

DESTINATION
Cleveland[®]

Strategic PLAN

2026-2030



Executive Summary

Every day, Cuyahoga County competes for visits against other cities and counties – both in-state and beyond. Destination Cleveland, the region’s destination marketing and management organization, serves as Greater Cleveland’s consumer marketing organization and focuses primarily on attracting audiences from outside the region. By drawing a larger share of visitors year after year, new money continues to flow into our economy and fosters regional growth.

Destination Cleveland is funded by a portion of the Cuyahoga County lodging tax, which is paid by visitors staying in county hotels and short-term rentals, and by revenue from partnership investments, sponsorships and paid advertising by local hospitality and tourism businesses. It operates as a private, non-profit organization.

This strategic planning report outlines the organization’s vision, mission, guiding principles, objectives, strategies and measures for 2026 through 2030. A follow-up to its 2022-2025 strategic plan, the organization’s vision, mission and four objectives are being carried forward. A new fifth objective – to build outstanding talent & operational foundation – will enable Destination Cleveland to reliably deliver on its external goals and remain an indispensable partner in the region’s economic development ecosystem.

This plan articulates Destination Cleveland’s purpose and describes how the organization continuously works to bring new money into the region and to broaden its reach and impact for regional economic growth. The following pages outline the organization’s 2026-2030 objectives and strategies, which have been developed and refined based on insights from research, industry analyses and engagement with Destination Cleveland staff, Board of Directors, travel & tourism industry partners, and other destination stakeholders. How the organization will measure its progress toward each objective is also defined.

To achieve the plan’s 5-year objectives and strategies, the organization’s leaders will develop a corresponding work plan annually to detail the tactics that team members will pursue under each strategy. Tactical progress will be evaluated quarterly, with adjustments made as necessary to ensure work contributes to long-term success.

VISION

Everyone loves Cleveland as much as we do!

MISSION

We are unapologetic promoters of Cleveland. By attracting people and connecting them to experiences that illustrate Cleveland’s diversity, creativity and contagious passion, we stimulate economic growth.

MULTI-YEAR ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. Increase visitation to measurably affect economic growth.
2. Strengthen perceptions of Greater Cleveland.
3. Amplify and enhance authentic and unique destination experiences across the region.
4. Leverage organizational expertise, capabilities and relationships to advance community priorities that align with Destination Cleveland’s mission.
5. **New Enabling Objective:** Build outstanding talent & operational foundation.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Contribute to building a strong economy
- Create a sense of belonging
- Seek community feedback and represent visitor viewpoint
- Invest in organizational capabilities and capacity

Strategic Framework

This graphic illustrates Destination Cleveland’s strategic framework and is designed to be read from the center circle to the outer edge. The core of what Destination Cleveland does is fulfilling its mission to bring the vision to fruition. Destination Cleveland can accomplish this by pursuing the five objectives outlined in this strategic plan. Destination Cleveland will apply its guiding principles (outer ring) to all aspects of this work.



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Introduction

Destination Cleveland's overarching goals are attracting people to Cleveland, which contributes to increasing lodging tax receipts, and maximizing visitation's positive effect on all communities in the region.

Since the launch of the Cleveland visitor brand in 2014, Cuyahoga County's travel and tourism industry has grown consistently. Through 2024:

- **Visitation to Cuyahoga County is up 10%**, in line with the U.S. domestic travel growth rate of 12%. Cuyahoga County's annual visitation growth rate surpassed the U.S. domestic travel growth rate in 7 of the past 10 years.
- **Tourism-related direct sales in Cuyahoga County are up 41%**, just shy of domestic travel-related direct sales growth at 46%.
- **Tourism-related employment is up 11% in Cuyahoga County.** One in 14 jobs is supported by the visitor economy.
- **In 2024, visitors generated \$1.5 billion in taxes**, representing an average savings of nearly \$1,460 per household in Cuyahoga County, up from \$983 per household in 2015 (the first year measured).



To inform its 2026-2030 strategic direction, the organization conducted extensive research and analysis in 2025, including:

- evaluation of learnings and insights over the last 10 years
- research and engagement with its staff, Board of Directors, travel & tourism industry partners and other destination stakeholders
- conducting a series of analyses, including:
 - a PESTEL analysis to scan external factors that may impact its work over the strategic plan implementation cycle
 - a competitive landscape analysis to dive deep into what peer organizations in key metropolitan markets are doing and understand their comparative data and
 - SWOT analyses to explore organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in each pillar of its work.

Through this work, the organization determined that the vision, mission and four objectives established for its 2022-2025 strategic plan reflect its ongoing work and remain relevant for the foreseeable future. These strategic plan elements are being carried forward, and a fifth objective was added to strengthen Destination Cleveland's people, culture, data and operations. This will enable the organization to reliably deliver on its external goals and remain an indispensable partner in the region's economic development ecosystem. The organization's work will continue to be done with a distinct passion for creating a sense of belonging in Cleveland so that everyone can see themselves here.

As the steward of the travel and tourism industry, Destination Cleveland's work consistently delivers results, contributing to travel and tourism's standing as a growth industry in Cuyahoga County. The organization has increased visitation and strengthened the city's image – exactly as it set out to do more than a decade ago. More than 18 million visits per year generate nearly \$7 billion in direct sales. To say this is an industry that makes a difference in Greater Cleveland is an understatement – for our community, tourism matters in an outsized way. Destination Cleveland is committed – through its new strategic plan – to further amplifying the impact of tourism for broader economic benefit throughout the region.

Compounding tourism's positive effect will take all Clevelanders. Residents, organizations and companies that call Cleveland home are its best ambassadors. For perceptions to continue to change, talent attraction to grow and outside business investment to increase, we all need to share our Cleveland experience – illustrating the Cleveland brand's values of being bold, passionate, unpretentious, determined, creative and always willing to connect.

If successful, the combined work of Destination Cleveland, its travel and tourism industry partners and the community over the next five years will contribute positively to affecting the following long-term outcomes:

- Perceptions of Cleveland
- Direct Visitor Spending
- Visit Volume

Vision

Everyone loves Cleveland as much as we do!

This statement continues to describe a future Cleveland that results from Destination Cleveland's work. If the organization successfully pursues its mission, objectives and strategies, this will be the result. This statement reflects the true passion of Destination Cleveland staff and board seeking a future state in which everyone inside and outside of Cleveland feels a sense of belonging in Cleveland.

Mission

We are unapologetic promoters of Cleveland. By attracting people and connecting them to experiences that illustrate Cleveland's diversity, creativity and contagious passion, we stimulate economic growth.

This mission statement describes **what, why** and **who**:

WHAT: Destination Cleveland is an **unapologetic promoter of Cleveland to attract visitors and connect them to experiences**. While there is more to the organization's work, these actions are at the core of Destination Cleveland's role.

WHY: To connect visitors to experiences that illustrate Cleveland's diversity, creativity and contagious passion and stimulate economic growth. Destination Cleveland attracts visitors as a tool that contributes to building a strong economy knowing that its greatest assets are its people. If Destination Cleveland can get visitors here and expose them to Cleveland's neighborhoods, sports, culture, music, outdoors, waterfronts, food and more, they will see themselves here and, hopefully, love Cleveland as much as we do and consider visiting again or even hosting a meeting, living, working or investing here.

WHO: Everything Destination Cleveland does is for **Cleveland** and its economic growth.

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles are not presented in any order of priority.

- **Contribute to building a strong economy.** As part of the region's economic development ecosystem, Destination Cleveland can increase tourism's impact on the overall economy while helping to stimulate economic benefit across all communities in Greater Cleveland.
- **Create a sense of belonging.** By integrating a sense of belonging into the organization's DNA and making it part of how it operates to increase tourism and strengthen Cleveland's reputation as a destination city, Destination Cleveland can help advance community priorities, including improving economic vitality for all people and communities.
- **Seek community feedback and represent visitor viewpoint.** As professionals focused on travel and tourism trends, needs and opportunities, Destination Cleveland provides a unique perspective within Greater Cleveland. By sharing this insight while also seeking input and other viewpoints through community engagement and collaboration, the organization can advance its mission and objectives.
- **Invest in organizational capabilities and capacity.** Investing in the organization, its people, its storytelling and innovative technologies – in a fiscally responsible manner – will help Destination Cleveland to ensure job satisfaction among staff and organizational sustainability while working to advance its goals and build support for its work.

Objective 1

Increase visitation to measurably affect economic growth

Attracting visitors is critical to Destination Cleveland's work and is at the core of its mission. Visitation boosts the economy by bringing individuals as well as large groups for meetings, conventions and events to the area. It also serves as an entry point for consideration of Cleveland as a place to live and invest.

STRATEGIES

1.1: Deliver personalized, data-driven marketing initiatives and campaigns that inspire visitors to travel and engage with Cleveland

1.2: Inspire residents to use Cleveland's brand messaging to attract visitors.

1.3: Use industry and consumer insights and best practices to align stakeholders and advocate to expand destination product offerings to continuously enhance visitor demands.

1.4: Enhance convention center, hotel partnerships, and sales initiatives to secure appropriate meetings and citywide events that boost demand across the hospitality industry.

1.5: Maximize convention services as a competitive advantage by aligning with evolving planner expectations by leveraging local expertise and focusing on attendance-building strategies.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- M&C room nights booked
- M&C room nights actualized
- Room nights booked (hotels + short-term rentals) in calendar year
- Marketing attributable room nights booked



Objective 2

Strengthen perceptions of Greater Cleveland

Attracting visitors to Cleveland to measurably affect economic growth is intrinsically tied to how Greater Cleveland is perceived as a place to visit, live and invest. While Destination Cleveland has made tremendous progress in strengthening both general and tourism-related perceptions over more than a decade, continued success requires a deeper understanding by regional stakeholders of how non-tourism perception categories affect how outsiders view Cleveland.

STRATEGIES

2.1: Drive a unified, compelling brand strategy to improve the perception of Cleveland, to grow the economy through tourism, as well as business attraction and talent.

2.2: Mobilize residents and local businesses to improve perceptions by positioning Cleveland as a go-to place to visit, meet and locate by sharing their authentic Cleveland stories.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Perception metrics by audience (resident, visitor, meeting planner/attendee, talent)*
- Past visitor satisfaction

**Measure may be amended after year one research is completed.*



Objective 3

Amplify and enhance authentic and unique destination experiences across the region

Industry partners' consistent delivery of memorable and authentic destination experiences contributes to visitor attraction and perception strengthening. As the steward of travel and tourism in Greater Cleveland, Destination Cleveland strives to cultivate a sense of ownership within the industry to contribute to visitor satisfaction and industry growth.

STRATEGIES

- 3.1:** Cultivate collective ownership of the visitor experience by uniting the hospitality sector around shared standards, storytelling, experience and service excellence.
- 3.2:** Implement physical placemaking solutions that continuously enhance the brand and improve visitor experience.
- 3.3:** Collaborate to curate and attract place-based, welcoming experiences in Cleveland's neighborhoods.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Stakeholder* confidence
- Visitor satisfaction with Cleveland offerings/experiences

**Stakeholders defined as hospitality/tourism partners and destination advocates; corporate partners and advocates; and government, civic, non-profit and community development collaborators*



Objective 4

Leverage organizational expertise, capabilities and relationships to advance community priorities that align with Destination Cleveland's mission

Beyond the activities it leads for the community, Destination Cleveland also uses its unique expertise, capabilities and relationships to support, advocate for and advance community projects that are led by other organizations but align with Destination Cleveland's mission. The organization's broad perspective can be used to advance projects that would benefit the entire community in the short term as well as for generations to come.

STRATEGIES

4.1: Align conventions and major events hosted in Cleveland with shared economic development agenda to drive growth.

4.2: Position Cleveland's waterfront as a signature asset, experience and a strategic differentiator that anchors identity, connection, investment and growth.

4.3: Leverage Destination Cleveland's marketing and sales success to help people to say yes to Cleveland as a go-to place to live, work and do business.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Willingness of talent to relocate
- Perceptions of Cleveland as a waterfront city
- Stakeholder perceptions re: value of Destination Cleveland resources



New Enabling Objective 5

Build outstanding talent & operational foundation

To reliably deliver on its external objectives, it is imperative for Destination Cleveland to continually strengthen its foundational operations. Doing so will also enable the organization to remain an indispensable partner in the region's economic development ecosystem.

STRATEGIES

- 5.1:** Continuously refine Destination Cleveland's role to remain relevant and indispensable to key external stakeholders by building a functional, trust-based collaborative ecosystem.
- 5.2:** Cultivate an authentic sense of belonging—where team members, partners, stakeholders, visitors and residents feel valued, welcomed, and connected to Cleveland's people, culture and purpose.
- 5.3:** Create a shared organizational direction by aligning outcomes data and initiatives with the broader strategy, ensuring every team member understands how their work contributes to community and organizational outcomes.
- 5.4:** Strengthen DC's role as a data- and research-driven organization by investing in analytics, AI applications and governance frameworks that support insight-driven decision making and operational efficiency.
- 5.5:** Build a culture of accountability and agility by cultivating leadership mindsets at all levels, reinforcing growth through feedback and risk-taking, and ensuring supporting culture.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Employee satisfaction/engagement
- Industry engagement



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