



WIDE OPEN
WONDER

— SOUTHWEST NORTH DAKOTA —

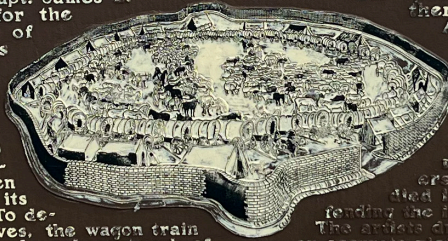
SOUTHWEST NORTH DAKOTA TOURISM
STRATEGIC VISION PLAN

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FORT DILTS HISTORIC SITE

On this site in September, 1864 an immigrant train, under the command of Capt. James L. Fisk, bound for the gold fields of Montana, was besieged by hostile Sioux Indians, despite the fact that an armed escort of 50 U. S. Cavalrymen had been provided for its protection. To defend themselves, the wagon train and their stock, a breastwork of prairie sod was built which en-



abled them to successfully resist attacks for 14 days until a rescue party conducted them to Fort Rice. A number of civilians and 8 of the 50 members of the Cavalry detachment were killed. The Fort was named for Jefferson Dilts, who died in gallantly defending the immigrant train. The artist's drawing presents an accurate picture of the Fort as described by participants.

Introduction

Throughout southwestern North Dakota, the rolling hills and wide-open prairies have long offered a sense of peace, adventure, and a deep connection to America's heritage. It was here, in the rugged beauty of the Badlands, that Theodore Roosevelt found a powerful source of renewal. After enduring profound personal loss, Roosevelt traveled west and discovered a landscape that stirred his soul and reignited his spirit. The Badlands became a place of healing and transformation – and a place where the challenges of frontier life served as a catalyst that shaped his future as a leader.

While much has changed since America's 26th president last visited this region, the spirit of the west remains.

With the opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in Medora in 2026, and the ever-growing popularity of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the Medora Musical, now is the time for southwest North Dakota to make a strategic, coordinated effort to plan for and benefit from an influx of visitors.

Why Tourism Matters

While tourism might not be top of mind when thinking about North Dakota, the visitor industry is actually a cornerstone of the State's economy. In 2023, the state welcomed **25.6 million visitors**, (nearly 60% between the ages of 25–44). Most of these visitors arrive by car, travel in the summer months, and are drawn to outdoor recreation, history, and special events.

With that number of visitors (more than 30x the State's population), the economic impact is significant. Tourism generates **\$3.3 billion annually statewide**, with food and beverage leading all spending categories. Within southwest North Dakota, **Stark County alone accounted for \$127.5 million** in visitor spending in 2023, followed by Billings County (\$24.1 million) and Dunn County (\$21.0 million). These dollars sustain the heart of local communities – restaurants, hotels, shops, attractions, and local jobs.

Tourism's value also extends beyond immediate spending. Every positive visitor experience is also a potential introduction to life in southwest North Dakota. Travelers who discover the region's small-town hospitality, wide-open spaces, and strong sense of community have a better chance of becoming repeat visitors - or even future residents and business owners.

By showcasing what makes the region special, tourism acts as a front door to workforce and resident recruitment, helping attract new families, entrepreneurs, and professionals who value safety, community, and quality of life.

Tourism not only sustains today's economy—it builds tomorrow's. With intentional planning and collaboration, southwest North Dakota can capture more overnight stays, extend visitor spending, and strengthen its identity as a destination rooted in western culture, natural wonder, and opportunity - for both visitors and those who may one day call it home.

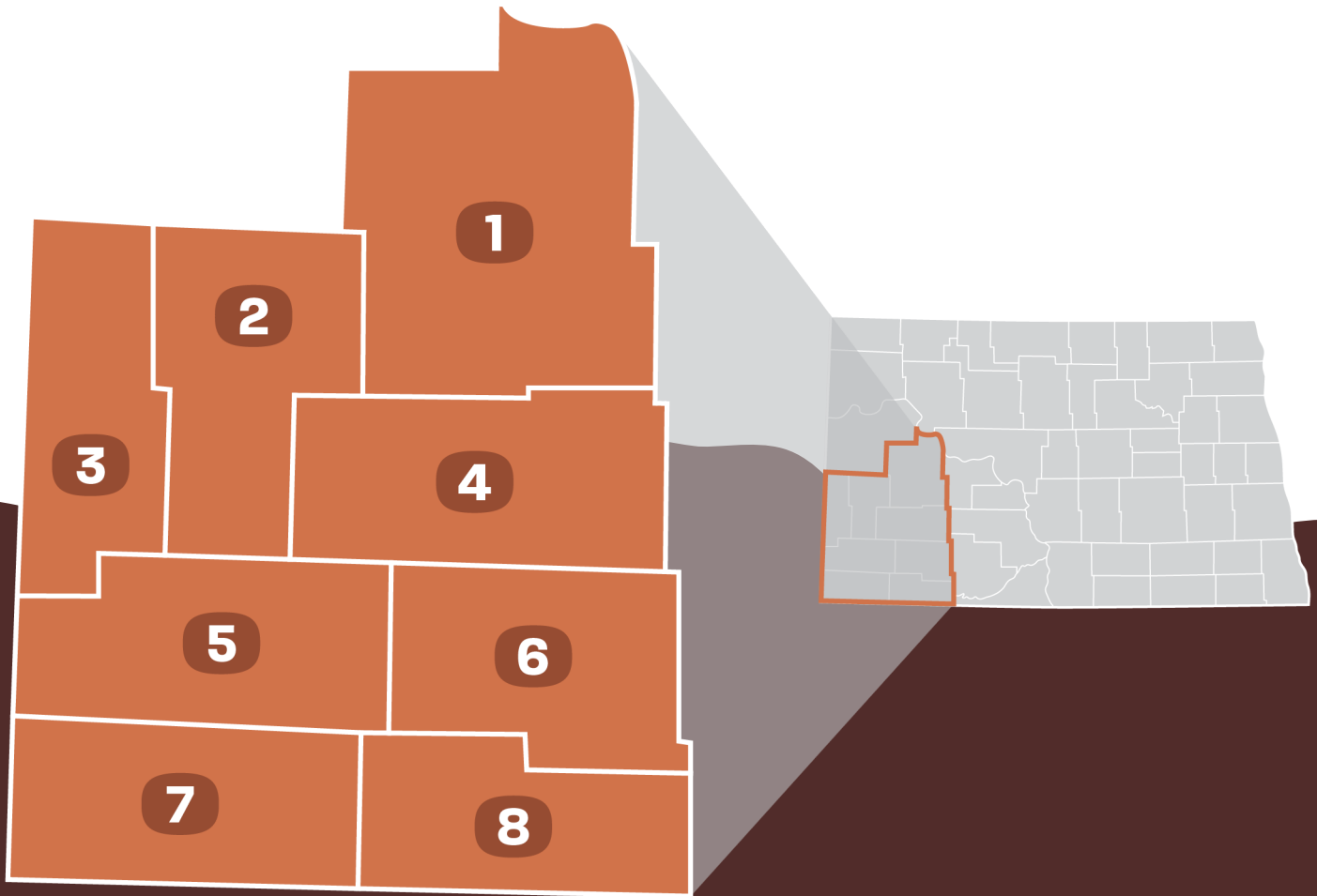
The Region

The eight counties that make up southwest North Dakota (also known as the Roosevelt Custer region), include some of North Dakota's most iconic landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and largely undiscovered tourism assets. Bordered by Montana to the west and South Dakota to the south, this region spans more than 170 miles from

east to west and approximately 100 miles from north to south.

With endless horizons, scenic byways, and deep connections to frontier heritage, southwest North Dakota offers a unique blend of natural wonder, historical depth, and emerging economic opportunity.

Counties of the Roosevelt-Custer Region



- 1** Dunn County
- 2** Billings County
- 3** Golden Valley County
- 4** Stark County

- 5** Slope County
- 6** Hettinger County
- 7** Bowman County
- 8** Adams County

The Project

The Roosevelt Custer Regional Council has brought together the counties of Adams, Billings, Bowman, Dunn, Golden Valley, Hettinger, Slope, and Stark to shape a shared vision for tourism – one that honors local character, inspires a sense of wonder, strengthens community vitality, and ensures the region is ready to welcome the opportunities ahead.

Developing this regional tourism strategic vision plan was both a data-informed process and a deeply human one. It was shaped by research, conversations, shared insight, and a collective sense of what makes this region extraordinary.

PROJECT GOALS

- Identify Vision & Aspirations for Tourism
- Identify Current Assets & Gaps
- Conduct Market Research
- Develop Realistic & Attainable Goals and Tactics
- Reshape Perceptions
- Assist/Enhance Tourism through Regional & Focused Tourism Strategic Vision Plans



VanHorn's Western & Antique Auto Museum
Marmarth

Charting the Course to Wonder

At the heart of the planning effort was a commitment to listening. Stakeholder engagement sessions were held in each of the region's eight counties, bringing together more than 60 local leaders and community members to share their perspectives, priorities, challenges, and aspirations.

A regional community survey drew more than 430 responses from across all counties and age groups, adding depth and diversity to the input received. A hands-on driving tour through all eight counties also allowed for first-hand observation of key assets, opportunities, access challenges, and visitor experiences on the ground.

Guidance throughout the process came from a regional steering team made up of local champions who met regularly to track progress, share insights, and align efforts across communities.

STEERING COMMITTEE

- Rebecca Ferderer, Adams County Development Corporation
- Kim Gaugler, City of Beach
- Carie Boster, Dunn County JDA
- Alicia Erickson, Dickinson CVB
- Connie Wax, Hettinger County
- Sara Otte Coleman, North Dakota Tourism
- Shelby Hewson, Slope County
- Marie Lorge, Slope County
- Ryan Jilek, Stark Development Corporation
- Clarence Sitter, Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation
- Amy McCann, Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library
- Teran Doer, Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Brooklyn Engelhart, Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Jessica Buer, Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Andrea Bowman, Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- AE2S Communications: Marty Doll, Cody Schuler, Raquel Strand, Andrew Spratta

45%

of survey respondents rated current overall tourism or visitor experience in southwest North Dakota as

“good or excellent”

Alongside robust community engagement, the plan draws on data-driven tourism research (conducted by Hanover Research); comparison to the tourism experience of two other midwestern presidential library locations; a high-level look at the region's digital presence; and local knowledge of the landscape, culture, and visitor trends. This multifaceted approach ensures that the strategy reflects both **where the region is now and where it has the potential to go.**

A detailed engagement and survey summary, asset inventory, and a comprehensive SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis can be found in Appendix A. The Hanover Research report on tourism data and comparable regions can be found in Appendix B.

Key Themes

From the feedback gathered throughout the planning process, common themes became clear. These themes reflect recurring sentiments related to tourism in southwest North Dakota, and were used to help guide development of the strategic vision plan:



Need for Funding

While ideas and opportunities are endless, the availability of funding or difficulty securing it to support tourism efforts is an ever-present challenge.



Western Culture and Theodore Roosevelt

There is a curiosity and appreciation for the region's western identity, which is reflected through Medora, the viewing of wild horses, horseback riding, rodeo traditions, agriculture, and the enduring frontier spirit shaped in part by the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt. From ranching roots to modern-day celebrations of cowboy culture, this western character remains one of southwest North Dakota's most defining and marketable attributes.



Early Settler and Indigenous History

The area's deep historical roots offer a strong foundation for meaningful interpretation, storytelling, and heritage tourism – from the perspectives of Native American heritage to early settlers.



Natural Wonder and Outdoor Recreation

The region's sweeping landscapes, open roads, and outdoor experiences stand out as some of its most compelling tourism assets, offering opportunities for exploration, adventure, and connection to nature.



Lodging and Dining

In many areas throughout the region, there are limited lodging and dining options. This could be a barrier to broadening visitor interest and encouraging longer stays. Shortages of employees, inconsistent hours, and lack of volunteers also contribute to this limitation.

Survey respondents rated "Local Cuisine and Dining Options" as one of the top things they look for when traveling.



Visitor Spending and Length of Stay

Visitors to southwest North Dakota don't stay as long, and don't spend as much per trip as they do in other comparable destinations. Most trips are day trips (average stay in Billings County is 1.3 days), and the region has fewer lodging, dining, and retail establishments per visitor than other comparable destinations.



Tourism Destinations Across Region

Local attractions range from iconic national landmarks to hidden community gems. These assets have potential to capture increased tourism traffic through more coordinated connection and promotion as part of a shared regional identity. The vast distances between amenities throughout the region have also been seen as a challenge in coordinating tourism efforts.

Survey respondents rated "Travel Distances Between Amenities" as one of the top challenges to tourism in the region.



Wayfinding and Access

Navigating between and within communities can be difficult for visitors with gaps in signage and cell phone reception, digital guidance, defined itineraries, rest areas/bathrooms, and clear travel routes limiting exploration and discovery. In addition, there are some attraction sites with significant access barriers, and other areas where "first impressions" could prove a detriment.



Activities and Entertainment

While there are several lesser-known attractions throughout the region, concerns linger about the lack of entertainment options for children, teens, and young adults. Visitors also have a perception of "running out of things to do quickly" upon visiting the region.

Survey respondents rated "Events, Festivals, and Shows" as the top tourism draw to the region.



Seasonality

Tourism is currently highly seasonal, with most activity occurring in the summer months. Relatively few offerings attract visitors during colder months. However, there is an interest across the region to expand and promote year-round attractions and reasons to visit.



Regional Marketing & Digital Presence

There is a need and desire for more coordinated marketing efforts, stronger storytelling or connection points, and a modernized digital presence that showcases the region's unique appeal to a broader audience.

Survey respondents rated "Marketing, Promotion, Advertising" as one the top opportunities to enhance tourism in the region.



Community Reception

North Dakotans are typically caring and tight knit, but some can be initially hesitant to welcome outsiders. A lack of local buy-in or understanding tourism's value to the local economy can create barriers to tourism expansion.

Audience Personas

A strong tourism strategy depends not only on the development of destinations and experiences, but also on a clear understanding of who visitors are, what motivates them, and how they make travel decisions.

By identifying key visitor types, the region can better tailor marketing, itineraries, amenities, and events to meet expectations and create memorable experiences. Audience personas

provide a research-based, human-centered lens into the preferences, needs, and barriers of different traveler groups – and they help ensure that promotional messages resonate.

With personas, users of this strategic plan can shift from broad generalizations about “tourists” to more nuanced strategies that engage families, cultural explorers, adventure seekers, and other niche markets in authentic and relevant ways.

Audience Personas can be found in Appendix C

Goals & Desired Outcomes

Based on what was heard and learned, five high-level strategic goals were identified that, if achieved, will help enhance tourism in southwest North Dakota. These goals reflect community insights and current realities, and help set the stage for long-term success.

Each goal includes desired outcomes and tactics to turn ideas into action. Actions include specific steps to implement, names of key collaborators/

organizations, a recommended timeline for implementation, and metrics to measure success.

While many important topics surfaced through community engagement, this plan focuses on the areas the Roosevelt Custer Regional Council, Steering Committee, counties, cities, and organizations believe are the highest priorities and most feasible to provide the biggest impact.



Regional Readiness

This symbol indicates a recommended tactic to prioritize prior to the opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in July 2026.



Enchanted Highway
Stark and Hettinger Counties

GOAL
1

Secure Funding for Tourism-Related Improvements

DESIRED OUTCOME: Consistent Funding Sources for Community Improvements, Beautification, Marketing, and Other Tourism-Related Initiatives

GOAL
2

Capitalize on Increased Visitor Traffic to the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library

DESIRED OUTCOME: Development of Theodore Roosevelt/Western Culture Themed Offerings, Experiences, Bundles, and Itineraries to Attract Multi-Day Stays.

DESIRED OUTCOME: Upkeep and Enhanced Promotion of Existing Cultural and Historic Visitor Amenities

GOAL
3

Revitalize Downtowns, Build Local Tourism Capacity/Buy-In and Become “Visitor Ready”

DESIRED OUTCOME: Improved Ability for Visitors to Discover, Navigate, Access, and Enjoy Amenities Throughout the Region

DESIRED OUTCOME: Welcoming, Attractive, and Service Ready City/Town Entrances, Business Districts, and Main Streets.

DESIRED OUTCOME: Expanded Dining, Retail, Lodging, and Entertainment Destinations and Improved Infrastructure

DESIRED OUTCOME: Communities, Businesses, and Leaders Equipped with Information to Understand, Support, and Grow Tourism

GOAL
4

Develop Year-Round Tourism Through Expanded Recreation, Events, and Festivals

DESIRED OUTCOME: Enhanced Year-Round Recreational Assets

DESIRED OUTCOME: Expanded or New Events that Attract Off-Peak Visitors

GOAL
5

Strengthen Regional Identity, Branding, and Partnerships

DESIRED OUTCOME: Coordinated and Implemented Regional Marketing Campaigns through New and Expanded Partnerships



White Butte
Slope County



GOAL 1

Secure Funding for Tourism-Related Improvements

Tourism is a critical driver of economic growth in southwest North Dakota, offering opportunities to strengthen local communities, enhance amenities, and support small businesses.

Securing consistent and diverse funding sources will be essential to implementing any improvements, building and maintaining infrastructure, and launching regional marketing initiatives. From community beautification and signage enhancements to expanded visitor amenities and promotional campaigns, these

investments ensure that the region can increase visitors, meet their expectations, and hopefully prompt repeat or extended visits.

By identifying, securing, and strategically deploying funding for tourism-related improvements, the region will be prepared to capture opportunities, enhance community pride, better support local businesses, and provide a welcoming and memorable experience for visitors.



Consistent Funding Sources for Community Improvements, Beautification, Marketing, and Other Tourism-Related Initiatives



High-Priority Tactic

Identify and Prioritize Potential Funding Sources

Funding is paramount to implement tourism strategies.



STEPS

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of available federal, state, foundation, and private-sector funding opportunities (grants, sponsorships, loan programs, etc.) relevant to tourism, infrastructure, marketing, cultural/historic preservation, and community beautification. *(See Appendix D)*
2. Develop a centralized funding database (e.g., shared online tracker or spreadsheet) for partners to monitor grant cycles, deadlines, eligibility, and reporting requirements.
3. Prioritize funding sources based on likelihood of success, competitiveness, eligibility requirements, and alignment with regional tourism goals.
4. Meet annually with economic development offices and state partners to review new opportunities and adjust funding priorities.
5. Connect local businesses, site operators, investors, developers, and entrepreneurs with available and appropriate funding.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- City/county economic development offices
- ND Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)
- State and federal funding agencies
- Banks and lenders
- Local businesses, philanthropic organizations, and potential investors

TIMELINE

- **Late 2025:** Conduct funding source review and create priority list; develop centralized tracking system.
- **2026:** Begin submitting priority applications; host annual partner funding review.
- **2027 and beyond:** Maintain and update funding tracker; expand applications to large-scale, multi-county opportunities.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Funding Source Inventory:** Complete funding source inventory by end of Year 1.
- **Funding Applications:** Submit at least two (2) grant or funding applications within 12 months.
- **Participation:** Maintain updated tracking document with all sources reviewed annually and with 100% county participation.
- **Secured Funds:** Secure a cumulative \$3 - \$6 million in public/private tourism investment by 2029.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Build Regional Capacity for Grant Writing and Funding Applications

STEPS

1. Host annual workshops (virtual or in-person) for community leaders, chambers, and nonprofits addressing grant writing, application preparation, and reporting requirements.
2. Develop a shared library of templates (sample narratives, budgets, letters of support) to streamline application development.
3. Establish a peer review team of regional partners to provide feedback, technical assistance, and guidance on applications before submissions.
4. Encourage collaborative applications that involve multiple counties or communities to increase competitiveness and scale.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- City/county economic development offices
- Local chambers of commerce and convention & visitors bureaus
- ND Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)
- State and federal funding agencies
- Local businesses and organizations

TIMELINE

- **2027:** Launch first grant writing workshops and create shared repository of templates.
- **2027–2028:** Formalize peer review process; pilot regional collaborative application.
- **2029 and beyond:** Continue workshops; target 1 – 3 collaborative applications annually.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Training Sessions:** Deliver 1-2 training sessions per year with at least 20 participants region-wide.
- **Increased Skills:** 75% of workshop participants report improved skills/confidence in post-training surveys.
- **Collaborative Applications Submitted:** At least one (1) annual collaborative grant application submitted annually.
- **Success Rate:** Increase overall regional grant success rate by 20%.
- **Templates Used:** 75% of county-specific applications using shared templates 2027.



Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library
Billings County



GOAL 2

Capitalize on Increased Visitor Traffic to the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library

The opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in 2026 presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for southwest North Dakota to elevate its profile as a tourism destination. While Medora and Theodore Roosevelt National Park have long attracted visitors, the Presidential Library will significantly expand both awareness and national/international visitors into the region.

If leveraged regionally, this asset can anchor broader economic and tourism growth across all eight counties in southwest North Dakota. To maximize this opportunity, surrounding communities must ensure they are prepared to capture visitor attention, extend stays, make navigation to and from sites a seamless experience, and create memorable connections that go beyond a single attraction.

By building packages, itineraries, and themed experiences around the Presidential Library, Theodore Roosevelt, and North Dakota's western heritage, the region can draw travelers beyond Medora into its other historic, cultural, and recreational offerings. These itineraries will not only add value for travelers, but also support local businesses, diversify tourism income, and maximize the economic impact of the Library's draw.

By aligning themes, the region can create a seamless and inspiring visitor experience.



Development of Theodore Roosevelt /Western Culture Themed Offerings, Experiences, Bundles, and Itineraries to Attract Multi-Day Stays



High-Priority Tactic

Develop Themed Itineraries and/or Driving Routes with Bundled Experiences

Itineraries and driving routes will help extend visitor stays beyond Medora.



STEPS

1. Convene local tourism, museum and chamber/visitor bureau representatives to select 3-5 priority themes (examples to right). (See Appendix F)
2. Leverage local expertise to map routes, confirm site hours, and ensure itineraries are realistic, family-friendly, and seasonally relevant.
3. Create itineraries in one-, two-, and three-day formats, incorporate photo stops, hikes, dining, exploration, lodging, experiences, etc.
4. Engage local businesses to offer theme-specific promotions (e.g., dining specials, retail displays, souvenir tie-ins, etc.).
5. Partner with lodging establishments to develop themed packages (e.g., bundled lodging + attraction admission + dining coupons) along suggested routes.
6. Produce professional, downloadable, and printed maps/guides with storytelling elements, travel tips, and QR codes.
7. Distribute itineraries through swnorthdakota.com, visitor centers, museums, gift shops, and digital channels (social media, travel blogs, influencer partnerships, other tourism websites, etc.).
8. Launch a "Southwest North Dakota Passport" program using stamps, QR codes, or scavenger hunt style "finds" at sites, with incentives or recognition for completion. Promote through print, digital, and physical means.
9. Collect and review visitor and business feedback annually; update itineraries to keep content fresh, relevant, and market aligned.

Example Themes

- Theodore Roosevelt Western Heritage (Marmarth, Medora, route to Mt. Rushmore)
- General Custer and Early Frontier (Custer Trail, Custer's Campsite, Sully's Waterhole, Fort Dilts, Killdeer Mountain Battlefield, Initial Rock, Square Butte)
- Badlands Adventure (Maah Daah Hey Trail, White Butte, Wildlife Refuges, etc.)
- Badlands Backroads (Burning Coal Vein, Hutmacher Farm, recreation areas, Enchanted Highway, etc.)
- Indigenous Culture (Last Great Buffalo Hunts; MHA Nation)
- Religious Heritage (Assumption Abbey, Ukrainian Churches)
- Golfing the Badlands (Bully Pulpit, South Heart, etc.)
- Historic Downtowns (Bowman, Richardton, Belfield, Beach, Killdeer, Marmarth, Hettinger, Mott, Regent, etc.)
- Museums (Golden Valley County Museum, Pioneer Trails Regional Museum, Hettinger County Museum, Van Horn's Western & Antique Auto Museum, Dickinson Heritage Museum, Dunn County Museum, Mott Gallery of History & Art, Dakota Buttes Historical Museum, Ukrainian Cultural Institute, etc.)
- Dinosaur Trails (Marmarth, Hettinger Dinosaur Park, Dickinson Dinosaur Museum)
- Railroad Enthusiasts (Milwaukee Road; early railroad routes)
- Hunting/Fishing Connections

Tactic Continued



GOAL 2 | DESIRED OUTCOME #1



COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library content team
- Local tourism, museum and chamber/visitor bureau representatives
- Event organizers and historians
- Lodging partners and business owners

TIMELINE

- **2025 – Early 2026:** Convene partner group; identify priority themes; draft itineraries/maps.
- **Early 2026:** Engage local businesses and lodging partners.
- **Spring/Summer 2026:** Launch itineraries, guides, and promotions.
- **Fall 2026 and Beyond:** Continued development and promotion of current and additional themes/bundles, itineraries, maps and supporting regional marketing material

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Itineraries:** 3 – 5 itineraries published by summer 2026; 12-15 itineraries live by 2027
- **Social Media Reach/Engagement:** 500+ direct engagements (likes, comments, shares, saves) on posts tied to themes/itineraries in Year 1.
- **Partner Engagement:** 50% of relevant local tourism, museum and chamber/visitor bureau representatives actively contributing (content, promotions, or packages) Year 1.
- **Business/Lodging Participation:** 20% of relevant local businesses and lodging establishments actively contributing (content, promotions, bundles, or packages) in Year 1; 10+ bookable bundles regionwide by 2028.
- **Distribution of Guides/Maps:** 1,000 printed copies distributed + 1,000 digital downloads/views in Year 1.
- **Regional Participation:** All counties represented across themes/itineraries by 2027.
- **Passport Program:** Launched by 2027.
- **Website Engagement:** 1,000 unique pageviews for Passport Program in Year 1 of launch.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Develop Mobile-Friendly, Interactive Digital Storytelling Tools (Audio, AR/VR)

STEPS

1. Audit existing storytelling platforms (e.g., Talking Trails) to identify opportunities for expansion and integration with new tools.
2. Form a technology and content task force including historians, tourism staff, site managers, and tech developers to define priority sites, stories, and desired visitor experiences.
3. Develop script and content plan featuring historically accurate narratives, archival photos, and/or 3D models/animations for selected site.
 - Examples: Audio tour of Enchanted Highway explaining history and behind-the-scenes; augmented/virtual reality for sites such as Fort Dilts or Hutmacher Farm to depict historic scenes, structures, or events
4. Select and contract technology and/or A/V partners to design and build mobile-friendly audio tours, augmented reality (AR) overlays, or virtual reality (VR) experiences that work on standard smartphones and tablets.
5. Pilot digital storytelling experiences at site to test usability and gather feedback.
6. Integrate storytelling tools into swnorthdakota.com, trip planners, and QR codes on site signage for seamless visitor access.
7. Launch a regional marketing campaign promoting the new interactive experiences, highlighting behind-the-scenes content and user testimonials.
8. Establish a long-term maintenance and content refresh plan to expand tours and keep them updated and engaging.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Site operators
- Local historical societies and museums (content expertise and site access)
- Historical Society of ND (historical accuracy and archival support)
- North Dakota Tourism Division (promotion and integration with statewide platforms)
- Talking Trails and other audio tour providers
- Local universities or tech startups (AR/VR development)
- Chambers of commerce, visitors bureaus, and site managers (pilot/testing)

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Audit existing platforms; identify priority sites/stories
- **2027:** Convene task force; develop scripts, secure content rights, and select technology partners.
- **2028:** Pilot audio/AR/VR experiences at 1 key site.
- **2029:** Expand to 1 – 2 additional sites
- **Ongoing:** Annual content updates, technology refresh, and expansion to new locations.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Audio/AR/VR Pilot:** Launch by 2028
- **Additional Content:** Launch 1 – 2 additional sites by 2029.
- **Visitor engagement:** 1,000+ total listens/views in first year of rollout.
- **Maintenance compliance:** Annual content refresh completed for all active experiences.

Upkeep and Enhanced Promotion of Existing Cultural and Historic Visitor Amenities



High-Priority Tactic

Expand Visibility of Lesser-Known Sites through Marketing, Visitor Tools, and Events

Southwest North Dakota is full of hidden gems waiting to be discovered.



STEPS

1. Create a comprehensive inventory and prioritization of all cultural and historic sites across the region (museums, historic landmarks, rural churches, heritage farms, overlooked trailheads, etc.).
2. Optimize site listings on swnorthdakota.com and in the **North Dakota Tourism Partner Portal** with updated photos, accurate descriptions, GPS coordinates, operating hours, and key features.
3. Integrate priority sites into regional itineraries, downloadable maps, brochures, etc. Distribute through online and print channels.
4. Develop and host a seasonal or themed event at a select site to enhance visibility and create a unique visitor experiences. Examples:
 - Interactive subsistence-living experience at Hutmacher Farm.
 - Wagon train reenactment at the Hiddenwood Cliff Custer campsite.
 - Ukrainian heritage celebration in Belfield.
 - “Hidden History Weekends” highlighting rotating lesser-known attractions.
5. Coordinate regional marketing campaigns to promote these sites and events through social media, earned media, and targeted advertising.
6. Review **ND Department of Commerce Marketing and Media Programs** for assistance.
7. Encourage local businesses to cross-promote sites/ events (e.g., restaurant placemats, hotel lobby maps, QR codes on receipts).
8. Monitor visitor traffic and feedback to refine event offerings and update promotional materials annually

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local governments, chambers of commerce, and convention & visitors bureaus
- North Dakota Tourism Division (Partner Portal support and statewide promotion)
- Historical societies, museums, site managers, community organizations, cultural groups, and heritage associations (event programming)
- Local businesses (cross-promotion and sponsorship)

TIMELINE

- **Early 2026:** Complete site inventory; update online directories and ND Tourism Partner Portal.
- **2026:** Integrate optimized sites into itineraries, maps, brochures, and marketing campaigns; develop seasonal event concepts and secure partners.
- **2027:** Launch first seasonal event.
- **2028 and beyond:** Expand events to additional sites; refresh listings and marketing materials annually.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Optimized ND Tourism Partner Portal and Online Directory Listings:** 100% of identified sites updated by 2026.
- **Inclusion in Itineraries and Marketing:** At least five (5) under-marketed/lesser-known sites included annually
- **Number of seasonal events launched:** One (1) by 2027.
- **Visitor attendance:** 500+ attendees at seasonal event in first year.
- **Partner participation:** 75% of site managers and local businesses engaged in cross-promotion activities.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Strengthen Site Operations and Partnerships

STEPS

1. Convene periodic meetings with historical site managers to discuss shared resources, address challenges and opportunities, and align strategies.
2. Support museums/heritage sites in adopting “open door” policies (expanded hours, clear signage, walk-in friendly practices).
 - Model: Hettinger County Historical Society’s open-door policy with sandwich boards.
3. Partner with schools and museums to integrate cultural/historic sites into curriculum and field trips, fostering youth engagement.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local museums, historical societies, and site managers/operators
- Local schools, universities, and education service centers

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Begin site manager/operator discussions.
- **2027:** Implement open door policies at select museums/sites.
- **2028:** Incorporate sites/history into school curriculum and/or field trips.
- **Ongoing:** Continue meetings and conduct annual reviews.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Museum Access:** 50% of regional museums implementing open-door or expanded access policies by 2027.
- **Education Outreach:** Five (5) school partnerships/field trip programs by 2028.

Theodore Roosevelt National Park





Downtown Beach
Golden Valley County



GOAL 3

Revitalize Downtowns, Build Local Tourism Capacity/Buy-In, and Become “Visitor Ready”

Southwest North Dakota’s communities serve as the front door to the west, and their appearance, amenities, and hospitality shape visitors’ first impressions. While many main streets and town entrances are welcoming, others require revitalization and investment to meet visitor expectations.

Wayfinding plays a pivotal role in shaping the visitor journey. Even in the digital era, clear and engaging signage remains essential for stress-free travel. A coordinated regional signage plan – paired with accurate online maps and mobile-friendly navigation tools – will help travelers discover lesser-known attractions while building confidence in exploring wide-open spaces.

Beautification, façade improvements, and community clean-up initiatives can transform these areas into attractive, service-ready destinations that invite exploration, shopping, and dining.

As this region has fewer lodging, dining, and retail establishments per visitor than other comparable destinations, a focus should also be placed on supporting the expansion of these amenities throughout the region.

Finally, it will also be important to prepare local leaders, businesses, and service professionals to embrace and support tourism. From frontline staff training to business development resources, building community capacity ensures that the benefits of tourism extend broadly while enhancing the visitor experience. By equipping communities with tools to succeed, the region can better foster local pride, strengthen its economy, and ensure travelers leave with lasting, positive impressions.



Improved Ability for Visitors to Discover, Navigate, Access, and Enjoy Amenities Throughout the Region



High-Priority Tactic

Implement a Regional Signage and Wayfinding Strategy

Visitors will need clear, consistent signage to navigate the region.



STEPS

1. Convene a working group of local tourism, chambers, historical societies, and city/county representatives to develop and review a signage inventory and identify gaps.
2. Develop a Regional Signage Master Plan that sets design standards (consistent fonts, logos, and branding aligned with “Wide Open Wonder”), interpretive/directional messaging best practices, and maintenance protocols.
3. Install or update interpretive panels with historical context, photos, and QR codes linking to expanded content, audio stories, or nearby attraction suggestions for high value sites.

Identified high-value sites that would benefit from enhanced signage:
 - Fort Dilts Historical Site
 - Enchanted Highway
 - Dickinson Museum Center
 - Hutmacher Farm
 - Beach Visitor Center
 - Custer/Sully Trails
 - Burning Coal Vein
 - Mystic Theatre in Marmarth
 - Killdeer Mountain Battlefield
4. Coordinate with county highway departments and **NDDOT** to improve directional highway signage along I-94, Hwy 12, Hwy 85, Hwy 200, and other major travel corridors.
5. Explore opportunities for creative/unique signage (public art, 3D installations, themed billboards, seasonal displays) that reflect the region’s identity and encourage photo stops.
6. Establish a long-term signage maintenance and replacement schedule, including responsibility assignments and funding mechanisms.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- ND Department of Transportation (NDDOT)
- Local governments, chambers of commerce, and convention & visitors bureaus
- Regional museums and historic site managers
- Local artists and design firms (for creative signage)
- Community foundations or civic groups for funding/maintenance support

TIMELINE

- **Early 2026:** Complete signage inventory and design standards; convene working group to review/prioritize.
- **2026 – 2027:** Secure funding; installation of priority signage.
- **2027–2028:** Expand signage program to secondary/creative projects (billboards, unique installations, interpretive elements).
- **Ongoing:** Full implementation; annual review of signage effectiveness and maintenance schedule.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Signage Inventory & Regional Signage Master Plan:** Complete Year 1.
- **Partner Participation:** All counties represented in signage plan.
- **Priority Sites Upgraded:** 20+ by 2029.
- **Consistent Directional Signage:** 80% of major corridors by 2029
- **Website/QR code Scans from Interpretive Signage:** 1,000 interactions end of Year 2.
- **Maintenance Compliance:** 90% of signs inspected and in good condition during annual review.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Ensure Accurate Digital Presence for Regional Tourism Sites

Visitors will need accurate online listings and navigation.



STEPS

1. Audit and optimize regional websites (including swnorthdakota.com and partner sites) for SEO best practices: (See Appendix E)
 - Update meta tags, headers, and keywords to leverage search and AI frameworks.
 - Incorporate priority SEO terms into navigation headings and page content.
 - Ensure mobile responsiveness and ADA compliance.
2. Audit all regional tourism sites on travel apps (Google Maps, Business Listings/Websites, Apple Maps, AllTrails, OnX, **ND Tourism Partner Portal**, TripAdvisor, Yelp, etc.) for accuracy (names, descriptions, hours, photos).
3. Correct inaccurate listings and add missing attractions using a standardized template.
4. Coordinate with site managers, chambers, and CVBs to ensure each site has a “digital steward” responsible for keeping information updated long-term.
5. Train local partners in SEO basics via workshops, webinars, or how-to guides to extend reach and improve the region’s collective online visibility.
6. Launch a navigation campaign promoting digital wayfinding resources and informing visitors how to download offline maps for use in areas with limited cell service.
7. Monitor analytics and visitor feedback, making regular updates to ensure accuracy and improved search performance.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local governments, chambers of commerce, and convention & visitors bureaus
- North Dakota Tourism Division
- Third party app/website business listing support teams
- Site managers; museum directors; attraction, lodging, and dining partners
- Regional IT/marketing consultants (SEO, AI support)
- Website design/development firms (technical build and AI integration)
- Local universities or tech partners (support with AI tool development/testing)

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Conduct digital audit; correct and standardize listings; develop training resources.
- **2027:** Begin SEO training sessions; launch navigation campaign; integrate AI monitoring.
- **Ongoing:** Expand training; integrate AI monitoring; full compliance with SEO and consistency standards across all sites

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Accurate Online/GPS Listings:** 100% of priority sites by end of 2026.
- **Partner Participation:** 50 regional businesses/organizations trained in SEO/digital listing best practices by 2027.
- **Website Performance:** 10% increase in organic search traffic to swnorthdakota.com within two years..



Long-Term Tactic

Expand Accessibility to Hard-to-Reach Sites

STEPS

1. Identify high-value but hard-to-reach sites (e.g., Killdeer Mountain Battlefield, Initial Rock, etc.).
2. Assess access barriers (roads, signage, parking, ADA compliance, private land considerations, etc.)
3. Meet with state/local partners, landowners, historical societies, DOT, public works, etc. to discuss barriers, challenges, and potential solutions.
4. Develop site-specific access plans that may include:
 - Road/parking upgrades or seasonal maintenance agreements.
 - Easement negotiations with private landowners.
 - Trail development or stabilization improvements.
 - ADA-friendly enhancements where feasible.
5. Secure funding and necessary permits through grants, tourism development funds, or public/private partnerships to implement priority improvements.
6. Provide clear online visitor information for hard-to-access sites (maps, warnings, access conditions, etc.).
7. Explore partnerships with outfitters for guided tours to otherwise inaccessible sites.
8. Monitor visitor usage and gather feedback to evaluate improvements and inform future upgrades.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- County and municipal governments (road/trail maintenance partners)
- ND Department of Transportation (infrastructure guidance and approvals)
- Site operators (site stewardship)
- Local chambers of commerce and convention & visitors bureaus (communications and promotion)
- Landowners and tribal representatives where applicable

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Conduct site assessments; identify priority improvements and funding opportunities.
- **2027:** Develop site-specific access plans; secure easements/permits and funding commitments
- **2028:** Implement improvements at highest priority site.
- **Ongoing:** Expand access solutions; launch guided tour partnerships.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Access Assessments & Site Plans:** Completed for 1 site by 2027.
- **Funding Secured:** For improvements to site by 2027.
- **Physical Improvements:** 1 site complete by 2028.
- **Maintenance Compliance:** Annual inspection reports confirm access routes remain usable and safe.

Welcoming, Attractive, and Service Ready City/Town Entrances, Business Districts, and Main Streets



High-Priority Tactic

Establish Ongoing Community Appearance and Maintenance Programs

First impressions will be important for new visitors.



STEPS

1. Develop and distribute a “First Impressions” checklist (See Appendix G) for local auditors, public works staff, and tourism leaders to assess entry corridors, downtown streetscapes, and key sites for visitor readiness.
2. Coordinate seasonal clean-up campaigns (spring spruce-ups, pre-summer beautification days) engaging residents, schools, and civic groups prior to the peak tourism season.
3. Review the **Tourism and Community Enhancement Grants** available for improvement and restoration grant opportunities.
4. Foster public-private partnerships within each community to co-fund and co-manage landscaping, planters, street furniture, and seasonal décor.
5. Launch a recognition program (e.g., “Best Dressed Downtown” or “Golden Broom Award”) honoring businesses & volunteers who enhance visual appeal.
6. Conduct annual site audits region-wide to track maintenance issues (mowing, weeds, signage, litter, sidewalk repairs, etc.).
7. Collaborate with city leaders to incorporate appearance/maintenance priorities into city budgets, local ordinances, and tourism development plans to ensure long-term sustainability and funding.
8. Launch a Community Beautification Grant Program offering small grants or matching funds to support:
 - Façade improvements
 - Mural projects
 - Welcome signage upgrades
 - Renovation/removal of dilapidated structures
9. Establish long-term maintenance and stewardship plans for amenities, murals, and public spaces, including volunteer programs and designated funding.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local governments, city planners, and city/county public works departments
- Local chambers of commerce, convention & visitors bureaus, and downtown business associations
- Civic/service clubs (Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis), youth groups, and volunteers
- Local businesses and other tourism partners

TIMELINE

- **2025 – 2026:** Develop First Impressions checklist; conduct initial audits; launch one (1) community clean-up campaign.
- **2027:** Formalize recognition program; launch first round of Community Beautification Grant; expand clean-up campaigns to all counties
- **2028–Ongoing:** Conduct annual audits and seasonal clean-ups; track progress using audit data and community feedback; fully establish long-term maintenance and stewardship programs for amenities

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Community Audits:** 5+ communities completing “First Impressions” checklist by 2027; 80% of audited sites showing year-over-year improvement.
- **Community Clean-Up:** 75% of communities holding clean-up campaigns by 2027.
- **Grants Awarded:** 5+ Community Beautification Grants provided by 2029.
- **Business District Occupancy:** Increase occupancy rates by 5% annually in participating downtowns over 3-year period.
- **Visual improvement score:** Communities improve by at least 1 full point on a 5-point First Impressions checklist year-over-year.



High-Priority Tactic

Invest in Visitor Friendly Amenities and Position Downtowns as First-Stop Visitor Hubs

Spaces should be welcoming for visitors.



STEPS

1. Install and maintain visitor/pedestrian-friendly improvements (lighting, benches, planters, signage, trash receptacles, bike racks, storefront updates, etc.) in high-trafficked areas and downtowns.
2. Transform vacant/dilapidated buildings into visually appealing assets (murals, community art, themed photo-ops, temporary pop-up markets).
3. Develop a Regional Mural Trail that connects multiple communities:
 - Commission local/regional artists to create murals reflecting history, culture, community identity, or tourism-attracting content.
 - Produce maps, itineraries, and digital guides linking murals with nearby dining, retail, and attractions.
4. Modernize visitor centers with updated interpretive displays, digital wayfinding tools, interactive maps and kiosks, and mobile integration.
5. Position downtowns as first-stop visitor hubs (see steps to right)
6. Establish maintenance schedules for streetscapes, lighting, and amenities.
7. Track data (foot traffic, retail sales, visitor surveys) to monitor success and refine offerings.

Visitor Hub Steps:

- Consider signing up for the Rest Area Literature Rack Program through the **North Dakota Department of Commerce**.
- Establish or enhance visitor centers or kiosks in central downtown locations (libraries, chambers, historic buildings).
- Ensure visible wayfinding signage points travelers to the downtown hub from highways and entry corridors.
- Develop “Welcome Walks” or self-guided tours highlighting shops, restaurants, murals, and historic sites within walking distance.
- Work with local businesses to standardize hours so visitors find open shops/restaurants when they arrive.
- Recruit or incentivize dining and retail options that fill identified gaps (e.g., coffee shops, evening dining, local crafts).
- Create family-friendly entertainment nodes (live music, street markets, evening events) to activate downtowns in the evening
- Brand each downtown as a gateway hub (e.g., “Discover Bowman First” or “Start in Dickinson”).
- Encourage storefront beautification and signage upgrades to create welcoming visuals.
- Develop a volunteer greeter/ambassador program (e.g., “Ask Me About _____” buttons for business owners and staff).

Tactic Continued





COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local governments and economic development offices
- Local businesses
- Chambers of commerce and CVBs
- Local artists and cultural organizations
- Business improvement districts and downtown associations
- Lodging and dining establishments
- Developers, investors, and entrepreneurs
- Tourism vendors (signage, kiosks, construction, tech providers)
- North Dakota Department of Commerce - Tourism & Marketing

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Identify mural trail pilot communities; begin adding amenities (benches, planters, etc) to areas most in need; begin visitor center modernization plans; launch “Welcome Walks” and/or greeter/ambassador program.
- **2027:** Launch mural trail pilot with existing murals and 1 – 3 new murals; host first downtown hub events.
- **2028:** Pilot first “downtown hub” visitor kiosks; integrate maintenance tasks into municipal budgets and planning documents.
- **2029 and beyond:** Expand mural trail to 10+ murals; annual maintenance, content refresh, and promotion of trail and hub projects.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Visitor Amenities:** 10+ new amenities installed (benches, lighting, signage) across downtowns by 2026. 20+ more by 2027
- **Murals:** 1 – 3 new murals commissioned by 2027; 10+ total murals on mural trail by 2029
- **Visitor Centers:** 1 – 2 visitor centers modernized by 2029
- **First-Stop Hubs:** Downtowns in all counties branded and promoted as “first-stop hubs” by 2029.
- **Foot Traffic:** 20% increase in downtown visitor foot traffic by Year 5.

Expanded Dining, Retail, Lodging, and Entertainment Destinations



High-Priority Tactic

Facilitate Market-Driven Development and Enhancement of Tourism-Serving Businesses

STEPS

1. Conduct a comprehensive gap analysis of lodging, dining, retail, and visitor services to identify opportunities and underserved areas.
2. Meet with local businesses, developers, entrepreneurs, and economic development offices to share findings and encourage tourism-related business starts.
3. Provide planning resources and technical assistance for new/expanding businesses, including:
 - Access to loans, grants, and incentive programs
 - Marketing and operational guidance
 - One-on-one mentorship for startups or expanding businesses
4. Work with local government to streamline permitting and zoning processes to reduce barriers and facilitate timely business development.
5. Assist prospective businesses with site selection and connections to local partners – including chambers, CVBs, property owners, and service providers.
6. Promote the regional tourism economy as an investment opportunity through targeted outreach to entrepreneurs and investors.
7. Monitor market trends and visitor demand annually to refine business support programs.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local economic development offices and planning departments
- Chambers of commerce and CVBs
- County/city governments (permitting, zoning)
- Small business development centers and lenders
- Local business owners
- Potential investors, developers, and entrepreneurs

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Conduct gap analysis; begin engaging businesses, developers, and investors and outlining support programs.
- **2026-2027:** Launch local incentive programs, technical assistance, and targeted investment outreach.
- **2028 and beyond:** Evaluate program outcomes and adjust support strategies for new business opportunities.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **New or Expanded Businesses:** 5+ new tourism-serving businesses by 2027; 10+ by 2029.
- **Business Support:** 20+ businesses receiving technical assistance by 2027.
- **Investor Engagement:** Track inquiries or leads generated through regional investment marketing campaigns; target 10+ active investor engagements by 2027.



High-Priority Tactic

Encourage and Incentivize Extended Business Hours/Seasons

Aligning business hours to tourism will help increase sales and visits.



STEPS

1. Analyze visitor flow patterns (TR Library visitation, seasonal peaks, weekends) to determine priority hours/days.
2. Work with businesses to coordinate operating hours aligned with demand, particularly evenings/weekends.
3. Launch an incentive program to encourage extended hours, including:
 - Featured placement on swnorthdakota.com, itineraries, maps, and social media
 - Small grants or “Weekend Ready” stipends for businesses extending hours/participating in packages
 - Shared staffing pools or volunteer support during peak events
4. Monitor business participation and visitor engagement, adjusting incentives as needed.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local economic development offices
- Local chambers of commerce and CVBs
- Local business owners
- Event organizers (coordination during peak periods)

TIMELINE

- **2025 – 2026:** Analyze flow patterns with Library opening; identify and convene participating businesses
- **2026–2027:** Launch expanded hours, bundled packages, etc.
- **2028 and beyond:** Expand participation; refine incentive program and adjust campaigns

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Business Participation:** 25+ businesses participating by 2027.
- **Aligned Hours:** 75% of participants adjusting hours to align with visitor demand



Medium-Priority Tactic

Diversify and Expand Overnight Accommodation Options

STEPS

1. Inventory existing lodging options (hotels, motels, guest ranches, campgrounds, Airbnb/VRBO, etc.) to identify diversification opportunities.
2. Identify and support development of niche accommodations, such as:
 - Historic inns or buildings converted into boutique lodging
 - Guest ranch stays
 - Unique “AirBNB-style” offerings (converted grain bins, covered wagons, historic structures, etc.)
3. Expand camping/glamping options by:
 - Upgrading primitive campsites to full-service (electric, water, sewer) where feasible
 - Introduce yurts, safari tents, or glamping pods to appeal to first-time outdoor visitors or stargazers
4. Provide technical assistance and incentives for modernization of existing lodging, including:
 - Facility upgrades
 - Branding/marketing support
 - Integration into booking platforms (Expedia, Airbnb, Booking.com)
5. Promote diversified accommodations in regional itineraries and marketing campaigns.
6. Monitor occupancy rates and visitor feedback to guide future investment.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local property owners, lodging operators, developers, and investors
- Economic development offices/planners
- Outdoor recreation and campground associations

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Conduct lodging inventory and gap analysis; identify potential pilot projects.
- **2027:** Support development or renovation of 1 – 2 unique lodging establishments; integrate new or modernized lodging options into regional itineraries and marketing campaigns.
- **2028 and beyond:** Ongoing monitoring, promotion, and support for additional lodging diversification.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **New or Diversified Lodging Options:** 1 – 2 new or renovated properties by 2027.
- **Glamping/Campground Expansion:** 1 – 2 upgraded or new camping/glamping sites by 2027.
- **Occupancy Rates:** Achieve 80%+ occupancy for newly developed or upgraded accommodations by Year 2 of opening.
- **Integration with Booking Platforms:** 80% of lodging options listed on at least 2 major travel services in Year 1.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Develop Retail, Culinary, and Entertainment Experiences That Showcase Regional Identity

STEPS

1. Launch a branded retail corridor or seasonal pop-up market in an identified priority location that highlights:
 - TR/western-themed goods
 - Local artisan crafts and heritage products
 - Ag-based retail (bison jerky, honey, canned goods, local wine/spirits, etc.)
 - Partnership with arts councils and maker collectives to curate rotating artisan showcases.
2. Provide small business development resources to encourage downtown shops to offer unique gifts, outdoor gear, or cultural merchandise tied to itineraries.
3. Promote retail districts through themed trails (e.g., “Antiques & Western Collectibles Trail” or “Badlands Maker Market Tour”).
4. Develop and host a multi-county “Regional Restaurant Week” to highlight culinary diversity (German, Ukrainian, Scandinavian, etc.) and entice off-season traffic. Incorporate a rotating “Farm to Table” special event.
5. Develop a “Presidential Plate” program to coincide with the grand opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, encouraging restaurants to feature Roosevelt-themed menu items or signature dishes inspired by regional history.
6. Support culinary entrepreneurs, food trucks, and mobile vendors through training, mentorship, and small business development services.
7. Explore and consider development of “business incubator” spaces, focused on food services, to provide access to shared or pop-up kitchen spaces (e.g., commissary kitchens or community centers) to lower entry barriers for new operators.
 - Connect culinary participants with regional farmers and suppliers to promote local sourcing and highlight the region’s agricultural heritage.
8. Expand seasonal and evening entertainment offerings, such as:
 - Weekly summer downtown music nights or outdoor movies
 - Regional heritage festivals (Ukrainian Days, Rancher Roundup)
 - Family-friendly interactive experiences (living history, scavenger hunts (i.e. “Find the Teddy Roosevelt”), escape-room style historic tours).
9. Partner with local venues and entrepreneurs to create indoor entertainment options for shoulder and winter seasons (e.g., bowling, small theaters, escape rooms, VR history experiences).
10. Promote initiatives through digital campaigns, itineraries, and social media.

Tactic Continued



GOAL 3 | DESIRED OUTCOME #3



COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Chambers of commerce and CVBs
- Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library
- Local farmers, food co-ops, and producers
- Arts councils, maker collectives, and retailers
- Small business development centers
- Event organizers, cultural groups, and local musicians/theater groups
- ND Department of Agriculture and ND Tourism Division

TIMELINE

- **2025 – 2026:** Identify retail corridor/pop-up spaces; plan Restaurant Week and Presidential Plate; design entertainment pilot (music night, festival).
- **2026:** Launch first Restaurant Week, pop-up market, and/or pilot evening entertainment series.
- **2027 and beyond:** Introduce “Farm to Table” event; introduce at least one (1) new indoor, off-peak entertainment option; expand programs to additional communities; introduce rotating seasonal culinary/retail/entertainment themes.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Culinary:** 10+ restaurants participate in inaugural Restaurant Week (10% growth annually); 3 – 5 culinary entrepreneurs supported by 2027; incubator space operating at 75% utilization by 2028.
- **Retail:** 2–3 retail trails established by 2027; 5% annual growth in retail sales tied to tourism.
- **Entertainment:** 2+ recurring evening/seasonal events launched by 2027; 5,000 combined event attendees annually by Year 3; one (1) new off-peak entertainment option available by 2028.

Communities, Businesses, and Leaders Equipped with Information to Understand, Support, and Grow Tourism



Medium-Priority Tactic

Build Community Awareness of Tourism's Economic Value and Provide Support and Training for Frontline Service Professionals/ Other Stakeholders to Create Positive Visitor First Impressions

STEPS

1. Develop tourism impact infographics and fact sheets highlighting local spending, jobs, and tax revenue in easy-to-digest visuals, customized by county or community.
2. Present regular tourism updates at city council, county commission, and school board using fact sheets, case studies, and success stories.
3. Create a "Case for Tourism" toolkit (presentation slides + talking points) to help local leaders and advocates champion the tourism message.
4. Create a peer network of county tourism leaders for sharing ideas, resources, and best practices.
5. Convene periodic roundtables (virtual or in-person) for chambers, CVBs, museums, lodging, dining, and community leaders to:
 - Share updates and align messaging
 - Discuss collaborative projects and joint funding applications
6. Provide practical training workshops in hospitality, customer service, digital marketing, and event planning – targeting businesses and frontline staff.
7. Integrate tourism education into civic and school programming (e.g., service clubs, high school career days, civics classes) to foster community buy-in and workforce interest.
8. Launch a Tourism Ambassador recognition program highlighting outstanding service professionals through awards, social media features, and small professional development grants.



GOAL 3 | DESIRED OUTCOME #4



COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local chambers of commerce, CVBs, and tourism boards
- ND Tourism Division
- City/County economic development offices
- School districts, career/technical programs, and community colleges
- Workforce training centers
- Local businesses and hospitality operators

TIMELINE

- **2025 - 2026:** Create county-level impact fact sheets; launch “Case for Tourism” toolkit; begin city/county presentations; establish peer network.
- **2027:** Expand into schools/civic programming; launch hospitality and customer service workshops (goal: at least one per county).
- **2028:** Launch Tourism Ambassador program
- **Ongoing:** Maintain annual updates; rotate roundtable hosts; track sentiment and spending trends.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Community engagement:**
 - Present tourism updates to 100% of city councils and county commissions in the region by the end of 2026.
 - Maintain at least 75% attendance from targeted stakeholder groups at roundtables.
- **Training Participation:** Conduct 1 – 2 workshops annually across the region with a minimum of 50 total participants per year.
- **Ambassador program:** Recognize at least one outstanding service professional per county each year starting in 2028.
- **Perception Shift:** Achieve a 10% increase in positive community sentiment toward tourism (via biennial survey) within three years.
- **Economic Indicators:** Track regional tourism spending and lodging tax growth annually as a measure of improved support and visitor experiences.

Logging Camp Ranch





**Headquarters
Trailhead**
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
North Dakota Field Office



GOAL 4

Develop Year-Round Tourism Through Expanded Recreation, Events, and Festivals

While summer remains the peak tourism season in the State, southwest North Dakota's landscapes and communities offer compelling reasons to visit year-round.

Expanding recreation and events beyond the traditional travel window will help stabilize local economies, support small businesses, and create reasons for visitors to return in every season. Initiatives such as winter festivals, holiday markets, and seasonal challenge campaigns can showcase the unique beauty of the Badlands under snow or the prairie in bloom.

Year-round tourism also requires strengthening recreation infrastructure and diversifying programming. By mapping trails, expanding guided

outdoor experiences, and investing in amenities, the region can better serve visitors during shoulder and winter seasons.

Bundling museums, historic sites, and cultural events into off-peak itineraries will further extend travel opportunities. With the right mix of programming, promotion, and infrastructure, southwest North Dakota can move from being a summer destination to a four-season experience.



Enhanced Year-Round Recreational Assets



High-Priority Tactic

Develop and Promote Year-Round Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

Outdoor recreation is one of the top amenities in Southwest North Dakota



STEPS

1. Conduct a comprehensive inventory and mapping of existing recreation assets (hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, ATV/UTV, snowmobiling, ice fishing, scenic drives). Include condition of trails, signage, access points, and amenities.
2. Develop a regional outdoor recreation guide (digital and print) highlighting:
 - Trails/routes by activity, difficulty, and season
 - Key access points with GPS coordinates
 - Nearby lodging, dining, fuel stops, and outfitters
 - Insider tips (e.g., best photo spots, seasonal considerations)
3. Bundle recreation experiences with lodging, dining, and cultural attractions and incorporate into itineraries and bookable packages (e.g., “Hike & Dine Weekend,” “Snowmobile + Cozy Cabins,” “Fall Hunting & Heritage Tour”).
4. Prioritize infrastructure upgrades at high-demand sites (restrooms, shaded seating, improved signage, accessible trailheads). Develop phased improvement projects with local governments and land managers.
5. Launch seasonal outdoor challenges with strong marketing hooks, incentives, and digital/social engagement:
 - Hike the Badlands Challenge
 - Winter Trails Passport
 - Spring on the Water (kayak, paddleboard, fishing)
 - Fall Hunting Adventures with lodging and gear discounts
6. Partner with and train local outfitters/guides to offer bookable experiences such as guided hikes, fossil digs (with ND Paleontology staff), horseback rides, ATV tours, or hunting

Tactic Continued





COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- County park boards, ND Parks & Recreation, county highway departments
- Local outfitters, hunting/fishing clubs, trail associations, snowmobile/ATV clubs
- North Dakota Tourism Division, chambers of commerce, local CVBs
- Lodging operators, recreation rental providers, outdoor retailers
- Local property owners

TIMELINE

- **2025 – 2026:** Complete asset inventory and mapping; develop recreation guide; identify priority infrastructure upgrades.
- **2026:** Publish recreation guide (digital + print); begin seasonal marketing campaigns; pilot first outdoor challenge (e.g., Hike the Badlands).
- **2027:** Expand challenges (Winter Trails, Spring on the Water); implement first round of infrastructure improvements (signage, restrooms, trailhead upgrades).
- **2028–2029:** Add new bookable packages, expand challenges across all counties, update guide annually.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Asset Inventory:** Complete 100% regional asset inventory by end 2026.
- **Recreation Guide:** Distribute at least 1,500 printed guides and achieve 1,000+ digital downloads/views in Year 1.
- **Outdoor Challenge Participants:** Secure 100+ participants in first-year with annual growth of 10%.
- **Lodging Tax:** Increase shoulder-season (Oct–April) lodging tax revenues by 8–10% within three years.
- **Bookable Outdoor Packages:** 12+ regionwise by 2029.
- **Amenity Upgrades:** 10+ improvements regionwide by 2029.

Expanded or New Events that Attract Off-Peak Visitors



Medium-Priority Tactic

Establish Seasonal and Themed Programming & Signature Events

STEPS

1. Identify priority event concepts and partners (ranchers, cultural groups, recreation outfitters, historic sites) and align with seasonal tourism goals with a focus on off-peak opportunities.
2. Launch one (1) recurring seasonal program. Examples include:
 - Cattle Country Ranch Tours (fall) with ranch demos, meals, and western talks.
 - Snowshoe/Ski Days events at Schnell Recreation Area, White Butte, and/or Bowman-Haley Dam.
 - “Illumination Trails” featuring a drivable map of light displays with local food/drink stops.
3. Partner with outfitters and gear providers to ensure access to rentals (snowshoes, skis, fat-tire bikes) and train them as event hosts.
4. Develop a signature regional winter festival (e.g., Badlands Winter Lights, Roosevelt’s Winter Retreat, Blizzard Festival, etc.) with music, vendors, outdoor activities, and cultural programming.
 - Align with the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library for signature cultural or history-themed events that anchor multi-day stays.
5. Bundle events with lodging/dining promotions and create bookable packages (e.g., “Festival Weekend Package” including lodging, event admission, and local meals).
6. Build and maintain a centralized regional events calendar across counties on swnorthdakota.com, integrated with partner websites and ND Tourism.
7. Monitor seasonal visitation trends using visitor metrics to evaluate the success of year-round initiatives and refine programming accordingly.
8. Launch a winter/off-peak marketing campaign promoting seasonal events, cozy retreats, and unique Badlands experiences through targeted ads, influencer partnerships, and social media storytelling.
9. Collect visitor feedback, lodging data, and social media analytics to evaluate success and refine programming annually.

Tactic Continued





COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Local chambers, CVBs, and tourism boards
- Event organizers, ranch operators, recreation outfitters, cultural/heritage groups
- Lodging and dining operators
- ND Tourism Division (marketing and statewide integration)

TIMELINE

- **2026:** Finalize event concepts, secure partners, build centralized events calendar.
- **2026 – 2027:** Launch first seasonal programs and pilot one signature event; begin marketing campaign.
- **2027–2028:** Expand recurring events across more counties; refine programming based on metrics; add 1–2 more signature events.
- **Ongoing:** Update calendar annually; adapt seasonal programming to trends and feedback.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Programs:** Launch at least one (1) recurring seasonal program by 2026.
- **Signature Event:** Host at least one (1) signature regional event by 2027 with 10% annual growth in attendance.
- **Lodging:** 10% increase in off-peak occupancy during event weekends by 2028.
- **Event Visibility:** Centralized calendar includes 100% of major county events by 2028.

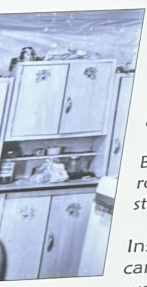


Hutmacher Farm Home

The Hutmacher farm home was constructed in the same fashion as the outbuildings on the farm-site, using sandstone, clay, brush, straw, and used only a small amount of lumber and other salvaged or purchased materials.

Beehive-shaped, clay coated chimneys are visible in two locations along the roof-line. Originally, coal stoves were attached to the beehive chimneys with stovepipe - one in the kitchen, one in the living room, and one in a bedroom.

Inside the house, the exposed timber rafters were covered with flattened cardboard boxes as insulation, and held in place by re-using canning jar lids as washers, and then covered with old pieces of fabric soaked in wheat paste, applied to the cardboard and painted to finish the ceilings.



and coal stove
cal Society of ND



Living Room
Courtesy of Father William Sherman



Ball canning jar lids used as ceiling insulation washers and empty wood thread spools used as coat hooks
Photographs by Ryan Bentley



Living/Dining Room and coal stove
Courtesy of State Historical Society of SD

Plank flooring was added to the farm house in the 1950s to cover the original oiled dirt floors.

Empty wooden thread spools were used as coat-hooks on the backs of doors, and disassembled wooden packing crates were used to build shelves and a small pantry/storage space under the chimneys. Curtains were hung between some of the rooms to serve as doors.





GOAL 5

Strengthen Regional Identity, Branding, and Partnerships

The “Wide Open Wonder” brand captures the rugged beauty and cultural richness of southwest North Dakota, but greater investment is needed to unify and amplify the region’s story.

Search engine optimization, refreshed websites, thematic content, and AI-driven campaigns can help ensure that attractions and communities

stand out in an increasingly competitive market. At the same time, cohesive branding across counties, events, and partner campaigns will strengthen recognition and reinforce a consistent identity.



Coordinated and Implemented Regional Marketing Campaigns through New and Expanded Partnerships



High-Priority Tactic

Strengthen Regional Brand Alignment and Resources

Coordinated branding and marketing will better unify the entire region into a desired tourism attraction.



STEPS

1. Develop a regional marketing resource hub containing logos, photo libraries, templates, messaging guidelines, calendars, and a partner directory (See Appendix H); ensure materials are downloadable and easy to customize.
2. Create a regional brand extension toolkit with customizable templates (ads, social graphics, press releases) to help communities align promotions with “Wide Open Wonder.”
3. Audit signage, visitor centers, and websites to ensure consistent brand integration across the region; provide recommendations for updates.
4. Design and distribute a press-ready media kit (high-resolution photos, story leads, fact sheets, contact directory) for earned media and influencer outreach.
5. Review the **ND Department of Commerce Digital Marketing Kit** for campaign integration and **advertising opportunities**.
6. Develop and roll out time-based signature marketing campaigns leveraging “Wide Open Wonder,” including:
 - A Presidential Library grand-opening campaign highlighting western culture and regional assets.
 - A “Hidden Gems” campaign spotlighting lesser-known attractions through video, blogs, and influencer content. (e.g. Fort Dilts, Custer/Sully Trail & Historic Markers, Hutmacher Farm, Old Yellowstone Trail/Marker, Burning Coal Vein, Mystic Theatre, VanHorn’s Western & Antique Auto Museum, Hiddenwood Cliff, Last Great Buffalo Hunt Sites, General Custer Campsite, Assumption Abbey, local museums)
 - Seasonal “content series” (e.g., Time Travel Tuesdays, Retro Routes) featuring historical sites, before/after photos, or heritage travel routes.
7. Integrate human stories by featuring residents and families with historic ties to pioneer, ranching, or cultural traditions across digital and social channels.
8. Launch geo-targeted ads (geo-fencing Medora, TRNP, and high-traffic areas) to promote nearby attractions, dining, and western culture experiences; retarget visitors with themed content after their trip.
9. Expand billboard, digital, and social ad placements tied to seasonal opportunities and visitor flows.

Tactic Continued





COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Chambers of commerce, CVBs, local tourism boards
- City/County economic development offices
- Local businesses, museums, lodging, and dining operators
- ND Tourism Division staff and digital/social partners
- Media outlets, influencers, and content creators

TIMELINE

- **2025 – 2026:** Develop resource hub, brand extension toolkit, and press-ready media kit; plan Presidential Library and Hidden Gems campaigns.
- **2026:** Launch initial marketing campaigns, themed social content series, and geo-targeted/retargeting ads; begin billboard/digital ad placements.
- **2027–2028:** Expand seasonal campaigns and refine marketing based on analytics and visitor feedback.
- **Ongoing:** Maintain brand consistency across partners, update resource hub, and continue coordinated campaigns and promotional efforts.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Marketing Resource Hub and Toolkits:** Launched and distributed to partners by Q1 2026.
- **Presidential Library Campaign:** Regionwide campaign launched by Q2 2026.
- **Hidden Gems Campaign:** Regionwide campaign launched by Q3 2026.
- **Digital/Social Engagement:** 30% increase in Year 1.
- **Partner Adoption:** 75% of partners using brand-aligned materials by 2026.



Medium-Priority Tactic

Expand Partner and Influencer Collaboration

STEPS

1. Host periodic roundtables (virtual or in-person) with chambers, CVBs, businesses, and tourism organizations to align messaging, share updates, and coordinate campaigns.
2. Deliver brand education sessions (webinars, workshops or checklists) for chambers, businesses, and other local communicators on correct use of logos, taglines, and messaging.
3. Encourage cross-promotion of events and attractions via partner websites, newsletters, social media, and in-person collateral (maps, placemats, QR codes).
4. Build partnerships with influencers and local content creators (travel bloggers, YouTubers, Instagram storytellers) to produce and share authentic content highlighting regional themes.
5. Establish a partner reporting and feedback system where collaborators can share campaign outcomes, visitor feedback, or local challenges for continuous improvement.

COLLABORATORS/CHAMPIONS

- Roosevelt Custer Regional Council
- Chambers of commerce, CVBs, local tourism boards
- City/County economic development offices
- Businesses, museums, lodging, and dining operators
- Influencers, bloggers, and content creators
- ND Tourism Division

TIMELINE

- **2025 - 2026:** Educate partners on brand use; set up roundtables; identify potential influencer collaborations.
- **2026:** Launch roundtables; implement initial cross-promotions; begin influencer campaign(s)
- **2027–2028:** Expand partnerships, track results, refine influencer/content collaborations.
- **Ongoing:** Update partners on branding standards and opportunities; maintain collaboration meetings.

EVALUATION METRICS

- **Partner Engagement:** 75%+ of identified partners actively participating in roundtables or campaigns.
- **Influencer/Content Reach:** Achieve 10,000+ combined impressions/engagements through influencer campaigns.
- **Cross-Promotion Participation:** Minimum of 25 partners sharing campaigns/events across websites, newsletters, and social media.
- **Brand Consistency:** Conduct annual audit of partner usage of regional branding; aim for 90% adherence to brand guidelines.

Last Great Buffalo Hunts

Adams County



Hiddenwood Hunt



Buffalo Trails Tour

Self-Guided Tour in the Dakota Buttes

DAKOTA BUTTES VISITORS COUNCIL
HETTINGER, ND

www.HettingerND.com/BuffaloTrails



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