Stakeholders described the destination as authentic, relaxed, welcoming, naturally beautiful, and emotionally meaningful to visitors and residents.

FOCUS GROUPS

In early June, four focus groups were held to elicit input from a variety of Southern Delaware Tourism partners including lodging operators, attractions, restaurants, and community organizations.

Stakeholders strongly expressed that Southern Delaware's story is bigger than the beach. Beaches and boardwalks remain the headline, but trails, state parks, fishing holes, waterways, farms, breweries, local shops, arts, heritage, culinary experiences, and community events all create reasons to stay longer and explore more deeply.

Stakeholders were also candid about the pressures connected to success. Workforce availability, attainable housing, transportation, traffic, healthcare capacity, and parking surfaced repeatedly. Many stakeholders viewed these issues as shared community priorities rather than tourism-only issues. Continued tourism growth will depend on the health, livability, and resilience of the communities that make the visitor economy possible.

One stakeholder described the feeling of crossing into the destination as a sense of peace. Others emphasized that Southern Delaware is not defined by one attraction. It is a collection of communities, experiences, restaurants, outdoor places, events, shops, and local traditions that together create a distinctive destination.



FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY

Stakeholder Views – Strengths

"As soon as I cross the Nassau Bridge, there's always been this sense of peace that washes over me." —

Vacation Rentals Stakeholder

- Distinctive sense of place rooted in authentic communities, rich local heritage, and natural beauty
- Nationally recognized beaches complemented by diverse inland experiences and exemplary culinary options
- Strong quality of life and welcoming community character
- Growing year-round assets including culinary, outdoor recreation, arts, and events
- Collaborative tourism community with engaged partners across Sussex County
- Strong regional accessibility and loyal repeat visitors

Stakeholder Views – Weaknesses

"What more can we add before it continues to put pressure on infrastructure, health care, roads, traffic, and our workforce?" — Attractions Stakeholder

- Managing growth while preserving Southern Delaware's strong sense of place and quality of life
- Expanding the destination story and visitor awareness beyond the beaches
- Building a stronger year-round visitor economy
- Addressing workforce, housing, and infrastructure challenges
- Better connecting coastal and inland communities
- Strengthening collaboration across tourism partners and communities

Stakeholder Views – Opportunities

"We're at an inflection point... now we have the opportunity to do some things we've never been able to do before." — Hospitality Stakeholder

- Continue strengthening a year-round visitor economy
- Further elevate western Sussex County and inland experiences in marketing messaging
- Expand sports, outdoor recreation, culinary, and heritage tourism offerings
- Broaden destination storytelling to reflect the rich cultural diversity and authentic experiences found across Sussex County
- Encourage longer stays by leveraging broader exploration across Sussex County
- Continue enhancing the visitor experience through destination development and infrastructure
- Strengthen collaboration among communities, chambers, businesses, and tourism partners

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BOARD MEMBER INTERVIEWS

Early in the planning process, Southern Delaware Tourism's Board of Directors convened to provide input on the desired outcomes. During this facilitated session, board members learned about trends and dynamics facing destination organizations and the parameters of destination management. The session concluded with a discussion of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Board members participated again later through individual interviews that gathered their firsthand perspectives on destination direction, vision, and business opportunities. Their views aligned closely with the focus group results.

The final board engagement occurred after the strategic imperatives were developed, gathering input on the direction and proposed recommendations. Board member input helped shape the final wording of the recommendations and the practicality of the implementation plan.



BOARD INPUT SUMMARY

Board Views – Strengths

- Build upon Southern Delaware Tourism's experienced leadership and dedicated staff
- Strengthen relationships and partnerships throughout Sussex County
- Increase Southern Delaware Tourism's presence and visibility within the community
- Continue evolving Board governance, policies, and organizational effectiveness
- Expand sponsorship and funding partnerships to support strategic priorities
- Continue telling Southern Delaware's story beyond the beaches
- Deepen community outreach and resident engagement

Board Views – Weaknesses

- Rising travel costs and economic uncertainty affecting visitor demand
- Managing growth while preserving Southern Delaware's character and quality of life
- Population growth straining infrastructure, accessibility, workforce, and housing
- Reducing seasonality through market diversification and year-round visitation
- Expanding into new visitor segments beyond traditional leisure travel
- Strengthening community support for tourism and demonstrating its value
- Protecting and investing in the destination's coastal assets, including beach replenishment

Board Views – Opportunities

- Position Southern Delaware Tourism as a destination leader and convener
- Build stronger community awareness and resident support for tourism
- Expand marketing to new audiences and emerging visitor segments
- Invest in modern marketing, storytelling, and digital engagement
- Grow strategic partnerships, sponsorships, and funding opportunities
- Strengthen Board governance and organizational capacity
- Leverage data and research to guide decision-making

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STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

The stakeholder survey reinforced the themes heard in interviews and group sessions. Ninety percent of respondents identified Southern Delaware's beaches and coastline as the destination's greatest asset. Accessibility was selected by 44 percent, family-friendly atmosphere by 29 percent, shopping and boardwalks by 29 percent, and outdoor recreation by 27 percent.

The survey also identified clear opportunities. Nearly 46 percent of respondents selected more signature experiences beyond the beach as a top opportunity. Forty-one percent prioritized more shoulder season events and festivals. Thirty-seven percent emphasized better connections between coastal and inland communities. Forty percent reported increased shoulder season travel, and another 40 percent observed growing demand for authentic local experiences.

The survey also pointed to the future role of Southern Delaware Tourism. Nearly 46 percent said the organization should prioritize tourism in ways that benefit residents, businesses, and visitors alike. Supporting events and festivals, strengthening competitiveness, and building greater resident understanding of tourism's value also ranked as important priorities.



STAKEHOLDER SURVEY RESULTS SUMMARY

Strengths:

- Southern Delaware's **beaches and coastline** (90%) remain the destination's **greatest competitive advantage**, complemented by **regional drive access** (44%) and a growing mix of **outdoor recreation** (27%) and **historic coastal communities** (27%).
- Stakeholders also recognize the value of Southern Delaware's family-friendly atmosphere (29%) and shopping and boardwalk experiences (29%).

Challenges:

- **Visitors are unaware of experiences beyond the beach** (50%), creating a barrier to increasing overnight visitation.
- Peak-season pricing and availability (29%) and Southern Delaware's perception as a summer-only destination (21%) continue to limit visitation growth.

Emerging Trends:

- Stakeholders are seeing **more shoulder-season travel** (40%) and growing demand for **authentic local experiences** (40%), suggesting opportunities to **expand visitation beyond the summer months**.
- **Shorter booking windows** (29%) also indicate visitors are planning trips differently than in previous years.

Top Priorities:

Stakeholders identified **signature experiences beyond the beach** (46%), **more shoulder-season events** (41%), and **better connections between coastal and inland destinations** (37%) as the most important opportunities to support overnight visitation.

Strategic Direction:

The highest priority for Southern Delaware Tourism is advancing tourism in **ways that benefit residents, locally owned businesses, and visitors alike** (46%), followed by **supporting events and festivals** (37%) and **strengthening destination competitiveness** (28%).



ORGANIZATIONAL REVIEW

This organizational assessment examines whether Southern Delaware Tourism's governance, staffing, operating model, and financial resources are aligned with its expanding role as Sussex County's destination marketing organization. It draws on the organization's public About Us information, the FY 2025 Annual Report, and the FY 2025 chamber funding guidelines to establish a practical baseline for implementation of the strategic plan.

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GOVERNANCE

Southern Delaware Tourism is governed by a broad, place-based board that connects the organization to chambers of commerce, hospitality and tourism businesses, community institutions, Sussex County economic development, and the Delaware Tourism Office. Current representation spans the Bethany-Fenwick, Greater Georgetown, Lewes, Greater Milford, Millsboro, Milton, Rehoboth Beach-Dewey Beach, and Western Sussex areas, with officers and members drawn from lodging, media, financial services, agriculture, museums, nature-based attractions, energy, and other visitor-economy sectors. This structure provides extensive countywide relationships and local insight to make clear committee roles, attendance, orientation, and shared accountability especially important. The FY 2025 funding guidelines reinforce this expectation by requiring chamber tourism representatives to serve as voting board members and attend at least 75 percent of board meetings.

Board Member List from visitsoutherndelaware.com/about-us

<u>Bethany-Fenwick Area</u> Lauren Weaver (Non-Voting Member) Executive Director, Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber of Commerce Alison Schuch (Voting Member) Fells Point Surf Co. Kristin Lang-Miller (Voting Member) Forever Media, Inc. <u>Delaware Tourism Office</u> Jessica Welch (Non-Voting Member) Director, Delaware Tourism Office <u>Greater Georgetown</u> Linda Price (Non-Voting Member) Director, Georgetown Chamber of Commerce Scott Anthony (Voting Member & Current SDT Chairperson) Money Mailer of Delaware Fred Thompson (Voting Member & SDT Co-Chairperson) Hampton Inn Rehoboth Beach <u>Lewes</u> Betsy Reamer (Non-Voting Member) Executive Director, Lewes Chamber of Commerce Maggie Lingo (Voting Member) Beacon Motel Jim Smith (Voting Member) Delmarva Power <u>Greater Milford</u> Jo Schmeiser (Non-Voting Member) Executive Director, Chamber of Commerce for Greater Milford Thomas Summers (Voting Member) Milford Museum Patrick Ruhl (Voting Member) Dupont Nature Center	<u>Greater Millsboro</u> Nadine Timpanaro (Non-Voting Member) Executive Director, Greater Millsboro Chamber of Commerce Mike Dunmyer (Voting Member) US Wind <u>Milton</u> (Non-Voting Member) – Open Kevin Thompson (Voting Member) Edward Jones Bonnie Hall (Voting Member) Nanticoke Indian Association <u>Rehoboth Beach – Dewey Beach</u> Kate VonVorst (Non-Voting Member) President/CEO, Rehoboth Beach – Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce Drew DiFonzo (Voting Member) TKO Hospitality Benjamin Gray (Voting Member) Mercantile Processing, Inc. <u>Sussex County Government</u> Andrew Harton (Voting Member) Sussex County Economic Development Director <u>Western Sussex</u> Terry Carson (Non-Voting Member) Executive Director, Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce Matthew Parker (Voting Member and Past SDT Chair) Lincoln Financial Advisors Kevin Evans (Voting Member) Evans Farms
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FINANCIAL

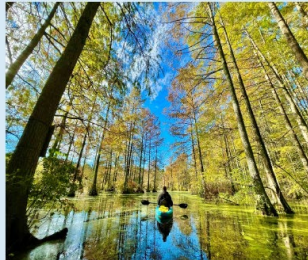
Southern Delaware Tourism operates as a 501(c)6 nonprofit and is funded primarily through Delaware's Public Accommodations Tax. The FY 2025 Annual Report states that Sussex County tourism generated approximately \$3 billion in visitor spending and that SDT distributed \$888,858 in grants to Sussex County chambers of commerce for local tourism promotion. The report also records 283,000 website visitors, \$302,543 in hotel bookings attributed to advertising, and \$2,391,947 in publicity value, providing evidence of return from core marketing activity. The FY 2025 funding guidelines show that chamber allocations may support regional advertising, special events, tourism-driven publications, website development, tourism-related personnel, approved capital investments, and other pre-approved expenses, with reporting and return-on-investment expectations. Together, these conditions point to the need for transparent allocation criteria, consistent performance reporting, and a clear distinction between resources that sustain core marketing and those used for new strategic initiatives.

02

FY 2025 Major Achievements

- **283,000** people visited SDT's website, [VisitSouthernDelaware.com](https://www.VisitSouthernDelaware.com).
- **15,533** hotel searches and **\$302,543** in hotel bookings were generated by SDT's advertising efforts. *Source: ADARA Impact.*
- **\$2,391,947** in publicity value for travel to Sussex County was generated by hosting and assisting travel journalists. *Source: Muckrack.*
- Increased exposure for highlighting **Southern Delaware's Culinary Coast™**, highlighting Sussex County's reputation as a Mid-Atlantic foodie mecca, with a concentration of restaurants, award-winning chefs, farms, wineries, distilleries, breweries, farmers markets, aquaculture (oysters, shellfish) and more — all leveraging the region's natural resources: farmland, Atlantic and bay waters, and coastal lifestyle.
- Our Certified Tourism Ambassador program has reached **220 Ambassadors** since the spring of 2025. The program won the 2024 Customer Support Award category in Learn Tourism's™ Learning Excellence Awards.
- Collaborated with regional tourism offices to create the **Cape-to-Cape Driving Tour** highlighting **8 must stop locations** in Sussex County.
- Sponsored the 9th Annual Southern Delaware Tourism Photography Contest and **obtained 205 photo entries** which have been added to SDT's media galleries for use in promotions, marketing, and advertising.
- **\$888,858** in funding grants were distributed to chambers of commerce (located in Sussex County) for local tourism promotion.
- Hosted its **Spring Partner Expo**, drawing **74 attendees** and featuring **16 exhibitors**. The event served as a valuable opportunity for networking, collaboration, and showcasing regional tourism initiatives.

FY 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

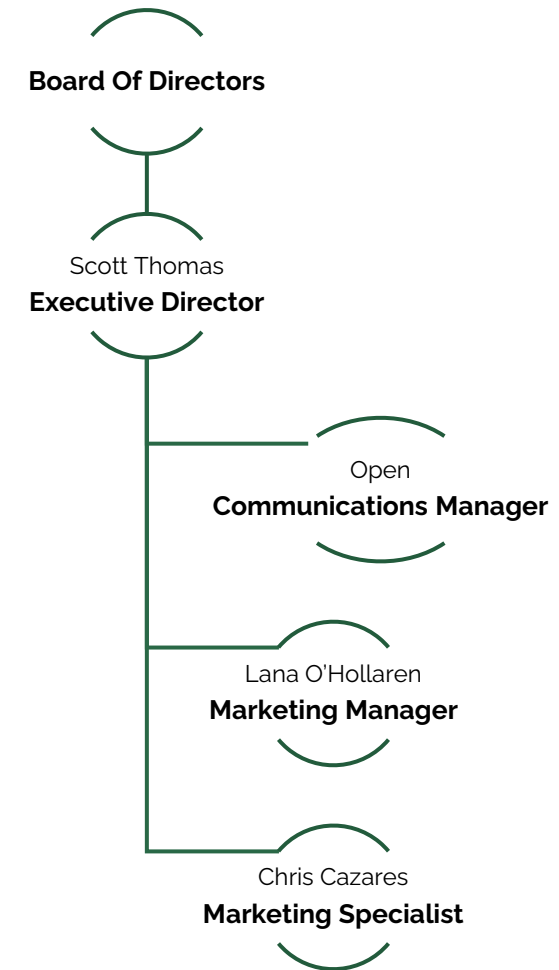


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TEAM

The organization operates with a four-person staff: an Executive Director, Communications Manager, Marketing Manager, and Marketing Specialist. This lean structure supports destination marketing, communications, partner outreach, research, grant administration, and coordination across Sussex County. The model has produced measurable results, but the breadth of responsibilities creates capacity risk as the organization adds strategic implementation, expanded research, destination development, sports and meetings work, and more formal partner accountability.

The Southern Delaware Tourism team delivered measurable performance gains in recent years. In FY 2025, VisitSouthernDelaware.com received 283,000 visits, up from 224,000 the prior year. Advertising generated nearly \$302,550 in tracked hotel bookings and \$2.4 million in earned media publicity value. These results are notable because Southern Delaware Tourism operates with a modest budget and a lean staff.





SWOT ANALYSIS

The Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats (SWOT) section narrows the research and engagement findings into the main strategic opportunities for Southern Delaware Tourism. These opportunities are not isolated ideas. They connect Southern Delaware's existing strengths, emerging pressures, funding changes, community needs, and competitive position.

Southern Delaware's greatest opportunity is to grow with purpose. The destination does not need to become larger simply for the sake of more volume. The higher value opportunity is to increase overnight stays, visitor spending, year-round business, countywide exploration, and community benefit while protecting the qualities that make Southern Delaware special.

STRENGTHS

Southern Delaware has several Strengths that should carry forward into the strategic plan. First, it has a strong coastal identity supported by clean, well-managed beaches and distinctive beach communities. Second, it has a meaningful sense of place that stakeholders consistently described as authentic, welcoming, relaxed, and emotionally resonant. Third, it has strong access from major drive markets. Fourth, it has a growing set of experiences beyond the beach, including culinary assets, outdoor recreation, state parks, trails, waterways, small towns, events, shopping, heritage, and agricultural experiences. Fifth, it has a tax-free retail advantage that peer destinations cannot replicate.

The destination also has a product quality story that is stronger than its size suggests. Southern Delaware has a high share of Upscale plus lodging, four luxury-classified properties, a meaningful amount of post-2015 hotel supply, and a mix of independent and branded properties. This allows the destination to compete for visitors who value quality, character, and convenience.

STRENGTHS	
	Distinctive beaches and communities
	Authentic, welcoming sense of place
	Access to major drive markets
	Quality lodging, culinary, and outdoor assets
	Tax-free retail advantage

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WEAKNESSES

Southern Delaware also has Weaknesses that need to be addressed. Seasonal concentration remains a major issue. Summer demand is strong, but more year-round demand is needed to support businesses and jobs across the full calendar. Visitor awareness beyond the beach is still limited, with many visitors not fully understanding the inland, culinary, outdoor, cultural, and year-round experiences available across Sussex County.

The organization is also operating with limited capacity. A four-person staff is expected to support marketing, partner coordination, research, grants, communications, community outreach, events, sports, and strategic implementation. Without additional capacity or stronger partner systems, the organization may struggle to deliver all priorities at the desired level.

Infrastructure, housing, workforce availability, parking, healthcare capacity, and traffic are also limiting factors. These are not issues Southern Delaware Tourism can solve alone, but tourism planning must acknowledge and respond to them through advocacy, communication, partner alignment, and experience management.

WEAKNESSES	
	Heavy summer seasonality
	Limited awareness beyond the beach
	Lean organizational capacity
	Traffic, parking, and infrastructure strain
	Workforce, housing, and healthcare constraints

OPPORTUNITIES

The strongest Opportunities are clear. Southern Delaware can grow shoulder season and off-season visitation. It can convert repeat visitors into deeper countywide explorers. It can better connect coastal and inland communities. It can use the Culinary Coast brand as a year-round differentiator. It can build sports, weddings, small meetings, LGBTQ+ travel, visiting friends and relatives, and other audience-based segments to supplement traditional family leisure travel.

New short-term rental revenue also creates an opportunity to make investments that were previously difficult to support. Southern Delaware Tourism should use traditional lodging-related resources to sustain and improve core marketing, while using new short-term rental resources to address off-season growth, inland exploration, product awareness, and emerging programs.

There is also a strong opportunity to deepen community alignment. chambers of commerce, businesses, local governments, venues, event producers, and community organizations all play important roles in the destination. Southern Delaware Tourism can serve as the convener that helps connect these partners to shared goals, clearer resources, and stronger communication.

OPPORTUNITIES	
	Grow shoulder- and off-season demand
	Connect coastal and inland experiences
	Expand Culinary Coast and audience segments
	Invest new short-term rental tax revenue strategically
	Deepen partner and community alignment

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THREATS

The main Threats are unmanaged growth, infrastructure strain, community frustration, seasonality, competitive funding gaps, aging product in parts of the lodging and restaurant base, short-term rental compliance issues, and climate vulnerability. If growth is not managed carefully, the qualities that make Southern Delaware attractive could weaken. If new funds are not invested clearly and strategically, the destination may miss a rare opportunity to strengthen its competitive position.

Peer destinations also set a high bar. Virginia Beach has deeper meeting infrastructure and a larger budget. Cape May County has a much larger visitor economy. The Outer Banks has a mature short-term rental funding model. Ocean City has scale and a high-volume event base. Southern Delaware should not try to copy these destinations; it should learn from them while building on its own distinctive strengths.

THREATS	
	Unmanaged growth and resident frustration
	Competitive funding and infrastructure gaps
	Aging lodging and restaurant product
	Short-term rental compliance risk
	Climate vulnerability

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STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations translate the research and engagement findings into action. Each recommendation includes a description of the strategy, what will be needed to deliver it, Southern Delaware Tourism's role, the resources required, the timeline between 2026 and 2030, and one or two key performance indicators.

Southern Delaware Tourism should use four role types. Lead means Southern Delaware Tourism owns the direction and drives implementation. Partner means Southern Delaware Tourism shares responsibility with other organizations. Advocate means Southern Delaware Tourism supports action by raising attention, providing evidence, or encouraging policy or investment. Monitor means Southern Delaware Tourism tracks the issue and stays engaged without taking primary responsibility.

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Competitive Positioning



Southern Delaware Tourism has historically focused on geographic origin markets as drivers of overnight stays. That approach remains useful, especially because Southern Delaware is a drive destination with access to large northeastern population centers. However, the next level of performance will require more audience detail. Visitor groups should be understood by needs, interests, travel timing, motivations, and likely spending patterns.

Objective: To increase year-round overnight stays throughout Sussex County through strategically targeted marketing initiatives.

Strategies:

1. Layer target audience details into current geographic marketing
 - a) Develop specific LGBTQ+ content and outreach initiatives
 - b) Enhance weddings content and partner engagement
 - c) Research weekday small meetings opportunity
2. Strengthen cooperative marketing coordination with partners and chambers
3. Explore a Sports Council
4. Broaden visitor profile and performance research
5. Convene a repeat visitor and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) initiative

1. LAYER TARGET AUDIENCE DETAILS INTO CURRENT GEOGRAPHIC MARKETING

Geographic targeting will work harder when campaigns also reflect why different travelers choose Southern Delaware and what they seek once they arrive. Southern Delaware Tourism should continue to market in priority origin markets, but the message should be tailored to audiences with different travel needs. Examples include families looking for beach vacations, couples looking for food and lodging quality, wedding parties looking for coastal settings, LGBTQ+ travelers looking for welcoming experiences, repeat visitors looking for something new, and small groups looking for weekday meeting options. Tailored messages make existing campaigns more relevant to the distinct needs that drive travel decisions.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism will need visitor research, campaign segmentation, partner input, updated content, and a stronger digital media plan. The organization should identify priority audiences, map the experiences that best fit each audience, and create content that connects those audiences with lodging, events, restaurants, outdoor recreation, shopping, and itineraries.

Within this strategy include three specific market segments for development:

- **Develop LGBTQ+ content and associated outreach initiatives**
- **Enhance current weddings content and partner engagement**

- **Research market opportunity for weekday small meetings to help build approach**

Role: Lead

Resources: Audience research, campaign planning support, creative content, partner listings, chamber coordination, website improvements, and advertising budget

Timeline: Define and plan in 2026. Launch in 2027. Optimize from 2028 through 2030.

Metrics: Growth in qualified website traffic to audience-specific content and increase in campaign-assisted lodging referrals or partner leads.

1. LAYER TARGET AUDIENCE DETAILS INTO CURRENT GEOGRAPHIC MARKETING

1A. DEVELOP SPECIFIC LGBTQ+ CONTENT AND OUTREACH INITIATIVES

Southern Delaware can serve LGBTQ+ travelers more effectively with accurate, welcoming, and practical information that supports confident trip planning. The work should focus on inclusion, visitor information, events, businesses, lodging, dining, arts, nightlife, and community experiences that help visitors make informed travel choices.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with community partners, businesses, event organizers, and chambers to inventory relevant experiences. The organization should also review language, imagery, and content standards to ensure that materials are welcoming and useful.

Role: Lead and Partner

Resources: Content development, stakeholder input, photography, website updates, partner outreach, event listings, and possible paid media support

Timeline: Research and planning in 2027. Launch in 2028. Refresh and track through 2030.

Metrics: Visits to LGBTQ+ travel content and number of participating businesses or events.

1B. ENHANCE WEDDINGS CONTENT AND PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

Southern Delaware already has the settings and suppliers to compete for weddings and celebrations, but prospective clients need a clearer path from inspiration to booking. The region already has distinctive lodging, restaurants, and venues that can support weddings and related travel. Better content and stronger partner engagement can help convert interest into overnight stays.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with venues, lodging partners, restaurants, florists, photographers, planners, and chambers to organize a stronger wedding content platform. The content should include planning resources, seasonal considerations, community options, and itineraries for guests.

Role: Partner

Resources: Partner inventory, wedding content, photography, digital landing pages, vendor coordination, and campaign support

Timeline: Inventory and partner outreach in 2026. Launch in 2028. Refine through 2030.

Metrics: Wedding content engagement and active wedding partner listings or referrals.

1. LAYER TARGET AUDIENCE DETAILS INTO CURRENT GEOGRAPHIC MARKETING

1C. RESEARCH WEEKDAY SMALL MEETINGS OPPORTUNITY

Before committing sales resources, Southern Delaware Tourism should test whether existing venues and lodging can support a focused weekday meetings market. The situational assessment shows the county lacks competitive conference capability. This suggests the opportunity is smaller meetings, retreats, board meetings, corporate planning sessions, association committees, and niche gatherings that can use hotels, restaurants, and non-hotel venues.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should complete a venue and lodging inventory, interview meeting planners and local partners, and test demand for weekday retreats, board meetings, and small association gatherings. Findings should define the priority segments, sales approach, and conditions for a limited prospecting initiative.

Role: Monitor in 2026, then Partner if the opportunity is validated

Resources: Venue inventory, lodging partner input, meeting planner research, sales tools, and staff capacity

Timeline: Research in 2028. Pilot outreach in 2029. Targeted sales support from 2029 through 2030, if viable.

Metrics: Qualified small meeting leads and estimated room nights connected to meeting inquiries.



2. STRENGTHEN COOPERATIVE MARKETING COORDINATION WITH PARTNERS & CHAMBERS

A more coordinated campaign cycle can help Southern Delaware Tourism, chambers, and partners combine their reach while reducing duplicated effort. The goal is to increase reach, reduce duplication, and make partner content more relevant to audience needs.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish a shared annual campaign calendar, issue clear partner briefs, and coordinate content, timing, and reporting with chambers and participating businesses. A repeatable planning cycle should identify responsibilities and opportunities for cooperative investment.

3. EXPLORE A SPORTS COUNCIL

Sports tourism can create shoulder-season demand, but capturing that opportunity requires a shared structure for venues, lodging partners, municipalities, schools, and event organizers. Sports can help create demand during shoulder and off-season periods, but it requires coordination, venue availability, housing, bid support, and staff attention.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convene venue operators, lodging partners, municipalities, schools, and event organizers to assess shared goals and operating requirements. The group should define governance, market priorities, bid support, event servicing, and the resources required for an effective council.

Role: Lead and Partner

Resources: Shared calendar, partner communication templates, campaign briefs, committee support, content guidelines, and reporting tools

Timeline: Calendar design in 2028. Formal cooperative marketing cycle in 2029. Annual refinement through 2030

Metrics: Number of participating partners and total combined campaign reach or engagement

Role: Lead and Partner

Resources: Venue agreements, lodging participation, sports market research, staff support, event servicing plans, and potential bid funding

Timeline: Plan in 2026. Initiate Sports Council in 2027. Targeted event pursuit beginning in 2027.

Metrics: Completion of regular performance reports and documented use of data in marketing or funding decisions

4. BROADEN VISITOR PROFILE AND PERFORMANCE RESEARCH

Stronger market intelligence is essential to understand who visits, when and why they travel, where they stay, and how marketing affects their behavior. Research is currently underused, but the future plan depends on better understanding who visits, when they visit, why they visit, where they stay, what they do, and how marketing influences behavior.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should adopt a research plan that combines visitor profiles, lodging performance, campaign analytics, partner reporting, and periodic stakeholder input. A simple dashboard and regular reporting schedule should turn the findings into marketing and funding decisions.

5. CONVENE A REPEAT VISITOR AND VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES INITIATIVE

Residents and loyal visitors can become trusted guides who encourage friends, relatives, and repeat guests to explore more of Sussex County. Southern Delaware has a loyal visitor base. Many visitors already know the beaches, but they may not know inland towns, farms, trails, heritage sites, local events, or culinary experiences.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with chambers, residents, and repeat visitors to identify underexplored experiences and develop practical hosting and return-visit itineraries. Digital promotion and ambassador-style outreach should make the content easy to share before and during a trip.

Role: Lead

Resources: Research tools, staff assignment, data partners, dashboard templates, and reporting time

Timeline: Research plan in 2027. Dashboard in 2028. Reporting from 2028 through 2030

Metrics: Completion of regular performance reports and documented use of data in marketing or funding decisions

Role: Partner

Resources: Resident messaging, itineraries, chamber content, local ambassador ideas, digital promotion, and partner coordination

Timeline: Concept development in 2027. Pilot launch in 2028. Expansion in 2029 and 2030.

Metrics: Engagement with repeat visitor or resident hosting content and growth in traffic to inland or countywide itinerary pages

Competitive Positioning - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
1. Layer target audience details into current geographic marketing a) Develop specific LGBTQ+ content and outreach initiatives b) Enhance weddings content and partner engagement c) Research weekday small meetings opportunity	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism will need visitor research, campaign segmentation, partner input, updated content, and a stronger digital media plan. The organization should identify priority audiences, map the experiences that best fit each audience, and create content that connects those audiences with lodging, events, restaurants, outdoor recreation, shopping, and itineraries. - To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with community partners, businesses, event organizers, and chambers to inventory relevant LGBTQ+ experiences. The organization should also review language, imagery, and content standards to ensure that materials are welcoming and useful. - To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with venues, lodging partners, restaurants, florists, photographers, planners, and chambers to organize a stronger wedding content platform. The content should include planning resources, seasonal considerations, community options, and itineraries for guests. - To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should complete a venue and lodging inventory, interview meeting planners and local partners, and test demand for weekday retreats, board meetings, and small association gatherings. Findings should define the priority segments, sales approach, and conditions for a limited prospecting initiative.	Lead Lead/Partner Partner Monitor, then Partner if validated	Tailored messages make existing campaigns more relevant to the distinct needs that drive travel decisions. - Accurate, welcoming information helps LGBTQ+ travelers confidently choose Southern Delaware. - Clear planning information and coordinated partners can convert celebration interest into overnight stays. - Evidence on demand and capacity will show whether small meetings can generate viable midweek business.	Define and plan in 2026, Launch in 2027. Research and planning in 2027. Launch in 2028. Inventory and partner outreach in 2026. Launch in 2028. Research in 2028, Pilot outreach in 2029,

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Competitive Positioning - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
2. Strengthen cooperative marketing coordination with partners and chambers	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish a shared annual campaign calendar, issue clear partner briefs, and coordinate content, timing, and reporting with chambers and participating businesses. A repeatable planning cycle should identify responsibilities and opportunities for cooperative investment.	Lead/Partner	Better coordination extends campaign reach while reducing duplicated effort across organizations.	Calendar design in 2028. Formal cooperative marketing cycle in 2029.
3. Explore a Sports Council	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convene venue operators, lodging partners, municipalities, schools, and event organizers to assess shared goals and operating requirements. The group should define governance, market priorities, bid support, event servicing, and the resources required for an effective council.	Lead/Partner	A coordinated council can align facilities, lodging, and event support around attainable sports business.	Plan in 2026. Initiate Sports Council in 2027.
4. Broaden visitor profile and performance research	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should adopt a research plan that combines visitor profiles, lodging performance, campaign analytics, partner reporting, and periodic stakeholder input. A simple dashboard and regular reporting schedule should turn the findings into marketing and funding decisions.	Lead	Better visitor evidence enables sharper market choices and more credible performance measurement.	Research plan in 2027. Dashboard in 2028.
5. Convene a repeat visitor and visiting friends and relatives initiative	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should work with chambers, residents, and repeat visitors to identify underexplored experiences and develop practical hosting and return-visit itineraries. Digital promotion and ambassador-style outreach should make the content easy to share before and during a trip.	Partner	Visitation by loyal guests and family/friends of residents helps grow off-season business.	Concept development in 2027. Pilot launch in 2028.

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Competitive Investments



The new short-term rental tax revenue created through HB 168 provides a rare opportunity. It can help Southern Delaware Tourism continue core marketing while adding new investments that were previously difficult to fund. However, the competitive assessment shows that Southern Delaware still operates with a smaller budget than several peer destinations. This means new resources must be divided carefully, used transparently, and connected to measurable outcomes.

Objective: Strengthen transparency and effectiveness in the use of Southern Delaware Tourism resources.

Strategies:

6. Separate new short-term rental funding from traditional hotel-related funding to address two separate objectives:
 - a) Traditional – Sustaining and, where reasonable, growing the traditional peak and shoulder seasons
 - b) Additional – Bolstering business during off-season and extending visits across Sussex County
7. Activate the Southern Delaware Tourism Marketing Committee to better assist with the development and deployment of marketing and cooperative programs
8. Use new initiatives to address seasonality/broaden countywide impact
9. Craft a specific Culinary Coast business plan

6. SEPARATE NEW SHORT-TERM RENTAL FUNDING FROM TRADITIONAL HOTEL FUNDING

A clear budget framework should distinguish the role of established hotel-generated resources from the new opportunities created by short-term-rental revenue. Traditional hotel-based funding should sustain and improve the core marketing that supports peak and shoulder season visitation. New short-term rental resources should support off-season growth, countywide exploration, product awareness, and new initiatives.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should adopt board-approved budget categories that clearly separate core hotel-supported marketing from initiatives funded through new short-term-rental revenue. Annual public reporting should show allocations, intended outcomes, and performance by category.

Role: Lead

Resources: Budget categories, board policy, public reporting, staff administration, and annual investment review

Timeline: Funding policy and reporting design in 2027. Budget alignment in 2028. Annual review from 2028 through 2030

Metrics: Percentage of funds assigned to defined strategic categories and annual investment report

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7. ENRICH THE SOUTHERN DELAWARE TOURISM MARKETING COMMITTEE

The Marketing Committee can provide sharper oversight by guiding two connected programs with distinct seasonal and geographic purposes. The first program should support traditional peak and shoulder season markets. The second should support off-season and countywide exploration priorities.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should revise the Marketing Committee charter, membership expectations, meeting schedule, and decision responsibilities around marketing needs. Staff should provide campaign briefs and performance reports that allow the committee to recommend and track specific actions.

8. USE NEW INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS SEASONALITY/BROADEN COUNTYWIDE IMPACT

New investment should fill demand gaps rather than add more promotion to periods and places that are already busy. New funding should support specific efforts that encourage travel during spring, fall, and winter, as well as on weekdays, and encourage visitors to explore beyond the coast.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish investment criteria that favor documented need periods, inland and countywide experiences, overnight potential, and measurable partner commitments. Pilot programs should use lodging and campaign data to determine which initiatives merit expansion.

Role: Partner

Resources: Committee purpose, staff support, campaign briefs, performance reports, partner participation, and decision timelines.

Timeline: Committee redesign in 2028. Active support in 2029. Annual refinement through 2030.

Metrics: Committee meeting participation and number of campaign or partner actions completed through committee input

Role: Lead and Partner

Resources: Off-season campaign budget, event support criteria, inland content, partner coordination, lodging data, and performance tracking

Timeline: Criteria in 2027. Programming in correlation with Marketing Committee activation. Expansion in 2029 and 2030. Evaluation in 2030.

Metrics: Off-season website traffic and lodging performance during targeted need periods

9. CREATE A CULINARY COAST BUSINESS PLAN

Culinary Coast has the ingredients to become a business development platform that connects agriculture, dining, lodging, events, and local communities. The situational assessment shows that agriculture is a major part of the Sussex County economy and that restaurant demand is strong. Stakeholders also noted growing interest in culinary experiences and authentic local culture.

The business plan should define the Culinary Coast audience, partner base, events, content, revenue opportunities, sponsorship options, off-season role, and performance measures. It should also connect farms, producers, restaurants, beverage makers, lodging, events, and communities.



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Role: Lead and Partner

Resources: Planning support, culinary partner engagement, content creation, event strategy, sponsor outreach, and campaign budget

Timeline: Business plan development in 2027. Activation in 2028. Growth in 2029 and 2030.

Metrics: Culinary content engagement and number of participating culinary partners or experiences

Competitive Investments - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
6. Separate new short-term rental funding from traditional hotel-related funding to separately address traditional peak season needs and additional off-season needs	- Traditional – Sustaining and, where reasonable, growing the traditional peak and shoulder seasons - Additional – Bolstering business during off-season and extending visits across Sussex County To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should adopt board-approved budget categories that clearly separate core hotel-supported marketing from initiatives funded through new short-term-rental revenue. Annual public reporting should show allocations, intended outcomes, and performance by category.	Lead	Distinct funding purposes protect core marketing while directing new revenue toward off-season and countywide priorities.	Funding policy and reporting design in 2027. Budget alignment in 2028.
7. Enrich the Southern Delaware Tourism Marketing Committee to better assist with development and deployment of coop marketing programs	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should revise the Marketing Committee charter, membership expectations, meeting schedule, and decision responsibilities around marketing needs. Staff should provide campaign briefs and performance reports that allow the committee to recommend and track specific actions.	Partner	Focused committee oversight can keep programs aligned while overcoming staff capacity challenges.	Committee redesign in 2028. Active support in 2029.
8. Use new initiatives to address seasonality/broaden countywide impact	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish investment criteria that favor documented need periods, inland and countywide experiences, overnight potential, and measurable partner commitments. Pilot programs should use lodging and campaign data to determine which initiatives merit expansion.	Lead/Partner	Targeted investment can move visitor demand into need periods and distribute benefits beyond the coast.	Criteria in 2027. Programming in correlation with Marketing Committee
9. Craft a specific Culinary Coast business plan	The business plan should define the Culinary Coast audience, partner base, events, content, revenue opportunities, sponsorship options, off-season role, and performance measures. It should also connect farms, producers, restaurants, beverage makers, lodging, events, and communities.	Lead/Partner	A business plan can turn strong culinary assets into coordinated direction.	Business plan development in 2027. Activation in 2028.

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Community Alignment



Southern Delaware Tourism depends on its community partners, especially the chambers of commerce. The chamber relationship is a major strength because chambers connect directly with businesses, events, residents, and local needs. It can also become a risk if expectations, funding, communication, and mutual responsibilities are unclear.

Objective: Enhance community-level involvement, understanding, and engagement in destination marketing, advocacy, and development initiatives.

Strategies:

10. Perform annual program performance assessments of chamber funding grants
11. Convene a destination alignment exchange
12. Chart opportunities and need periods for special events
13. Develop a shared commitment statement and renewable memorandum of understanding
14. Deepen updates to each Chamber Board and membership
15. Inventory and expand shared content, imagery, video, and programming

10. PERFORM ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS OF CHAMBER FUNDING GRANTS

An annual review should show what chamber grants delivered, what worked, what needs improvement, and how funded programs advanced destination priorities.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should create a consistent grant assessment template covering objectives, expenditures, audience reach, overnight impact, results, and lessons learned. Annual review meetings with each chamber should identify improvements and inform future funding decisions.

Role: Lead

Resources: Grant criteria, reporting templates, chamber meetings, performance measures, and board review

Timeline: Template development in 2028. First full assessment in 2029.

Metrics: Reporting completion and documented improvement actions for each funded partner

11. CONVENE A DESTINATION ALIGNMENT EXCHANGE

A recurring destination exchange can give chambers, local governments, businesses, community leaders, and Southern Delaware Tourism a shared forum for decisions and coordination.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convene a recurring, facilitated exchange with chambers, local governments, tourism businesses, and community leaders around a focused set of destination issues. Each session should conclude with documented decisions, owners, and follow-up dates.

Role: Lead

Resources: Facilitation, meeting materials, issue briefs, partner invitations, and follow-up tracking

Timeline: First exchange in 2027. One or two meetings each year through 2030.

Metrics: Attendance by partner type and number of shared actions advanced after each exchange

12. CHART OPPORTUNITIES AND NEED PERIODS FOR SPECIAL EVENTS

Event planning should begin with evidence about lodging need periods, community assets, audience potential, and partner capacity. Events should be connected to clear need periods and visitor segments.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should combine an event inventory with lodging need-period data, audience potential, community assets, and partner readiness. The resulting opportunity map should guide event development, sponsorship, and marketing support.

Role: Partner

Resources: Event inventory, lodging data, chamber input, event criteria, sponsorship guidelines, and marketing support

Timeline: Inventory in 2028. Engage support and provide updates from 2028 through 2030.

Metrics: Number of need-period events supported and lodging or traffic performance during supported event periods

13. DEVELOP A SHARED COMMITMENT STATEMENT AND RENEWABLE MOU

Southern Delaware Tourism and its chamber partners need a durable agreement that turns shared intent into clear mutual expectations. The agreement should define communication expectations, content sharing, reporting needs, program collaboration, visitor service support, and shared advocacy responsibilities.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should draft the commitment statement and memorandum with direct input from chamber leaders and the board. The final agreement should define responsibilities, reporting, communication, renewal, and a practical process for addressing missed commitments.

Role: Partner

Resources: Agreement template, board input, chamber input, possible legal review, and annual renewal process

Timeline: Drafting in 2028. Adoption in 2029.

Metrics: Number of signed agreements and partner satisfaction with clarity of roles

14. DEEPEN UPDATES TO EACH CHAMBER BOARD AND MEMBERSHIP

Regular briefings can give chamber boards and members a clearer view of Southern Delaware Tourism's programs, funding, results, and opportunities to participate.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish an annual briefing schedule and a concise presentation package covering programs, funding, results, and participation opportunities. Staff should tailor each update to the priorities and questions of the host chamber.

Role: Lead

Resources: Presentation materials, annual schedule, staff time, impact data, and chamber coordination

Timeline: Begin in 2026 and continue through 2030.

Metrics: Number of updates delivered and improvement in partner awareness measured through surveys or feedback forms

15. INVENTORY AND EXPAND SHARED CONTENT, IMAGERY, VIDEO, AND PROGRAMMING

Each community already holds stories and media assets that could strengthen a fuller, more balanced picture of Southern Delaware. Many communities have local stories, events, images, businesses, and experiences that could help visitors better understand the full destination.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should provide partners with a standard inventory template, shared content guidelines, and a central process for submitting and updating assets. A gap analysis should then prioritize new photography, video, stories, and community programming content.

Role: Partner

Resources: Asset inventory, content standards, shared folders or digital asset systems, photography and video needs, and staff coordination

Timeline: Inventory in 2026, content refresh in 2027, annual updates through 2030.

Metrics: Number and quality of assets collected and number of campaign or website uses of shared content

Community Alignment - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
10. Perform annual program performance assessments of chamber funding grants	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should create a consistent grant assessment template covering objectives, expenditures, audience reach, overnight impact, results, and lessons learned. Annual review meetings with each chamber should identify improvements and inform future funding decisions.	Lead	Annual evidence makes grant decisions more accountable and links funded work to destination priorities.	Template development in 2028. First full assessment in 2029.
11. Convene a destination alignment exchange	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convene a recurring, facilitated exchange with chambers, local governments, tourism businesses, and community leaders around a focused set of destination issues. Each session should conclude with documented decisions, owners, and follow-up dates.	Lead	A regular forum can surface shared issues early and coordinate action across destination stakeholders.	First exchange in 2027. One or two meetings each year through 2030.
12. Chart opportunities and need periods for special events	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should combine an event inventory with lodging need-period data, audience potential, community assets, and partner readiness. The resulting opportunity map should guide event development, sponsorship, and marketing support.	Partner	Matching events to lodging gaps and audience demand helps them generate incremental visitation rather than crowd busy periods.	Inventory in 2028. Engage support and provide updates from 2028 through 2030.
13. Develop a shared commitment statement and renewable memorandum of understanding	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should draft the commitment statement and memorandum with direct input from chamber leaders and the board. The final agreement should define responsibilities, reporting, communication, renewal, and a practical process for addressing missed commitments.	Partner	Written expectations clarify responsibilities and make collaboration consistent across leadership changes.	Drafting in 2028. Adoption in 2029.

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Community Alignment - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
14. Deepen updates to each Chamber Board and membership	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should establish an annual briefing schedule and a concise presentation package covering programs, funding, results, and participation opportunities. Staff should tailor each update to the priorities and questions of the host chamber.	Lead	Direct updates help chamber leaders and businesses understand how to participate in and benefit from destination programs.	Begin in 2026 and continue through 2030.
15. Inventory and expand shared content, imagery, video, and programming	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should provide partners with a standard inventory template, shared content guidelines, and a central process for submitting and updating assets. A gap analysis should then prioritize new photography, video, stories, and community programming content.	Partner	A shared asset inventory reveals usable stories and reduces gaps and duplication in promotional materials.	Inventory in 2026, content refresh in 2027, annual updates through 2030.

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Organizational Advancement



Southern Delaware Tourism is respected, but it is lean. A four-person staff cannot continue absorbing expanding expectations without clearer sequencing, stronger committees, added capacity, better research systems, and professional development. Organizational advancement is not separate from destination strategy. It is what makes the strategy possible.

Objective: Lead, direct, and support the strategies and initiatives of the strategic plan.

Strategies:

16. Guide the collaborations and realistic timeline needed for strategic initiatives
17. Retool Marketing Committee for active implementation
18. Add Director of Strategy and Advancement
19. Examine governance structure in the next strategic planning cycle
20. Determine and drive Southern Delaware Tourism's role in sports event bookings
21. Enhance market research investment and assign responsibility for data use
22. Continue professional development for team members

16. GUIDE COLLABORATIONS AND THE REALISTIC TIMELINE NEEDED FOR INITIATIVES

The plan will be more achievable when initiatives are sequenced as an annual work program rather than launched all at once. Not every initiative should launch in the first or second year. Southern Delaware Tourism should identify what starts in 2026, what pilots in 2027, what scales in 2028 and 2029, and what should be evaluated by 2030.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convert the plan into a phased annual work program with named owners, dependencies, funding needs, and decision points. Quarterly progress reviews should identify delays early and reset priorities when capacity or conditions change.

17. RETOOL MARKETING COMMITTEE FOR ACTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

The Marketing Committee should function as a working body that helps translate campaign priorities into assignments, coordination, and performance review. The committee should help move ideas into action rather than serve only as a general discussion group.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should equip the Marketing Committee with a revised charter, action-oriented agendas, assigned workstreams, and timely campaign data. Members should leave each meeting with clear decisions, owners, deadlines, and measures of completion.

Role: Lead

Resources: Implementation dashboard, staff lead, board reporting, partner assignments, and annual work planning

Timeline: Plan adoption in 2026. Implementation plan examined and updated annually through 2030.

Metrics: Percentage of milestones completed on time and quarterly board review of implementation status

Role: Lead

Resources: Committee charter, meeting calendar, campaign briefs, data reports, and partner participation

Timeline: Redesign in 2027. Active implementation in 2028. Annual refinement through 2030.

Metrics: Committee meeting attendance and number of implementation actions completed

18. ADD DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY AND ADVANCEMENT

Expanded expectations now exceed what the current lean team can absorb without dedicated senior capacity for implementation and partner coordination. Both Board members and stakeholders referenced the availability and presence of the Executive Director, but if the Executive Director is out of the office, the in-office oversight must still be maintained. The position could help manage plan implementation, partner coordination, research use, funding alignment, board reporting, and community engagement.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should define the position's authority, responsibilities, required competencies, funding source, and relationship to existing staff and committees. Board approval, a structured hiring process, and a clear first-year work plan should support successful integration.

Role: Lead

Resources: Job description, funding plan, board approval, hiring process, onboarding plan, and performance goals

Timeline: Position design and approval in 2028. Hiring in 2028. Full integration in 2029. Role refinement in 2030.

Metrics: Position filled and completion of assigned implementation milestones

**SEE RECOMMENDED ORGANIZATIONAL
STRUCTURE & TIMELINE**



19. EXAMINE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE IN THE NEXT STRATEGIC PLANNING CYCLE

As Southern Delaware Tourism's role expands, its governance model should be tested against future needs without disrupting current strengths. The goal is to ensure that the governance model across the various chambers of commerce fits the expanded role Southern Delaware Tourism is being asked to play.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should set the questions the future governance review must answer and gather evidence on representation, committee effectiveness, decision-making, and organizational needs. An independent advisor and stakeholder input can help the board evaluate options objectively.



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Role: Monitor in the near term and Lead when the review begins

Resources: Board committee time, governance advisor support, legal review if needed, and stakeholder input

Timeline: Preparation in 2029. Recommendations in 2030.

Metrics: Completion of governance review and adoption of approved governance improvements

20. DETERMINE AND DRIVE SDT'S ROLE IN SPORTS EVENT BOOKINGS

Sports partners and event organizers need clarity about whether Southern Delaware Tourism will lead sales, support bids, coordinate services, provide research, or convene the market.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should document the sports sales and servicing functions currently performed by venues, hotels, municipalities, and event organizers. Partners should then agree on Southern Delaware Tourism's lead, support, or convening responsibilities and the criteria for accepting opportunities.



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Role: Partner until resources are added to allow SDT to Lead

Resources: Sports role definition, venue input, hotel input, event calendar, bid criteria, and staffing support

Timeline: Role definition in 2026. Staff position added and Council framework created in 2027. Targeted activity from 2028 through 2030.

Metrics: Number of sports leads supported and estimated room nights or economic impact from supported events

21. ENHANCE MARKET RESEARCH INVESTMENT AND ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY FOR DATA USE

Research will influence decisions only when the organization invests consistently and assigns clear responsibility for gathering, interpreting, and sharing data.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should assign a staff owner for the research program and approve a recurring budget for data, analysis, and reporting. The owner should maintain the dashboard, interpret findings with partners, and document how evidence affects major decisions.

Role: Lead

Resources: Staff assignment or position, data tools, partner reporting, dashboard template, and training

Timeline: Assignment in 2027. Expanded research and data use in 2028.

Metrics: Number of reports produced and number of strategic decisions supported by data

22. CONTINUE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEAM MEMBERS

Delivering more advanced destination work will require the team to keep building skills in marketing, management, data, sales, grants, accessibility, and inclusion. Priorities should include digital marketing, destination management, data use, partner engagement, group sales, grant management, accessible tourism, and inclusive marketing.

To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should create annual development plans that connect each employee's responsibilities with priority skills, training options, and an available budget. Staff should share and apply learning through updated practices, tools, and partner support.

Role: Lead

Resources: Annual training budget, conference participation, peer learning, professional memberships, and staff development plans

Timeline: Annual updating through 2030.

Metrics: Training hours completed and documented application of professional development to programs or operations

Organizational Advancement - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
16. Guide the collaborations and realistic timeline needed for strategic initiatives	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should convert the plan into a phased annual work program with named owners, dependencies, funding needs, and decision points. Quarterly reviews should identify delays early and reset priorities when capacity or conditions change.	Lead	Clear sequencing directs limited staff and partner capacity toward achievable annual priorities.	Plan adoption in 2026. Updated annually through 2030.
17. Retool marketing committee for active implementation	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should equip the Marketing Committee with a revised charter, action-oriented agendas, assigned workstreams, and timely campaign data. Members should leave each meeting with clear decisions, owners, deadlines, and measures of completion.	Lead	An implementation-focused committee can turn campaign decisions into coordinated assignments and measurable action.	Redesign in 2027. Active implementation in 2028. Annual refinement through 2030.
18. Add Director of Strategy and Advancement	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should define the position's authority, responsibilities, required competencies, funding source, and relationship to existing staff and committees. Board approval, a structured hiring process, and a clear first-year work plan should support successful integration.	Lead	Dedicated senior capacity is needed to coordinate delivery, partnerships, research, funding, and reporting.	Position design and approval in 2028. Hiring in 2028. Full integration in 2029.
19. Examine governance structure in the next strategic planning cycle	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should set the questions the future governance review must answer and gather evidence on representation, committee effectiveness, decision-making, and organizational needs. An independent advisor and stakeholder input can help the board evaluate options objectively.	Monitor in the near term and Lead when the review begins	A timely governance review can ensure representation and decision-making fit the organization's expanding role.	Preparation in 2029. Strategy in 2030.

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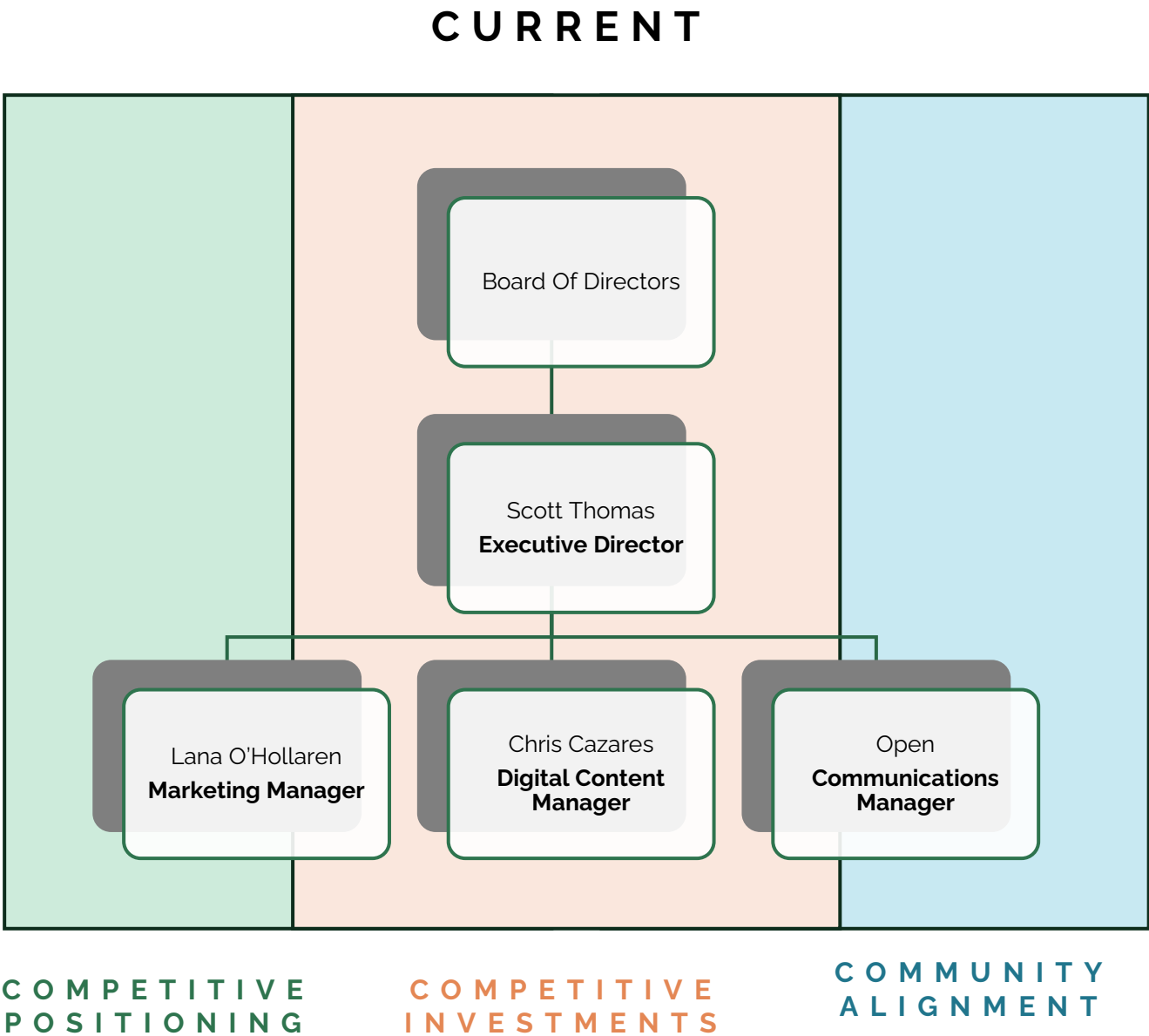
Organizational Advancement - Summary

Strategies	Conceptualized Recommendations	Role of SDT	Targeted Outcome	Timeline
20. Determine and drive Southern Delaware Tourism's role in sports event bookings	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should document the sports sales and servicing functions currently performed by venues, hotels, municipalities, and event organizers. Partners should then agree on Southern Delaware Tourism's lead, support, or convening responsibilities and the criteria for accepting opportunities.	Partner until resources are added to allow SDT to Lead	A defined role prevents service gaps and improves competitiveness, giving event organizers and partners a clear point of coordination.	Role definition in 2026. Staff position added and Council framework created in 2027.
21. Enhance market research investment and assign responsibility for data use	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should assign a staff owner for the research program and approve a recurring budget for data, analysis, and reporting. The owner should maintain the dashboard, interpret findings with partners, and document how evidence affects major decisions.	Lead	Assigned ownership turns market data into routine decisions instead of occasional reference material.	Assignment in 2027. Expanded research and data use in 2028.
22. Continue professional development for team members	To deliver this strategy, Southern Delaware Tourism should create annual development plans that connect each employee's responsibilities with priority skills, training options, and an available budget. Staff should share and apply learning through updated practices, tools, and partner support.	Lead	Expanded skills will equip staff to deliver the strategic plan's more technical, inclusive, and partnership-intensive work.	Annual updating through 2030.

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RECOMMENDED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

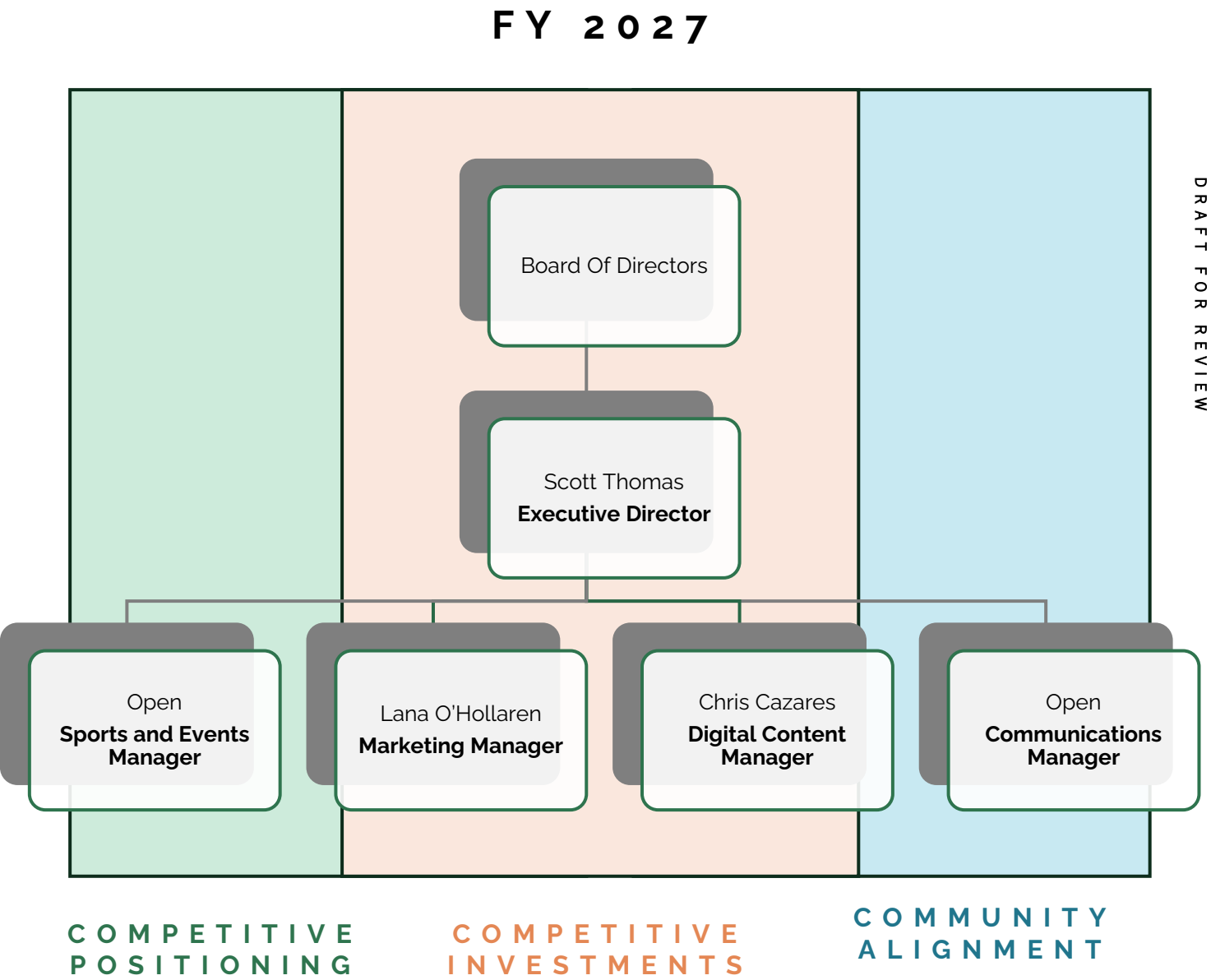
The staffing structure for Southern Delaware Tourism needs to grow and change as the organization implements the strategic plan. The following slides show the progression of the positions to accommodate the recommended direction. Based on the Current organizational structure and anticipated future openings, it will be important to replace these critical positions as quickly as possible. The Marketing Manager and Digital Content Manager play vital roles with the strategic categories of Competitive Positioning and Competitive Investments. These categories are largely visitor-facing or destination product focused. The Communications Manager plays an essential role in communicating the value of tourism across community partners.



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RECOMMENDED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

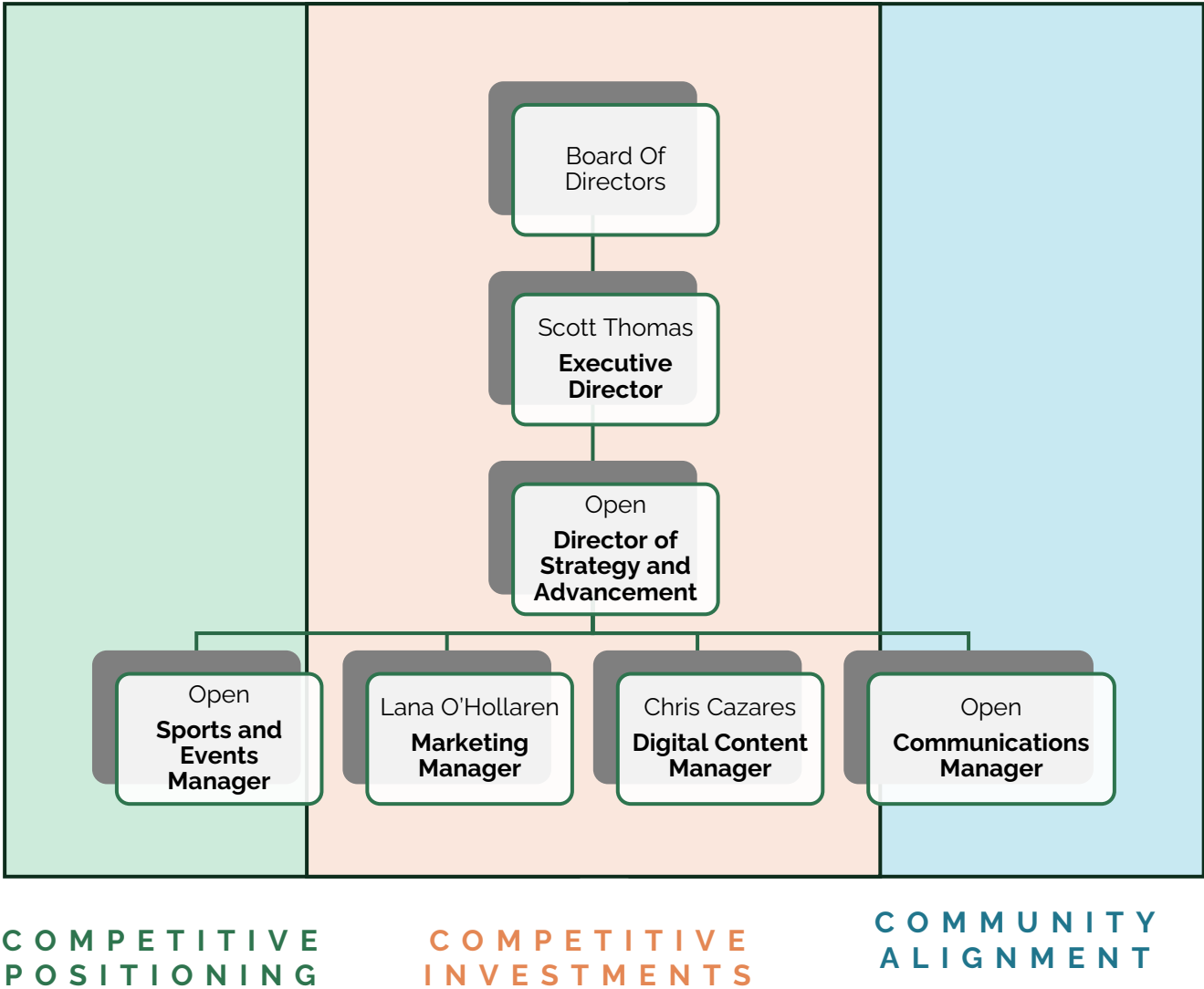
As the organization shifts into the first full year of strategic plan implementation, the immediacy of the sports opportunity becomes paramount. The addition of a Sports and Events Manager allows Southern Delaware to coordinate business development and group business services to optimize the impact of youth and travel tournaments and key group travel events across Sussex County. This position plays an important role in creating, organizing, and managing the efforts of the Southern Delaware Sports Council. This person will arrange for room blocks, venue use, and associated event services for group-related, qualified sports and event leads and bookings.



RECOMMENDED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The implementation of the Southern Delaware Strategic Plan will continue to evolve as the organization moves through the second year of compiling results. The attention to community alignment will continue to grow in importance and the Executive Director's role will grow more consequential. Accommodating this important ongoing program area will be extremely time-consuming and require substantial attention from the Executive Director. Adding a Director of Strategy and Advancement will help manage and direct team members while the Executive Director focuses on building community engagement.

LATE FY 2028 OR EARLY FY 2029





IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation should be managed as a living process. The plan should not sit on a shelf after approval. Southern Delaware Tourism should translate the recommendations into annual work plans, quarterly progress reviews, partner assignments, and board-level reporting.

The organization should use a phased approach. The first year should establish the foundation. The second year should launch priority programs. The third and fourth years should scale and refine the work. The final year should evaluate progress and prepare the next planning cycle.

Implementation will require discipline. Southern Delaware Tourism should not try to launch every initiative at once. The organization should protect core marketing activities while adding new work in a sequence that matches staffing, funding, partner readiness, and performance results.

OVERALL RECOMMENDED TIMELINE

Southern Delaware Tourism should manage implementation through five steps.

1. Assign ownership. Each recommendation should have a staff lead, a board connection where appropriate, and partner groups where needed.
2. Set annual priorities. At the start of each year, Southern Delaware Tourism should identify which recommendations will be advanced, what resources are available, and what outcomes are expected.
3. Create a simple dashboard. The dashboard should show status, next steps, lead responsibility, timeline, funding need, and KPIs.
4. Report progress quarterly. Staff should update the board on milestones, barriers, and decisions needed. Partner initiatives should also include regular updates to chambers and relevant stakeholders.
5. Adjust based on evidence. The plan should be flexible enough to respond to market changes, funding levels, partner readiness, and performance results.

Year	Primary Focus	Major Actions
2026	Set the foundation	Adopt the plan, separate funding logic, define target audiences, redesign marketing committee, start research framework, draft chamber reporting templates, begin destination alignment exchange, define sports role, and prepare staffing plan.
2027	Launch priority programs	Launch audience-based marketing, activate cooperative marketing cycle, complete first chamber funding assessment, pilot sports and event need period work, adopt shared commitments, launch small meetings outreach if validated, and hire or assign strategy capacity.
2028	Scale and refine	Expand successful campaigns, grow Culinary Coast activation, deepen research reporting, launch or expand repeat visitor and VFR initiative, strengthen countywide content, and prepare governance review.
2029	Improve and align	Use performance results to adjust marketing, funding, events, and partnerships. Complete governance review and refine long-term investment priorities.
2030	Evaluate and prepare next plan	Evaluate performance against KPIs, document results, identify unfinished priorities, update roles and resources, and begin the next strategic planning process.

Success will depend on focus. The most important near-term actions are to clarify funding use, define target audiences, strengthen the marketing committee, improve research, deepen chamber alignment, and add the capacity needed to manage a larger strategic role. These actions will create the base for longer-term success. By following this plan, Southern Delaware Tourism can strengthen its role as a destination leader, build more balanced year-round visitation, support stronger countywide benefits, protect Southern Delaware's sense of place, and help Sussex County thrive as a premier travel destination.



**COAST & COUNTRYSIDE:
NAVIGATING TOURISM'S
FUTURE FOR THE BENEFIT
OF SOUTHERN DELAWARE**

2026 Strategic Plan

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