

2025-2030 BELLINGHAM TOURISM STRATEGIC PLAN

Enhancing Recreation, Arts, and Culture through Lodging Tax Investments

A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bellingham has the potential to be a standout regional tourism destination, offering a perfect blend of outdoor adventure, rich cultural experiences, and inviting urban centers. By investing in recreation, arts and culture, Bellingham can thrive as a vibrant city while ensuring that tourism benefits the local community and environment. This strategic plan will help guide the effective use of lodging tax revenues to achieve these goals and create a lasting positive impact on the city's economy and quality of life.

In 2025, the industry is expected to generate approximately \$2.5 million in lodging taxes. This is a tax collected from visitors staying in accommodations such as hotels and motels.

This plan does not cover Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism (BWCT)'s Strategic Plan, Destination Marketing Plan and Program of Work; however, it does support and inform BWCT's work. BWCT is the nonprofit destination marketing organization responsible for promoting Bellingham and Whatcom County as a premier tourism destination. The City designates a portion of its lodging taxes to support the activities of BWCT and collections from the Tourism Promotion Area (TPA) also pass through the City to BWCT. In turn, BWCT reinvests these funds strategically for economic and community vitality, serves as an ex-officio advisor to the Bellingham Tourism Commission, and supports other lodging tax grantees with marketing support.

B. VISION STATEMENT

To position Bellingham as a premier destination for recreation, arts, and culture while fostering sustainable tourism that enriches the local community, supports downtown and Waterfront District revitalization, and protects the region's natural assets. Together these priorities contribute to Bellingham's unique identity.

C. GOVERNANCE

1. **Tourism Commission**

The City Council authorized a Tourism Commission for the purpose of establishing, maintaining, and/or coordinating relationships and communication between agencies promoting tourism and between such agencies and the city.

2. **Lodging Tax Advisory Committee (LTAC)**

LTAC is a subcommittee of the Tourism Commission and, pursuant to state law, consists of at least five members. It must include:

- At least two members who represent businesses required to collect the lodging tax (e.g., hotels).

- At least two members who are involved in activities authorized to be funded by lodging tax revenues.
- An elected official of the city, who serves as chair of the committee.

LTAC (and the Tourism Commission) will use this strategic plan as a guide when soliciting grant applications and considering budget recommendations for City Council consideration.

3. **Allowed Uses of Lodging Tax (RCW)**

The City may use lodging tax for:

- Tourism marketing.
- Marketing and operations of special events and festivals designed to attract visitors.
- Supporting the operations and capital expenditures of tourism-related facilities owned or operated by a municipality or public facilities district.
- Supporting the operations of tourism-related facilities owned or operated by nonprofit organizations.

D. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

When evaluating funding requests for events, activities, or initiatives in Bellingham, including BWCT's Marketing and Media Plan, the following guiding principles should be considered.

1. **Maximizing Positive Economic Impact**

- Increase visitor spending: Focus on investments likely to draw visitors from outside the region and generate spending in Bellingham's local economy, including accommodations, dining/entertainment, experiences/tours, retail, and transportation.
- Collaborate with hotels and area businesses: Favor projects that support partnerships with area businesses, promoting collaborations between event organizers and local vendors, venues, and service providers.

2. **Building and Strengthening Bellingham's Identity**

- Authentically represent Bellingham's brand: Prioritize funding for events, initiatives and facilities that align with and showcase Bellingham's unique cultural, recreational, and environmental assets.
- Increase regional and national visibility: Invest in events and facilities that elevate Bellingham's profile regionally and nationally, establishing and supporting Bellingham as a destination of choice for both leisure and group travel.
- Provide inclusive and diverse representation: Fund initiatives that celebrate the diversity of Bellingham's residents, history, and cultural influences, ensuring an authentic visitor experience.

3. **Supporting Off-Peak Season Events and Activities**

- Diversify the tourism calendar: Focus on funding events during Bellingham’s off-peak seasons (e.g., fall, winter and spring), extending the prime summer tourism season and mitigating seasonal fluctuations in business activity.
- Leverage seasonal strengths: Encourage events that capitalize on Bellingham’s unique seasonal offerings, such as winter sports, indoor cultural activities, and creative programming during the off-peak seasons.

E. STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

This plan focuses on three key strategies where lodging tax investments can have the most significant impact:

1. **Promote Outdoor and Indoor Recreation Opportunities**
2. **Strengthen and Expand Arts and Cultural Experiences in Bellingham Urban Villages, with an emphasis on Downtown**
3. **Improve Visitor Experience**

Strategy 1: Promote Outdoor and Indoor Recreational Opportunities

Bellingham’s and the region’s natural surroundings are a core visitor attraction. Legacy investments, such as the Greenways levy, and National Parks have created exceptional outdoor recreation opportunities. With over 80 miles of trails in Bellingham and 200 miles through the county, strategic investments in outdoor infrastructure and accessibility will continue to draw adventure visitors. While there is an abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities, the community is lacking in sufficient indoor recreational facilities to draw visitors during the off season.

Actions: Lodging Tax Investment

- **Event and Festival Promotion:** Sponsor outdoor recreational events and races that attract athletes and spectators from outside the region.
- **World Cup 2026:** FIFA Seattle has selected Bellingham as a Fan Zone. At a minimum, Bellingham will host 6 watch parties, which will air the Seattle matches. Invest in watch parties and activities that enhance visitor experience.
- **Off-peak Sports and Recreation Promotion:** Encourage off-peak indoor and outdoor recreation opportunities.
- **Visitor Infrastructure:** Help fund enhancements to improve the visitor experience which may include trailhead infrastructure, signage, and other improvements.
- **Tourism-Related Facilities:** Invest in City-owned facilities to improve the visitor experience while also focusing on community priorities such as an indoor recreation facility, state-of-the-art covered skatepark, and public docks/boardwalks in the Waterfront District.

Actions: Advocacy

- **Trail Network Expansion and Maintenance:** Encourage maintenance and expansion of Bellingham’s extensive trail systems for hiking, biking, and other outdoor sports and recreation.
- **Waterfront District Development:** Continue developing Bellingham’s Waterfront District, including access to the bay, trails, and facilities for water sports like kayaking and paddleboarding.
- **Indoor Multi-Purpose Facility:** Advocate for the creation of facilities that support a wide range of sports and recreational activities to attract athletes and teams.

Strategy 2: Strengthen and Expand Arts and Cultural Experiences in Urban Villages, with an emphasis on Downtown

Downtown Bellingham and Fairhaven serve as the focal point for both visitors and residents. Strategic investments here will attract more visitors to the city center, increase foot traffic, and improve the downtown experience for both visitors and locals. Provide visitors with authentic experiences that tie into local culture. In 2024, over 400,000 people who came from outside 50 miles visited in Downtown and over 220,000 people visited Fairhaven¹.

Actions: Lodging Tax Investments

- **Event and Festival Promotion:** Use lodging tax funds to support cultural events and festivals. Fund music festivals, theater productions, and arts festivals to attract diverse audiences. Encourage partnerships between local museums, galleries, and arts organizations to create collaborative marketing campaigns. Support food-related experiences like culinary tours, farm-to-table dining, and brewery tours to highlight Bellingham’s distinctive local cuisine and craft beverages.
- **Activation and Placemaking:** Support infrastructure for live music and arts festivals in public spaces such as Depot Market Square and Maritime Heritage Park. Outdoor art, murals, and sculptures can turn a walk through the city into an enriching, visually stimulating experience, encouraging people to explore beyond their original destination.
- **Visitor Experience:** Enhance public spaces, streets, restrooms, wayfinding systems, and other facilities to support downtown tourism.
- **Tourism Related Facilities:** Continue to support city-owned (public-facility district) venues such as the Mount Baker Theatre and the Whatcom Museum. Consider creative ways to invest in nonprofit art venues, galleries, and creative spaces that together elevate the impact of the Arts District.
- **Partnerships with Local Businesses:** Fund marketing initiatives to promote downtown and Fairhaven’s arts, dining, and shopping scene and consider both districts tourism-related facilities.

¹ Visitor data sourced from Datafy and provided by BWCT.

Actions: Advocacy

- **Cultural Tourism Strategic Plan Implementation:** Encourage the City, Downtown Bellingham Partnership, and the Fairhaven Association, to support BWCT and arts agencies to implement actions outlined in this plan.
- **Public Facilities District:** Support the City's desire to extend the collection of the sales tax rebate for 30-years to generate additional economic impact in Bellingham.
- **Clean, Safe and Welcoming Downtown:** Support initiatives to keep public spaces clean, safe and welcoming.

Strategy 3: Improve Visitor Experience

A clean, safe and welcoming city is essential for attracting visitors because it directly impacts their overall experience and sense of security. Visitors are more likely to visit destinations that offer well-maintained streets, public spaces, and facilities, as it enhances their comfort and enjoyment. Cleanliness reduces health risks and creates a welcoming atmosphere, while safety ensures visitors feel at ease exploring and engaging with the local culture. When a city is perceived as clean and safe, it builds trust and encourages positive word-of-mouth, leading to repeat visits and higher visitor satisfaction. Improving the visitor experience is about making the city more accessible, engaging, safe, and sustainable.

Actions: Lodging Tax Investments

- **Wayfinding:** While smartphones and GPS apps have revolutionized navigation, physical signage remains a vital part of the wayfinding ecosystem. Install clear signage in key areas that provide directions to popular destinations, transit hubs, and amenities – especially in the downtown core. Digital maps and apps that offer real-time information can further enhance convenience. The City has support from, and partners with, BWCT to create wayfinding solutions.
- **Visitor Readiness Audit:** Collaborate with BWCT to conduct an audit of both indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, as well as arts and cultural facilities, to assess their readiness for visitors, ensuring they are clean, well-maintained, and welcoming.

Actions: Advocacy

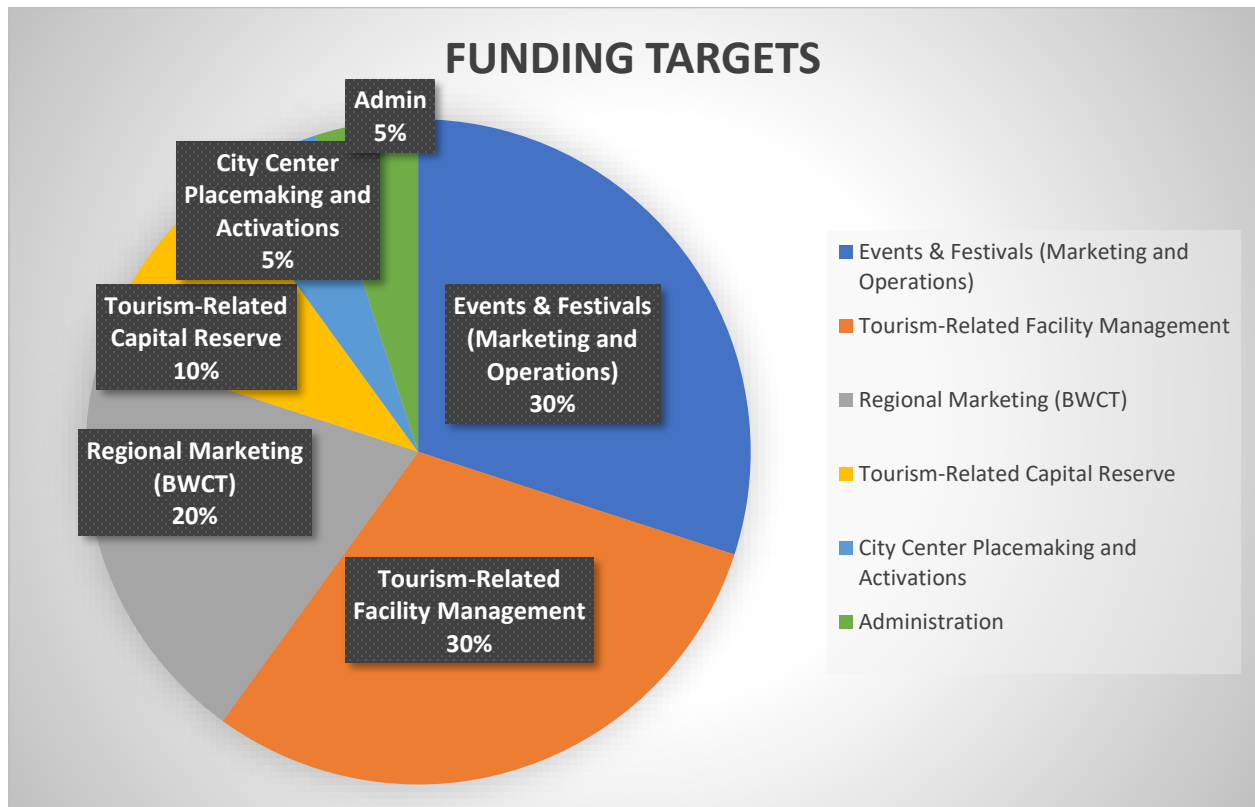
- **Clean and Welcoming:** Support the City's efforts to keep our city clean, with an emphasis on visitor destinations like trailheads, parks, parking areas and facilities like Depot Market Square.
- **Addressing Homelessness:** Encourage City leadership to continue to actively address issues and pursue partnerships related to ending homelessness and providing clean-up of encampments in the city.
- **Public Safety:** Support the continuation and expansion of city-wide public safety initiatives that create a welcoming and secure environment for both visitors and residents.
- **Create a Welcoming Atmosphere:** Encourage BWCT, Fairhaven Association, Downtown Bellingham Partnership, hotel operators and business owners to train tourism ambassadors and

employees so they can provide local insights, assist with directions, and offer recommendations. Their enthusiasm can significantly impact the overall visitor perception.

- **Charging Stations:** Advocate for local and state agencies to provide mobile phone, vehicle and other electronic charging stations to keep visitors connected and engaged during their visit.
- **Responsible Recreation:** Pledge to use trails and outdoor recreation spaces responsibly to maintain the region's natural assets and encourage outdoor enthusiasts to pledge the same.
- **Regional Relationships:** Support the health and vitality of the regional tourism landscape by maintaining strong relationships with neighboring destination marketing organizations such as Skagit and Island counties and Canadian entities like Surrey and Vancouver and offer necessary support for the State of Washington Tourism's efforts including advocating for consistent and stable funding.

F. FUNDING TARGETS

Generally, lodging tax revenues will be allocated across the following categories (percentages subject to change annually):



*BWCT has a roughly \$2.2M budget for regional marketing. Approximately \$1.4M TPA (Tourism Promotion Area), \$550k City Lodging Tax, and \$250k County Lodging Tax.

G. IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

1. **Oversight and Coordination**

City Staff will oversee the implementation of this strategic plan, with help from the Tourism Commission.

2. **Evaluation Metrics**

Key performance indicators (KPIs) will include:

- Growth in visitor numbers and overnight stays, including increases in lodging tax and tourism promotion area funds.
- Grantees - Growth in visitor numbers, spending, and overnight stays, including increases in lodging tax and tourism promotion area funds from individual grantees to inform future awards.
- Enhanced visibility of Bellingham through increased marketing and media coverage.

3. **Periodic Review**

The strategic plan will be reviewed annually to assess progress and adjust as necessary.