

Haywood County  
Tourism Development  
Authority

Group Sales  
3 Year (2016-2019)  
Strategic Plan

August 2016

## Overall Strategic Objectives

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- Utilize Haywood County's numerous event and meeting venues to drive group bookings that will generate new room nights and increased visitor spending across the entire county.
- Seek out opportunities to generate county-wide economic impact through meetings, motorcycle events, and group tours that facilitate activity in multiple communities.
- Increase performance metrics by 25% each year
- ROI goal is 5 to 1 (meaning every \$1,000 spent, \$5,000 is our return).

## Strategies

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**Establish appropriate expectations for the group sales function.** Destination group sales is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes time to develop the relationships necessary for success in the business and to be considered as a possible meeting and event by planners. Many planners are booking business two to four years out from the time of their event, meaning that a return on this investment may not be fully realized for some time. A reasonable goal to reach this objective is by 2020.

**Leverage Haywood County's strongest destination attributes** to generate planner interest in the county's meeting and event venues. Haywood County is not going to compete for business in the group market by trying to be like everyone else, particularly when competing against more established destinations or urban areas. It must attract the interest of planners by leveraging its competitive advantages but still addressing their needs. These assets include:

- Scenic natural mountain beauty
- Wide variety of unique accommodation and event venue spaces.
- Competitive room rates
- Central location within a day's drive of many major markets, with easy access via Interstate 40

- Frequent commercial air service located less than 1 hour away
- Two of the most popular national parks in the U.S.
- Wheels Through Time continues to be rated #1 on Trip Advisor
- Other major nationally-known attractions (Harrah's Cherokee Casino, Biltmore) in close proximity
- Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center
- Multiple championship golf courses
- Winter sports venues
- Numerous opportunities for unique offsite activities and events, including team-building and training exercises

**Prioritize the target markets for the TDA's group sales initiatives.** Prioritizing the allocation of the TDA's time and money doesn't mean that the staff won't welcome all leads and service all groups with the same enthusiasm. But the group market is large, diverse, and complicated. With one sales position, the TDA does not have the resources to chase down business in every segment of the market. It also needs the support and efforts of industry partners to determine where to allocate its resources for the greatest impact.

**The goal is to gain as much of the market as possible with certain niche groups.**

**Year 1: (2015-2016)**

- Senior and Boomers Group Tour Markets
- Motorcycle Groups and Events
- Military Reunions
- African-American Group Tours
- Targeted In-state and Florida group market

## **Year 2: (2016-2017)**

### **Continue pursuing the above markets along with:**

- Business, Government, and Association Meetings
- Destination Weddings
- International Travel – Europe and Canada
- Expand regional group market to include SC, GA, VA, KY, and TN

## **Year 3: (2018-2019)**

### **Reevaluate all the above markets to ensure they are a fit for Haywood County.**

### **Continue pursuing those markets as well as:**

- Religious groups (in conjunction with Lake Junaluska and Lake Logan)
- Student groups (Sports and musical)
- Millennials
- LGBT
- International Travel – Canada and Asia
- Expand group market to include OH, IL, IN, NY, PA, and WV

## **Year 4: (2019 -2020)**

### **Continue to evaluate all group segments. Make the necessary changes as needed.**

- Alumni Groups
- Expand market to Eastern half of US.
- Hispanic group travel

**Identify the most appropriate types of meetings and events for each venue,** and target the appropriate markets for each accordingly. This includes identifying state, regional, and national events that are primarily in drive markets for attendees. It also means working with local sports promoters and coaches to drive

bookings for suitable amateur sports events. The TDA and its partners should also leverage contacts within the local resident population who represent possible sources of meeting and event business for the county.

The target market segments with the greatest potential return on investment include, in no particular order:

### **SMERF (Social, Military, Educational, Religious, and Fraternal) Markets**

The SMERF market is huge and in many cases still growing, although its precise size is nearly impossible to estimate. Many destinations are competing for business in this category due to its size and their ability to host many different types of SMERF events (particularly if their corporate meeting business is soft). However, it tends to be price-sensitive and focused upon value, and site selection is often driven by the ability to travel to a location central to where many attendees live. Many SMERF event planners are not professionally trained, or are not planning events as a full-time occupation. Social media has become a very important influencer of attendance and site selection for many SMERF segments.

***Social*** –This segment includes the reunion market, which continues to grow as Baby Boomers retire and multigenerational travel emerges as a major force shaping travel behavior. This trend is particularly strong in ethnic markets (African-Americans and Hispanics). It is among the harder to reach group segments and is often not professionally planned or managed.

Boomer and Senior groups continue to be our biggest audience. My goal is to strengthen that relationship and continue cultivating this huge population. However, as this market ages and moves toward Generation X as the next segment, it will continue to dwindle in the next decade.

Haywood County is an intriguing option for African American groups. This segment is interested in history and gaming. With Haywood County having a rich civil war history and the newly discovered slave graves, and our close proximity to Harrah's Cherokee Casino, this segment should continue to grow.

Hispanic market will be a goal in the future, possibly 2019 and beyond. There is still research needed as to if Haywood County is a destination for this segment.

**Military** – There are many military retirees and active duty personnel within North and South Carolina, Georgia, and north Florida. All have large and growing military installations, and significant concentrations of veterans. There are 400,000 military veterans in South Carolina alone, representing 12% of the adult population. Large numbers of veterans also reside in North Carolina (11% of the adult population) and Georgia (10.4%). Military reunions are a significant and growing group segment--there are at least 8,500 planners in this market who plan up to 15,000 reunions annually, attracting over 300,000 attendees. This market also includes large segments such as reunions of military “brats.”

I will continue to focus on this segment. The Vietnam and Gulf War veterans are the most active segment of this audience. However, much like the Senior and Boomer markets, this segment is dwindling as the trend is that veterans from Iraq and Afganistan are not as apt to attend reunions. This group stays in touch via social media. This market will continue to dwindle in the coming years.

**Educational** – For Haywood County, this segment probably has the weakest potential of the SMERF markets in terms of generating broad impact for the destination. Overnight student travel is not a significant factor for western North Carolina, and most of the county’s venues aren’t well-suited for meetings in this market. However, Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center may be of great interest to the segment, given attractive room rates; meeting and event venues built around classroom training; and the lack of adult beverages.

**Religious** – This segment includes both church-related conferences (for which Lake Junaluska is already competing) as well as smaller groups such as

overnight youth travel for retreats and sporting activities (skiing, snowboarding, whitewater rafting) and retiree travel. The youth group market for winter sports may be particularly appealing if Wolf Ridge does not reopen for business following the fire that damaged their facility.

***Fraternal*** – Demand in this segment remains steady, and includes both traditional collegiate fraternities and sororities (especially their alumni groups) as well as fraternal organizations.

**Destination Weddings** – Although it shares some similarities with the social component of SMERF (difficult to target, very weekend-oriented, often not professionally planned), this segment is distinct in that it has its own needs and demands. The service provided to this segment is usually intensive and hands-on, and there is typically an associated demand for numerous related services other than just overnight accommodations. These include unique venues, florists, catering, stylists, equipment rental, and musicians. The market will require its own inventory of unique venues and assets in order to be competitive with many nearby destinations.

**Talent and Dance Organizations** – While this is a fast-growing market that is typically price-sensitive and weekend-oriented, it also has sizeable state and regional networks to facilitate event planning and event attendance.

Continue our partnership with Folkmoot USA, HART Theatre, Strand Theatre, and Imperial Theatre.

**Motorsports** – This is a large market that is already attracted to the county because of the many destination attributes which appeal to motorsports enthusiasts: Wheels Through Time; the Blue Ridge Parkway; Great Smoky Mountains National Park; other scenic drives in the area; a variety of accommodation types; and attractive room rates. The region has already developed a strong reputation and awareness in this category. The market is segmented into numerous groups and associations representing different niches, car and motorcycle types, and geographies.

Some groups are likely too large for the destination, but many others will be attracted to the area because of that combination of unique assets.

**Youth and Adult Sporting Events** – These are perhaps the most competitive group market segments for destinations, as they are highly coveted due to their size and the level of visitor spending generated. It covers an extremely broad range of activities, from youth baseball tournaments to bicycle road races to ski and snowboard events. Competition is especially fierce in the traditional youth and adult sports categories, with communities investing millions of dollars in new facilities to attract large regional and national events and offering various incentives (financial and otherwise) to associations and event planners.

For Haywood County to compete in this category, it must carefully detail its available assets (including venues such as ball fields and gymnasiums as well as “non-stadium” venues such as road and mountain biking routes); determine which assets will realistically enable it to attract events; and work with local promoters, planners, and coaches who can provide connections to the typically well-developed networks associated with many sports. Haywood County will not be ideally suited to every type of competition – some events are too large, some require significant incentives, and some won’t be attracted to the county if accommodations are spread out too far from venues. It will take time – many events are booked two to four years out – but carefully considered action plan for selected sports and events will wield success.

This market segment has not been fully crafted by HCTDA. We helped host CYCLE NC in 2015 which gave us tremendous word of mouth by cyclists from across the region. It also helped us to better prepare to plan an event of this scope. However, this is a plan for 2017 or 2018.

**Corporate** – Haywood County does not possess many of the typical assets needed to compete for corporate meeting business or traditional large association conferences. But there is an opportunity for the county to attract very specific types of corporate functions, such as smaller retreats, team-building activities, and training events.

There may also be interest in the county's non-traditional meeting and event venues as primary meeting locations or for off-site activities. Even within this segment of the market, Haywood County won't appeal to everyone, especially groups that usually frequent large high-end resorts or which demand easy airport access. This market will require time to cultivate and identify potential sales targets.

I will be attending Small Market Meetings and MPI Carolinas in 2016 to kick start our name recognition and have conversations as to what we have to offer and what meeting planners expect.

**Motorcoach** – While it has certainly diminished from its peak during the 1970s and 1980s, motorcoach is still a viable segment of the group business. The market has evolved into various sub-segments and niches, including bank travel, sporting events, alumni groups, gaming, and ecotourism. Pricing has also evolved as a differentiator, with high-end providers like Tauck Tours and value-priced operators segmenting the market and offering substantial differences in tour experiences. The greatest challenge for Haywood County in this market will be competing against nearby Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, destinations which offer a wide range of hotel price points and an array of nighttime entertainment.

Our biggest challenge continues to be getting coach groups to stop instead of pass-through Haywood County. With easy access from Pigeon Forge to Asheville, groups generally do not think of Haywood as a destination. I have been working to change that at travel shows like ABA, TAP, Select Travel, Boomers in Groups, Florida Motorcoach, and many other trade shows. I am adding a few others in 2016-17 as well to further solidify us as a must see destination. Obviously our goal is for overnight stays, but I am happy at this time if a group stops on Main Street for lunch or only visits Wheels Through Time.

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The opportunity arises from a single stop, with hope that they will come back in the near future, stay overnight, and start spreading word throughout the industry that we are indeed a destination. This process has started with several coach groups already visiting. My goal is that we get 20 motorcoaches in next year (10 of which stay overnight).

**Outdoor-Related Enthusiast Groups** – What has at least somewhat offset the decline in the overall motorcoach market over the last two decades is the growth of enthusiast and affinity segments of the group market. With its two national parks and scenic mountain beauty, Haywood County is well-positioned to compete for business from outdoor-related affinity groups such as birders and nature photographers. Interest groups such as these have grown substantially in the U.S., particularly as Baby Boomers have become empty nest travelers, and they often spend at a high level.

Running groups, ski clubs, cycling, softball tournaments, paddle boarding, golf and disc golf are just some of the groups we will be targeting in 2017-2018. There are so many outdoor groups that I will need to focus on a few in order to be successful. I hope to make us competitive with surrounding areas and become the home to 1 signature event in the future.

**Create a Group Sales Task Force** composed of the sales manager and representatives of the county's hotels, meeting and event venues, and attractions. This will be a committee to advise the TDA on the private sector's own sales initiatives, develop new strategies and tactics, and support the sales manager position by participating in sales blitzes, trade shows, and fam tours. Representatives should be part of a "coalition of the willing," able to help do the heavy lifting and teamwork required of a destination sales effort.

This has only begun with the Group Sales Committee. While the committee gives support, advice, and suggestions, more volunteers will be needed to create a group ambassador team. My goal is that this will be done in 2016.

**Develop appropriate sales tools** for both the sales manager and representatives of the destination to use when selling Haywood County to group leaders and decision makers. Many planners are moving away from using the large binders and notebooks with details about hotels and event venues that destinations have published in the past, and are relying a great deal more upon destination websites. The TDA must offer a robust, detailed group meeting and event section on its website that can be used as a planning resource, with extensive information about hotels, venues, activities, and attractions. This includes PDF fact sheets addressing several or all of the audience opportunities outlined above.

The groups webpage has been added to the main site. There has also been several itineraries, profile sheets, and photos added to entice group tour planners to inquire.

But given the likelihood that the county also has low awareness as a group destination, Haywood County needs a printed image piece that can be used to stimulate interest and be used as a mailer. This is not a directory; rather, it's a collateral piece that presents the destination assets of Haywood County to the planner audience in an attractive manner, intended for the planner who knows nothing or very little about the destination. It can be supplemented as a fulfillment piece with other materials addressing specific needs or questions of interested planners, or in response to an RFP.

This is still a work in progress. Our first goal is to get our partners on board, to speak group language, and be enthusiastic about group business. After partners are on board, we will work on crafting more and more experiences, fact sheets, and have more selling tools at our disposal.

**Establish appropriate performance measures for the group sales function.**

Given the time required to develop relationships and to book future business, these metrics may change as the position evolves and business is realized. These measures include:

- Sales activities performed, including sales calls, trade shows attended, and site inspections conducted
- Performance measures, including leads generated, bookings at venues, and room nights realized
- Productivity measures, including repeat business in both venues and accommodations
- Cost productivity, such as cost per lead, booking, and room night – We are not ready to track these yet. Will discuss with Committee.
- Inbound leads and bookings serviced
- Lead conversion and closing ratios - Have not discussed tracking these numbers with committee.
- Event booking to room supply ratio – Have not discussed tracking these numbers with committee.
- Return on investment metrics as determined by the TDA- We are not ready to track these yet. Will discuss with Committee.
- Mystery shopper measures - We are not ready to track these yet. Will discuss with Committee.

Performance measures are currently being tracked. The figures are based on first year measurement amounts. Some tracking numbers will not be ready to be measured by until at least one year after group sales program began. Many will not be tracked until several years after the program began.

**Identify and catalog all of the meeting and event assets in the county and create a single database maintained by the TDA.** In addition to the typical data necessary for a database of assets (size of the venue, floor plans, number of sleeping rooms, availability of audio/visual equipment, etc.), the TDA will want to address a number of other issues because of the unique variety of venues in the county. These include:

- Food and beverage availability (in-house or catered)
- Ability to handle inclement weather
- Turnkey staffing and programming

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- Planner testimonies
- Preferred list of caterers and other service providers, with available references
- Suitable loading and off-loading sites for motorcoaches and trucks
- After-hours access
- Set-up and tear-down capability
- Team-building activities
- Wedding amenities
- Wireless Internet availability
- Shuttle service or other transportation capability
- Baggage handling
- Special menus for groups

Some of these items are currently listed and tracked. Most of these are not. I will have this list compiled and thorough by the end of 2016. This will be a group effort that includes partners, committee members, and staff.

A robust database is critical for addressing the needs of the planner, particularly in a non-traditional meeting destination like Haywood County. Even something as seemingly random as the ability to serve breakfast may be a capability desired by some groups, especially in the motor coach segment.

**Provide group sales education and hospitality training for local industry partners.** The care and servicing of planners and groups is a critical part of the market. While there are Haywood County partners who have many years of experience in this field, others may lack the requisite expertise for managing the group business. As it prepares to enter the category with its own sales initiatives, the TDA must ensure that its partners understand the expectations of the market; the terms and conditions of group bookings; and the hospitality required to drive guest satisfaction and repeat business.