



Photo credit: Brian Blackford, ICI

Jasper County Tourism Commission Strategic Action Plan

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JCEDO



**JASPER COUNTY
TOURISM COMMISSION**



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**
Miller College of Business
Indiana Communities Institute

OVERVIEW:

Tourism is an important contributor to Indiana's economy, attracting more than 77 million visitors and yielding \$13.1 billion dollars in visitor spending annually (as of 2021). Many of these visitors are drawn to Northwest Indiana because of its proximity to Chicago, quaint towns, rich cultural heritage, agritourism, and outdoor recreation. At the southern end of the "Region" is Jasper County. Visitors to Jasper County, among other opportunities, can explore an array of stunning mural masterpieces found in several communities, indulge at one of several culinary destinations, and experience the annual migration of thousands of sandhill cranes.



Photo credit: Jasper County Tourism Commission

In the fall of 2023, the Jasper County Tourism Commission (JCTC) sought to engage in a strategic planning process to help guide the organization in the coming months and years. The planning process was conducted in partnership with the Indiana Communities Institute (ICI) at Ball State University's Miller College of Business. The facilitators at ICI have decades of combined experience working in tourism and community development including at the state tourism office, at various tourism venues or non-profits, and in higher education.

The process objectives included:

- To review the current role, work products, and partnerships related to the JCTC and its tourism efforts
- To consider possible future roles, work product, and partnerships related to the JCTC and its efforts
- To prioritize action items for pursuing the agreed upon roles, work product, and partnerships
- To determine next steps and make action assignments related to the JCTC and its efforts

To achieve these objectives, the facilitators developed a multi-session assessment and guided discussion with JCTC staff, board, and community members. The effort was designed to review where the organization, specifically, and tourism, more generally, is now, consider what could be next, and identify how best to get there. While the process aided in evaluation of current efforts, it also helped identify and organize priorities. These priorities were further vetted with staff to ensure alignment with available resources.

This report summarizes findings based on an assessment of current realities (Where are we now?), a vision for future possibilities (Where do we want to go?), and action steps for how to best achieve the desired success (How do we get there?). It is all categorized within three

overarching JCTC focus areas: Destination Development, Destination Marketing, and Organizational Management.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Before considerations for future work can be made, a better understanding of the current landscape is necessary. Following a site visit and meetings with JCTC staff, facilitators from the Indiana Communities Institute led a session with JCTC staff and board to share more about the state of tourism, asset map, and discuss other existing realities. Information shared and findings uncovered during that meeting are outlined in this section.

The State of Tourism

While this report focuses on Jasper County, national and statewide context can and should serve to guide and inform decision-makers. Tourism is a crucial driver for economic expansion, fostering dynamic communities, generating employment prospects, and sparking the inception of new enterprises. However, the tourism industry remains vulnerable to lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic shifts. Prior to the pandemic, Indiana boasted \$13.3 billion in travel spending. Current travel spending remains approximately 3% lower than pre-pandemic rates. Optimistically though, travel spending is up from 2021 by roughly 23%, which experts believe to be indicative of the post-pandemic recovery in the industry.

To help cultivate tourism in Indiana, there is a network of state and local organizations working to market and/or develop product. Approximately 78 of 92 Indiana counties collect an innkeeper's tax, including Jasper County. In 2023, the total amount generated from innkeepers' tax in Jasper County was approximately \$290,000. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure has been on the rise since 2020. In Indiana, local tourism offices (convention and visitors bureaus/destination management organizations) have staff sizes that range from a one-person effort to a team of dozens. Additionally, budgets vary greatly across the state and recent data indicates that CVBs/DMOs are operating with budgets ranging from \$25,000 to more than \$10 million. Budgetary priorities in Jasper County in recent years have included investments such as the JCFA Horse Barn, festivals and community support, mural week, and Staddon Field, to name a few.

The general areas of focus for local tourism offices typically includes a combination of the following:

- Marketing (leisure and/or business)
- Niche market development and marketing
- Resident "attraction" and engagement
- Research
- Community development/leadership

Jasper County's mission is "Strengthen and diversify the local economy, attract quality jobs, and encourage entrepreneurial growth to create opportunities for Jasper County and its residents." Current areas of focus include recreational, residential, tourism, and trade interests with initiatives focused on prosperity for the Jasper County.

Asset Mapping

Every community has a variety of innate resources. Asset mapping helps identify what they are. It can be done in several ways. ICI used the community capitals, as defined by the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), to frame the discussion in Jasper County. RUPRI recognizes eight types of community capitals, one more than researchers Flora and Flora originally identified in the 1990s. The capitals include: Financial, Intellectual, Human, Social, Cultural, Political, Physical, and Natural.

Participants were asked to identify community assets related to each capital. It is important to note that asset mapping is a subjective exercise and there may be differences regarding what assets fall under which type of community capital. There is also potential for significant overlap. While asset mapping is not a definitive process, it does provide useful context and can help align goals and tactics with available resources. A recap of the assets identified, along with a brief description of each capital, is provided in Table 1 (next page).

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Table 1. Asset Mapping Exercise	
Capital with Brief Explanation	General Assets
Financial: Money, Other Liquid Assets	Hotels/Innkeepers, J-N Foundation, Community banks (local and regional), Operation Round-Up (JC REMC), Parks Board, Prairie Arts Council, Local families
Intellectual: Productive Capabilities of a Population Related to Knowledge, Innovation, etc.	Agricultural knowledge (impact on culture), Purdue Extension, Homesteading, St. Joe College certification programs, Pipestone, Homeschool (Ag-based), FBI, Remington Seeds
Human: Productive Capabilities of a Population Related to Health, Wellbeing, etc.	Franciscan Hospital, “Back to Earth”/Open Air, Local trails, No maternity ward, Childcare facilities.
Social: Trust, Relationships, Networks	Farmers Market, Churches, 4H, Trails group (Jasper Co. trails), Social clubs (Lions, Rotary, Moose, VFW, KOC), Chambers (WF, DM, REN), Main Streets (Remington, Rensselaer), Friends of Parks groups, BPA, Prairie Arts Council, 3 public schools, 2 private schools, Restaurants (winery, brewery), Parks (pickleball, disc golf), 2 golf courses, Bowling alley, Embers Event Center, Carnegie Theatre, Fendig Summer Theatre
Cultural: Practices, Values, and Identities Based in Society	Murals, PAC, Hunting, Religion, Progressive, Kankakee River, Baum’s Bridge, Kankakee Valley Historical Society, Dutch heritage, Festivals
Political: Influence, Power, and Goodwill that is Held, Spent, or Shared	Vacant buildings in downtown, Mostly good relationship with (and between) local governments, Large landowners, 2 different time zones, North-South distance (the region north, Lafayette to the South)
Physical: Built Environment, Infrastructure	Courthouse, Windmills, I65, St. Joe College grounds, Fairgrounds, Parks (town-based), Splash pad, Jasper-Pulaski Rec., Greyhound bus, Fair Oaks Farms, City infrastructure to roads, Walking trails, Western Cemetery, Perkins Farm, Farmer’s market, Campgrounds
Natural: Resources Provided by Nature	Jasper-Pulaski Rec., Sandhill cranes, Kankakee and Iroquois River, Nature preserves, Open-air land, Perkins Farm-small farms

Thought Questions

Once participants reviewed the “state of tourism” and considered various assets, ICI asked the following thought questions to gauge general awareness of what JCTC does and whether it aligns with current perceptions and/or expectations for tourism in the community.

- Question 1: Did anything about the presentation/current state of tourism and the JCTC surprise you? Did this presentation change your answer to the question posed at the beginning of the meeting (what do you think the JCTC’s most significant role is)? If so, how?
- Question 2: What do you think the JCTC currently does well? *Consider: destination marketing, partnerships, event sponsorships, etc.*
- Question 3: What questions or concerns might you have regarding what the JCTC currently does?

It seems how participants viewed JCTC’s role prior to the meeting generally aligned with their perceptions following a deeper dive into the overall tourism environment, the current work product, and the community’s assets. Some comments gathered during this discussion centered around the value of and need for: promotion and marketing, increase in tourism related revenue, and funding to current community development efforts.

Posing the question “where are we now” and exploring the related feedback helped the group identify current strengths, take into account ongoing challenges, and uncover any disconnects between the two. This process highlighted Jasper County’s wealth of community assets that will undoubtedly be central to the region’s tourism industry for years to come.

WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

To identify visionary ideas, pinpoint issues and opportunities, and find viable solutions, ICI conducted a day-long planning session in December. The results of that session are captured in this section and the next one. An effective plan starts with a vision or at least an understanding of the possibilities. While the scope of this planning process did not allow for an in-depth discussion around a robust community vision for tourism, ICI did ask participants to look ahead and consider what visitor-focused product might exist in the future. The framing used helped identify potential priorities.

Headlines from the Future

During their session with ICI, participants were asked to write “Headlines from the Future.” Primarily used to break the ice and ease into a brainstorming mindset, the “Headlines from the Future” exercise also provided some aspirational goals to be mindful of as more specific and immediate efforts are pursued. All participants were asked to think creatively about what headlines will be written about tourism in the

community a decade from now. Specifically, the group was asked to write headlines through three different prisms: local tourism in general, the JCTC as an organization, and tourism in the region. Following are the key themes that emerged per each lens and related headlines.



Photo credit: Ren Art Walk

Local tourism in general:

- Parks/splash pads
- Murals/festivals
- Trails (connectivity and development)
- St. Joseph College

“JASPER COUNTY TRAILS CLUB EXPAND TO NEWTON AND PULASKI COUNTIES”

“PARKS DEPARTMENT EXPANDS PROGRAMMING FOR ALL AGES”

JCTC as an organization:

- Funding/capital investments
- Festivals and community events
- County-wide collaboration
- Communication and storytelling

“JASPER COUNTY TOURISM JOINS FORCES WITH WHEATFIELD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOR BIGGEST SANDHILL CRANE FESTIVAL YET”

“JNF, JCEDO, AND JC TRAILS CLUB COLLABORATE BRINGING TRAILS TO OUR COUNTY THAT CONNECT COMMUNITIES”

Tourism in the region:

- Proximity to Chicago resulting in growth/tourism
- Intraregional transportation
- Trails/waterways connectivity
- Athletic events to serve as convener

“NORTHWEST INDIANA’S POPULATION BALLOONS AS MORE RESIDENTS CONTINUE TO LEAVE THE CITY”

“EXPANDED TRAILS AND WALKING PATHS IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR HOOSIERS BY CONNECTING COMMUNITY”

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Much of the planning session was spent exploring specific issues and opportunities prior to identifying solutions for addressing or pursuing them. The group also considered who might be best suited to lead or support various steps and possible timelines and metrics. Results from each activity are outlined below.

Issues and Opportunities

With ICI facilitating the conversation, the group identified 37 issues and opportunities of note for advancing tourism in Jasper County. They included:

- A. Participation-planning, organizational involvement
- B. Getting beyond the 'same old six'
- C. Unified communication/coordination
- D. Small business supports
- E. Website to support small businesses
- F. Getting people off the interstate
- G. Promoting small towns
- H. Transportation options from I65 hotels to places across county
- I. Readyng communities for tourism development
- J. Infrastructure for development
- K. Branding our communities in relation to possible change
- L. Zoning/comp planning design standards
- M. Competition for visitors within area: festivals, events, etc.
- N. Activation for winter
- O. Connections center on SR 10
- P. Sandy Pines utilization, cottages, etc.
- Q. Façade grant program
- R. "Brain drain"—bringing people back to area
- S. Trail planning/development/connectivity
- T. Hospital as resource for talent development
- U. St. Joe College property
- V. Residential opportunities in southern part of the county
- W. Airport-events
- X. Jasper Co. fairgrounds local draw
- Y. Jasper Co. fairgrounds year-round
- Z. Fair Oaks Farms
- AA. Sports complex/fields
- BB. Water ways access/activation
- CC. Jasper-Pulaski State Rec area
- DD. Commission partnerships
- EE. Navigating commission's role (tourism/econ. Development/workforce)
- FF. Marketing with video
- GG. Commission as a repository of grant opportunities (information sharer)

- HH. Leverage arts, murals, and more
- II. Education about role/focus of tourism office
- JJ. Expand on youth and educational experiences
- KK. Spencer Park bandshell (utilization/activation)

Participants were then asked to prioritize the issues and opportunities based on which they felt were of most interest or importance. Each participant was given three dots and instructed to place only one dot on a particular idea. Once the dots were placed and counted, ICI worked with the participants to combine related issues and opportunities. The group ultimately identified five priority areas (see Table 2).

Table 2: Top Issues and Opportunities (Priority Areas)
Promoting Small Towns & Encouraging Travel Off the Interstate (F, G, H; 9 votes)
Trail Planning, Connectivity and Development (S; 6 votes)
Exploration/Repurposing of St. Joe College Property (U; 7 votes)
Development of Sports Complex/Fields (AA; 6 votes)
Leveraging the Arts, Murals and More (HH; 5 votes)

Participants then self-selected, based on interest and/or expertise, a priority area to explore further with at least one other person. Together, they considered solutions, or tactical steps, for each priority area. Steps were considered based on three timeframes:

- “First steps” are within six months from now (through mid-2024)
- “Next steps” occur after the first six months through late 2025 (18 months)
- “Future steps” are from 2026 through 2028.

It should be noted that the emphasis, because this is an action plan more than a comprehensive strategic plan, was put on the first and next steps. The groups worked to identify networks, or partners, who could support JCTC efforts to achieve these steps. The list of networks was not exhaustive, rather a reflection of top-of-mind options to reflect the most likely partners. The list of partners will most likely grow and/or evolve.

Following the meeting with key stakeholders, JCTC staff met with the facilitators to further assess the identified priority areas based on alignment with available resources and relevance to impact. Those discussions resulted in three bigger-picture focus areas and some refined priorities.

The Jasper County Tourism Commission Strategic Action Plan is outlined at the conclusion of this report. It includes the top priorities (goals); first, next, future steps (tactics); and networks (partners) within the context of three overarching focus areas.

CONCLUSION

ICI's role in supporting the Jasper County Tourism Commission planning process was to facilitate a discussion about the current state of tourism in Jasper County, consider what future possibilities may exist, and pinpoint action steps for addressing or pursuing identified and prioritized issues or opportunities. In some cases, the outlined action is relatively straightforward, but more discussion is likely necessary to achieve success in other areas.

Destination Development



Priority Area: Help Develop Outdoor Recreation: Trails, Parks, and Preserves		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Collect access & usage data; Help convene conversations	Fund signage; Fund trail + trail head activation	Help connect & activate trails county wide
Metrics: Signage designed and installed; increased activation		
Partners: parks board; IDNR; community foundation; cycling groups; local businesses; etc.		
Priority Area: Help Develop Arts and Culture Amenities		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Identify + connect with possible sites for additional mural sites; Help understand artist needs	Develop mural tour; Identify & develop experiences around murals: classes, winter window paintings, camps, etc.	Install QR codes at art sites to inform; Install additional public art (sculptures, etc.); Link arts-culture opportunities to the region
Metrics: Additional mural sites; Additional public art; Increased Mural Walk traffic; County-wide art presence		
Partners: Artists; schools; community foundation; Tippecanoe Arts; local businesses; local government		
Priority Area: Help Develop Communities to Promote Towns and Get People off of the Interstate		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Conduct a needs assessment in each community + county; Access + analyze footfall data; Identify collaborative opportunities	Map and target projects for development in communities; Conduct resident Quality of Place amenity survey	Study visitation trends;
Metrics: Baseline data established; Increased visitation to amenities and activities		
Partners: Local elected officials; community members; chambers of commerce; Main Street organizations, etc.		
Priority Area: Update Destination Development Grants Program		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Review & update grant application and reporting process to ensure alignment with community asset development & other priorities	Identify vision for future projects & investments based on community asset development & other needs	Impact study
Metrics:		
Partners: Local communities; local businesses; local amenities and activities		
Priority Area: Support Sports Complex Development		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
	Help lead community engagement around development of & preparation for Newton Co. site	
Metrics: Number of stakeholders or residents connected with		
Partners: The Forum; local sports network; local real estate; Indiana Destination Development Corp., etc.		
Priority Area: Support St. Joseph College Property Redevelopment		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Serve as a convener if needed		
Metrics: N/A		
Partners: Community foundation, St. Joseph College; City of Rensselaer, etc.		

Destination Marketing



Priority Area: Promote and Market Outdoor Recreation: Trails, Parks, and Preserves		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Map assets; Identify funding options	Get on the state trail map; Develop additional campaigns as needed	
Metrics: Access to state map		
Partners: parks board; Indiana DNR; IDDC; community foundation; cycling groups; local businesses; etc.		
Priority Area: Promote Arts and Culture Experiences		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Discuss possible mural passport with Eye Dart	Create & distribute mural passports; Identify cross pollination opportunities for various arts events, products	
Metrics: Created passport; increased traffic to murals and related events		
Partners: Eye Dart; artists; schools; community foundation; Tippecanoe Arts; local businesses; local government		
Priority Area: Promote Communities to Get People Off of Interstate		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Conduct outreach to Indiana Destination Development Corp. & INDOT regarding signage and promotion options at new rest area; Work with local communities to identify needs; Establish quarterly meetings	Develop & install signage or promotion at rest stop if approved; Integrate visitor info & links to JCTC on local community websites; Collaborate with local communities and organizations to further promotional events	
Metrics: Increased integration of local websites; installation of signage or promotion elements at rest stop (if pursued); Quarterly meetings established & conducted		
Partners: Local elected officials; community members; chambers of commerce; Main Street organizations, etc.		
Priority Area: Develop Marketing Campaign		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Initiate discussion with Eye Dart regarding a 2025 campaign to promote Jasper Co. overall & key assets in particular (including arts & outdoor recreation)	Develop & implement campaign	Evaluate campaign metrics; Update & adapt as needed
Metrics: Campaign launched; metrics established, analyzed, & met		
Partners: Eye Dart; local communities; local businesses; local amenities & activities		
Priority Area: Enhance Website		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Monitor website numbers to understand usage & establish a baseline; Evaluate how to display & share things	Make website updates as needed	
Metrics: Established baseline; Metrics achieved		
Partners:		



Priority Area: Hire & Maintain Tourism Staff		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Clarify job title; Post position	Onboard staff	
Metrics: New staff hired		
Partners:		
Priority Area: Larger Capital Investment in Tourism Center		
First Steps (mid 2024-2025)	Next steps (2025)	Future steps
Identifying needs	Researching and touring other centers, include in planning for 2026 budget	Finding appropriate property
Metrics: Jasper County needs/market identified, similar tourism and visitor centers used for proposed budget		
Partners:		
Priority Area: Maximize Available Resources		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Identify resource needs; Research available data providers (esp. related to footfall data); Join Indiana Tourism Association	Secure & utilize data resources to help drive decisions	
Metrics: Joined ITA; Data resources secured		
Partners:		
Priority Area: Build Tourism Alliances with Newton County		
First Step/s (mid-2024-2025)	Next Step/s (2025)	Future Step/s (past 2025)
Identify key partners & conduct outreach	Review related data	
Metrics: Ongoing conversations		
Partners: Community foundation		