



TOURISM

Tourism is a large part of Independence County's economy, providing 450 jobs and bringing just under 160,000 visitors to our towns and cities each year. Despite being a nearly \$50 million a year industry, Independence County's tourism sector has been on a steady decline, both in terms of visitor interest and revenue, for more than a decade.

IMPACT Independence County establishes specific goals that maximize the area's potential as a tourist destination and boosts the economy through focused development and marketing of tourism assets. The Plan organizes a permanent tourism structure that is designed to manage tourism initiatives, promote tourism-related jobs, provide for innovative community development, enhance natural resources, and promote recreational opportunities and cultural activities.

Tourism is one of the most efficient ways to create jobs in Independence County. Existing natural resources and attractions lend themselves perfectly to increased job opportunities for county residents. IMPACT Independence County is dedicated to creating tourism-related jobs and providing opportunities for entrepreneurial growth.

Historic Main Street will be branded as "Downtown Alive" and will become an exciting enclave that is welcoming to all generations. The strategic investment in Historic Downtown Batesville and an intentional connection to Lyon College will create a vibrant college community that combines the ambiance of a small, southern town to create a unique college community atmosphere attractive to college students, young families, and retirees.

The combination of vibrant small town community atmosphere surrounded by beautiful mountains, lakes and rivers and supported by exemplary and progressive medical care allows Independence County to become a nationally-recognized retirement community. A national marketing campaign will be designed to promote this significant community potential.

Independence County's natural beauty and many outdoor recreation and adventure opportunities will be brought to life on the banks of the White River and across the Ozark Foothills of North Central Arkansas. We will develop and market our abundant natural assets

through development of the White River waterfront and unified trails and signage—making our community not only a tourist destination but a place people want to stay and live—from college students to retirees.

STRATEGIC GOAL #1

Establish a countywide Tourism Commission with an executive director and staff that organizes and promotes the county's overall tourism activities and coordinates such efforts with tourist-related businesses and the county's economic development organizations. It is intended that Independence County becomes a premiere state, regional and national center of outdoor recreation as the Gateway to the Ozark Mountains.

Action Steps in Support of Strategic Goal Number One Are:

- a.*** Form a Tourism Commission as a division of the Batesville Regional Economic Development Alliance and Chamber of Commerce. The Tourism Commission will oversee the executive director in a comprehensive re-branding and marketing effort of Independence County to the state, region, and nation.
- b.*** Obtain initial financial support to operate the Tourism Commission from local businesses. Long-term economic support will be obtained through continued local business support, passage of a countywide advertising and promotions tax, and available state and federal grants.
- c.*** Update the overall brand identity of Independence County and its cities and towns to produce a clean, updated, and unified image. This brand will encompass North Central Arkansas and will be the foundation for a professional marketing plan. A detailed plan for placement of destination and historic signage throughout Independence County will be developed to direct visitors to the county's outdoor and historic assets.
- d.*** Work with Lyon College and UACCB to develop a hospitality training program to support tourism growth in the area. This program will occur as continuing education for current tourism employees and/or professional certifications/designations for college students.
- e.*** Develop a Regional Visitor's Center that will serve as a focal point for visitors to North Central Arkansas. Consider staffing the visitor's center with Lyon College and UACCB students through an innovative work-study program that allows students to gain experience in the tourism profession.
- f.*** Develop a professional marketing strategy designed to promote the unique synergy between a vibrant college/retirement community; availability of cultural/artistic entertainment and sporting events at the colleges; and outdoor recreation and adventure opportunities provided by the White River, Jamestown Crag, Poke Bayou, Ozark Heritage Center, Spring River, Blanchard Springs Caverns, Mammoth Cave and the Ozark Mountains.
 - i.*** An integrated media packet that includes publicity materials focused on tourism activities in North Central Arkansas, including a website connected to the State Department of Parks and Tourism, compact disk and full-color brochures will be distributed to state and national media outlets, state-wide visitor centers, area hotels, etc.

- g.** Create a comprehensive community calendar of musical events, festivals, art and theater productions, sporting activities, etc. Market the community calendar and related activities throughout the region using radio, print and television advertising.
- h.** Host a familiarization tour for meeting planners, special events planners, and military reunion organizers to host events in Independence County. Develop contacts with national bus tour companies and organizers to recruit them to the area.
- i.** Develop a plan to recruit events to Independence County including university-related business travel, youth sporting events at the baseball, soccer and swimming complexes, fishing tournaments, boat races, etc.
- j.** Inventory all meeting venues and hotel spaces and determine capacity to host significant tourist events. Based on the results of the inventory, prepare a comprehensive report on the findings and develop a detailed plan to address challenges identified in the report.

STRATEGIC GOAL #2

Continue development of Historic Downtown Batesville to emphasize its architecturally attractive downtown buildings, historic churches, beautiful turn-of-the-century neighborhoods, historic cinema attractions, unique shopping venues, antique stores, eclectic and trendy clothing stores, high-end dining, and pubs.

Action Steps in Support of Strategic Goal Number Two Are:

- a.** Develop a comprehensive and achievable master plan for historic Batesville that addresses the specific requirements of a historic downtown district; defines land and building use plans that recognize the importance of historical context; establish standard design guidelines, including building appearance, signage and general streetscape parameters. Extend the master plan into an artist's rendering of a redeveloped Historic Downtown Batesville.

Historic Downtown Batesville should develop a lasting and recognizable image that is distinguishable from the greater Batesville community. The master plan will establish pedestrian-friendly designs of streets, public areas, and public-private connections. Downtown will be planned to become a place of 24-hour activity, encouraging sidewalk and plaza cafes and street vendors to help enliven the downtown area.
- b.** Develop a specific brand and logo for Historic Downtown Batesville—"Downtown Alive." Aggressively market the Downtown Alive brand on a regional, state, and national level in a manner that positions Historic Downtown Batesville as a vibrant and exciting small town, college community with loft apartments, family-friendly entertainment, diverse and eclectic shopping, dining, pubs, arts, cinema, and musical entertainment.
- c.** Define Historic Downtown Batesville into distinct districts with individual personalities that are individually and collectively developed with adequate buffering, suitable pedestrian connections (walkable/bikeable trails, parks and easy access to the historic core), and aesthetic signage standards that define a sense of place.

- i. Gateway Structure to Historic Downtown Batesville - A beautiful native fieldstone gateway will be erected at the intersection of St. Louis Street and Main Street to define the entrance into Historic Downtown Batesville.
- ii. Historic Neighborhood District - Driving South on Main Street and bordered by Water Street, Boswell Street and concluding at 7th Street is a unique community of 19th century Victorian mansions, early 20th century cottages and a large number of homes listed on the historic register. The Historic Neighborhood District will be established as smaller, walkable/bikeable residential neighborhoods within the downtown area and redesigned as pedestrian-oriented rather than vehicle-oriented.
- iii. Civic Center District - Located south of the Historic Neighborhood District is Batesville's Civic Center District, which is comprised of historic churches, the original Lyon College campus, and City Hall. The Civic Center District should be developed as a distinctive mixed-use area for retail, office, and residential spaces. Vacant lots should be redeveloped with a focus on creating a series of outdoor venues such as outdoor cafes and courtyards, unique retail businesses appealing to the 20 to 40 year age generation, and businesses that provide community-oriented goods and services.
- iv. Historic Downtown District - The area from 4th Street to Central Street contains the Historic Downtown District, the primary focus of the downtown redevelopment plan. This area is envisioned as a mixed-use focal point in the Batesville community and for Independence County. Street level retail shops, professional offices, and second story loft apartments are envisioned in this district.

Historic Downtown will be the financial, office, and government center of the region and will be planned as a place where people live, visit, and work in a safe, pedestrian-friendly environment.

- v. Riverfront District - This area of town is south of Central Street. Anchored by the Melba Theater and bordered by College Street and the Bayou, the Riverfront District will become a regional destination, providing opportunities to attract large numbers of people to Historic Downtown Batesville. Business development in the Riverfront District will be a blend of entertainment venues designed to attract younger adults (college students and young families). Outdoor development will tie commercial businesses into both water and walking and bike trails in the bayou area.
- vi. Polk Bayou - Within the Riverfront District, Polk Bayou will be developed to improve access and eco-friendly usability of this unique water system.
 - The City of Batesville and the Alliance will develop a plan for improving the floating experience along Polk Bayou by removing old piping and other unsightly, manmade clutter that defeats the natural experience desired by tourists and community residents interested in natural, outdoor adventure.
 - The City of Batesville and the Alliance will develop a plan to improve access to Polk Bayou at the entrance point beneath the bridge at White Drive, thereby providing better access and connection to downtown Batesville.
 - Maxfield Park, located next to Polk Bayou, will be developed as an

outdoor musical performance venue with comfortable bench seating and a relaxing atmosphere.

- The White River access point (current pick-up location for O'Neal Outfitters) will be redeveloped and cleaned up.

- d. Create a Historic Downtown Revitalization Fund through grants and low-interest loan funds that fosters building redevelopment and serves as a catalyst for growth in Historic Downtown Batesville.
- e. Create incentives, such as a tax abatement program, to aid development of a full spectrum of downtown housing.
- f. Assist developers with design, zoning, land assembly, and site preparation costs.
- g. Provide tax credits on the full value of historic buildings to encourage rehabilitation/preservation of existing buildings used for housing and potential housing structures.
- h. Create a downtown development authority that has the ability to issue bonds and assist with project financing.
- i. Adopt alternative building codes for renovation of space above commercial establishments for housing. Examine options for expanded middle and low-density residential housing.
- j. Develop and implement a sidewalk improvement plan for the downtown area.
- k. Develop and implement a coordinated streetscape program that will provide pedestrian amenities including street trees, public spaces, benches, public art, and historic lighting.
- l. Ensure a high-speed wireless umbrella that covers Historic Downtown Batesville to attract technology-related business.
- m. Identify properties or districts in Historic Downtown Batesville that are eligible for the National Historic Register. Obtain historic designations for all such properties identified.
- n. In accordance with the master plan for restoring historic buildings, create functional commercial space and specialty shops at street level. Loft apartments and professional office space will be developed in second floor spaces. Historic tax credits, rent, and tax incentives and other special inducements will be used to attract and support business.
- o. Complete current streetscape work. Install historically accurate street lighting throughout the downtown area. Emphasize landscape amenities through wayfinding and distinctive signage that celebrates the historical context of downtown.
- p. Relocate the Independence County Library to the Barnett Building. Expand the library's technology capabilities to create 21st century relevance. Develop the library into a community center that hosts special community events, activities, and civic/business functions.
- q. Complete renovations of the Melba Theater.

- r. Build specialty, handcrafted wood signs and place at the entrance to the Historic Downtown Batesville travel corridors.
- s. Commission historic murals on key buildings to drive this historic image of the downtown area.

STRATEGIC GOAL #3

Continue development of the White River waterfront area to allow better access to and enjoyment of this tremendous natural resource. Development efforts will focus on expanding river access by creating eco-friendly, natural uses through an interconnected complex of outdoor experiences such as hiking, biking and horseback riding trails, wilderness camping, river rafting, canoeing, white water kayaking, etc. Eco-friendly, natural, outdoor adventure opportunities are key to attracting people to Independence County.

Action Steps in Support of Strategic Goal Number Three Are:

- a. Develop a pedestrian boardwalk with historic lighting, signage, maps and descriptive pictures of White River history, river topography, native animals, fish, flora and fauna in Riverfront Park directly on the waterfront. The waterfront pedestrian boardwalk will include a fishing pier section and a river view area with benches for resting, talking, and reading. The spillway area will be illuminated at night to create strong nighttime aesthetics.
- b. Extend the White River pedestrian boardwalk into a scenic nature trail that runs west along the White River to the conflux of the White River and Polk Bayou. The scenic nature trail will continue along the banks of Polk Bayou into Historic Downtown Batesville and conclude at Maxfield Park and will include historic markers depicting key historical events that occurred in the area.
- c. Construct a full-service marina where Polk Bayou meets the White River. The marina will accommodate private boat docks, bait store, dining facility adjacent to the marina to provide high-end, river view dining.
- d. Build a bridge across Polk Bayou at the marina and create a new river beach area called North Beach, a sandy beach designed as a family entertainment and river recreation center.
- e. Develop an arboretum behind the newly developed North Beach across the bottoms of lower Main Street. The scenic nature trail discussed above, will travel through the arboretum and down Polk Bayou to Maxfield Park.
- f. Continuing west along the White River after North Beach, develop a high-adventure trail system between Batesville and Mountain View running with the White River and traversing through the Ozark Mountains. Begin a process with the State of Arkansas's Parks and Tourism Department to form a new state park on the White River midway between Batesville and Mountain View.
- g. The Kennedy Park area on the White River's south side will be redeveloped to include a public pier with boat docks, boat rentals, bike rentals and riverboat excursions in addition to expanded dining and pub style restaurant venues. Access to the sand bar will be improved by the creation of a navigable road to the sand bar area.

- h.** The sand bar south of Kennedy Park will be renamed South Beach and developed into a separate and eclectic outdoor recreation venue with a splash park for children, sunbathing areas for youth, low level piers for fishing and outdoor cooking, food truck dining and general areas of river interest.
- i.** A Class 4/5 whitewater kayaking park will be developed in the White River, just south of the spillway and adjacent to South Beach. This highly technical and professional kayaking run will be used to host competitive kayaking contests, drawing outdoor enthusiasts to the area.
- j.** The amphitheater will be expanded to accommodate live music concerts and other large scale outdoor events, with seating capacity for up to 5,000 people. The amphitheater expansion will consider the AMP in Northwest Arkansas as a potential model.
- k.** Construct pedestrian bridges across the White River at lock number one in Batesville and at lock number two in Desha with scenic walking/biking trails on each side of the river connecting the pedestrian bridges. This will provide 15 miles of circular scenic trail system along both banks of the White River.
- l.** Relocate and dock the Mary Woods II at the Kennedy Park Pier and convert the boat into a unique, floating regional visitors' information center and river history museum.
- m.** Develop a miniature-styled train ride opportunity on the banks of the White River for children and adults that is modeled after the Zilker-Zephyr in Austin, Texas.

STRATEGIC GOAL #4

Develop and promote Independence County as the southern gateway to the Ozark Mountains and the tourism hub for North Central Arkansas.

Action Steps in Support of Strategic Goal Number Four Are:

- a.** Consider adopting sister city relationships with the North Central Arkansas Communities of Mountain Home, Mountain View, and Hardy. Mountain Home is the Northern Gateway to the Ozarks and is in close proximity to Bull Shoals and Norfolk Lake. Mountain View is located between Batesville and Mountain Home in the middle of the beautiful Ozark Mountains and is home to wonderful blue grass music and the Ozark Folk Center. Hardy sits on the banks of the Spring River, a nationally-recognized, year-round white water river that is powered by a steady flow from Mammoth Cave.
Collective vision and marketing of regional tourism opportunities rather than county or city marketing is substantially more powerful at the state, regional, and national levels.
- b.** Engage the Master Gardeners Club to develop a beautification plan for the major roadway, bridges, and communities in Independence County.
A primary focus will be beautification of Highway 167 between the top of Ramsey Mountain and the White River Bridge by adding trees, flowers, and historic lighting with banners that include the names of all area communities.

Major entry corridors into each Independence County community and selected primary intersections within each community will be planned by the Master Gardeners Club.

- c. Highlight the Batesville Motor Speedway's races as a unique and exciting activities occurring from March to September in Independence County. Include the Motor Speedway in all marketing materials, brochures, and electronic media advertising.
- d. Develop and promote Jamestown Crag as a major high-adventure tourism opportunity for Independence County. The Crag includes over 70 bolted climbing routes that span a 40-acre climbing wall. Improve the entryway into the Crag with good signage and road access.

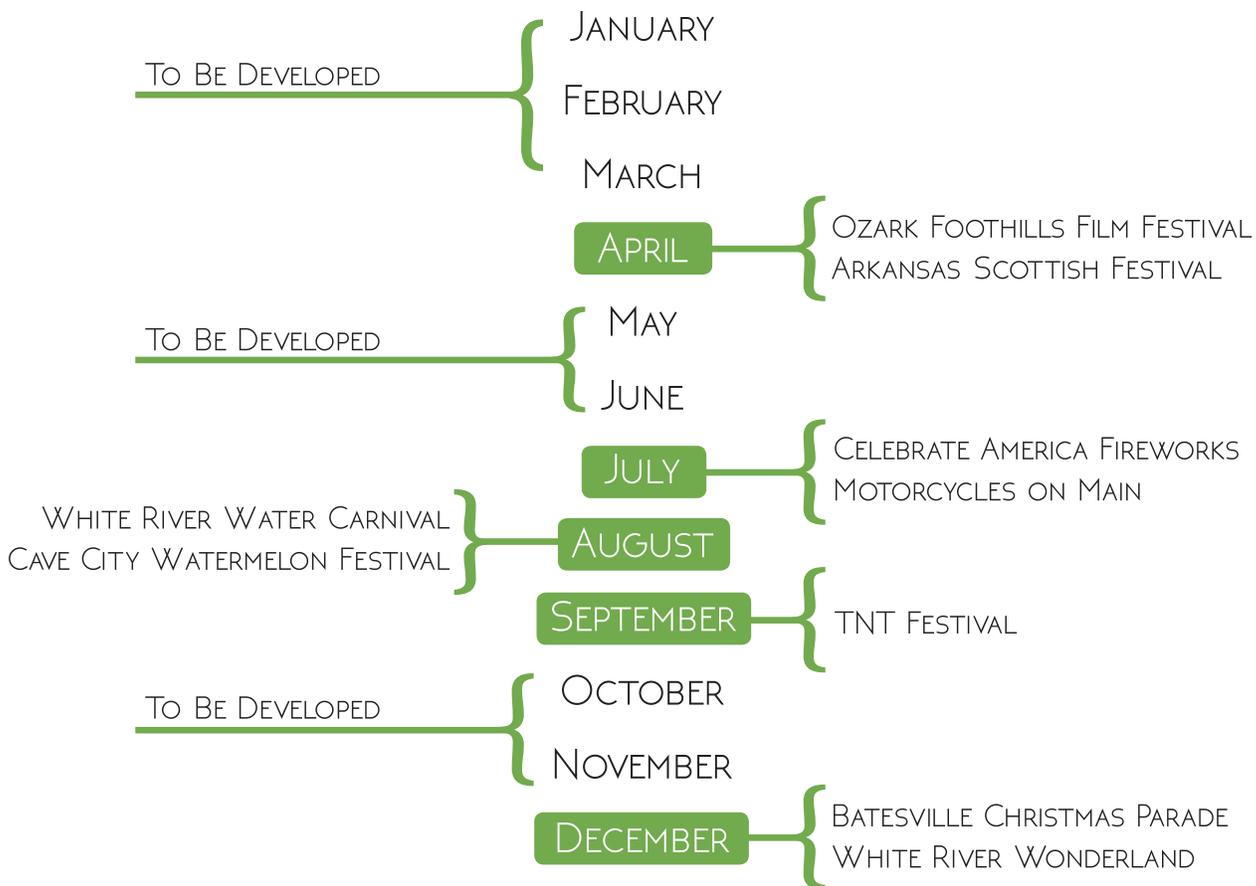
Prepare Crag-specific marketing materials and professional publicity frameworks designed to attract regional rock climbing enthusiasts (Mid-South region outdoor supply stores, internet, word of mouth, etc.). Establish the Crag as a leading Mid-South adventure location.
- e. Utilizing the miles of property available to Independence County through the State of Arkansas's Rails-to-Trails Program, develop an overland trail program throughout the county that connects all major communities through a formal County Greenway Program, providing pedestrian and biking access throughout the county.
- f. Prepare a 10-year plan for extensive development of regional cycling, walking, backpacking, horseback riding trails, and motorcycle routes through North Central Arkansas with specific emphasis on the Rails-to-Trails Program.
- g. Identify properties or districts throughout Independence County that are eligible for inclusion in the National Historic Register. Obtain historic designations for all such properties identified.
- h. Identify significant historical events and sites in Independence County and erect appropriate historical markers and interpretive signage. Tour maps and brochures will be developed accordingly.
- i. Promote the county's unique heritage present in the Mark Martin Museum and the Old Independence Regional Museum.

STRATEGIC GOAL #5

Create 12 major annual festivals/tourist events (one per month) that promote business volume and traffic flow to Independence County. Each major festival/tourist event will be marketed via radio, television, newspaper, internet, and social media to the Mid-South region of the United States: Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee. The festivals will be featured prominently by the State of Arkansas's Department of Parks and Tourism on its web site and in its annual publications (Arkansas Adventure Guide, Arkansas Tour Guide).

Action Steps in Support of Strategic Goal Number Five Are:

a. The following table lists current Independence County festivals. At this time, seven months of the calendar year do not feature a festival, event, or activity. The executive director of the tourism commission will be charged with developing a full schedule of monthly festival activity.



b. Batesville will celebrate its 200th anniversary as an incorporated community in 2021. This milestone and Batesville’s status as the 2nd oldest community in Arkansas is a unique opportunity to create large scale celebrations around this event. The Batesville 200 Celebration will be designed to be the largest annual event in Independence County.

Other considerations for festival activities are music and visual arts festivals, an Elvis Presley Festival, a Johnny Cash Festival, a Latino Heritage Festival, and Cinco de Mayo.

c. A significant opportunity for Independence County is the development of regional and state-level youth sporting events in baseball, soccer, and swimming due to high quality investment in facilities, fields, and other sporting infrastructure.

The Tourism Executive Director, in partnership with the Batesville Department of Parks and Recreation, will develop a multi-year schedule of youth sporting tournaments and events to be hosted in Batesville. Additionally, the tourism executive director will develop statewide

relationships and a proactive marketing plan that attracts additional youth sporting events.

- d. The Batesville Community Center will be marketed as a venue for statewide meetings, corporate retreats, and large scale gatherings.

STRATEGIC GOAL #6

Establish Batesville as a nationally-recognized retirement community based on its position as a uniquely progressive, rural, southern college community in close proximity to beautiful outdoor recreation and adventure opportunities with the presence of a high-quality medical center and over 100 medical doctors.

