October 2013

Warren County (NC)

Economic Development Commission

MARKETING PLAN: 2014-2016

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HERITAGE · TOURISM · CULTURE

Executive Summary

Warren County, NC Tourism Vision

Our true gems are our people, our culture, and our places. These assets are what endear Warren County to us and will strongly attract visitors when actively promoted.

Tourism Mission Statement

To strengthen Warren County, North Carolina's economy through the development of tourism-related opportunities that will promote the county as a sustainable tourism destination.

Tourism Marketing Strategies:

1. Market to key niche audiences to **increase group visitation** by 10% annually
2. **Increase spending** from travelers to Warren County by 10% annually

To accomplish these benchmarks, the plan focuses on specific marketing tactics: **market research, collateral materials/digital media, sales promotions, public relations/publicity** and **advertising**. The intent is to realize the vision of the original *Tourism Strategic Plan* through actionable marketing strategies, goals and tasks. These tasks include:

- Establish, utilize and maintain a **consistent design philosophy** that represents the image, graphics and messages describing Warren County's brand promise
- Employ **cost effective marketing strategies** to achieve maximum return on investment
- **Collaborate** with tourism industry partners to extend marketing reach
- Make **experiences easier and engagement more consistent** for the visitor
- **Measure** marketing activities to demonstrate positive tourism impact annually.

Physical product development and enhancement is also important to building the critical mass of activities and experiences that will attract key target markets. A separate goal is included to ensure Warren County can expand its quality and quantity of visitor experiences through development of new or enhanced activities and assets that encourage first-time visitation as well as reasons to return.

Target Markets:

Given the limited funding and resources to market, and the unique stories/visitor ready experiences currently available, Warren County will focus on very specific markets to maximize impact and generate visitors as a strategy for increasing the economic impact from tourism.

1. **Group Tours**: specifically the **SAVE** Markets engaged in:
    a. **Scientific** research
    b. **Academic** field trips (professors and students)
    c. **Volunteer** projects (architecture, archeology, historic preservation, etc.)

   d. **Education** and lifelong learning (students, adults)
2. **Cultural heritage travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150 mile radius
   a. Historical Societies, museums in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
   b. Statewide history organizations (Preservation North Carolina, North Carolina Society of Architectural Historians, NC Archaeology Association, etc.)
   c. Retirement Communities in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
   d. Former residents of Warren County
3. **Nature-based travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150 mile radius
   a. Garden clubs in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
   b. Former residents of Warren County
4. **African American travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150-mile radius
   a. Family reunions
   b. Group tours
   c. Former residents of Warren County
5. **Second Home Owners at Lake Gaston**:
   a. Residents
   b. Visiting Friends and Relatives

Tourism Marketing & Management:

The *Tourism Strategic Plan* already outlines a "Marketing Organizational Chart." This plan recommends slight modification of these tourism roles and measurement processes.

The Warren County EDC has allocated a budget of $15,000, plus staffing time, to conduct tourism marketing activities for the destination.

Table of Contents

1. Tourism Vision and Mission Page 5
2. Situational Analysis Page 6
   - Target Markets
   - Tourism Competition
   - Distribution Channels
   - SWOT Analysis
   - Issues & Considerations
3. Overall Objectives Page 17
4. Specific Marketing Goals & Tactics Page 18
5. Warren County Tourism Marketing & Management Page 27
   - Representation, Roles & Responsibility
   - Projected Income Statement
   - Monitoring & Measurement

1. The Tourism Opportunity

Warren County, NC Tourism Vision

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Tourism Mission Statement

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Core Competencies

Two lakes – Gaston and Kerr – provide the basis for outdoor recreation and nature-based activities in this rural county in central North Carolina. Warren County also has an abundance of historic sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places (25), representing various aspects of significance: architecture, association with an individual, an event or at least 50 years old. An historic downtown business district has roots to African American merchants, one of the few extant in the state.

Strategic Objectives

1. *Increase the economic impact generated from tourism to enhance the quality of life of all residents.*
2. *Increase the quantity and quality of tourism business opportunities for residents as a viable economic development strategy for the county.*
3. *Increase the quality and quantity of consistently-offered experiences to attract visitors and their spending to the county.*

Resources

Currently, funding for tourism promotion and development is provided in the county's budget. There is not a dedicated lodging tax. The county also oversees the management of the destination website, and coordinates ongoing meetings of local tourism industry stakeholders as part of its economic development strategy.

2. Situational Analysis

About the Destination Product: Warren County, North Carolina

Warren County is strategically located an hour north of Raleigh/Durham, North Carolina and 90 minutes from Richmond, Virginia. Sandwiched between two major interstates (I-85 and I-95), the destination is a prime location for motorists traveling up and down the Eastern Corridor.

Warren County: Centrally Located	
Warren County to Richmond, Virginia	84 miles
Warren County to Raleigh/Durham, NC	49 miles
Warren County to Greensboro, NC	96 miles
Warren County to Rocky Mount, NC	37 miles
Warren County to Washington, DC	184 miles

Popular **Lake Gaston** attracts retirees and second homeowners for boating, fishing and sailing as well as other unique lake community activities. Outdoor recreation is not currently a year-round activity, with most of the lake centric experiences and events happening in late spring, summer and early fall. Although only a fraction of Kerr Lake is located in Warren County, the attraction is popular for its beaches, camping, fishing and other water sports.

The county has a few "visitor ready" attractions/experiences and hosts several popular events to market. Additional community events may appeal to some visitors and Lake Gaston residents.

Key Attractions:

- Cherry Hill Plantation (music concerts)
- Historic Downtown Warrenton (for shopping, dining, architecture)
- Keat's Point Farm
- Kerr Lake State Recreation Area (camping, beaches, boating, recreation)
- Kim's Vineyard (seasonal winery, tasting, sales)
- Lake Gaston (events, lakefront dining, shopping + limited boating, fishing)
- Lakeland Theatre (performing arts)
- Roost Crossroads Antique Store (shopping)

Key Events:

- April: Haliwa-Saponi Native American POW WOW
- April: SpringFest, Warrenton
- July 4 July 4th Parade, Wise
- Late July: Ridgeway Cantaloupe Festival, Ridgeway
- September Agricultural Fair, Warren County Fairgrounds
- October: Fall Harvest Festival, Warrenton
- December: Christmas Parade

Additionally, Preservation Warrenton hosts a successful bi-annual historic sites tour attracting approximately 800 visitors for the two-day event. A significant percentage of the guests travel from Richmond (VA) and Raleigh.

Target Markets

Before describing the target markets for Warren County, it is important to understand current visitation to the region and state.

Tourism to and within North Carolina

Visitors traveling to and within the state of North Carolina spent a record $19.4 billion in 2012, supporting more than 40,000 North Carolina businesses and directly supporting nearly 200,000 jobs across the state. State and local tax revenues generated as a result of visitor spending totals more than $1.5 billion annually. North Carolina ranks as the 6th most visited state in the United States *(Source: http://www.nccommerce.com/tourism/).*

The **2012 profile of North Carolina overnight visitors**:

- 58% female; 52% male
- 58.4% are married; an additional almost 20% are divorced, widowed or separated
- 85.4% are white; almost 11% are black/African American
- average age of visitor is 46 years, with 52.8% 45+
- 40.5% of visitor parties had a household income of $75,000 or more; 13% reported a household income over $125,000

North Carolina's average spending of an overnight travel party is $548, 6.3% below the U.S. average visitor party spending of $664. North Carolina's out-of-state visitor party spending was more on par, at $648, while North Carolina resident spending was considerably less at $343 per visitor party.[1]

For North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development's market research, Warren County is in the Piedmont Region. Top states of origin for travelers to the Piedmont Region are, in order of percentage, 1) North Carolina (30%), Virginia (10%), South Carolina (8%), Florida (6%), New York (6%), Georgia (6%) and Pennsylvania (3%).

Some other relevant statistics about **2012 Domestic Travel to the Piedmont Region**:

- Spend less than visitors to other regions: average household trip expenditure was $426, and $531 for overnight visitors
- Dominant leisure market: 74% traveled for pleasure; 16% for business, meetings/conventions
- Average travel party size was 1.9 people; 22% of travel parties included children
- 47% stayed in a private home while 53% stayed in a hotel/motel. Rental home or condo is only 2%; personal second home/condo are also occupied by only 2%
- Repeat visitors comprise the largest proportion of visitors; 66% have visited the region 3+ times in the past five years, 22% have visited once or twice in the past five years

[1] Source: Fast Facts, 2012 Impact of Visitor Spending/TNS Travels America, 2013; The 2012 Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties, US Travel Association 2013*

- Consistent year-round visitation: 23% in winter; 29% in spring; 26% in summer and 22% in fall
- Shorter stays than in previous years: average length of stay was 3.1 nights vs. 3.4 nights in 2011
- The breakdown of total trip expenditures for overnight visitors ($531):
    - Lodging = $165
    - Food/beverage/dining = $100
    - Gasoline = $81
    - Transportation = $74
    - Shopping/gifts/souvenirs = $42
    - Groceries = $23
    - Entertainment/admissions = $21
    - Amenities (golf fees, spa, etc.) = $8
    - Other = $7
    - Parking, tolls = $6
    - Gaming = $4

Top **Advertising Markets** sending overnight visitors to North Carolina's Piedmont Region:

1. Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville (9.2%)
2. Charlotte (9.0%)
3. Greensboro-High Point – Winston-Salem (5.1%)
4. New York (4.9%)

NC Piedmont Region Activity	% Overnight Visitor Participation	NC Daytripper Activities
Visiting Relatives	36%	19.1%
Shopping	22%	11.6%
Visit Friends	19%	7.8%
Fine dining	13%	7.1%
Rural sightseeing	11%	12.9%
Historic sites/churches	9%*	4.2%
Museums	8%*	4.8%
Special events/Festivals	5%*	0.8%
Old homes/mansions	4%*	2.2%
Wine tasting/Winery tour	3%*	1.4%
Nature travel/Ecotouring	3%*	1.6%
Fishing	3%*	2.6%

*Number rounded based on "Activities" graph provided. Source: 2012 North Carolina Regional Travel Summary – Piedmont Region, NC Department of Commerce/Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development

Profile of Current Warren County Visitor Markets

It is important to consider current motivations and profiles of key markets to understand if they are a good fit for Warren County. The county's *Tourism Strategic Plan* identified the following audiences for marketing to attract visitors to the destination from 2009-2012.

Business Clientele: Due to limited accommodations and lack of major industry in the county, the volume of business clientele in Warren County is hard to define. The Ivy Bed and Breakfast reports that several customers stay regularly at the inn while conducting their business in the area. Contacting specific lodging establishments in the county and Henderson may provide more detailed information, including volume and seasonality.

Family travelers: Those traveling with either children or grandchildren, make up 30% of U.S. adult leisure travelers. Grandparents traveling with grandchildren represent 7% of U.S. adult leisure travelers. Family travelers take an average of 4.5 trips each year. (Source: travelhorizonsTM, July 2009)

Festival/Event Travelers: According to the Americans for the Arts' "Arts & Economic Prosperity IV" Report, attendees to North Carolina nonprofit arts and culture event spent an average of $23.37 per person (excluding the cost of admission) in 2010. Residents spent approximately $18.91, while out-of-state attendees spent an average of $63.79.

2010 Spending of North Carolina's Non-Profit Arts and Culture Event Attendees			
Category of Event-Related Expenses	**Resident Attendees**	**Non-Resident Attendees**	**All Cultural Audiences**
Meals and Refreshments	$9.91	$20.77	$10.99
Souvenirs and Gifts	$2.54	$7.84	$3.07
Ground Transportation	$2.21	$8.71	$2.86
Overnight Lodging (one night only)	$2.17	$21.00	$4.04
Other/Miscellaneous	$2.08	$5.47	$2.41
Average Event-Related Spending Per Person	**$18.91**	**$63.79**	**$23.37**

Source: Arts & Economic Prosperity IV: The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture Organizations and Their Audiences in the State of North Carolina, 2012, Americans for the Arts. www.ncarts.org.

Group Travel: According to the American Bus Association (ABA), motorcoach-based tourism generates almost 1.4 million jobs in the U.S. paying almost $55.7 billion in wages and benefits.[1] The *2011 Motorcoach Census*, produced by the ABA Foundation, reports that students represent one fourth of all passengers on motorcoach tours, followed by seniors age 55+ (23.3%). ABA also reports that U.S. passenger bus travel rose by 7.5 percent from 2011 to 2012.[1] According to an ABA 2009 report:

- The daily expenditure for each person traveling on a one-day tour in North America is $74.93 inclusive of traveler and operator expenditures
- The daily expenditure for a multi-day tour traveler is $156.16
- One Motorcoach spending one night at a destination generates approximately $11,600 for the local economy through spending on meals, lodging, attraction tickets and other items.

Group travel creates community, either among people who already know each other, or individuals who want to meet others with similar interests, and have a connected experience in a safe and secure environment. (Source: Group Travel 101, http://www.grouptravelleader.com/Article.aspx?id=710)

Specialty Group Tour Markets

Religious Travel Groups: People of faith travel together for a purpose. "Church travel is about building community, deepening our faith and spreading the message that has impacted our lives so deeply." (Source: Faith Travel 101, http://www.goingonfaith.com/Article.aspx?id=342)

Educational Travel Groups: Adults engaging in educational travel seek experiences that offer life-long learning opportunities, expand their knowledge about a particular subject or connect them more deeply with a culture or place. Often hosted by educational institutions (alumni travel) or mission-based non-governmental organizations (Sierra Club, Smithsonian Institution, National Geographic), these high-end trips include expert lecturers (either faculty or local) for smaller groups of 10-15 patrons. Many of these travel planners belong to the Educational Travel Community (www.travelleraning.com)

School Groups: School group trips offer students and teachers the opportunity to truly experience curriculum and expand on what is learned in the classroom. Compliance with North Carolina Department of Education policies and procedures is important for academic approval/endorsement and compensation.

Interstate Travelers: Families on vacation, Retired couples touring, Commuters

Annual Average Daily Traffic		2012
I-85 (Manson)	Exit 223-226	24,000
I-85 (Wise)	Exit 229-233	23,000
I-85 (Welcome Center)	Exit 233 – VA Line	24,000
I-95 at NC 58 (Wilson)	Exit 127 to 132	33,000
I-95 at NC 43 (Rocky Mount)	Exit 138 to 141	39,000
I-95 at US Hwy 158 (Roanoke Rapids)	Exit 173 to 176	39,000

Source:http://www.ncdot.gov/doh/preconstruct/tpb/traffic_survey/download/NCDOT2012AADT_Report.pdf, pages 197, 293, 446-447

Local Families: Warren County's estimated population was 20,576 in 2012 (per the U.S. Census Bureau). There are approximately 1100 members of the Lake Gaston Association, representing the seasonal homeowner market.

Additional markets and motivations for consideration include:

African-American Travelers: In 2010, African American travelers engaged in 172.6 million domestic person-trips, or 9% of the total U.S. domestic trips. Domestic travel spending by African American travelers was $48.6 billion, representing 7% of the total domestic spending by U.S. travelers. African Americans have an above-average focus on being active when on vacation; they enjoy shopping (73%), fine dining/culinary/wine (62%), sporting events (60%), arts/cultural activities (51%) and historic/heritage activities (48%). The top states for African American travelers (in priority order) are Georgia, California, Texas and Florida followed by other places in

the South (3%-6.9%). (Exerted from *The Power and Opportunity of the Multicultural Market,* American Hotel & Lodging Association)[2]

Cultural Heritage Travelers: According to the *2013 Cultural & Heritage Traveler* Report by Mandala Research, 76% of all U.S. leisure travelers – or 129.6 million adults annually – engage in a cultural or heritage activity. The cultural heritage traveler is older, more affluent, educated, often married, spends more, stays longer and travels more frequently that the average U.S. traveler. They are also more likely to stay in a hotel, motel or B&B. Top activities of cultural heritage travelers include:

- 40% attended cultural and/or heritage fair or festival
- 33% attended an art/craft fair or festival
- 31% shopped for items made by local artisans and craftspeople
- 25% sampled traditional artisan products

The average trip spending by cultural and heritage travelers is $1,319 representing a sizable growth opportunity for Warren County to attract visitors who spend more and stay longer based on authentic experiences and activities.[3]

Green Travelers: Environmental issues impact travel decisions. With over 79% of U.S. adults considering themselves environmentally-conscious and increasingly aware of terms such as carbon footprint and global warming, travelers are beginning to make decisions based on sustainability criteria. However, while environmental responsibility is one of the prime factors influencing the selection of travel companies, American travelers continue to lack the willingness to pay extra to support environmentally-friendly travel providers. (Source: travelhorizonsTM, July 2009)

"New Normal" Travelers: Since the 2008 economic downturn, U.S. travelers have changed vacation patterns and are motivated by new emotions about travel. A 2013 nationwide study by PGAV Destination and H2R Market Research revealed that today's travel consumers are "wiser, seek greater value, and are more sensitive to pain points." Destination planning is motivated by three key "emotional drivers: 1) reconnect with my loved ones; 2) please the people I care about; and 3) have fun together." Some other relevant points from the research report:

- When defining value, guests look to affordability, quality, safety and relaxation offered by the experience – it's not just about the dollars
- 69.1% are more likely to search for coupons, bargains or deals on the places visited (than five years ago)
- 47.4% review blogs and other opinions before booking (or selecting a destination)
- Engage in more pre-planning, more likely to stay close to home and visit less crowded/less commercial places
- Motivations inspiring Splurge purchases: creation of memories (90%); less stress (77%); personal enrichment (68%); being good parent/spouse (64%); deeper engagement (62%); reward (52%); self expression (32%). Interest to splurge is greater among people under 40 and those who have children. Splurgers look for quality, convenience, comfort, access, and personalization (one-on-one interaction with an expert.)
- Seek an ***escape*** – "We are more likely to pursue activities that are '**off the beaten path**' or visit popular places '**off season**' to avoid crowds"

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[2] Sources: Suzanne Cook Consulting, LLC; U.S. Travel Association; U.S. Travel/Ypartnership travelhorizons TM; TNS Travels America; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

[3] Source: *The Cultural and Heritage Traveler, 2013 Edition*, Mandala Research LLC 2013

Source: *The New Destination Visitor: Travel Motivations in the Post-Recession Era,* PGAV Destinology, Volume 10, Issue 2, May 2013

Warren County Target Tourism Markets: 2014-2016

Given the limited funding and resources to market, and the unique stories/visitor ready experiences currently available, Warren County will focus on very specific markets to maximize impact and generate visitors as a strategy for increasing the economic impact from tourism.

6. **Group Tours**: specifically the **SAVE** Markets engaged in:
    a. **Scientific** research
    b. **Academic** field trips (professors and students)
    c. **Volunteer** projects (architecture, archeology, historic preservation, etc.)
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    b. Statewide history organizations (Preservation North Carolina, North Carolina Society of Architectural Historians, NC Archaeology Association,
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    a. Residents
    b. Visiting Friends and Relatives

Tourism Competition for Warren County, North Carolina

Perhaps the greatest competition for Warren County comes from **Hamilton** in neighboring **Martin County**. Located within easy on-off access to I-85, Hamilton has seven hotels and motels – including popular chain properties (Holiday Inn Express, Days Inn, Hampton Inn and Econo Lodge) and restaurants – appealing particularly to pass-through motorists and business travelers. In addition to visitor services, the County also features a number of attractions including Deadwood (miniature golf course, cafe and dinner theatre), East Carolina Motor Speedway, and Senator Bob Martin Eastern Agricultural Center.

According to the June 30, 2012 *Statement of Activities*, expenses for the Martin County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) were $170,748. In part, this funding is due to revenues generated from a local occupancy tax. The Authority uses two thirds of the funds

remitted to it to promote travel and tourism in Martin County and uses the remainder for tourism-related expenditures. The TDA maintains the website, Visit Martin County, to provide travel information to potential visitors including list of attractions, heritage, arts & culture, festivals, recreation and meeting places. The TDA also promotes its meeting facilities via C-Event and features its agricultural heritage on Homegrown HandMade, a site sponsored by Golden LEAF Foundation as a collaboration between the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, North Carolina Arts Council and HandMade in America.

A 2012 bill modifying the Martin County Occupancy Tax, however, allows the county to "keep up to six percent (6%) of the first $500,000 of gross processed collected each year and one percent (1%) of the remaining gross receipts collected each year." (Source: House Bill 1203, General Assembly of North Carolina Session 2011, May 31, 2012)

Other competition for Warren County includes:

- Apex, NC listed as #9 of 50 Best Places to Live by *Money Magazine*
- Morrisville, Mooresville and Holly Springs as the best places to raise kids in North Carolina, according to *nerdwallet.com*
- Mt Airy, named the top retirement community in North Carolina, and Elkin, featured as one of the top small towns in North Carolina by ActiveNC
- Edenton and Asheville named NC's Best Small Towns and Villages by *Frommer's.*

Tourism Distribution Channels

Currently, with little product for sale, Warren County does not have direct distribution channels. However, through its bed/ breakfasts and camps, the county reaps the benefit of advance sales through **on-line reservations** made directly to the lodging establishments. In addition, Magnolia Manor Plantation Bed and Breakfast pre-sells all-inclusive weekend wedding packages, elegant barn receptions and other special events through its online reservation system. These indirect selling channels help promote Warren County travel product.

Another indirect distribution channel is the **I-85 Southbound Welcome Center** managed by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, Division of Tourism and Sport. As evidenced below, the visitor traffic to this center is significant. Customers may book room reservations at no charge through the staff at this facility, plus the center offers extensive placement for brochures and information on North Carolina attractions.

I-85 Southbound Welcome Center Attendance:

2013 (Jan-May): 271,117
2012 (full year): 704,280
Peak year was 2006: 907,448 visitors
Highest months of usage, in order: May, June, July
Lowest months: January, February

Source: www.nccommerce.com/tourism/research/visitation-research/welcomecenters

The Economic Development Commission currently manages the Warren County Tourism website (http://www.warrencounty.com). According the U.S. Travel Association, consumers are changing trip planning behavior by using more social media and mobile devices than other forms of information.[4]

U.S. Consumer Trip Planning Behavior

In 2012, nearly one-quarter (23%) of domestic leisure travelers relied on friends and relatives to plan their trips, while three in ten (31%) utilized their own past experiences. One in ten used destination websites, nine percent used traveler provider websites (airline, hotel, rental car, cruise, tours, etc.), five percent used social networking and four percent used a mobile device to help plan their trip.

Compared to 2009, only two percent used social networking sources and one percent used their mobile device to assist in trip planning. Direct experiences and destination websites were relied on slightly more in 2009 than in 2012.

Source: U.S. Travel Association, 2013

Managing and updating the Warren County tourism website will grow in importance to market products and services to prospective travelers. As the budget grows and new products are available, expanding technology to include mobi applications, smart phone compatibility, and QR codes to link advertising and collateral materials with digital media will be important marketing strategies for Warren County. Utilizing social media – Facebook, Pinterest, Four Square, Twitter, Trip Advisor and other emerging community or crowd sourced networks – will also be vital for Warren County to efficiently and effectively leverage its resources to reach target markets.

Tourism SWOT Analysis for Warren County, North Carolina

Strengths

The county has an abundance of dedicated individuals ready to help develop and market tourism products and experiences for visitors. Community volunteers and business leaders successfully produced a *Tourism Strategic Plan* in 2009 to focus Warren County tourism efforts and resources.

The two lakes are popular for a variety of **outdoor recreation**. While not substantiated with market research, the lakes provide a motivation for most leisure travelers – including second homeowners and retirees. Manmade attractions (such as the motorsports park) offer additional outlets for sports enthusiasts. New sports and recreation venues – especially for equestrian and cycling – could be developed, although should not detract the county from marketing current "visitor ready" activities.

Significant for any destination is its collection of compelling stories, which differentiate it from other places. These stories may be historical or contemporary, associated with a person or event, or

[4] Source: US Travel Association, http://www.ustravel.org/news/press-kit/travel-facts-and-statistics

represent a specific theme. Stories unique to Warren County, or with enough critical mass of assets to be competitive and enticing for a visitor, include:

- **Archaeology, Architecture & Agriculture**
- **Birthplace of Environmental Justice**
- **Birthplace of Nathanial Macon and Reynolds Price**
- **Cultural Diversity: Native American, African American, German**
- **Soul City**

Some of the local stories can be easily developed into visitor ready itineraries, tours and experiences; others will require physical product development and/or enhancement. Trivia, such as the story of the French Government planting 90,000 grape vines in Ridgeway, adds to the "place-based" content for exploration and education.

A key objective for tourism development – and marketing – is to get visitors to spend money in the county. Expanding business opportunities for specialty shopping (ex: Bass Pro Shop, outdoor recreation), restaurants or country store near Kerr Lake, touring (hunting licenses, etc.) can extend the current summer/seasonal visitation and increase the economic impact from tourism.

Weaknesses

The lack of dedicated staff and competitive marketing budget hinders Warren County's ability to advance its tourism agenda. Additionally, the lack of an occupancy tax diminishes the source for additional funding. Without a revenue stream, it is unlikely Warren County will be able to adequately market to attract the volume of year-round visitation required to make the desired economic impact.

Currently there is little market research conducted locally to track and measure the impact of tourism to the county. This data is vital to demonstrate the current revenue generation from sales tax and document other purchases from out-of-town visitors. This data is also necessary for year-over-year comparison and annual benchmarking, as well as to establish marketing conversion rates. It will also be necessary to conduct some type of baseline to use as an unbiased educational tool if an occupation tax is considered in future.

Lack of visitor ready attractions and products for sale to visitors reduce Warren County's ability to realize the economic impact potential derived from sales tax revenues generated by tourist spending. Many attractions have limited hours of operation or do not charge an admission, thereby limiting the ability to capture spending (via gift shop, etc.) from visitors. Poor infrastructure and signage throughout the county further compromise a visitor's ability to navigate the area and engage in the variety of activities available.

Opportunities

The proximity to major markets in both Virginia and North Carolina as well as two major interstate corridors (I-85 and I-95) provide significant opportunity to attract the desired volume –and profile – of travelers to Warren County.

The increase in social media as an outlet for travel recommendations helps level the playing field, allowing smaller rural areas to compete with larger (well funded and marketed) destinations.

Engaging social media networks can effectively help build a dedicated community of travelers for Warren County.

Interest in tourism related to the environment, African American heritage, agriculture and "off the beaten" destinations is on the rise. Capitalizing on the distinctive stories unique to Warren County and packaging them for sale is an opportunity to attract new (or repeat) customers to the area.

Threats

Nearby destinations are poised to develop resources into authentic experiences that compete with Warren County's offerings.

Environmental impacts may also negatively impact growth in tourism. With its current focus on outdoor recreation, Warren County's tourism could suffer from a bout of inclement weather or diseases impacting the health/quantity of fish available. Fickle tourists will find other destinations and activities to experience if weather is not suitable for boating, fishing, and other outdoor sports activities.

Another economic recession can reduce the number of leisure travelers overall, or force some travelers to stay closer to home. Designing weather- and recession-proof marketing strategies will be important for Warren County to stay competitive and maintain its current level of tourism.

Issues & Considerations

Great thought and deliberation went into the development of Warren County's *Tourism Strategic Plan*: *2009-2012.* The document – created with assistance from the North Carolina tourism office and involvement by elected officials, Chambers of Commerce, local business owners and community leaders – articulated three tourism goals for Warren County:

1. Develop a strong Tourism Program with clear objectives and well defined goals to increase the economic impact of tourism in Warren County
2. Achieve a Communication/Education program for stakeholders in the tourism industry.
3. Create a specific image of the Warren County tourism experience through the development of a marketing program that will utilize compiled tourism information. Warren County tourism will be promoted on local, state and national levels.

Subsequent tasks and milestones are outlined for each goal. As many of these goals are still relevant and valuable to a sustainable tourism program, the Tourism Committee is encouraged to complete key elements in the *Tourism Strategic Plan* to enhance tourism in Warren County.

3. Overall Strategies for the Warren County Tourism Marketing Plan

This marketing plan refines several of the *Tourism Strategic Plan*'s goals and tasks by focusing more specifically on measureable benchmarks.

Tourism Marketing Strategies:

3. Market to key niche audiences to **increase group visitation** by 10% annually
4. **Increase spending** from travelers to Warren County by 10% annually

To accomplish these benchmarks, the plan focuses on specific marketing tactics: **market research, collateral materials/digital media, sales promotions, public relations/publicity** and **advertising**. The intent is to realize the vision of the original *Tourism Strategic Plan* through actionable marketing strategies, goals and tasks. These tasks include:

- Establish, utilize and maintain a **consistent design philosophy** that represents the image, graphics and messages describing Warren County's brand promise
- Employ **cost effective marketing strategies** to achieve maximum return on investment
- **Collaborate** with tourism industry partners to extend marketing reach
- Make **experiences easier and engagement more consistent** for the visitor
- **Measure** marketing activities to demonstrate positive tourism impact annually.

Physical product development and enhancement is also important to building the critical mass of activities and experiences that will attract key target markets. A separate goal is included to ensure Warren County can expand its quality and quantity of visitor experiences through development of new or enhanced activities and assets that encourage first-time visitation as well as reasons to return.

4. Specific Tourism Marketing Goals & Tactics

Tourism Goal 1:
Establish, utilize and maintain a consistent design philosophy that represents the image, graphics and messages describing Warren County's brand promise.

Defining The Brand Promise:

Currently, the "brand" recorded in Warren County *Tourism Strategic Plan* is "Warren County, the Jewel of North Carolina." A brand is not a tag line, but rather the consumer's emotional connection to a destination. Therefore, a brand promise is what a host destination pledges to deliver (as experiences, activities, hospitality) when a visitor/guest arrives and spends time (and hopefully, money.)

Community and business leaders shared several words and phrases to describe what makes Warren County special and distinctive from other North Carolina destinations:

Developing and agreeing on a brand promise is important to set the benchmark(s) for measuring visitor satisfaction and marketing with key messages/impact. Evaluating the level to which the brand promise is delivered can also be measured against the **Tourism Mission Statement** as articulated in the *Tourism Strategic Plan: 2009-2012:*

> "To strengthen Warren County, North Carolina's economic through the development of tourism-related opportunities that will promote the county as a sustainable tourism destination."

IMMEDIATE

Task 1.1: Convene Warren County Tourism Committee to develop the destination brand promise as the foundation for creating all marketing materials, developing tourism product, hosting visitors, and measuring their experience satisfaction.

Tourism Committee Exercise: Each member prepares a list of five phrases or words that embody the type of destination experience visitors should have when in Warren County. Bring to a meeting to use as the basis for developing a short, two-sentence "brand promise" as the county's commitment to the visitor.

Task 1.2: Create a unifying **logo and tagline** for Warren County to communicate the destination's distinctive tourism experiences, and consistently use this graphic treatment in all Warren County print, electronic, digital and promotional marketing activities.

Task 1.3: Establish **design guidelines** for usage of the Warren County logo and tagline to instruct public and private entities on how to apply these elements on various collateral and digital media. Distribute instructions electronically with jpeg and templates to Tourism Committee members and other industry representatives.

Task 1.4: Design shell advertisements, press release letterhead, website landing pages and home pages, and social media sites to demonstrate placement and usage of new logo and tagline.

Task 1.5: Replace all existing Warren County visual graphics with the new logo and timeline by the next production cycle when materials are reproduced.

SHORT TERM

Task 1.6: The ECD should distribute design guidelines to all tourism businesses for use in developing their own collateral materials.

LONG TERM

Task 1.7: The ECD should update the design guidelines as appropriate *annually*. A handbook with guidelines is kept on file in the ECD offices, with an electronic copy available for distribution at will.

Tourism Goal 2:
Use Cost Effective Marketing Strategies – specifically Digital Media and Public Relations – to achieve maximum return on investment measured by increased visitation and positive economic impact from tourism for Warren County.

IMMEDIATE

Task 2.1: Update Warren County's main website, www.warrencountync.org, to include a "Tourism" landing page on the site that links to the Warren County's tourism website, www.warrencountync.org

Task 2.2: Revise the Warren County tourism website, www.warrencountync.org to include the new logo and tagline, consistent design philosophy and updated travel information.

Tourism Committee Exercise: Each member identify one destination website they really like and write down why. Bring to a meeting to use as the basis for designing the architecture, components and style of the updated www.warrencountync.org site

Task 2.3: Create an excel **database** of travel journalists, freelance writers, regional press (newspaper, magazine, radio, TV), bloggers and specialty niche market publications (online and print) to use for distribution of press releases, event promotion and other media announcements.

Task 2.4: Create an annual editorial calendar for promoting destination information, activities and events to journalists to cultivate coverage of Warren County in key media outlets.

- This **editorial calendar** includes specific story ideas to pitch to media throughout the year, schedule of press releases for distribution about significant events and activities, on-air interviews for TV local interest news shows, and appropriate information for upload onto social media sites
- An outline of **key media services** is also produced for posting on the website to define the assistance to journalists looking for stories, wanting help with on-site research visits, and access to permission-free images.

SHORT TERM

Task 2.5: Secure social media sites and links (flickr, YouTube, Pinterest, Facebook) for posting information in tandem with website content and public relations activities. The architecture for these sites are outlined in tandem with the update of www.warrencountync.org

Task 2.6: Create dedicated content to enhance the Warren County tourism website for use by target markets, media, and group tour planners:

- Simple and well organized home page with links to Warren County Tourism's social media sites (Facebook, twitter, Youtube, flickr and pinterest) plus links to other Warren County sites (Official County site, Chamber, Lake Gaston Chamber, Cooperative Extension, etc.) and North Carolina Tourism partners (www.visitnc.com)
- Dedicated **media section** with list of story ideas, fast facts about the county, rights-free images, media request form, press releases, etc.
- Write and organize destination **content by categories**, such as t*hings to do, food & drink, festivals & events, heritage & culture.*

- Separate **business directory** of tourism attractions, restaurants, lodging, retail businesses
- **Plan Your Trip** section with logistics about traveling to and within Warren County, including maps, licenses and permits, climate, local services and other helpful trip planning information

LONG TERM

Task 2.7: Update www.warrencountync.org content, at minimum, *each quarter* to showcase seasonal images, interests, activities and events.

Task 2.8: Hire a videographer to **produce storylogs** for uploading onto YouTube to help promote Warren County's key educational themes and experiences.

Task 2.9: Host a **photography contest** on Facebook and Flickr to promote images of various Warren County attractions, landscapes, etc.

- Produce a photo album with cutlines from the winning photographers for distribution at travel shows, post online

Task 2.10: In partnership with the North Carolina tourism office, host a **journalist familiarization tour** to cultivate coverage in niche market media (if possible, around important anniversary associated with one of the major destination stories.)

Tourism Goal 3:
Focus on key niche audiences to increase and manage pre-scheduled group tours

1. **Group Tours**: specifically the **SAVE** Markets engaged in
    a. **Scientific** research
    b. **Academic** field trips (professors and students)
    c. **Volunteer** projects (architecture, archeology, historic preservation, etc.)
    d. **Education** and lifelong learning (students, adults), Roads Scholars
2. **Cultural heritage travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150 mile radius
    a. Historical Societies, museums in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
    b. Statewide history organizations (Preservation North Carolina, North Carolina Society of Architectural Historians, NC Archaeology Association, North Carolina Literacy & Historical Association)
    c. Retirement Communities in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
    d. Former residents of Warren County
3. **Nature-based travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150 mile radius
    a. Garden clubs in Raleigh-Durham, Greensboro, Richmond
    b. Former residents of Warren County
    c. Photography clubs: Carolina Nature Photography Association, Durham Photography Club, Triangle Photography Club and student Carolina Photography Association at UNC-Chapel Hill
4. **African American travelers**: targeting visitors from a 150-mile radius
    a. Family reunions
    b. Group tours
    c. Former residents of Warren County
5. **Second Home Owners at Lake Gaston**:
    a. Residents
    b. Visiting Friends and Relatives

IMMEDIATE

Task 3.1: Develop a **database of specialty organizations** (see above) in North Carolina and Virginia with members or organizing groups to solicit for day tours to Warren County.

Task 3.2: Develop a **list of local experts** that can serve as "guides" for various group tours. Secure bios, fee for services and other information that can be compiled into a directory for use in promoting guided tours.

Example: Local honeybee expert was mentioned on the County Calendar, June 18, 2012 as offering a "Honeybees are Sweet!" workshop

Task 3.3: Work with local experts to create themed day tour itineraries and other information that will help sell these day tours to group tour operators, bank club managers and group travel planners. (*see Goal 5*)

Task 3.4: Contact the North Carolina Department of Commerce/Office of Tourism for a **list of tour operators and receptive operators** currently including North Carolina on their schedule for group tours, as well as specialty operators for African American tours, church groups, nature-based tours and cultural heritage tours.

- Confer with the Group Tour Manager on how to prepare materials for use in marketing to these operators at annual conventions including National Tour Association (NTA – December); American Bus Association (ABA - January); Travel South Showcase (February/March) and other trade shows where the state exhibits.

SHORT TERM

Task 3.5: Establish a **group tour scheduling system** for booking and hosting group tours in the county.

Task 3.6: Contact the **Schools of Architecture** for inquire about and schedule class visits (ex: Duke, NC State, UVA And Historic Preservation classes at UNC-Greensboro, NC State Public History studies and ECU Historic Studies program) to Warren County.

Master students make good interns to research tourism markets for historic homes and preservation groups.

LONG TERM

Task 3.7: Participate annually in **National History Day** in North Carolina to attract group tours and school groups interested in Warren County (www.nchistory.org) National Contest is June 15-19 and theme is "Rights and Responsibilities." Theme sheet is available at www.nhd.org.

Task 3.8: Produce an annual Warren County **Calendar** of activities, tours and other special events for Lake Gaston and Kerr Lake residents.

- Secure list of primary residence addresses for the second home owners and send a "New Year" welcome packet with the Warren County Tourism Calendar.
- Provide Lake Gaston Homeowners Association a *quarterly* newsletter article to keep residents informed

Tourism Goal 4:
Collaborate with key tourism industry partners to extend marketing reach and leverage resources

IMMEDIATE

Task 4.1: Contact **North Carolina Division of Tourism** to determine deadlines and instructions for posting new content on the www.visitnc.com website, for inclusion in the state travel guide, listings on the event calendar and other free promotional venues (press release distribution, group tour manual, international representation, etc.) Input this information into the annual planning calendar for reference and action.

Task 4.2: Contact **Henderson Hotel/Hospitality Association** to discuss ways to collaborate – promotions, cross marketing with coupons and "bounce back" incentives to cultivate repeat customers, etc.

SHORT TERM

Task 4.3: Establish working relationship with **Vance-Granville Community College** to enhance student engagement and academic alliances through:

- Tourism research or project development internships for class credit
- Hosting visiting professors or SAVE groups
- Providing and/or hosting hospitality training workshops and other professional development courses

Task 4.4: Each May, participate in annual National Tourism Week activities at the **I-85 and I-95 Welcome Centers** by hosting Halawi-Saponi Native American dancers or artist to provide demonstrations. (During meetings with North Carolina Tourism, identify rules and regulations for welcome center events and get on schedule early; identify other opportunities to showcase Warren County – giveaways of Ridgeway cantaloupes? Coupons for dining or shopping in downtown Warrenton? Animals from Keat's Farm or Wildwood? Music from Cherry Hill Plantation?

Task 4.4: Establish working relationships with area **Chambers of Commerce** to define specific roles and responsibilities for tourism development, marketing and management in Warren County:

- Co-op advertising in target market publications, maps, guides
- Sweepstakes or incentives for visiting
- Event sponsorships and coordination
- Local marketing and tourism education vs external marketing

LONG TERM

Task 4.5: One day each quarter (March, June, September, December), schedule "**Warren County Day**" at the I-85 Welcome Center to generate awareness for Warren County attractions and activities, encourage visitation that can be documented by presentation of coupons at local stores, restaurants.

Task 4.6: Seek out and obtain **one new marketing partner** (destination marketing organization, business, government agency, educational institution, etc.) *each year* to leverage resources and expand reach of Warren County's limited investment in tourism.

Tourism Goal 5:
Develop Tour Itineraries and Packages to Make Experiences Easier and Engagement more Consistent for visitors to Warren County

IMMEDIATE

Task 5.1: Use the two Warren County CDs (Your Town, Our Town … Explore the Gateway to the Carolinas & Tarheel Towns: Warrenton) to revise current routes into **timed and detailed tour itineraries** from various gateways and focusing on general as well as specific themes (identified as the major selling proposition for Warren County.) Upload onto the website for easy reference, trip planning.

Task 5.2: Empower local organizations to develop and price a **half-day and full-day tour itinerary** for marketing to groups. Various iterations of these tours should be developed for different audiences, based on a) time available and b) potential themes (to encourage repeat visitation.)

- Work with local restaurants to offer box lunches or on-site dining as part of the tours
- Recruit local businesses to offer specialty items at a group discount for a "take away" souvenir gift bag (as part of the tour package price)
- Identify and secure bios of various experts to lead the tours.

SHORT TERM

Task 5.3: Secure a grant from IMLS or NEH to professionally produce an **audio driving tour CD**, podcast or other digital format using the historical data included on the current driving tour brochure. Use the summer and fall for production, with the CDs available for loan at the I-85 welcome centers.

Task 5.4: Offer an incentive for a local entrepreneur to become a receptive operator or tour guide service. Encourage these experts to post services on peer-to-peer sites such as peoplefirsttourism.com

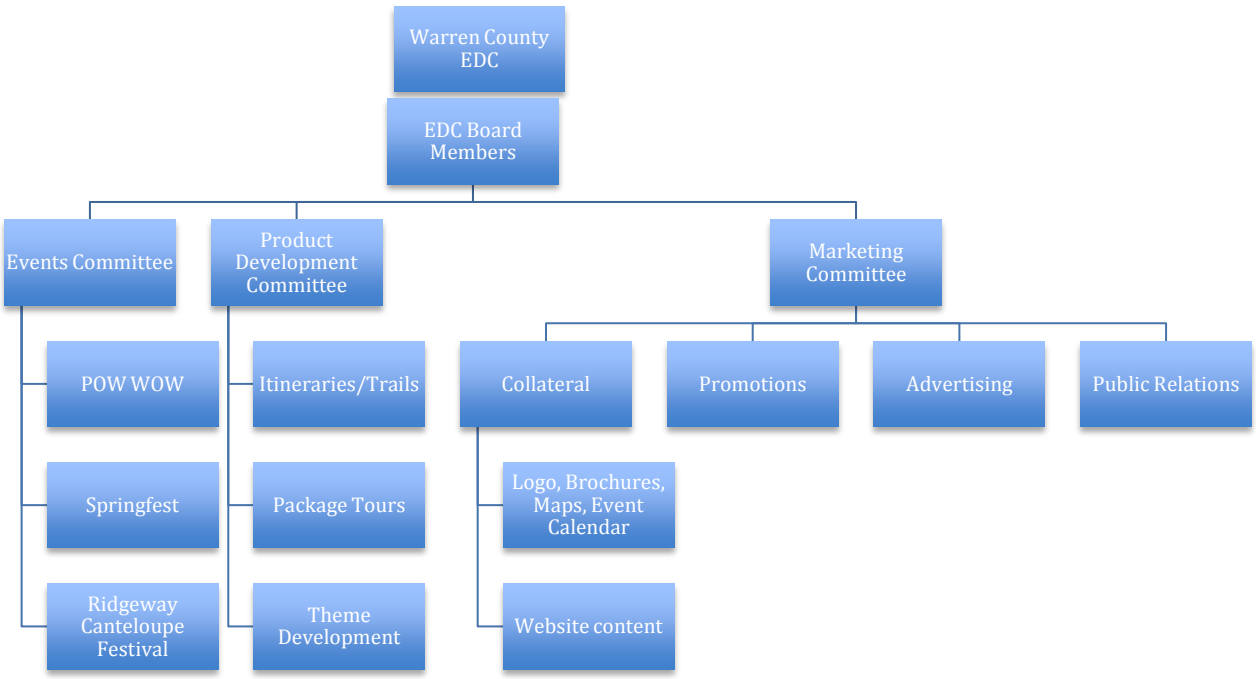
LONG TERM

Task 5.4: Develop **overnight packages** with local bed and breakfasts, Keat's Point Farm and other accommodations for special getaway experiences: stargazing, grape picking, cantaloupe picking, preservation/restoration workshops, Lakeland Theatre or Halawi-Saponi dance performances, and other place-based educational and entertainment activities. Market online via website, living social, groupon, and other digital media sources.

5. Warren County Tourism Marketing & Management

Identifying the roles and responsibilities for implementing a marketing plan is as important as establishing ways to evaluate tourism's impact on a destination.

The *Tourism Strategic Plan* already outlines a "Marketing Organizational Chart." This plan recommends slight modification of these tourism roles and measurement processes.



Representation, Roles & Responsibilities

EDC Board: Warren County's Tourism Authority responsible for reviewing policies, procedures, annual budgeting and funding strategies (including potential occupancy tax), hiring and evaluation of staff.
Warren County EDC: Staff responsible for daily oversight and implementation of the county's tourism marketing plan, including

- Fulfillment of visitor inquiries
- Analysis of Visitor Research
- Creation and placement of advertisements and press releases,
- Registration and attendance at trade shows,
- Assistance with organizing special events
- Convener and coordinator of Tourism Committee and other visitor

Tourism Committee: A volunteer advisory group currently meeting the second Tuesday of every other month with the oversight to provide intelligence to the Warren County EDC.

Events Committee: A volunteer group of community leaders who identify and advise on tasks related to the creation, implementation and evaluation of local events

Product Development Committee: A volunteer group responsible for establishing and enforcing visitor readiness criteria to ensure customer satisfaction.

Marketing Committee: A volunteer group responsible for researching tourism trends and advising staff on promotions, public relations, sales, advertising and collateral production to advance the tourism goals for Warren County.

Warren County Tourism Marketing – Projected Income Statement

Revenue Source		**Amount**	**Notes**
	Warren County EDC	$15,000	
	Sales Tax Revenue		TBD
Expenses			
Production:			
	Website design & maintenance	1500	Estimated
	Discover Guides, Maps	1800	
	Graphic Design	1000	
	Group Tour Manual	500	
	Audio CD Driving Tour		TBD
	Trade Show booth	1000	
	Annual Calendar of Events	500	
Distribution:			
	Domain Registration, Hosting	100	Annual fee
	Trade Show: ABA, Travel South	2000	
	Postage (media, tour directory)	250	
	Welcome Center Promotions	500	
	Media Database	350	
Marketing:			
	Advertising (regional)	5000	
	Social Media	500	
		15000	

Measuring Tourism Impact

Annual data collection, at minimum, will help Warren County begin to monetize the impact of tourism on the local economy. This market research can be conducted a number of ways:

- **Event Attendance**:
  - Attendee Counts (resident and visitors)
  - Collecting E-mail addresses
  - Intercept Surveys
- **Customer Identification:**
  - Zip code collection for sales at Local Businesses
  - Zip code and/or E-mail addresses collected at Attractions
  - License plate records (for Main Street Warrenton)
- **Customer Surveys**:
  - E-surveys sent to local business, attraction databases to evaluate satisfaction
  - E-surveys sent to event, attraction customers to get visitor feedback
  - Social media polls to gage "friend" or "fan" opinions
- **Marketing Conversion/Return on Investment:**
  - Measuring the advertising value of publicity
  - Measuring the conversion rate of advertising
  - Measuring the increase of sales tax revenue attributable to visitors

While state data is informative, Warren County needs to collect and analyze meaningful local research. Relevant NAICS codes from the Department of Revenue can help inform origin of visitor spending. Mining specific State Tourism data can yield some useful statistics, such as a 7% increase in annual revenues are from food and lodging. Weddings and other special events at Magnolia Manor may be another benchmark for measuring Warren County's tourism performance against other rural North Carolina destinations. Other benchmarks for comparable tourism evaluation include:

- Sales tax revenue (by zip code analysis)
- Volume of weddings, reunions and other "occasion" bookings
- Occupancy rates at bed and breakfasts
- Daily attendance at special events (exit surveys, station counters)

Designing an easy and effective market research system to collect and analyze data is vital to the integrity of the market research. It is also important for one entity to manage the system and process of data collection. Exploring a possible alliance with the Vance-Granville Community College may be a way to engage students in this data collection and ensure an independent, consistent proctor.

Tourism Success for Warren County, NC is defined by:

- **Increased Visitation**
- **Increased Customer Satisfaction**
- **Increased Positive Publicity**
- **Increased Tourism Spending**

Reporting the impact of tourism is an important annual activity, to monitor growth and sustainability, educate elected officials and business leaders on the industry sector (re: employment, sales tax revenues, etc.) and potentially build a case for increasing the county's line item budget and staffing (or revenue source, such as a possible dedicated tax) for tourism marketing and product development.