

TOMPKINS COUNTY
DRAFT STRATEGIC TOURISM PLAN
2021-2027

Tompkins County – Strategic Tourism Plan | Third Edition: 2021-2027

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INTRODUCTION

The Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Plan establishes our community’s goals regarding tourism. This document lays out our mutual values and aspirations for the development of tourism over the next six years.

The preparation of this plan was guided by the Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB). This board advises Tompkins County on matters of tourism policy and on the allocation of the hotel room occupancy tax.

This plan intends to guide future decisions and investments relating to tourism in our county. The goals and critical actions described in this plan were the result of many months of work by dedicated members of the STPB and other stakeholders in the tourism sector.

Constant effort is required to establish and maintain a destination’s appeal for visitors. Tompkins County is fortunate since it is home to institutions, landmarks, and natural features that attract a global audience.

Tourism presents a real opportunity for Tompkins County in terms of economic development and the enhancement of our residents’ quality of life. Visitor spending supports local jobs and offsets household tax burdens for county residents. Over the past two decades, the Tourism Program has made lasting and meaningful investments in organizations and facilities that help make Tompkins County a great place to live, work, and visit.

This plan looks ahead to the future of travel and tourism in our region. Several emerging issues are currently affecting travel behaviors, such as the growth of short-term rentals, prevalence of smartphones, and increasing demand for locally sourced foods and beverages.

This plan also looks outward toward the visitors who decide to travel to Tompkins County. The recently completed Visitor Profile Study (appendix 3) helped the STPB gain knowledge about the motivation for travel to our county and the sorts of activities visitors choose. This data has been critically important for the development of goals.

Finally, this plan was prepared with the help of people who live and work in Tompkins County. A community survey conducted in late 2018 and early 2019 gathered feedback from 309 individuals (appendix 4) regarding their ideas for tourism development. A facilitated “focus search process” stakeholder meeting with 21 representatives of local nonprofit organizations was held in April 2019 to determine how our community can advance tourism.

Once this plan is adopted by the Tompkins County Legislature, the following actions are proposed:

- Review and revise the policies of the STPB
- Update grant guidelines and related documents

SUSTAINING THE VALUE OF THE LOCAL TOURISM SECTOR

For the past 20 years, the Tompkins County Tourism Program has supported a wide variety of community-led initiatives that enhance our local quality of life. These investments have been possible due to growing local revenues generated by the hotel room occupancy tax.

The room tax is paid by visitors who stay in hotels, motels, and bed and breakfasts in Tompkins County. The purpose of the room tax is defined in local law as follows:

“The revenue derived from the tax ... shall be allocated to enhance the general economy of Tompkins county, its cities, towns, and villages, through promotion of tourist activities, conventions, trade shows, special events, and other directly related and supporting activities.” (County L.L. No. 4-1989 Hotel Room Occupancy Tax §150-20: Disposition of revenues. <https://ecode360.com/8412617>)

The STPB is charged with the task of advising the County Legislature on the allocation of these funds. As such, the board has sought projects and investments that attract visitors and increase travel demand to our community. The intent is to create a virtuous cycle where growing visitation drives sustainable and resilient economic growth that supports the Tourism Program’s various initiatives.

Tompkins County is fortunate to have institutions, events, and natural features that consistently attract visitors. However, revenue from the room tax is never guaranteed. Economic conditions, fuel prices, weather, and other unpredictable external factors all influence travel decisions.

Through the development of this plan we have learned more about the importance of tourism to our local economy. A recent study by the Downtown Ithaca Alliance revealed that most downtown restaurants and retailers rely on out-of-county visitor spending (Claritas/EnviroNics, 2018). Revenue from visitors is also essential to supporting many of our local cultural institutions. Spending by visitors supports 3,718 local jobs throughout the county (Tourism Economics, 2018).

Success as a tourism destination requires constant vigilance to ensure that we maintain and increase our appeal to new visitors. Since its establishment, the STPB has supported a wide array of tourism projects and investments intended to build travel demand where capacity exists in our local market.

It is the intent of this plan to describe strategies that will allow Tompkins County to sustain the value of its local tourism sector for years to come.

TOMPKINS COUNTY TOURISM PROGRAM

Hotel Room Occupancy Tax

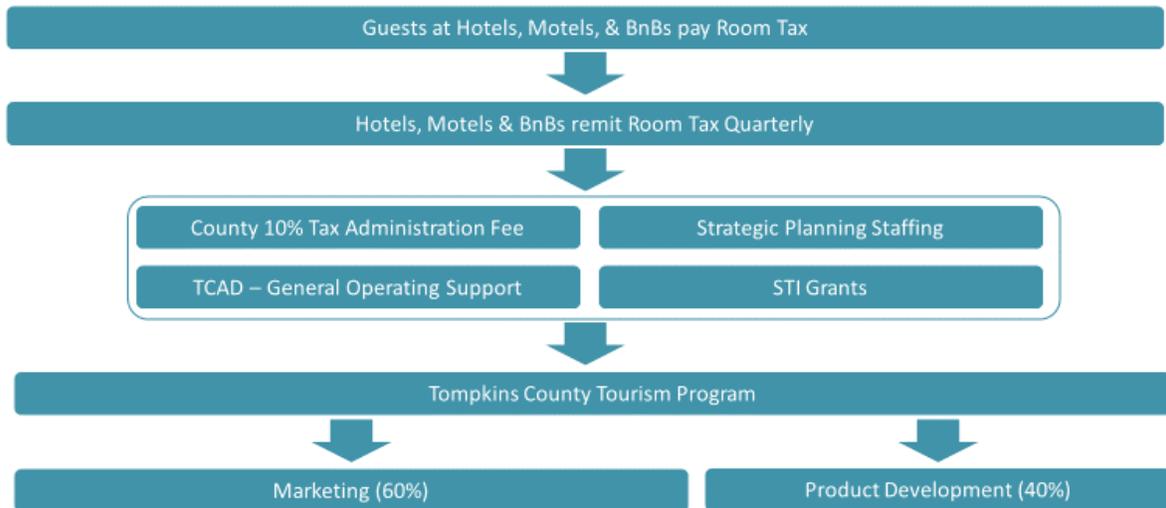
Tompkins County established a hotel room occupancy tax (room tax) in 1986 (appendix 1). All Tourism Program activities conducted by the county are supported by this revenue source.

By law, room tax revenues are dedicated to local tourism development.

“The revenue derived from the tax, after deducting the amount provided for administering such tax, as so authorized by this article, shall be allocated to enhance the general economy of Tompkins County, its cities, towns and villages, through promotion of tourist activities, conventions trade shows, special events and other directly related and supporting activities.” (Source: Tompkins County Hotel Room Occupancy Tax Law, Chapter 150, Article II, §150-20 Disposition of Revenues.)

Prior to 2001 nearly all revenues from the room tax were allocated to destination marketing. In 2001 the County Legislature approved an increase in the room tax from 3% to 5%.* Since this time, the Tourism Program has allocated revenue from this tax as follows:

- 60% for Marketing (representing the historic 3% tax revenue)
- 40% for Product Development (representing the additional 2% tax revenue)



* Bed and breakfasts with 10 rooms or fewer were exempted from the increased tax. The room tax for these properties remains at 3%.

Over the past decade, online platforms for short-term rentals have gained in popularity for travelers. In 2016, Tompkins County became the first county in New York State to establish a tax collection agreement with Airbnb. Airbnb reports that 27 other counties in New York have established voluntary collection agreements[†]. Since this time, some municipalities in Tompkins County have considered or adopted regulations on short-term rentals.

Strategic Tourism Planning Board

In 1998 the Tompkins County Legislature reconfigured the Advisory Board on Tourism Development into the STPB. This board is charged with advising the County Legislature on tourism development, evaluation of the activities of recipients of room tax funds, development of tourism policy, and advising the county on the allocation of room tax funds (STPB bylaws, article 2, section 1).

The STPB is composed of 18 voting members and seven non-voting representatives. The board typically holds 10 meetings per year. STPB currently has four standing committees, five grant review committees, and six other active committees.

Since 2005 Tompkins County has maintained a Strategic Tourism Plan to provide guidance to the Tourism Program and inform decisions regarding the allocation of room tax revenue. This plan was updated in 2013. Since this time five additional tourism topical plans have been prepared:

- Wayfinding and Interpretive Signage Plan – 2014
- Heritage Tourism Implementation Plan – 2015
- Beautification, Signage, and Public Art Strategic Plan – 2016
- Agriculinary Tourism Implementation Plan – 2016
- Outdoor Recreation Implementation Plan – 2018

These documents are available online at <http://tompkinscountyny.gov/tourism/plan>.

Current Programs

Tompkins County currently funds the following initiatives from the hotel room occupancy tax:

Marketing

- Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB)
 - Provides destination marketing services. The Ithaca/Tompkins County CVB is our official Tourism Promotion Agency (TPA) and is authorized to access state resources from I♥NY. The CVB has three primary functional units:
 - Marketing & Public Relations

[†] <https://www.airbnb.com/help/article/2319/occupancy-tax-collection-and-remittance-by-airbnb-in-new-york>

- Visitor Experience
- Group Sales
- Market the Arts
 - Promotes visual artists and writers collectively to visitors
- Tourism Marketing & Advertising Grants
 - Promote events and projects likely to attract visitors in a manner consistent with CVB strategy

Product Development

- Arts & Cultural Organizational Development Grants
 - Enhance our brand as a cultural destination by supporting major arts and cultural assets
- Beautification, Signage & Public Art
 - Improves the visual beauty of communities with outdoor plantings and attractive signage to direct travelers to key destinations
- Community Arts Partnership – General Operating Support
 - Strengthens the visibility and viability of the county’s arts community
- Community Celebrations Grants
 - Support local events that convey our unique culture and history
- County Historian
 - Provides historical connections to today’s tourism events and projects
- Hospitality Workforce Development
 - Builds awareness and encourages interest in hospitality and tourism career pathways.
- Public Art Grants
 - Support the creation of public art and encourages additional funding from local, private foundations
- Tompkins Festivals Program
 - Provides event organizers with tools to make events successful, create positive visitor experiences, and establish significant attractions
- Tourism Capital Grants
 - Support the creation and expansion of major visitor attractions
- Tourism Project Grants
 - Support events and projects likely to attract overnight visitors or accomplish actions defined in the Strategic Tourism Plan

Other / Flexible

- Strategic Tourism Implementation Grants

- Support projects that substantially advance critical actions identified in the 2020 Strategic Tourism Plan or other tourism implementation plans
- Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD)
 - Supports the operation of TCAD as defined in a five-year agreement
- County 10% Tax Administration Fee
 - Per the local law, the county allocates 10% of room tax collections for tax administration purposes.

Expenditures by Program

	Total Funding 2013-2019	Years Funded	Annual Average
Marketing			
Convention & Visitors Bureau	\$7,161,389	7	\$1,023,056
New Tourism Initiative Grants	\$463,980	6	\$77,330
Tourism Marketing & Advertising Grants	\$354,453	7	\$50,636
Discovery Trail	\$241,775	7	\$34,539
Market the Arts	\$73,850	7	\$10,550
Tompkins Tourism Partner Award	\$6,000	4	\$1,500
	Total Funding 2013-2019	Years Funded	Annual Average
Product Development			
Tourism Capital Grants	\$1,504,763	7	\$214,966
Arts & Cultural Organizational Development Grants	\$1,488,956	7	\$212,708
Beautification	\$970,217	7	\$138,602
Tourism Project Grants	\$626,240	7	\$89,463
Community Arts Partnership - General Operating Support	\$279,078	7	\$39,868
Community Celebration Grants	\$236,973	7	\$33,853
Hospitality Workforce Development	\$216,600	7	\$30,943
Festivals	\$180,434	7	\$25,776
Ticket Center Ithaca	\$46,099	1	\$46,099
County Historian	\$48,750	7	\$6,964
Public Art Grants	\$24,302	3	\$8,101
	Total Funding 2013-2019	Years Funded	Annual Average
Other / Flexible			
County 10% Tax Administration Fee	\$1,759,290	7	\$251,327
Tompkins County Area Development - General Operating Support	\$927,808	7	\$132,544
Strategic Tourism Implementation Grants	\$627,396	5	\$125,479
Strategic Planning & Staffing	\$650,374	7	\$92,911

History of Grant Awards 2013-2019

Grant programs have represented a key way the Tourism Program has operated. Over the past seven years, the Tompkins County Tourism Program issued 604 grant awards across seven different grant programs. Grants were issued to more than 100 different organizations.

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Grant Program	Average Grant Award	Average Number of Awards per Year	Total Grants Issued 2013-2019
Arts & Cultural Organizational Development	\$22,970	9	61
Tourism Capital	\$18,314	11	77
Tourism Project	\$8,240	11	76
New Tourism Initiative	\$7,606	9	61
Tourism Marketing & Advertising	\$2,836	18	125
Community Celebration	\$1,254	27	189
Strategic Tourism Implementation	\$41,826	2	15

ACHIEVEMENTS 2011-2019

- Completed topical Tourism Implementation Plans
 - Beautification, Signage and Public Art Plan
 - Agriculinary Tourism Implementation Plan
 - Heritage Tourism Implementation Plan
 - Outdoor Recreation Tourism Implementation Plan
 - Wayfinding and Interpretive Signage Plan
- Supported annual Beautification program plantings at over 30 sites
- Assisted dozens event organizers through the Tompkins Festivals program
- Installed eight works of public art with the Community Arts Partnership
- Launched Visitor Arrival to Destination (A2D) training program for hospitality workforce
- Trained 229 people through Hospitality Star and 118 people through Visitor A2D training programs
- Established an Agriculinary Tourism Coordinator position at CVB
- Supported renovation or construction of three new Visitors Centers operated by the CVB
- Launched or revamped websites
 - www.ithacatrails.org
 - www.gofingerlakes.org
 - www.ithacaevents.com
- Supported marquee events such as:
 - Downtown Ithaca Ice Festival / Winter Festival
 - Finger Lakes International Dragon Boat Festival
 - Ithaca Underground: Big Day In & Naked Noise
 - Spring Writes Literary Festival
 - Summer Shakespeare Festival
 - Wizarding Weekend
 - ... and many more!
- Supported new tour offerings through Discover Cayuga Lake (lake cruise) and the Ithaca Youth Bureau (bicycle)
- Supported the revitalization of Stewart Park and the establishment of the Cayuga Waterfront Trail
- Supported new exhibits at Sciencenter, Museum of the Earth and Cayuga Nature Center
- Supported signage & site improvements to the Ithaca Children's Garden
- Supported new performance spaces at Community School of Music and Arts, Running to Places Theatre Company
- Supported visitor enhancements at natural sites such as Ithaca Falls and Lick Brook
- Supported facilities improvements at the State Theatre and Ithaca Farmers Market
- Supported the construction of the Tompkins Center for History & Culture

Tompkins County and Ithaca are regularly recognized in national media for excellence. Among our most recent and notable accolades are:

- Ithaca named one of the "Top 10 American Cities for Family-Friendly Travel" by Forbes.com
- Ithaca named the prettiest town in New York by Architectural Digest
- Ithaca named one of the "Top 50 Most Underrated Cities to Visit in the US" by Thrillist.com
- Ithaca awarded the title of one of the "US Top Emerging Nature Destinations" at the Luxury Travel Guide Awards
- Ithaca recognized for being #2 on "The Best Small College Towns" by USA Today
- Robert H. Treman State Park selected as the "Best Swimming Spot in New York State" by the Weather Channel
- Ithaca named as the 10th "Best New York Art Spots that Aren't in NYC" by Huffington Post
- Ithaca designated as the "#1 Best College Town" in the 2013-2014 AIER College Destinations Index
- Ithaca Farmers Market selected as one of "8 Must-Visit Farmers Markets Around the US" by Zagat.com
- Ithaca mentioned in Travel and Leisure's list of "America's Most Romantic Towns"
- Ithaca named the "#1 Smartest City in America" by VentureBeat Online
- Ithaca named the "#1 Best College Town in America" by Business Insider

<https://www.visitithaca.com/awards-mentions> (This list will be revised with current information following public comment period)

VALUES

The Tompkins County Tourism Program adheres to a set of core values to guide our decisions.

All goals and critical actions described in this plan flow from the following eight values:

- Leverage Local and Regional Assets
- Improve Connectivity within the County
- Create Multi Day and Off-Peak Travel Demands
- Develop Accountable and Transparent Programs
- Advocate for Policies that Affect Tourism
- Thoughtfully Support New Economic Growth
- Enhance Visitor Experience
- Present our Inclusive, Accessible, Vibrant and Sustainable Community

SETTING THE BASELINE

This Place We Love

Tompkins County offers a unique blend of rural and urban settings, spectacular natural features, and world-class academic institutions. At its center, the city of Ithaca sits at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake and serves as the county’s commercial and cultural hub.

Higher education is at the core of our county’s economy, as more than 23,000 students come to study at Cornell University and Ithaca College annually. Nearly one-fifth of all jobs in the county are related to education. In addition, manufacturing and high-tech sectors contribute substantially to the strong local economy.

Tompkins County offers a wide range of artistic and cultural experiences that appeal to residents and visitors alike. Our collection of theatres, museums, and heritage resources have defined our reputation as a cultural destination in the region.

Commercial wine production in the Finger Lakes began over 150 years ago. Since then the region has earned world-wide recognition for producing high-quality wines. In 1981, four Cayuga Lake wineries formed the first official wine trail in New York. Today, more than 460 acres of wine grapes are grown along Cayuga Lake.

Our community prides itself on fostering diversity and inclusion. Tompkins County seeks to honor the inherent value of every visitor’s unique story, perspective, and experience. We welcome visitors regardless of their race, color, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or socio-economic status.

Many people fall in love with our area for its natural wonders. Recreational options are plentiful on Cayuga Lake, at the county’s four state parks, and at dozens of gorges and waterfalls. It is easy to see why “Ithaca is Gorges.”

Visitor Profile

In 2018, the Ithaca/Tompkins County CVB engaged consulting firm JLL to conduct a study of visitors to Tompkins County. There were two components to the study:

- 1) Online survey of recent visitors and people planning to travel to the county
- 2) In-person surveys of visitors at major attractions in the county

The last Visitor Profile Study was conducted in 2009 (Chmura Economics & Analytics). The table below compares the findings from the two studies.

Comparison of Highlights	2019 Overall Results	2009 Overall Results
Repeat Visitation	76% repeat	69%
Overnight Percentage	78% staying overnight	63%
Spending	\$366 per party per day	\$331
Travel Party Size	3.3 people	3.0
Nights Spent	2-3 nights	2.4
Mode of Transportation	21% air	10%
Stays in Hotel/Motels/Inns	60%	50%
Same day Travel Planning	2%	15%
Primary Reason for Travel	Outdoor Leisure Activities	Gorges & State Parks*
Visitor Satisfaction	80% will return	81%

The study yielded several noteworthy findings (full results of this study are in appendix 3 to this report).

- Traveler Profile

- Repeat visitors – Over three-quarters (76%) of respondents reported that they had visited the area previously.
- Trip length – Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents stayed overnight. Most overnight visitors stayed for two to three nights. Very few visitors had trips lasting more than four nights.
- Travel party type – The average travel party size was just over three people with adults accounting for roughly two-thirds of the group (3.3 total, 2.4 adults). Most respondents stated they were traveling either as a family (with kids) or couple.
- Travel planning
 - Travel planning resources – Most respondents used either information from college/university websites or knowledge from a previous visit to the area to make their travel plans. Local or regional destination websites (i.e. VisitIthaca.com) were the third most used travel planning resource.
 - Travel decision timing – Most respondents began making travel plans between one and two months in advance. Very few visitors made travel plans a week or less in advance.
- Traveler origin and transportation
 - Driving – Most visitors arrive in Tompkins County by automobile. Three-fifths (60%) of respondents reported driving between three and six hours.
 - Flying – Nearly one-fifth (21%) of respondents traveled by air, with the majority arriving at Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport.
 - Top home states – New York, Pennsylvania, California, and New Jersey
- Spending

- While overall spending increased from 2009, when adjusted for inflation, this trend reverses.
- Retail spending was notably lower than in comparable destinations.
- Demographics
 - Age – Most respondents were between 40-70 years in age.
 - Sexual orientation – 20% of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+. (This compares to approximately 4.5% of the adult population in New York State per a 2017 Gallup survey.)
- Travel Purpose
 - Leisure (38%) including the following reasons:
 - Sightseeing
 - Outdoor oriented experiences
 - Just to get away
 - College (32%) including the following reasons:
 - Visiting a student
 - College tours
 - On-campus events
 - Campus sightseeing tour (not related to college enrollment)
 - Business (16%)
 - Visiting Family and Friends (14%)
- Activities
 - The top responses included:
 - Dining at unique restaurants
 - Visiting gorges and waterfalls
 - Hiking on local trails
 - On-campus activities
 - Strolling through the Ithaca Commons
 - Additional notable responses included:
 - Visiting area wineries
 - Visiting state or local parks
 - Visiting locations on the Discovery Trail
 - Exploring Ithaca Farmers Market
 - Touring museums or galleries
 - Boating or other water-based excursions on Cayuga Lake

Objectives

The Tompkins County Tourism Program seeks to achieve the following objectives by 2027:

- Annual Overnight Visitors: 900,000
- Annual Visitor Spending: \$300 million
- Annual Household Tax Benefit: \$950

Performance Indicators

The following performance indicators will assist the STPB and Tompkins County Tourism Program understand the health of the tourism sector.

Source	Indicator(s)	Frequency	Notes
STR (Smith Travel Research)	Hotel industry statistics: . Occupancy . Avg. daily rate . Supply & demand	Monthly	Private market data
All The Rooms - Analytics	Short-term rental statistics: . Occupancy . Average daily rate . Supply & demand	Monthly	Private market data for top short term rental platforms
Tourism Economics	Economic impact . Visitor spending . Local tax benefits	Annual	Provides comparison statistics to other counties in New York State.
Tompkins County Finance Department	Room tax collections	Quarterly	Quarters are shifted one month from calendar (Q1 is Dec, Jan, Feb)
Cornell University & Ithaca College	Admissions & Enrollment	Annual	Leading indicator of travel demand
Tompkins County Area Development	Local economic statistics: . Employment . Gross product . Compensation	Every 3-5 years	Private economic data (i.e. IMPLAN)
NYS Dept. of Labor	Detailed local statistics: . Employment . Wages	Quarterly	Quarterly census of employment and wages
Cornell Program on Applied Demographics	County Statistics . Population . Labor market	Annual	
Consulting Firm (TBD)	Visitor Profile	Once every 5 years	See “Policy & Evaluation Focus Area” (section 8, page XX)

Competition

Regional Comparison

Ithaca and Tompkins County hold competitive advantages compared to our neighboring communities in several categories. Our destination offers a high value for visitors with a bounty of affordable attractions.

Hotels & Restaurants – Tompkins County has over 2,100 hotel rooms and 500 restaurants¹, many of which are in the City of Ithaca. The variety of accommodation and dining options available in our community allows our area to serve as a hub for travelers exploring the Finger Lakes region.

Higher Education – Our county has a large concentration of post-secondary students due to the presence of Cornell University and Ithaca College. These institutions provide programming for students, researchers, and the public. In addition, these institutions routinely attract on-campus meetings, parents, athletic events, artistic performances, and prospective students. The presence of higher education institutions makes Ithaca a viable destination for private regional bus operators and commercial airlines. Furthermore, Cornell and Ithaca College support the following facilities that support tourism in our area:

- Cornell Botanical Gardens
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- H.F. Johnson Museum of Art
- Ithaca College Athletics & Events Center / Natatorium

Outdoor Recreation – Many destinations in the Finger Lakes region offer waterfalls, lake activities, and pristine natural areas. Tompkins County has distinguished itself through the continued development of a local trail network that connects major outdoor recreation sites to other parts of the community.

Theatres, Museums & Cultural Attractions – It is unusual for a place the size of Tompkins County to offer such a variety of cultural experiences for visitors. The cultural attractions in our community compete with establishments in larger metropolitan areas. In addition to our multiple local theatres, museums, and an independent cinema, our local institutions of higher education routinely offer high caliber performances that are open to the public.

Agritourism & Vineyards – While many destinations in the Finger Lakes boast a variety of vineyards, Tompkins County has unique offerings in this category. The Ithaca Farmers Market stands out as an anchor attraction which connects local farmers with consumers. Local resources including the Cornell's College of Agriculture & Life Science and Botanical Gardens attract gardeners and other agricultural professionals.

¹ Source: TC Dept of Health. Figure includes all food service establishments including food trucks & caterers.

Downtown Ithaca – The Ithaca Commons is a truly unique destination unmatched by neighboring cities in our region. The Commons serves as an anchor of our community’s identity and as a host for cultural events. This recently renovated pedestrian street has the capability to host festivals and connect visitors with local merchants.

Festivals & Major Events – Any given weekend in upstate New York one can find many events – especially during the summer and fall. Tompkins County hosts several popular festivals and major events including Grassroots Festival of Music & Dance (July), Apple Harvest Festival (September), and Ithaca Festival (June) to name a few. To maintain and grow our events, it is essential that our county’s events offer unique experiences and are promoted to new audiences.

Comparable Destinations

Travelers have many choices – the first of which is deciding where to go. Several comparison destinations were identified for their similar attributes to Tompkins County. These destinations feature major educational institutions and comparable core urban areas. Research into these destinations revealed the following observations:

- Some destinations incorporate brand elements from local institutions of higher education into their destination marketing. For instance, Destination Ann Arbor (the DMO for Ann Arbor, Michigan) incorporates the school colors for the University of Michigan into its website and printed material.
- Some destinations had established grant programs for tourism generating events and marketing campaigns. For instance, the Central Pennsylvania CVB grants funds to organizations in Centre County for projects that support significant economic impacts and strengthen the perception of the county.
- Some municipalities use hotel room tax funds to support convention centers. For instance, Saratoga County, NY allocates a portion of room tax revenue to support the Saratoga Springs City Center.
- Many municipalities had established some procedure to collect room taxes from short term rentals (i.e. Airbnb and VRBO). For instance, the City of Berkeley, California, requires short term rental operators to pay a \$220 application fee and a monthly enforcement fee of 2% of taxable receipts in addition to a 12% transient occupancy tax. The city allows online registration and payment of fees for short term rentals.

Strategic Opportunities & Limitations

Current Local Considerations

- *Seasonality & Academic Calendars* – Visitation to Tompkins County is strongly influenced by season and academic calendars. There is capacity within the existing lodging establishments to increase overnight visitation from November to April. Even during peak season, local hotels often have spare capacity from Sunday to Thursday. This

capacity represents an opportunity to expand tourism to Tompkins County without building additional hotel rooms.

- *Conference Center* – The proposal to redevelop the Green Street Garage currently includes a conference center component. Recent feasibility studies indicate that a downtown conference center could provide economic benefits to the county but that such an operation would require a subsidy to operate.
- *Wayfinding Signage* – In 2014 the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce completed a Wayfinding & Interpretive Signage Plan for the county. While funds have been set aside to advance this project, it has not yet been implemented. In addition, the expanded network of recreational trails throughout the County may require additional signage not considered in the 2014 plan.
- *Transportation* – One of the most common frustrations for travelers to Tompkins County is the lack of convenient transportation options (section 8, page XX). However, without substantial changes to federal and state transportation infrastructure policy, the highway and railroad service are unlikely to change any time soon. The City of Ithaca recently began a parking study to examine the availability and pricing of public structured and on-street vehicle parking. Work is currently underway to expand terminal facilities at the Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport and additional airline service is anticipated. Limited options for motor coach and intercity bus parking has resulted in adverse impacts on tourism to Tompkins County.
- *Tompkins Center for History & Culture* – In 2019, Tompkins County opened the Center for History & Culture (TCHC) on the Ithaca Commons. This space includes the downtown visitors center, CAP Art Space gallery, and exhibit space for The History Center. TCHC has the potential to serve as a hub for regional tour operations and a visitor destination. Currently, the TCHC is run by a governance council where representatives of partner organizations share in decision making for the operation and marketing of the facility.
- *Resource Allocation* – The Tourism Program relies on funding from the room tax to support a variety of programs (section 4). The STPB often faces difficult choices when preparing annual budgets as there are many compelling requests for funding.
- *Short Trip Length* – Overnight visitors to Tompkins County typically stay two to three days even though they have often planned their trips months in advance. It may be possible to encourage these visitors to extend their trips by one or more nights.

Emerging Trends & Challenges

While it is impossible to predict the future, there are several emerging trends and issues that may have substantial effects on tourism in Tompkins County and beyond.

- Higher Education Enrollment
 - o Most travel to Tompkins County is related to activity at Cornell University and Ithaca College (appendix 3). Demographic shifts and changes to the perceived

value of higher education will affect enrollment. In addition, potential legislation affecting college tuition and student loan debt could substantially impact demand for higher education. Changes to demand for higher education have the potential to fundamentally impact demand for travel to our county. Monitoring trends relating to higher education at the national, regional and local level will provide an important indicator for the local tourism economy.

- Short Term Rental (STR) Platforms
 - o Currently, the vast majority of STR listings in Tompkins County are on Airbnb which has an established voluntary collection agreement for room tax (section 4, page XX). However, the market for STR listings is highly competitive and several other platforms may gain market share in coming years. Depending on changes in the market, the County may consider additional voluntary collection agreements with other platforms or other means of ensuring compliance with the room tax law.
 - o Municipal regulation of STRs may impact the supply of rooms in coming years. Currently only one municipality has regulated STRs (Village of Cayuga Heights).
 - o Anecdotal evidence suggests that the growth of STR room inventory locally has reduced business to established bed and breakfast businesses in Tompkins County.
- Visitor Readiness & Tourism Training
 - o Staff in many businesses and occupations encounter visitors who pose questions about our destination. As new businesses open and new people begin careers, the need for visitor readiness and tourism training will increase. The Tompkins County Workforce NY office has partnered with the CVB and DIA to establish the Visitor Arrival to Destination training program. This program will need to be promoted to area employers and its content will need to be reviewed periodically to ensure accuracy. As training methods evolve, new tourism training programs may be appropriate.
- Chinese & Asian Outbound Travelers
 - o With economic gains over recent decades, the number of Chinese and Asian outbound travelers has increased. Travelers from China find few signs or instructions in their language and employees are often unfamiliar with cultural expectations of foreign travelers. It will be important to ensure hospitality staff can engage with Chinese and Asian travelers successfully.
- Cannabis Legalization
 - o In 2019, New York State Legislature considered the legalization of cannabis for adult recreational use. While this effort was unsuccessful, proponents of legalization are likely to continue their efforts. There are several potential impacts of cannabis legalization relevant to Tompkins County:

- There may be potential to integrate cannabis cultivation with existing agritourism assets in our region such as vineyards. Our region may benefit from efforts to demonstrate successful small-scale farming techniques.
 - Expanded agricultural research on cannabis at Cornell University may attract new audiences to our County. As other states consider legalization of cannabis, the demand for research will grow.
 - It will be important for local officials to be educated on the potential economic and community issues surrounding cannabis legalization. While a future state law may define rules for licensing establishments for private consumption and consumption of cannabis in public spaces, it is likely that local officials will also have some control over these issues.
- Micro-Mobility & Ride Hailing
 - The range of transportation options in Tompkins County has expanded substantially in recent years as services offered by Lime (pedal bikes, e-bikes, & e-scooters), Uber & Lyft (ride hailing apps) have become available. While these services may improve transportation options to some locations, visitors are not always aware of their availability and costs. It will be important to integrate new transportation options into visitor-facing resources and tourism training courses. Areas with constrained parking may benefit the most by shifting visitor trips away from private automobiles.
 - Climate Change & Extreme Weather
 - Climate change and related weather events could have adverse consequences on many elements of Tompkins County, including tourism. Prolonged drought, flooding, and extreme temperatures all present unique challenges relating to tourism. Environmental changes could threaten the appeal of major attractors for visitors to Tompkins County. The addition of indoor venues for events and gatherings and communicating climate-related conditions to visitors will be increasingly important
 - Harmful Algal Blooms (HAB) / Cayuga Lake Health
 - HABs on Cayuga Lake threaten human health, aquatic ecosystems, and the viability of lake activities enjoyed by residents & visitors. Efforts at the state and local level are underway to prevent HABs and communicate risks. However, visitors to our county may be unaware of this phenomenon and may be upset by their inability to enjoy swimming or boating on the lake. The relatively small number of public beach access areas to Cayuga Lake in Tompkins County increases the impact of HABs related beach closures on our local tourism economy.
 - Decline of Traditional Retail
 - Over the past several years many traditional retail stores have lost business and closed due to emerging national trends. The growth of e-commerce, shifting

consumer habits, and over-development of chain stores are among some of the major factors causing a prolonged decline of retail sales. Ithaca and Tompkins County are not immune to these trends and many retailers in our area have struggled to stay open. Historically, shopping had been a top activity for visitors to our area.

- Mobile Payments / Cashless Economy
 - o While cash is still used for many transactions, new payment technologies allow consumers to rely more heavily on debit cards, credit cards, and mobile devices. Not all service workers, entertainers, and retailers have the capability to accept non-cash payments for tips and purchases. Without the appropriate tools, these individuals and businesses may miss opportunities to make sales and earn income.
- Search Engine Algorithms
 - o Many visitors use online search engines (such as Google) for travel planning. The algorithms which determine the placement of search results often change without warning - this can affect the placement of official tourism information in search results and the way potential travelers retrieve online information. It is not safe to assume that official travel information from the CVB or other sources will be presented clearly to prospective visitors. It also presents a challenge to track how information about our destination is shared with internet users.
- Event Safety and Security Costs / Requirements
 - o State policies are driving increasing requirements for security at events. The costs of increased security may threaten the viability of some large community events. County level action may be necessary to consider all alternatives relating to these changing requirements.
- Living Wage
 - o Local and state legislation to define or require a living wage could have meaningful impacts on the tourism sector. As defined by the 2019 Living Wage Study conducted by Alternatives Federal Credit Union a living wage is \$14.28 per hour for employers who provide health insurance. If a living wage were required by local or state law, employers in the hospitality sector may face difficult short-term choices regarding hours and personnel. Increasing operational costs for lodging establishments and restaurants may result in higher prices for customers.
- Virtual / Augmented Reality
 - o Technological advancements continue to improve virtual and augmented reality capability. These emerging media may allow for some unique opportunities to promote our destination and enhance visitor experiences. In addition, improved virtual reality may provide a way to enhance accessibility to locations that cannot accommodate people with mobility impairments. Widespread use of augmented reality technology at destinations in Tompkins County may require enhancements to wireless networks – especially for non-urban locations.

- Aerial Drones
 - o As prices drop and technology improves small, remote-controlled aircraft have grown in popularity recently. While aerial drones can capture photos and videos from unique perspectives at outdoor events, natural features, and other locations their use may be perceived as a nuisance by visitors. Rules and norms regarding their operation remain unclear. Communicating and enforcing site-specific rules regarding aerial drones may become a growing issue for tourism destinations.

GOALS

The following chapter identifies specific goals and actions for the Tompkins County Tourism Program to accomplish.

Goals in this document are classified into focus areas – these topical categories provide context on our local tourism development strategy.

Actions are the specific activities that the STPB, Tourism Program, or other partner organization can perform to advance the goals.

Overall Goals

The following goals broadly support tourism development and promotion. These goals cross over multiple focus areas.

1. Increase average overnight trip length by one night
2. Increase average visitor spending by 5% annually in established downtowns and villages
3. Offer indoor and outdoor visitor programming 360 days per year
4. Increase visual and physical access to Cayuga Lake through collaborative efforts with municipal and private stakeholders
5. Increase the share of new visitors to 30%
6. Provide accurate information to decision makers on legislation and policies that affect tourism
7. Continuously refine communication techniques and media to grow awareness of our destination and its assets
8. Foster collaboration among tourism partners to achieve common goals

Focus Areas

This plan identifies 15 focus areas for tourism development in Tompkins County. Each is classified into one of four categories: (listed alphabetically)

- Priority: primary tourism motivations and issues facing our destination
 - o Diversity & Inclusion
 - o Higher Education
 - o Marketing & Sales
 - o Outdoor Recreation
 - o Transportation & Connectivity
 - o Waterfront
- Foundation: persistent and strong influences on the tourism sector
 - o Agriculinary
 - o Arts & Cultural Heritage
 - o Downtown Ithaca
 - o Festivals
 - o Planning & Evaluation
- Emerging: long-range opportunity to increase travel demand
 - o Sports
- Destination Services: efforts to grow our local tourism economy
 - o Beautification & Placemaking
 - o Conferences & Groups
 - o Visitor Experience

Priority

Diversity & Inclusion

Ithaca and Tompkins County have a reputation for welcoming people of all backgrounds. The city of Ithaca has affirmed its status as a Sanctuary City, and Tompkins County has adopted an official Diversity Statement. Our community has earned recognition as a place that is accepting and open to all people.

Data about our visitors and residents confirm the diversity within our community. The Visitor Profile Study (appendix 3) revealed that 20% of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+. (This compares to approximately 4.5% of the adult population in New York State per a 2017 Gallup survey.) Census data show that Tompkins County's racial and ethnic diversity compares closely to larger communities and ranks 11th among counties in upstate New York (2017, Simpson Diversity Index).

Moving forward, it will be important to ensure that Tompkins County intentionally includes all people and welcomes diverse audiences. We will strive to ensure that people of all races, colors, sexual orientations, gender identities, religions, ages, nationalities, and abilities feel welcome when visiting Tompkins County. Visitors to our community want to feel accepted and see themselves represented in our media.

We recognize that long-term effort will be required to ensure that our destination is inclusive to all people. We believe that supporting diverse visitor groups will enhance local appreciation for the value of diversity in our community and region.

Goals

- Maintain and enhance our destination's appeal to LGBTQIA+ audiences
- Actively promote our destination to diverse audiences
- Establish cultural awareness training opportunities for tourism sector

Higher Education

Education is the primary economic engine of Tompkins County. Our three key academic institutions -- Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3) -- have a combined student enrollment exceeding 29,000 in the county. Higher education was associated with many primary motivations for travel in the Visitor Profile Study (appendix 3). The study identified 10 specific reasons associated with higher education tourism: visiting students, college tours, and on-campus activities were the top three.

The county's high proportion of college students directly affects our tourism market. Annual events such as orientations, move-in days, parents' weekends, reunions, and commencements attract large numbers of visitors to Tompkins County. The demand from these events regularly approaches or exceeds the county's lodging room supply.

Our county's higher education institutions offer bountiful options for visitors throughout the year. Cornell University is often cited among the most picturesque campuses in the nation. In addition to the gorges and waterfalls, the university includes unique visitor attractors such as the Cornell Botanical Gardens, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art and the Lab of Ornithology. The institutions also offer performance spaces such as Ithaca College's Ford Hall, which was renovated in 2014 and seats over 600. Collegiate athletic events attract participants and spectators for a variety of competitions. Finally, the institutions attract a substantial amount of business travelers for research, meetings, and campus-related activities.

Looking ahead, several emerging trends relating to higher education should be considered as they will impact local tourism issues. Generational and demographic trends have profound effects on higher education. The decline in the high school student population in upstate New York has caused college recruitment officials to expand their reach to find prospective students. While many families prioritize college visits, there is a growing trend of waiting until a student is admitted before planning a college visit – as such the timing of college visits has shifted from summer to the winter and spring.

Every new class of incoming students presents a remarkable opportunity from the tourism perspective. These students (and their families) are bound to make many future trips to Tompkins County for decades to come.

Goals

- Strengthen the partnership between higher education institutions and the Tompkins County Tourism Program
- Provide all campus visitors with accurate information about local events, establishments, and community resources.
- Enhance local transportation connections between campuses and downtown Ithaca for visitors

Marketing & Sales

Destination marketing is essential to increasing awareness of Ithaca and Tompkins County as a vibrant and exciting place to visit year-round. Marketing and advertising are core functions of the CVB.

The CVB markets our county through the VisitIthaca.com website, an annual travel guide publication, social media, and advertisements in a variety of media (online, radio, print, etc.). The CVB works directly with travel writers and bloggers to showcase attractions in our county to new audiences. The CVB leverages the local investment in destination marketing with state matching funds from I♥NY.

The Visitor Profile Study findings have major significance for destination marketing efforts. The study revealed that many people make travel plans using information from college websites and knowledge from previous visits to Ithaca (appendix 3). The study showed that most travel is planned between one and six months in advance. In addition, the study indicated a growing share of repeat visitation (76% compared to 69% in 2009). The study also provided detailed information about our county's most typical travel party types (families and couples). In the coming years, it will be increasingly important to develop communication strategies that can reach these visitors.

One current limitation to our destination sales efforts is the lack of a community conference center. While large meetings can be hosted at on-campus venues, these spaces are in high demand for campus-related events. Prior studies on the feasibility of a conference center in Tompkins County have confirmed the viability of this concept. The addition of a conference center would allow our community to attract new tourism business during off-peak periods.

Goals

- Build a conference center to host events beyond the capacity of our current meeting spaces
- Increase engagement with online destination marketing efforts and distribution of travel guides
- Maintain working partnerships with higher education institutions on destination marketing efforts
- Provide support to local tourism partners through marketing and advertising.
- Increase media impressions and social media engagement

Outdoor Recreation

Gorges and waterfalls define the landscape of Tompkins County and attract the attention of travelers. Our county offers a wealth of outdoor recreational opportunities from hiking and biking on local trails to paddling and windsurfing on Cayuga Lake. The Visitor Profile Study identified visits to gorges and hiking as two of the top seven most popular visitor activities (appendix 3).

Tompkins County contains three state parks, 240 miles of recreational trails, four local parks along Cayuga Lake, and over 19,000 acres of state forest land. Several local organizations help people engage with the environment, such as the Cayuga Nature Center and Ithaca Children's Garden. Our county's unique outdoor environment is tightly integrated into our history and culture.

Yet, opportunities remain for our county to improve its appeal as an outdoor-focused destination. Critical links need to be filled in our trail network, and public lake access sites are in high demand. Several goals and actions were identified in the recently completed *Outdoor Recreation Tourism Implementation Plan*. Looking ahead, many questions remain about the maintenance and stewardship of local outdoor recreational resources.

Goals

- Maintain and enhance our status as a destination for outdoor recreation.
- Complete the goals and actions in the *Outdoor Recreation Tourism Implementation Plan*

Transportation & Connectivity

Navigating between various destinations is an integral part of any trip, and visitors to Tompkins County have many options to consider. The Visitor Profile Study revealed that most of our visitors drive here and many visitors who fly in choose to rent a car upon arrival (appendix 3). It also showed that many of our visitors have experience navigating our county's streets either as tourists or residents. This presents some unique circumstances for considering improvements to visitor transportation.

The Visitor Profile Study confirmed that some visitors believe that Tompkins County is not easy to get to. While Ithaca has several inter-city bus lines (Short Line, OurBus, and the Cornell Campus to Campus service) connecting to New York City and other metro areas, we aren't served by an interstate highway or passenger train service. Improvements to regional and statewide transportation networks are beyond the scope of this six-year plan and generally beyond the funding capacity of the Tourism Program.

Tompkins County offers a wide range of transportation services and infrastructure available to visitors, commuters, and residents. In addition to TCAT bus service, Gadabout, taxis, and Ithaca CarShare, several new transportation options have recently emerged such as bike sharing (Lime) and app-based ride hailing (Uber & Lyft). The city of Ithaca offers public structured and on-street parking in downtown, and Collegetown and is currently studying its overall parking strategy.

Looking ahead, the Tourism Program has the capability to leverage local investments to improve transportation for visitors to our county. Improvements to our community's wayfinding signage will be important to help new and repeat visitors of all abilities navigate without using a smartphone. Enhanced transit links between core visitor destinations will help to relieve parking demands in downtown Ithaca and on college campuses.

Goals

- Implement wayfinding signage countywide recommended in the 2014 Wayfinding and Interpretive Signage Plan
- Refine visitor communication regarding transportation options and parking
- Leverage local investments in infrastructure to improve visitor transportation options

Waterfront

Cayuga Lake is a signature landscape feature that contributes to the overall attractiveness and uniqueness of our county as a tourism destination. The lake is the backdrop for the Ithaca Farmers Market and Stewart Park – two top attractions in our area. Many waterfront destinations in Ithaca are connected by the Cayuga Waterfront Trail.

Yet, the waterfront remains an underdeveloped tourism asset. Nearly four-fifths (80%) of respondents to the Visitor Profile Study reported that they did not participate in any lake activity. Recent developments and plans have started to generate excitement about the potential of the waterfront.

While some tourist destinations are located on or near Cayuga Lake or its inlet, there is relatively little private development in the vicinity. There is potential with the right type of development to provide enhanced waterfront access and experiences that would bring increased vitality and excitement to the overall package of opportunities for visitors to explore.

Goal

- Improve public access for all types of waterfront experiences, including walking, gathering places, cafes/sitting areas, boating, running, biking, and pedestrian connections.

Foundation

Agriculinary

Tompkins County contains a mix of urban and rural places. Agriculinary tourism represents an opportunity for visitors to experience the best of our area’s agricultural and culinary offerings. Development of agriculinary tourism provides people with a chance to experience working landscapes and learn about our community through its land and food. The growth of agriculinary tourism increases opportunity for farmers, producers, and restaurants to sell locally sourced foods to new customers.

Our county has several key agriculinary tourism assets, including the Ithaca Farmers Market, Cayuga Lake Wine Trail, and the Farm to Fork brand. Following on the 2016 Agriculinary Tourism Implementation Plan, the Ithaca/Tompkins County CVB created a new position focused on the promotion of agriculinary tourism and a microgrant program for agriculinary destinations. Our county is home to a concentration of craft cider producers – a sector that we expect to grow in coming years.

Looking ahead, we want to expand the availability of locally produced foods and beverages and increase visitor opportunities to engage with our local agricultural community. Efforts from a wide range of private partners will be needed to ensure that Tompkins County maintains its reputation as a destination that offers high-quality, locally sourced foods and beverages.

Goals

- Increase visibility and sales of locally produced food and beverage for visitors
- Enhance our reputation as a destination for agriculinary tourism
- Build capacity for emerging agriculinary tourism districts and attractions through ongoing trainings, workshops, and networking events
- Integrate established agriculinary tourism attractions with outdoor recreation opportunities
- Increase traffic on Visit Ithaca - Farm to Fork website
- Connect the Ithaca Farmers Market to emerging waterfront development
- Seek media coverage and other opportunities to further position Ithaca/ Tompkins County as a top agriculinary tourism destination with a focus on assets such as the area’s burgeoning craft cider industry, quality of craft cider, and scientific research being led by Cornell

Arts & Cultural Heritage

Artistic and cultural attractions are a key element of many visitors' experiences in Tompkins County. Indeed, many of our community's largest cultural institutions rely on visitors to support a variety of performances, exhibits, and other artistic programming. A full calendar of cultural events allows us to offer unique and inspiring visitor experiences year-round.

In 2019 Tompkins County was recognized as the #6 medium-size metropolitan area for arts vibrancy by the National Center for Arts Research (SMU DataArts, 2019). We are home to a wide variety of theatres, museums, and creative institutions. Our community's cultural offerings attract diverse audiences for live performances, exhibitions, and other events. As a cultural destination, we have been far more successful than most communities of our size.

Over the past five years, Tompkins County has made substantial progress toward advancing heritage tourism. The recently established Tompkins Center for History & Culture is the cornerstone of heritage tourism in our community. Looking ahead, visitors appear to be interested in the development of a college or university related museum in Tompkins County (appendix 3).

Tompkins County seeks to maintain and grow its reputation as a destination for cultural tourism. Our cultural institutions offer compelling reasons for travelers to discover new experiences and extend the length of their trip. However, these institutions rely on human talent, inspired marketing, and accessible physical venues to engage our visitors.

Goals

- Increase ticket sales and attendance at cultural attractions in Tompkins County
- Position cultural events and attractions to extend trip length
- Maintain our status as a cultural destination in upstate New York
- Increase marketing of arts and cultural heritage tourism assets
- Focus sales efforts on group tours that incorporate cultural heritage tourism assets

Downtown Ithaca

The shops, restaurants, offices, and services clustered around the Ithaca Commons comprise the primary commercial hub of our community. In addition to its local significance, the Commons is a primary destination for tourists: over one-third of visitors reported visiting the Ithaca Commons during their last trip (appendix 3). In 2015, 40 years after its creation, the Commons was re-built with new features that improved its value as public infrastructure. In addition to new residential and commercial development downtown, two new hotels have recently opened near the Commons.

The Downtown Ithaca Alliance is the area's business improvement district and as such provides supplemental services to preserve and develop the district. The Ithaca Commons is a one-of-a-kind venue for large-scale outdoor events such as Apple Harvest Festival. The presence of four hotels with a combined total of 575 rooms makes downtown Ithaca the core of our area's visitor market and a destination easily accessible to many tourists.

Yet, downtown Ithaca faces distinct challenges regarding tourism. Foot traffic downtown suffers due to the effects of academic calendars and seasonal slumps in visitor traffic. Data from the Visitor Profile Study suggests that tourist retail spending has decreased, and that store owners may need to find new and creative ways to engage with shoppers. Additional opportunities exist to establish a wayfinding program, enhance local transportation options, and upgrade parking facilities.

Goals

- Establish a downtown Ithaca community conference center
- Establish downtown Ithaca as the county's primary hub for group tours
- Strengthen the performance of retail in downtown Ithaca
- Increase the availability of family-centered entertainment options in downtown Ithaca
- Evaluate options to improve downtown transportation connections to benefit visitors, downtown employees, and residents

Festivals

Major events attract visitors, generate publicity, and create community excitement. Festivals help us present all aspects of our community and express our local cultures. Festivals can also provide economic benefits to vendors, food establishments, and hotels.

DIA operates the Tompkins Festivals program, which supports event organizers throughout the county. This program consults with organizers of large events, offers workshops for event organizers, and operates an equipment rental program. The Tourism Program has supported dozens of events and festivals through various grants.

The demands placed on event organizers change frequently. For instance, recent concerns about safety have led to increased security mandates for some organizers. In order to ensure that Tompkins County can offer a robust calendar of events and festivals, ongoing education of event organizers is needed.

Goals

- Support event organizers with accurate educational materials and equipment rental
- Increase visitor attendance at festivals
- Support the development of festivals that have the potential to extend trip length

Planning & Evaluation

Planning and evaluation is the foundation on which the Tompkins County Tourism Program is built and sustained.

Evaluation is ongoing work that tests aspects of the program for performance and continued relevance. Evaluation forms the basis from which we make improvements to the program whether through suggested discussions with a partner or by changing portions of the program. This may happen through tweaks, substantial changes, or even elimination of program elements.

Planning is ongoing as well. It responds to changes in the market landscape and in making predictive decisions about the direction of the program. In planning we support the health of our tourism industry as well as our community's assets for the betterment of the lives of our citizens as we work to align the two.

The STPB Planning & Evaluation (P&E) Committee does the formative work around the parts of the long-range plan, bringing them to implementation. Its recommendations are brought to the STPB for consideration as issues arise.

Goals:

- Update the Visitor Profile Study every five years
- Provide consistent reporting guidance for partner organizations and grant recipients
- Annually identify local and state issues where education and advocacy may be appropriate based on the goals of this plan
- Periodically review how to balance support for legacy partners and new partners
- Review the STPB bylaws every three years

Emerging

Sports

Sports tourism holds the potential to attract new audiences of athletes and spectators to Tompkins County. Except for college sporting events, this tourism market has been largely overlooked. Tompkins County has the fundamental elements necessary to host additional individual and team sporting events throughout the year.

Currently, Cornell University and Ithaca College host a wide variety of college athletic events on their campuses. Our scenic state and local parks offer unique venues for outdoor events, such as the Cayuga Lake Triathlon. However, many regional youth and adult athletic events secure facilities outside Tompkins County.

In order to unlock this potential, key investments are needed to enhance the quality and availability of playing fields. Improvements to local playing fields will benefit local residents as well as visitors. In addition, deeper partnerships between local event organizers and campus athletic departments will be necessary to increase the public benefits of the collegiate facilities in Tompkins County.

Goals

- Strengthen partnership with colleges to host sporting events on campuses
- Attract new annual sporting events to Tompkins County

Destination Services

Beautification & Placemaking

Investments in the appearance and functionality of public spaces are vital to ensure that these locations attract visitors and residents. The aesthetic visual quality of our county's public spaces has a major influence on visitor experience and resident satisfaction. The presence of benches, lighting, public art, wastebaskets, and bollards can transform public spaces and lead to community-wide benefits.

The Tompkins County Tourism Program has supported a countywide Beautification program through a collaborative effort between the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, DIA, and the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce. This program has leveraged the efforts and enthusiasm of dozens of volunteers and sponsors since its establishment in 2002. The 2016 Beautification, Signage, and Public Art Strategic Plan defined goals and actions for this program. The plan also defined locations for plantings in the city of Ithaca and throughout the county. Recently, CAP identified the "Tompkins Giant" as the theme for a series of public art installations imagined for the area.

Looking ahead, it will be important to ensure that beautification and placemaking efforts supported through the Tourism Program align with destinations of interest to visitors. The long-term viability of this program depends on the strength of the partnerships that support its ongoing work.

New approaches may be necessary to enhance public spaces in different settings. (For instance, large planter boxes installed on the Ithaca Commons may not fit on narrower sidewalks in other neighborhoods.) In some situations, it may be appropriate to use low-cost, temporary measures to test the viability of enhancements to public spaces. This approach is sometimes called "tactical placemaking," and it has the potential to enhance our visitor experience.

Goals

- Maintain attractive plantings and well-maintained public spaces at key visitor destinations, including the Ithaca Commons, Collegetown, and the Waterfront
- Build upon municipal partnerships to support beautification and placemaking efforts through financial and in-kind assistance to ensure long-term program sustainability
- Increase volunteer and sponsor engagement with the Beautification program
- Commission high-quality public art consistent with the Tompkins Giant theme in locations with high visibility to visitors
- Establish a process to support tactical placemaking efforts that have potential to enhance visitor experiences

Conferences & Groups

As Tompkins County’s supply of accommodation options has expanded in recent years, the addition of new conferences and group tour bookings will be vital to ensure the stability of the hospitality sector. Visitors associated with conferences and groups often travel during off-peak days and seasons and bring business to hotels, restaurants, attractions, and retailers.

While our county currently lacks a conference center, we offer unique spaces for meeting planners, including locations on the campuses of Cornell University and Ithaca College. Efforts to explore the viability of a new community conference center in downtown Ithaca are underway. A conference center would allow our community to host events that currently conflict with academic schedules or don’t fit into our current meeting space inventory.

The ongoing expansion of the Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport will likely result in the establishment of new direct airline routes – and potentially lead to opportunities to attract new business meetings to our county. Enhanced partnerships between the CVB and our higher education institutions hold the potential to attract new conferences to our county. Continued engagement with tour operators will improve the desirability of Ithaca and Tompkins County as a destination for organized groups.

Goals

- Increase conference and group tour business during mid-week and off-peak season
- Enhance the visibility of our destination to group tour operators

Visitor Experience

Sometimes, travel can be a confusing, frustrating, and stressful experience. Travelers often need access to accurate information, essential services, and personalized assistance to enjoy their journeys.

The CVB operates three visitor centers in the county. In addition, CVB staff answer visitor questions over the phone and via online chat. Through a partnership with the Tompkins County Workforce Development Board, the CVB offers Visitor Journey Arrival to Destination (A2D) ambassador training. This program supports tourism training for front-line hospitality staff and other community members who wish to engage more effectively with visitors.

The Visitor Profile Study indicated that our visitors are remarkably satisfied with their trips to Tompkins County (appendix 3). However, it will be important to stay up to date with consumer technology, understand visitor preferences, and respond to new inquiries to maintain this level of satisfaction.

Goals

- Maintain or increase visitor satisfaction
- Maintain or increase total visitor engagement at visitors centers and online
- Increase the number of Visitor Journey A2D participants

Proposed Actions & Measures

[to be formatted as table]

Diversity & Inclusion

Actions

- Ensure that photography and video used for destination marketing represent our community's diversity
- Support local events that celebrate our diversity through marketing and promotion
- Identify and develop cultural awareness training programs for community ambassadors and hospitality workforce
- Recruit STPB board members from diverse backgrounds
- Identify accessibility barriers at major visitor attractions and support measures to improve accessibility
- Support events and attractions that engage diverse local populations
- Gather appropriate information about visitor diversity in future Visitor Profile Studies

Measures

- Diversity of responses in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in profile study:
 - o “Offers a welcoming environment for visitors”
 - o “Appeals to many different audience groups”
- Participation in tourism-oriented cultural awareness training

Higher Education

Actions

- Integrate campus event calendars with CVB & IthacaEvents.com
- Hold quarterly meetings between Cornell University, Ithaca College, TC3, and the CVB to maintain long-range event coordination
- Encourage and incentivize event organizers to align event timing with academic calendars
- Assess current transportation options between campuses and downtown Ithaca and identify potential intervention points that would improve connectivity
- Identify unique large-scale events that can be hosted on-campus when classes are not in session (such as Science Olympiad)
- Annually review campus tours and student orientation programming to ensure current information about local tourism assets is accurate
- Identify off-campus community assets that are linked to higher education institutions to incorporate into tour itineraries

- Engage Cornell University, Ithaca College, and TC3 employees with tourism training opportunities such as Visitor Journey A2D
- Connect local hospitality staff with on-campus opportunities to learn from faculty and guest lecturers

Measures

- On-campus events listed on IthacaEvents.com
- Visitor attendance at on-campus attractors
- Performance of transit service between downtown Ithaca and campuses
- College related travel purposes reported in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor reported participation in on-campus activities in Visitor Profile Study

Marketing & Sales

Actions

- Promote Tompkins County as an accessible destination for outdoor recreation
- Promote Ithaca and Tompkins County as a destination that is easy to get to by various modes of transportation
- Promote Tompkins County to targeted and niche audiences such as LGBTQIA+ and agricutinary tourists
- Focus and refine marketing and advertising efforts for higher education-focused visitors.
- Build and maintain a library of attractive imagery and video of Tompkins County's tourism assets
- Offer annual marketing workshops and educational resources to local tourism partners.
- Develop cooperative advertising opportunities to help local tourism partners reach out-of-county audiences
- Develop a marketing strategy focused on connecting with repeat visitors
- Identify and engage markets for potential new visitors, including new niche travel segments

Measures

- Annual VisitIthaca.com website traffic, social media engagement, and media impressions
- Percent of travel guides distributed outside of Tompkins County
- Percent of visitors using CVB resources for travel planning as reported in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in Visitor Profile Study:
 - o “Makes it easy to get information about things to do”
 - o “Appeals to many different audience groups”

Outdoor Recreation

Actions

- Leverage local and regional funding sources to address maintenance needs of recreational trails and other outdoor recreational assets
- Engage an external consultant to assess the potential value of the county's outdoor recreational assets (e.g. parks, trails, established events) relative to national trends for future tourism development
- Identify and engage out of region group tour operators who can offer destination biking, hiking, paddling, or other extended outdoor recreation trips in Tompkins County
- Update and implement the Priority Trails Strategy to reflect potential new trail segments and actions for land and water trails
- Assess the marketing needs for outdoor recreation tourism and develop a coordinated marketing plan

Measures

- Miles of connected, multi-use trails within Tompkins County
- Established public access points to Cayuga Lake for swimming and/or boating
- Percent of visitors participating in outdoor recreation activities as reported in profile study.
- Attendance at state and local parks

Transportation & Connectivity

Actions

- Explore and support efforts to establish a downtown Ithaca intermodal transit center
- Evaluate ways to enhance visitor experience at key transportation terminals, including the airport, intercity bus depot, and downtown parking garages
- Research how mobility as a service options may align with visitor transportation needs
- Evaluate the creation of a fully accessible shuttle service between Cornell University and downtown Ithaca and other destinations
- Create a transportation communication strategy for visitors
- Coordinate with TCAT and partner municipalities to establish remote parking for downtown workers to improve availability of parking for visitors
- Connect existing multi-use trails to improve access to the urban area

Measures

- Performance of transit service between downtown Ithaca and campuses
- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in profile study:
 - o “Makes it easy to navigate to the different attractions”

- “Is easy to get to”

Waterfront

Actions

- Review existing local waterfront plans and identify active development projects
- Invite development proposal teams to present draft plans to STPB members for consideration of issues that affect visitors
- Assess waterfront sites appropriate for open space, enhanced public access to Cayuga Lake, trail connections, and other amenities valued by visitors to Tompkins County
- Evaluate opportunities to create and expand year-round tourism destinations along the waterfront

Measures

- Established public access points to Cayuga Lake for swimming and/or boating
- Visitors reporting participation in any lake activity in profile study
- Visitor spending on outdoor experiences in profile study

Agriculinary

Actions

- Establish branding guidelines for “Farm to Fork” partner farms and restaurants
- Explore the expansion of agriculinary microgrants to support the agritourism sector
- Identify and engage out of region group tour operators who can offer destination culinary tours in Tompkins County
- Evaluate the potential for the development of new niche agriculinary tourism themes (such as establishing a fiber trail)
- Collaborate with partners to develop packages that integrate local chefs, farms, and rural lodging
- Explore improvements to the Ithaca Farmers Market to expand lake access and attract customers throughout the year

Measures

- Visitors reporting participation in the following in the Visitor Profile Study:
 - Visiting area wineries
 - Exploring the Farmer’s Market
 - Visiting a local farm or orchard
- Visitor spending on dining and craft beverages in the Visitor Profile Study
- Participation in local agriculinary conferences, workshops, and networking events

Arts & Cultural Heritage

Actions

- Identify and leverage collaborative marketing opportunities for cultural organizations
- Provide digital marketing assistance to local cultural organizations
- Capture and distribute media reflecting the range of cultural offerings available in Tompkins County on the CVB website, the annual visitor guide, and other destination promotional material
- Evaluate the feasibility of proposals that integrate natural areas and outdoor performance (i.e. waterfront performance venue)
- Develop a set of standard metrics for all local cultural organizations, including those affiliated with our higher education institutions, to report to the community on an annual basis (consider using Cultural Data Profile system)
- Perform a regional assessment of competitive venues and cultural attractions
- Perform an assessment of IthacaEvents.com ability to promote and distribute event information to target audiences
- Develop a clear communication channel for all local cultural events (including those affiliated with our higher education institutions)
- Provide current information to hospitality staff and local ambassadors on local artistic & cultural programming
- Support cultural programming and marketing geared toward LGBTQIA+ audiences
- Seek out public relations opportunities to highlight arts and cultural assets in Ithaca
- Develop visitor packages that combine local food and beverage offerings with artistic and cultural experiences
- Evaluate the feasibility of establishing permanent museum exhibits focused on Cornell University and Ithaca College at the Tompkins Center for History & Culture
- Engage the County Historian to develop heritage tourism assets available for incorporation into exhibits and tours
- Identify group tour operators willing to include local arts and cultural heritage tourism attractions

Measures

- Cultural events listed on IthacaEvents.com
- Ticket sales, total attendance, and out of county visitors to established cultural tourism attractions supported by the Tourism Program
- Visitors reporting participation in the following activities in the Visitor Profile Study
 - o Visiting locations on the Discovery Trail
 - o Touring a museum or gallery
 - o Touring a historic site or landmark
 - o Seeing a live performance or concert at a local theatre
- Visitor spending on museums, attractions, and other entertainment in the Visitor Profile Study

- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in the Visitor Profile Study:
 - o “Offers compelling arts, history, and cultural enrichment”
 - o “Appeals to many different audience groups”

Downtown Ithaca

Actions

- Perform a downtown retail market study
- Explore policies and programs that encourage retail-focused events and unique or experiential retail
- Encourage the addition of banners and flags throughout downtown
- Develop a year-round calendar of tours focused on heritage, food, and culture
- Support City of Ithaca efforts to enhance the visitor experience at downtown parking garages
- Establish consistent wayfinding for pedestrians and motorists throughout downtown Ithaca
- Engage downtown businesses and employees with tourism training opportunities such as Visitor Journey A2D.

Measures

- Increased foot traffic as measured by pedestrian counters on the Commons
- Visitors reporting a walk on the Ithaca Commons in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor spending on dining and retail in Visitor Profile Study

Festivals

Actions

- Annually evaluate the need to add or replace rental items in the Tompkins Festivals equipment rental program
- Annually review local regulatory issues affecting event organizers
- Provide annual workshops and educational materials for event organizers

Measures

- Visitors reporting that they attended a special event or festival in Visitor Profile Study
- Total attendance and out of county visitors at major annual events supported by the Tourism Program
- Utilization of equipment rental by event organizers
- Participation in Tompkins Festivals workshops for event organizers

Planning & Evaluation

Actions:

- Establish a line item in the Tourism Program budget to ensure regular funding is available to perform updated market evaluations
- Consider appropriate demographic questions to include in future Visitor Profile Studies, especially regarding diversity
- Determine annual priorities for evaluation at the first P&E Committee meeting of each year
- Review proposed local, state, and federal legislation, policies, and programs affecting tourism annually before July; where appropriate, the P&E Committee will recommend board action for advocacy
- Engage the STPB in education and advocacy efforts focused on local and state government as deemed necessary by the P&E Committee
- Develop a policy to balance the needs of legacy partners and new partners and offer guidance for organizations seeking Tourism Program support
- Establish and define key indicators to be included consistently in grant reports to STPB
- Establish and distribute guidance on measuring event attendance for partner organizations
- Provide a progress report on goals in the Strategic Tourism Plan to the STPB every two years

Measures

- Progress toward overall goals

Sports

Actions

- Identify and engage sporting event organizers interested in hosting events in Tompkins County
- Evaluate the feasibility and costs of upgrading municipal sports fields to be capable of hosting large events

Measures

- Visitors reporting attendance at a sporting event in Visitor Profile Study

Beautification & Placemaking

Actions

- Annually review the planters and public spaces maintained by partner organizations and prioritize locations relevant to visitor experience and established development nodes
- Review and update the Beautification, Signage, and Public Art Strategic Plan.

- Review and document beautification practices in comparable cities and counties to identify best practices
- Engage municipal partners considering modifications to public spaces to ensure that tourism-supportive features are incorporated
- Identify locations where tactical placemaking efforts could enhance visitor experience and engage municipalities regarding implementation
- Support the establishment and maintenance of public art in locations with heavy visitor traffic
- Promote public art installations in Tompkins County
- Support beautification improvements in rural communities

Measures

- Number of plantings maintained by the Beautification program
- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in Visitor Profile Study:
 - o “Has a clean, unspoiled environment”
- Public art installations supported by the Tourism Program

Conferences & Groups

Actions

- Leverage airport connections to grow niche meeting and retreat business
- Build the association market (state, regional and national)
- Host an industry conference to gain exposure to domestic tour companies
- Grow international visitation to Tompkins County
- Leverage regional partners to create fresh tour product to increase overnight trips
- Identify and engage niche group travel opportunities

Measures

- Meeting, conference, and athletic event leads sent and booked
- Group tour and leisure leads sent and booked
- Total booked economic impact attributed to CVB meetings and group sales efforts

Visitor Experience

Actions

- Research and deploy integrated communication systems to share up-to-date information with visitors and front-line tourism staff (i.e. SMS or push notifications)
- Evaluate ways to enhance visitor experience at key transportation terminals, including the airport, intercity bus depot, and downtown parking garages

- Refine and expand tourism training programming offered through Visitor Journey A2D
- Research personal concierge service technology systems
- Continue to engage with visitors outside of visitor center facilities

Measures

- Visitor likelihood to return as reported in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor recommendation of our destination for a vacation or getaway as reported in Visitor Profile Study
- Visitor agreement with the following statements about our destination in Visitor Profile Study:
 - o “Offers a welcoming environment for visitors”
 - o “Makes it easy to get information about things to do”
- Participation in A2D training
- CVB visitor touchpoints at visitor centers, off-site events, online chat, and other methods

TOMPKINS COUNTY TOURISM PARTNERS

(listed alphabetically)

Core Tourism Program Partners

- Community Arts Partnership
- Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County
- Downtown Ithaca Alliance
- Tompkins County Area Development
- Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce – Ithaca/Tompkins County Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Tompkins County Historian
- Tompkins County Workforce Development Board

Higher Education Partners

- Cornell University
- Ithaca College
- Tompkins Cortland Community College

Local, Regional & State Partners

- Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway
- Cayuga Lake Wine Trail
- City of Ithaca
- Discovery Trail
- Finger Lakes Beer Trail
- Finger Lakes Land Trust
- Finger Lakes Regional Tourism Council
- Finger Lakes Tourism Alliance
- Hotels, Motels, Inns & B&Bs
- Ithaca Farmers Market
- Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport
- I♥NY (Empire State Development)
- Local Restaurants
- Local Retailers
- Local Transportation Providers
- NYS Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
- Past Tourism Program Grant Recipients
- Regional Media Outlets (TV, print, radio, online, etc.)

- Regional Tourism Promotion Agencies
- Tour Operators
- Tompkins Center for History & Culture
- Tompkins County Area Transit
- Tompkins County Parks & Trails Network
- Towns & Villages in Tompkins County

GLOSSARY

- Action
 - Specific activities which will advance one or more goals
 - See section 8
- Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB)
 - AKA “Visit Ithaca”
 - The Ithaca/Tompkins County CVB is a division of the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce. It is the official Tourism Promotion Agency for Tompkins County. The CVB has three primary departments: marketing, group sales, and visitor experience.
- Core Tourism Program Partners
 - Entities that participate in the annual room tax budget development. These organizations receive annual funding to assist the Tourism Program. Each entity prepares an annual work plan and budget request for review by the STPB Budget Committee.
 - See section 4
- Focus Areas
 - Thematic categories for goals and actions
 - See section 8
- Goal
 - Results and outcomes sought by the Tourism Program. All goals in this plan are aligned with one or more values. Most goals are organized by focus area.
 - See section 8
- Housing & Economic Development (HED) Committee
 - The HED Committee reports to the Tompkins County Legislature. The STPB reports to the HED Committee, which makes recommendations to the Legislature. Committee assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the Legislature.
- I♥NY
 - AKA “Empire State Development”
 - Official New York State Destination Marketing Organization
- Hotel Room Occupancy Tax
 - AKA “Room Tax,” “Bed Tax,” “Lodging Tax” etc.
 - A tax paid by visitors to Tompkins County who stay in hotels, motels, and bed and breakfast establishments. The tax rate is 5% of the daily rate for all lodging properties with 11 or more rooms and 3% of the daily rate for all smaller lodging properties. The law describes specific exemptions for permanent residents and tax-exempt guests. Tompkins County first levied a hotel tax in 1986. The tax rate was increased in 1989 and 2001. The tax is remitted quarterly.
 - See appendix 1 / County L.L. No. 4-1989 - <https://ecode360.com/8412617>

- Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB)
 - Advisory board to the Tompkins County Legislature on all matters relating to tourism. The STPB is the formal advisory board charged by the Tompkins County Legislature with providing oversight and strategic direction for tourism initiatives that promote economic development and enhance the quality of life for residents in Tompkins County. The STPB was established in 1998.
- Tompkins Center for History & Culture
 - Established in 2019, this facility serves as the home to The History Center in Tompkins County, Community Arts Partnership, the CVB's downtown visitor center, and several other nonprofit organizations.
- Tompkins County Tourism Program
 - The official name of the overall program funded by the hotel room occupancy tax.
- Tourism Marketing
 - Activities that entice visitors to travel to Tompkins County. Marketing activities include identification of potential visitors, market research, advertising campaigns, public relations, social media campaigns, group sales, conference and meeting sales, and visitor center operations.
 - The STPB has established a budget policy that allocates 60% of the available hotel room occupancy tax to marketing annually (appendix 2.)
- Tourism Product Development
 - Activities that enhance the attractions, amenities, services, venues, events, and other features that bring visitors to our community. Product development activities can include feasibility studies of potential improvements, grants to support festivals, capital improvements, and general operating support for local organizations.
 - The STPB has established a policy that allocates 40% of the available hotel room occupancy tax toward product development annually (appendix 2)
- Tourism Promotion Agency (TPA)
 - AKA "Destination Marketing Organization"
 - County-designated organization eligible for matching funds from I♥NY
- Value
 - Highest-level description of the STPB and Tourism Program's mission
 - See section 6
- Visitor
 - AKA Tourist
 - A person whose home is located at least 50 miles from Tompkins County
- Visitor Journey Arrival to Departure (A2D)
 - A tourism training program for front-line hospitality staff and community members operated by the CVB and the Workforce Development Board. The A2D training program launched in 2018 and replaced the Hospitality Star program.

- Visitor Profile Study
 - Research conducted in 2018 and 2019 to provide insight related to overnight visitors to our county. The study was performed by JLL on behalf of the CVB and the Tourism Program using online and in-person intercept surveys. The results of the study serve as a foundational element for the Strategic Tourism Plan. The previous study was completed in 2009.
 - See appendix 3 and section 7
- Voluntary Collection Agreement
 - An agreement between Tompkins County and Airbnb, Inc. for the collection of hotel room occupancy taxes. In July 2016, Tompkins County became the first county in New York State to enter into such an agreement.