

THE 2025-2027  
STRATEGIC PLAN  
FOR THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF



Mission Statement:

We exist to advance the economic vitality and quality of life for residents and visitors as Iowa's premier destination.

# FORWARD

The evolution of Destination Marketing as a function of community development and prosperity has hit break-neck speed over the past five years. Along with the growing realization that Destination Marketing is not limited to just attracting overnight visitors to a community, a recent study by Destinations International identifies organizational imperatives that weren't part of the conversation in a pre-pandemic world.

This philosophical evolution actually began in the Summer of 2009 when industry thought leader Maura Gast (then the outgoing Chair of Destinations International) spoke these words:

*If you build a place where people want to visit, you'll build a place where people want to live.  
If you build a place where people want to live, you'll build a place where people have to work.  
If you build a place where people want to work, you'll build a place where business wants to be.  
If you build a place where business wants to be, you'll be back to building a place where people want to visit. It all starts with a visit.*

Destinations International recently codified Maura's concept into the following graphic:



The marketing of destinations has been occurring for over a century...but the stakes have never been higher nor the opportunity greater than right now. In American cities and counties, the latest iteration of Destination Marketing began sweeping the nation in the 1980s and 1990s as revenues from hotel occupancy taxes became available to virtually every community.

Today, however, the mandate has grown significantly larger, as it is increasingly obvious that communities need effective marketing for more than just attracting visitors; destinations need to be marketed to attract investment, workforce, entrepreneurs and future residents. Every community is in a competition to attract the best and brightest as a way to enhance quality of life and long-range sustainability. And, as we emerge from a worldwide pandemic, this new directive is even more crucial to a community's success. Indeed, the road to recovery is through the Visitor Economy.

The realization that a Destination Marketing Organization's (DMO) role has grown stems, in part, from a 2015 study by Longwoods International that proves that tourism advertising has a marked effect on consumer interest in communities as a place to live, go to college and start a business. That means DMOs must focus on more than just "Heads in Beds." Destination Leadership Organizations (DLOs) help plow the road for Economic and Community Development agencies.

It is with these concepts in mind that the Board of Directors of Think Iowa City met on April 10th, 2025 to map out a strategy for the evolution of the organization and destination over the next three years. No longer content to continue with traditional destination marketing strategies, the Board is working to re-imagine the role of the organization within the greater community development imperatives in the region.

That said, the Board is committed to staying the course with the organization's four primary pillars: Innovative Sales & Marketing, Authentic Placemaking, Intentional Community Engagement and Building a Sustainable Organization.



In preparation for the Board Workshop to develop this updated Strategic Plan, DMOproz gathered online survey responses from community and business leaders. We met with professional staff to vet concepts gleaned from the research to prepare a short list for Board consideration. This background intelligence was shared with the Board as it gathered to ideate how the organization will address the opportunities before the community and the organization.

In the DMO world, a **Strategic Plan is the Action Plan for the Board of Directors**, outlining things that it can and will do to propel the destination and the organization forward. This is the value-add that the Board can and must bring to the table. The DMO Marketing Plan is the roadmap for professional staff as they identify and work the markets most appropriate for the destination with new promotional and sales tactics. It is here where the Innovative Sales & Marketing Pillar resides. The other three are captured here.

The full Strategic Plan for the Board of Think Iowa City begins on page 4.

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## GOAL

### ADVOCATE FOR DESTINATION ENHANCING DEVELOPMENT

#### **Objective A**

***Support the development of additional and complementary tournament-grade sports facilities***

#### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Engage with local sports clubs and leagues to ascertain the level of interest and/or need for additional facilities
- Analyze opportunities to encourage the development of an indoor complex that could also host non-sports related events
- Consider the opportunities that additional sheets of ice could provide to attract competitions to the region

#### **Objective B**

***Analyze opportunities to capitalize on the region's rich sports heritage***

#### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Analyze opportunities to continue to expand upon the community's sports legacy
- Support expansion of opportunities for girls' & women's athletic competitions
- Consider opportunities to further position the region as the international home of wrestling

### **Objective C**

#### ***Prioritize opportunities to reclaim the River and Riverfront***

##### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Set up top-level meetings with the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Iowa DNR to better understand their plans and challenges regarding the Iowa River
- Continue to work with the University, municipalities, Better Together 2030 and the Friends of Coralville Lake to collaboratively envision the future of the river and riverfront
- Continue to encourage the actualization of the Master Plan, the Conservation Plan and State Grants

### **Objective D**

#### ***Continue to support the creation of Museums and attractions that underscore our brand essence***

##### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Support efforts to develop a Museum of Creative Writing to capitalize on and broaden our recognition as a UNESCO City of Literature
- Analyze the experiences and programming response of other UNESCO cities for ideas on how to maximize our designation
- Support efforts to identify expansion opportunities for the Iowa Children's Museum
- Be the Catalyst, Champion and Connector for these and other projects

## GOAL

### CONTINUE TO SUPPORT INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE THE DESTINATION EXPERIENCE

#### Objective A

***Support the growth and development of events and festivals as a magnet to attract visitors to the region***

##### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Direct our focus on events that authentically align with our brand and are scheduled during months in which hotel availability is highest
- Provide our expertise in event management to assist local groups to build their festivals
- Continue to review grant guidelines and budget strategies in order to produce the highest possible ROI
- Consider ways to utilize or invest in additional assets for community use (e.g., tents, sandwich boards, portable stage, etc.)

#### Objective B

***Continue to support the Arts & Culture community to maximize the region's brand identity***

##### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Consider the results of the Arts Feasibility Study currently in play to identify opportunities for collaborative growth
- Continue to revitalize the Arts Alliance and encourage, where appropriate, for organizational mergers for higher efficiency
- Analyze whether Arts competitions (such as Grand Rapids' Artprize or official high school sponsored competitions such as state speech, state choir, state debate, etc.) would elevate the region's brand as an arts-centric community
- Continue to examine ways to enhance the region's Calendar of Events

#### Objective C

***Continue to advocate for enhanced transportation options for visitors and residents alike***

##### *Suggested Tactics:*

- Continue to monitor discussions regarding commercial rail service to and within the destination
- Advocate for a regional bus/trolley system
- Continue to support increased passenger air service to CID and seamless transportation to and from the Airport

**Objective D*****Continue to support an enhanced destination experience throughout the region****Suggested Tactics:*

- Continue to support the expansion of the IRL & Riverfront Crossing Districts as premiere entertainment and leisure destinations
- Support the expansion of Iowa City's South of 6 District, and Greater Iowa City, Inc.'s strategic investment districts of Cherry Street in North Liberty, 5th Street in Coralville, and the Sycamore Neighborhood in Iowa City
- Work with area Park Districts and Conservation areas to develop a more compelling and uniform directional signage programs on regional trails
- Work with municipalities to develop more effective signage to identify the availability of parking



## GOAL

### CONTINUE TO DEVELOP ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND CAPACITY

#### Objective A

***Continue to communicate the role and impact of Think Iowa City to the residents of the region to encourage their support of our mission***

*Suggested Tactics:*

- Encourage social media sharing to expand Think Iowa City's reach and frequency
- Analyze opportunities to develop a regular presence in local media ("did you know?")
- Regularly share metrics regarding how our work affects residents (i.e., Due to travelers, property taxes are \$X lower per household, etc.)

#### Objective B

***Continue to investigate opportunities to grow the Think Iowa City budget and capacity***

*Suggested Tactics:*

- Assess the availability of new revenue streams in order to add professional staff to expand the organization's impact
- Analyze opportunities to trim underperforming line items in order to build competitive compensation packages to prevent top talent from decamping for more lucrative private sector opportunities

#### Objective C

***Design a Succession Plan to ensure the future viability of Think Iowa City***

*Suggested Tactics:*

- Identify and codify a process for the future replacement of organizational leadership at both the Staff and Board level
- Develop a process for the capture and future availability of long-term institutional knowledge to ensure the organization is positioned to never miss a beat in its evolution