

Visit Elizabeth City 2023-2026 Strategic Plan



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Overview

The community of Elizabeth City and the entire world are both very different places compared to when Visit Elizabeth City's (VEC) last strategic plan was created in 2019.

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic led to the greatest upheaval in travel and tourism since World War II, and its impacts are still being felt across the sector three years later. The pandemic was felt in every community and tourism-related business around the world, and North Carolina's northeast corner was hardly an exception. The colossal reshaping of consumer behavior and preferences, business operations, and experiential travel will have reverberations for many more years to come.

Locally, the police shooting of Andrew Brown, Jr. in April 2021, coming 11 months after the police shooting of George Floyd led to a national reckoning around race relations in the U.S., greatly impacted both the community and the organization charged with marketing it. Visit Elizabeth City has courageously implemented a number of initiatives intended to bring about greater diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and to inspire community healing while also strengthening its appeal as a destination.

Obstacles to both community healing and Elizabeth City's reputation as a destination remain. But substantial progress has been made in both areas. Visit Elizabeth City has implemented a significant initiative that employs an experienced consultant and provides real action steps towards achieving VEC's goals in DEI. VEC has led several important destination product development efforts since 2019, including the Coast Guard Marathon and the Hot Cocoa Crawl. And its ongoing public relations activities complement this work through the creation of an effective community and destination storytelling platform.

Overview (cont'd)

Much work remains to be done by the community and VEC, but this strategic plan is intended to build from that success and address challenges both new and old. This plan is also realistic about the human and financial resources available to both VEC and community partners, and seeks to make Elizabeth City more competitive while generating greater economic impact through increased overnight visitation. As destinations both near and far have witnessed since 2019, no plan can possibly prepare stakeholders for all the unknown challenges and opportunities that will arise during the next plan period. But a strategy should also be a plan around which to improvise and prepare VEC for its ongoing destination leadership role regardless of crises and good fortune to come.

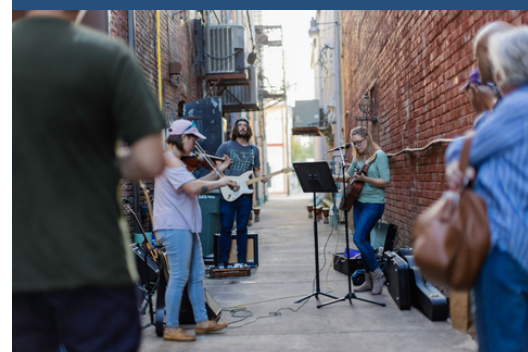


Visit Elizabeth City Strategic Plan - Guiding Principles

- 1. Build from strengths.** VEC and its stakeholders must be realistic about the potential for Elizabeth City tourism and execute with authenticity. Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County possess credible strengths that can be leveraged, but that potential must be matched with investment in and curation of those strengths.
- 2. Be intentional with resource investment.** Rather than trying to do too much, it would be better for VEC and its community partners to focus their efforts upon doing a few things really well. Investments—from human resources to destination promotion activities to financial expenditures.
- 3. Embrace diversity, equity, and inclusiveness.** VEC has already demonstrated that it is among the nation's emerging leaders in terms of its emphasis on DEI and the role it has taken to encourage both healing and action in the community. Building upon those efforts will demonstrate that the organization is serious about making a difference.
- 4. Acknowledge the benefits to the community of destination promotion.** Destination promotion (and the resulting overnight visitation) delivers benefits to the community far beyond heads in beds and dollars in cash registers. The community image that VEC delivers via its marketing and the subsequent experiences of visitors can bring retirees, entrepreneurs, new students to area colleges, and new jobs (tourism and non-tourism-related) to Pasquotank County. The importance of destination promotion to the entire community cannot be understated, particularly after the events of the last three years.
- 5. Emphasize collaboration and partnerships.** Actions that impact the destination experience often seem to occur in silos in Elizabeth City, and tend to be more reactive than proactively considered and driven. There are numerous entities that ought to be gathered at the table more regularly to decide how to best move the destination experience forward.

Strategic Destination Strengths

- Elizabeth City's waterfront location (and the potential for even greater engagement with the waterfront by residents and visitors alike)
- The area's proximity to the Outer Banks and the visitor traffic that feeds it
- The county's location near several major metro areas on the East Coast, including the Tidewater of Virginia, Richmond, Raleigh/Durham, Washington, Baltimore, Greensboro/Winston-Salem, and Charlotte.
- History of the community and the region
- A tradition of hospitality, as demonstrated by the "Harbor of Hospitality" moniker
- A US Coast Guard community, and the related awareness and travel generated by the Coast Guard presence
- The Museum of the Albemarle
- Tourism sector leadership
- Three area institutions of higher learning
- Arts and culture
- Downtown Elizabeth City revitalization
- Quaintness and small-town charm
- Business travel as a foundation for filling rooms during weekdays and shoulder seasons



Strategic Destination Weaknesses

- Despite its waterfront location on the Pasquotank River and the Inner Banks, access to the waterfront and views of the water are still very limited
- Insufficient number of visit experiences to generate longer or repeat visits
- Fragmented funding, with both the county and the city mandated to direct in part a share of occupancy tax revenue
- Perception of the community (both external and internal)
- Silo mentality among community organizations and a lack of collaboration
- Fiscally challenged partners
- Division within the community, particularly as revealed since the Andrew Brown, Jr. shooting



Strategic Imperatives: Situation Overview, Goals, Strategies, and Tactics

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE 1: Continue the emphasis upon community storytelling to promote the destination and generate overnight visitation.

Situation Overview

Elizabeth City has substantially benefited from storytelling-based new product development (“Calling All Elizabeths”; “Hot Cocoa Crawl”; Coast Guard Marathon) and a professional public relations approach in recent years. That effort has resulted in valuable media exposure and national recognition of the destination and community. As a destination promotional tactic, public relations typically delivers exceptionally high return on investment and no medium communicates better the depth and breadth of the destination.

Effective storytelling is even more critical as a component for Elizabeth City given the community’s continued recovery and healing from the tragic events of 2021. And because Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County don’t have the natural draw of a beachfront asset like many other eastern North Carolina destinations, VEC must work harder and smarter to promote the assets it does have and create new ones.

Goal

Build a powerful community storytelling initiative that positions Elizabeth City as the most diverse and vibrant destination in eastern North Carolina.

Strategies

- Continue to invest resources into effective storytelling media that generate destination awareness of Elizabeth City and communicate the depth and breadth of the visit experience to build overnight visitation, longer stays, increased spending, and repeat visits.
- Cultivate and develop Visit Elizabeth City’s owned media channels (video, social media, the destination website) as effective storytelling vehicles.

Tactics

- Expand the professional public relations outreach to additional regional and national media, recognizing that public relations is an investment that requires time and relationship-building before resulting in media placements that make a difference.
- Identify strategic storytelling themes that are authentic, sustainable, and likely to lead to overnight stays, increased visitor spending, and heightened visit satisfaction.
- Determine a schedule for redevelopment of the destination website, and invest sufficient resources accordingly. The site is in need of a rebuild that emphasizes more robust storytelling, curation, and imagery.
- Evaluate and consider investment in video assets for incorporation into YouTube, the website, and social media. The popularity of TikTok has only increased the importance of video as a driver of destination awareness and a medium for communicating depth and breadth of the destination. Video also offers the potential for strong return on investment because of the ability to utilize across a variety of media.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE 2: Create a more holistic and proactive destination development partnership with Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County in order to bring new destination experiences to fruition.

Situation Overview

- Progress has been made on destination enhancement and development in Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County, but there is still much work to be done to deliver upon the potential of the community.
- There are numerous destination and community enhancement initiatives envisioned, planned for, or in development in Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County, but they often seem to occur in silos rather than as part of a holistic vision and plan that is coordinated amongst VEC, the city, the county, and other stakeholders.
- Destination product development shouldn't occur solely through the legislatively-mandated grant making application process created by VEC. But the current city/county restricted funds guidelines and VEC application process should be subject to additional review and improvement.

Goal

Implement a regular plan of work for destination development that engages major community partners and results in a comprehensive vision for achievable investment in new visit experiences across the city and county that generate new room nights.

Strategies

- Produce a destination master plan that ties together existing development plans and also identifies new opportunities for destination and community enhancement. This effort should be a shared effort by VEC, the city, the county, and other stakeholders such as the three colleges and universities in Elizabeth City.
- Support and advocate for investment in capital improvements that connect and enhance the ability of visitors and residents to engage with Elizabeth City's greatest destination assets, including downtown and the waterfront. Many of the ideas and plans related to the waterfront have yet to be fulfilled.
- Strengthen the city/county restricted funds guidelines and application process to improve accountability, alignment with fiduciary duty, and opportunities for collaboration. The investment process often occurs in isolation and is reactive rather than collaborative.

Tactics

- Invest in the development of a destination master plan that establishes a formal vision for new destination products and enhancement, and identifies investment opportunities for government and granting entities, tourism impact, and timelines for development.
- Review the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank County Tourism Development Authority's restricted funds guidelines and application process, looking at examples from other destinations to strengthen accountability and alignment with the board's fiduciary duty. Following their review and approval by the board, discuss the new guidelines and process with city and county staff and elected officials.

- Engage annually with the city and county to review their destination investment priorities. Even some priorities that seemingly have little impact upon the destination may represent opportunities for enhancement of the destination experience. A new greenway, for example, may be enhanced with interpretive signage or outdoor art and made into an attraction that appeals to visitors and residents alike, and helps tell the Elizabeth City story.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE 3: Implement the three-year VEC diversity, equity, and inclusion action plan.

Situation Overview

- Tourism has been an active and valuable participant in the healing of the community in the aftermath of the Andrew Brown, Jr. shooting, and VEC has assumed an uncommon (for a destination its size) leadership role in this effort. The hiring of a professional and experienced consultant to define and assist VEC is an investment that will pay dividends for many years if the prescribed actions in its DEI plan are implemented.
- As Elizabeth City, the tourism sector, and the nation continue to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusiveness initiatives, VEC must follow through and implement--and continue to evolve--its own DEI initiatives.

Goal

Complete the implementation of Visit Elizabeth City DEI action plan, and refine as needed.

Strategies

Complete the implementation of Visit Elizabeth City DEI initiatives and monitor both their effectiveness and ongoing community conversations around DEI.

Tactics

- Partner with Elizabeth City community organizations to continue conversations around tourism and DEI.
- Continue to monitor and utilize Destinations International DEI research, best-in-class practices by other destination leadership organizations, and professional development to maintain a leadership role in the community.

- Be intentional about the use of storytelling, imagery, and other resources to demonstrate that Elizabeth City is welcoming to all, regardless of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability.
- Monitor the effectiveness of VEC's DEI initiatives through community conversations, resident surveys, and other methods of assessment.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE 4: Build a more collaborative and strategic relationship with area colleges and universities.

Situation Overview

- The relationship between tourism and Elizabeth City's three colleges and universities (Elizabeth City State University, Mid-Atlantic Christian University, and College of the Albemarle) can be enhanced to be more strategic rather than simply tactical.
- The relationship between tourism and higher education shouldn't run primarily through other organizations such as Elizabeth City Council, and shouldn't be mostly transactional in nature (e.g. only relevant during grant making periods).
- While "town and gown" relationships are often challenging in many communities, there are numerous aspirational examples of how universities, communities, and tourism can all benefit from a more constructive partnership beyond just annual campus events (such as Homecoming, graduations, and reunions) that also grows room nights. These partnerships in Elizabeth City will require more vision and collaboration than what currently exists, however.

Goal

Establish an ongoing tourism relationship between area colleges and universities, the city, the county, and Visit Elizabeth City that is mutually beneficial to all parties and results in increased room nights sold, while maintaining the Tourism Development Authority's fiduciary duty.

Strategies

- Align tourism, municipal, and higher education interests and establish mutually beneficial goals and ways of collaborating outside of the city/county restricted funds application process.
- Identify and actively plan for opportunities for destination product development that benefit colleges and universities, the community, and the destination. Some aspirational examples in smaller communities include:
 - Florence, SC and Francis Marion University:
<https://www.mainstreet.org/blogs/national-main-street-center/2022/06/02/community-spotlight-downtown-florence-and-francis?CommunityKey=c40a84d1-46b2-465c-985c-c08ed69081ab>.
 - Starkville, MS and Mississippi State University's downtown Idea Shop:
<https://www.msstate.edu/newsroom/article/2019/03/msu-idea-shop-officially-opens-downtown-starkville>.
 - Johnson City, TN and the West Walnut Street project connecting downtown to East Tennessee State University:
<https://www.johnsoncitytn.org/westwalnutplan/>.

Tactics

- Convene a regular working group of representatives of tourism, area colleges and universities, the city, and the county to identify specific new opportunities for destination product development. An example of this might be a museum in downtown Elizabeth City that celebrates Black aviators given the high profile Aviation Science program at Elizabeth City State University, one of the only historically Black colleges and universities in the nation with such a curriculum.
- Identify and study examples of successful collaboration in other college-oriented communities, such as those listed above.
- Seek out more opportunities to leverage tourism as the first date of the student/parent/alumni relationship through greater integration of college and VEC promotional efforts, and work to attract parents and alumni of the three area colleges and universities to Elizabeth City outside of major event weekends.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE 5: Establish and invest in the Elizabeth City destination brand.

Situation Overview

- While promotional marketing communications for VEC have undeniably improved in recent years, the destination still lacks an emotionally connected brand. The “Harbor of Hospitality” moniker is established and unique, but fails in several aspects. First, watercraft anchoring at Elizabeth City while traveling the Intracoastal Waterway don’t pay occupancy tax. Second, while Elizabeth City’s waterfront is an asset, the fact that it has yet to achieve its full potential doesn’t build credibility for the brand. And third, the destination (and community) need a new, aspirational brand after the events of the Andrew Brown, Jr. tragedy that unifies the community and creates a more positive perception of the destination for outsiders.
- A richer, more emotionally connected brand would allow the community to better leverage the “halo effect” benefits of destination promotion, boosting other forms of economic development for the region and improving community image.

Goal

Develop and implement an emotionally connected destination brand for Elizabeth City by 2025.

Strategies

- Craft an emotionally connected destination brand for Elizabeth City that unites the community and enhances both internal and external perceptions.
- Utilize the new destination brand and invest in Visit Elizabeth City promotion as a means of driving other forms of community economic development.

Tactics

- Identify the emotional connections desired for the brand and establish a destination brand promise that authentically communicates what Elizabeth City offers. This brand should include both a visual and verbal component and be authentic and highly aspirational.
- Integrate the brand into all Visit Elizabeth City marketing communications, and seek out local partners such as the city, county, and area colleges and universities to support.





What Does Destination Success Look Like for Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County?

- More visitors spend the night in Elizabeth City.
- Greater visitor satisfaction with the Elizabeth City destination experience.
- Visitors spend more time in the destination and money in area businesses.
- External and internal perceptions of the community are more positive.
- Destination enhancement projects are planned for, executed, and completed.
- Increased visitor spending grows small businesses, employs more residents, and enhances the local tax base.
- Downtown revitalization continues its momentum.
- Area colleges and universities partner with Visit Elizabeth City to proactively plan and execute new visitor experiences that also enrich the community.