

GREATER **FOX**
CITIES
APPLETON WI



DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

2023-2033



Task Force

The Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau would like to thank the regional community leaders who gave of their time and expertise as they served on the Task Force, providing guidance, leadership and support of the development of the Destination Master Plan.

Task Force Members:

Ryan Batley, General Manager, Best Western Premier Bridgewood Resort Hotel & Conference Center

Beau Bernhoft, Administrator, Village of Little Chute

Kevin Englebert, Deputy Director, East Central WI Regional Planning Commission

Sara Hanneman, Assistant Executive Director, Future Neenah

Karen Harkness, Director of Community and Economic Development, City of Appleton

Kara Homan, Director of Planning & Zoning, Outagamie County

Jane Lang, Mayor, City of Neenah

Jim March, Administrator, Town of Grand Chute

Sam Schroeder, Community Development Director, City of Menasha

Jennifer Stephany, Executive Director, Appleton Downtown Incorporated

Maria Van Laanen, President, Fox Cities Performing Arts Center

Abe Weber, Director, Appleton International Airport

Project Team

The Fox Cities CVB would like to thank the dedicated project team members who worked diligently to move this plan forward, from concept to completion. We want to acknowledge the partnership with MMGY NextFactor, the lead agency on the project. The depth of knowledge and focus this team brought to the planning process was appreciated. This plan is, by design, a living document that will continue to deliver exceptional value to the community as we journey through the implementation phase and forge new partnerships along the way.



Fox Cities CVB:

Pam Seidl, Executive Director, Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau



MMGY NextFactor:

Paul Ouimet, Partner, President, MMGY NextFactor

Cassandra McAuley, SVP Destination Stewardship, MMGY NextFactor

Linda John, Executive Consultant, MMGY NextFactor

Teresa Allan, Project Manager, MMGY NextFactor

IMAGINE IT'S THE YEAR 2033

Imagine it's the year 2033. The Fox Cities region is well known in the Midwest and beyond for doing really innovative things. Visitors are flocking to the area at all times of the year to experience the uniqueness of the region and they're leaving feeling inspired, rejuvenated, well-fed and with lots of new memories to share with friends and family.

Most visitors are inspired to plan a return visit. Some are even imagining building a life in the Fox Cities and potentially even opening a business.

As they ride e-bikes on a connected trail from one Fox Cities community to another, stopping along the way for coffee, lunch, live music and a craft brew, their imagination is fueled by the beautiful landscape of greenspaces, and parks that have been developed to be family-friendly places that encourage active lifestyles in all seasons. Their imagination is also fueled by the friendliness and sense of community amongst the 19+ municipalities in the Fox Cities.

Some visitors have come to the Fox Cities for the first time as convention delegates, and are inspired by the local subject matter experts speaking at their conference at the Fox Cities Exhibition Center in downtown Appleton. The ingenuity and original thinking in the region inspires new ideas and collaboration opportunities. They decide to come back with their family for the upcoming Winter Festival.

The Fox Cities region has also become widely recognized as a tournament destination for youth sports. The Community First Champion Center has been expanded and the region reaps significant benefits from visiting teams and their families.

As a whole, the region is benefiting from increased diversity. Residents are also benefiting from new amenities that support the shared value of cultural experiences like the new regional indoor concert and event venue and acoustic enhancements at the Fox Cities Exhibition Center.

Many of these additions to the region were made possible thanks to a Tourism Development Grant through the Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, while others were the result of ongoing collaboration between many partners to realize the vision for the greater region.

The Fox Cities are flourishing, the resident base is growing and everyone is benefiting from the influx of economic impact from visitors. As community leaders look back, they will point to 2022/23 and their involvement in developing the Destination Master Plan that set it all in motion.

A message from the Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau

The Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) has been focused on strengthening the local economy by investing in and promoting our community since 1986. It's a mission we take seriously and have made significant strides toward demonstrating. By leveraging local room tax dollars, we were proud to be a part of the development of two "once in a generation" projects: the Community First Champion Center to grow our sports tourism business and the Fox Cities Exhibition Center to host larger meetings and conventions. We have proudly supported accessible kayak launches, signage, trails, museum exhibits and events with our Tourism Development Grants.

As we mature as a destination, however, the importance of taking the time to consult with our communities, partners, local officials and residents about our long-term vision and opportunities is critical.

Not lost in this is the need to strategically consider the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism globally and locally. This plan will help to guide our efforts well beyond recovery while taking into account changes to trending consumer needs and behaviors.

Throughout this 10-month process, we have been purposeful to engage with a broad-spectrum of community members, thoughtful about understanding existing strategic initiatives and open to the input from all.

Our commitment to this plan is unwavering. We have built aspects of it into our organizational strategic plan and will work with our Task Force of engaged community builders — and others — to advance the rest. We will be reporting on our progress annually to ensure the community can track the efforts.

Destination Master Planning is a complex undertaking, yet it's one we know will pay dividends for the Fox Cities for years to come.



Pam Seidl
Executive Director
Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau



Executive Summary



There's no doubt that businesses and residents in the Fox Cities have benefited from recent growth in the visitor economy. While 2020 changed the game for the tourism industry both here in the Fox Cities and globally, our region fared better than many thanks to strategic investments in developing our tourism infrastructure and sustaining our attractions.

For that reason, it was important that we turn our focus to what's next; how do we continue to grow our capacity, experiences and brand with a lens of ensuring we're building for the benefit of our residents as well as our visitors. That's why we chose to undertake a stakeholder-led Destination Master Plan.

Tourism master planning is about taking a strategic, rather than organic, approach to defining an overarching vision and competitive positioning for the Fox Cities.

The strategic goals provide the framework for decision making regarding efforts and investments to enhance the visitor economy in the Fox Cities. These goals offer guidance on how to achieve the overarching vision and develop a competitive positioning of the Fox Cities as a destination of choice.

- #1 Strengthen the brand through iconic festivals
- #2 Develop communities as experiences
- #3 Enhance outdoor recreation opportunities
- #4 Expand strategic regional collaboration
- #5 Improve access and connectivity

State of the Industry

The Fox Cities visitor economy experienced considerable growth over the past decade: record setting numbers posted in 2019; new product introduced into the destination, including the Fox Cities Exhibition Center (FCEC) and the Community First Champion Center; and launch of a new website and the rollout of the Fox Cities Originals destination brand.

In 2020 however, everything came to an abrupt halt as the COVID-19 global pandemic decimated the tourism industry worldwide, leaving significant damage in its wake for the Fox Cities, a region heavily dependent on group-based gatherings to drive the visitor economy. Throughout the pandemic the spirit of those in the Fox Cities remained focused on better days ahead, and through pure grit, hard work, and determination, they saw their tourism numbers begin to rebound in 2021. By 2022 tourism demand had returned to pre-pandemic levels, ahead of the forecasted reports that a return to 2019 travel demand levels may not occur until 2023/24 (Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company).

This destination master plan represents a doubling down on the tourism economy outlook by rejuvenating the investment and excitement around the pre-pandemic momentum of 2019 while capitalizing on new post-pandemic trends, such as increased traveler demand for nature and the great outdoors, along with meaningful and immersive travel experiences.



By 2022 tourism demand had returned to pre-pandemic levels, ahead of the forecasted reports.



Regional Context

The Fox Cities Destination Master Plan was created within the context of existing City, County and Village plans, policies, and regulations. We recognize and respect the work already done and consider it a strong foundation to build upon. The following is a list of specific planning documents referenced during the project engagement:



Calumet County Master Plan (2016)



City of Appleton Comprehensive Plan — Envision Appleton (2022)
City of Appleton Growth Report (2020)



City of Neenah Comprehensive Plan Update 2040 (2016)



College North Neighborhood Plan (2022)



Fox Cities CVB Annual Reports (2019, 2020, 2021)



Imagine Fox Cities (2021)



Outagamie County Comprehensive Plan 2040 (2020)



Village of Fox Crossing Comprehensive Plan (2018-2038)



Village of Little Chute Comprehensive Plan (2016-2036)

Master Planning Process

The future success of the Fox Cities visitor economy depends on the public, private and civic sectors co-creating their shared vision for the future of the region that supports a balance of visitor growth, resident quality of life, and overall quality of experience for all who spend time in the Fox Cities. With that guiding principle at the forefront, this master planning process was designed to engage and collaborate with tourism stakeholders, community stakeholders, and residents of the Fox Cities.



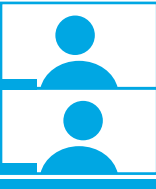
Task Force

A Task Force of 12 community leaders from the Fox Cities was struck to guide the process, advise on key considerations and champion the Master Plan both through development and into implementation. The Task Force met for three in-person working sessions throughout the process.



Stakeholder Engagement

MMGY NextFactor met with over 50 stakeholders through a series of 10 sector-specific focus groups and conducted 12 in-depth interviews, all which took place between May and September, 2022. The primary purpose of this engagement was to identify key opportunities and challenges for the future of the Fox Cities as a destination for visitors and a quality place for residents to live, work and play.



Interviews

12 in-depth interviews were conducted in-person and virtually with key stakeholders who provided specific insights into different communities within the Fox Cities.

Focus Groups

Focus groups included stakeholders from the following sectors:



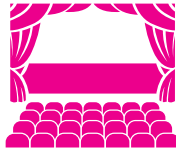
Lodging



Attractions



Restaurants



Venues



Transportation



Economic Development



Municipal Leaders



Sports Clients



Meetings and Convention Clients



River Enthusiasts

Additionally, MMGY NextFactor conducted a DestinationNEXT stakeholder assessment study, resulting in 111 completions, along with a resident survey, resulting in 577 completions.

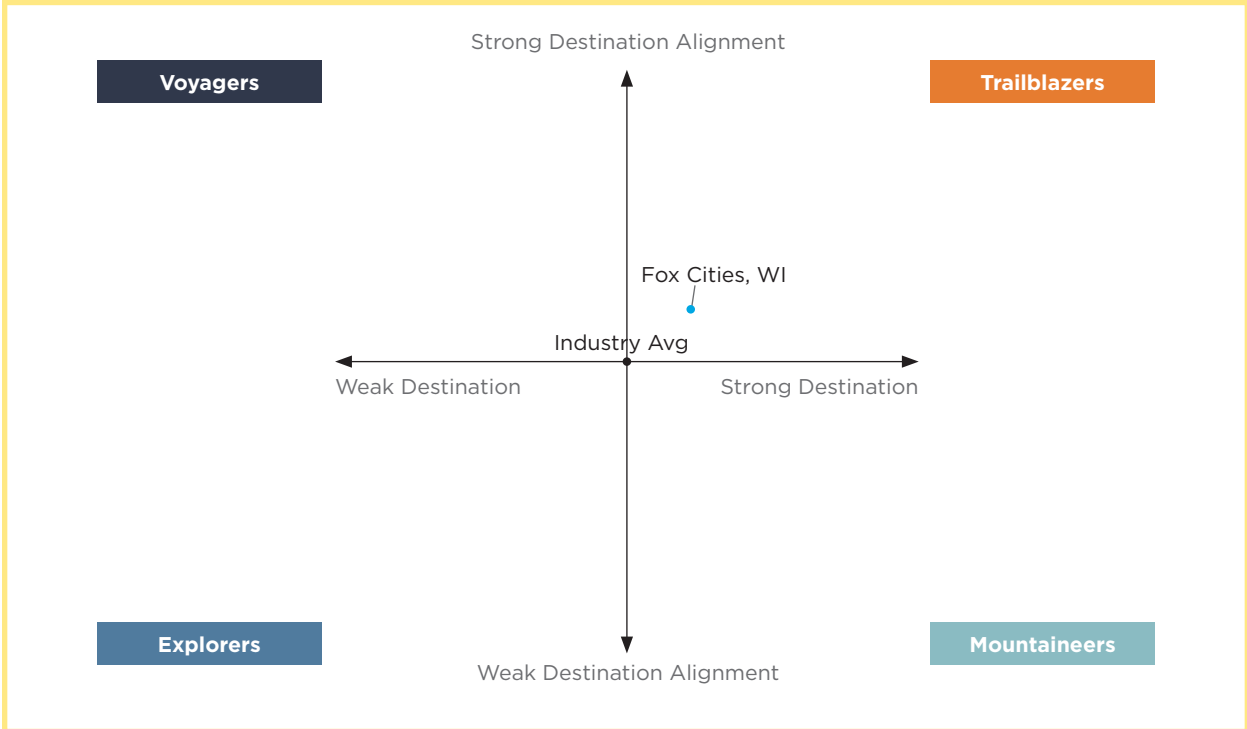
DestinationNEXT Assessment

MMGY NextFactor conducted a detailed assessment of the Fox Cities visitor economy utilizing a comprehensive stakeholder survey that measures destination strength and destination alignment, based on a series of 24 variables. The results were then used to plot the Fox Cities into a Scenario Model, which shows the specific opportunities for the Fox Cities and their partners to build upon.

From a destination strength perspective, the Fox Cities outperformed the industry average, posting the highest scores in the areas of Arts, Culture & Heritage along with Outdoor Recreation. The lowest scores fell in the categories of Local Mobility & Access, along with Destination Access.

From a destination alignment perspective, the Fox Cities also outperformed the industry average, with the highest scores in the areas of Organization Governance and Regional Cooperation. The lowest scores fell in the categories of Workforce Development and Equity, Diversity & Inclusion.

Overall, the Fox Cities landed in the Trailblazer quadrant of the DestinationNext Scenario Model, with above industry average scores for both destination strength and destination alignment—a result most destinations aspire to, but historically only 40% of destinations overall, on average, have achieved.





Resident Survey

In consultation with the Fox Cities CVB staff, MMGY NextFactor developed an online survey to identify and gauge residents' perceptions on a variety of key characteristics with respect to livability, culture, economy, and sense of place. 577 residents of the Fox Cities region participated in the survey.

Roughly 85% of residents agree that tourism is good for the Fox Cities and 68% agree that the Fox Cities are places where people want to visit. Additionally, 42% of respondents felt that there are currently too few visitors to the destination, and only 2% felt that there are too many.

When asked about the actual tourism activity of the Fox Cities, fewer than half of all residents were aware of the number of visitors annually, where visitors are

coming from, the amount of money visitors spend when visiting the Fox Cities, the number of jobs tourism creates in the region and the infrastructure development in the Fox Cities that has been possible due to visitor spending.

Finally, when asked about the Fox Cities brand, 40% of residents were familiar or extremely familiar with the brand while 60% were somewhat familiar or not familiar at all with the brand.

The compiled data, along with key findings and recommendations, were presented to the Task Force in a series of three on-site working sessions throughout the project. Taken together, the sum of all of the engagement uncovered 13 key findings.

See Key Findings on next page



Key Findings:

1. The waterways are essential elements of the destination experience and critical to development opportunities.
2. Further development and promotion of the Fox Cities brand represents a significant opportunity.
3. The Fox Cities have a significant opportunity to embrace the winter season with infrastructure, activation, and investment.
4. Outdoor recreation and wellness experiences represent a significant development and enhancement opportunity.
5. The communities that comprise the Fox Cities each offer unique attributes and settings that should be celebrated and further enhanced.
6. The family-friendly, safe, and affordable nature of the Fox Cities offers a unique selling point for the destination.
7. The diversity of innovation and industry in the Fox Cities can contribute to the return of business travel and meetings and conventions.
8. Arts and cultural events and festivals position the Fox Cities as a key regional destination with attributes to improve quality of life.
9. The Fox Cities are becoming known as a premier sport tournament destination.
10. Regional connectivity, access and wayfinding throughout the region needs to be enhanced.
11. The Fox Cities diverse populations must be engaged in experience development and place branding.
12. Residents of the Fox Cities require engagement and education to become better destination ambassadors.
13. The Fox Cities should continue to leverage their conservation and sustainability initiatives to attract more tourism business.

Visioning Session

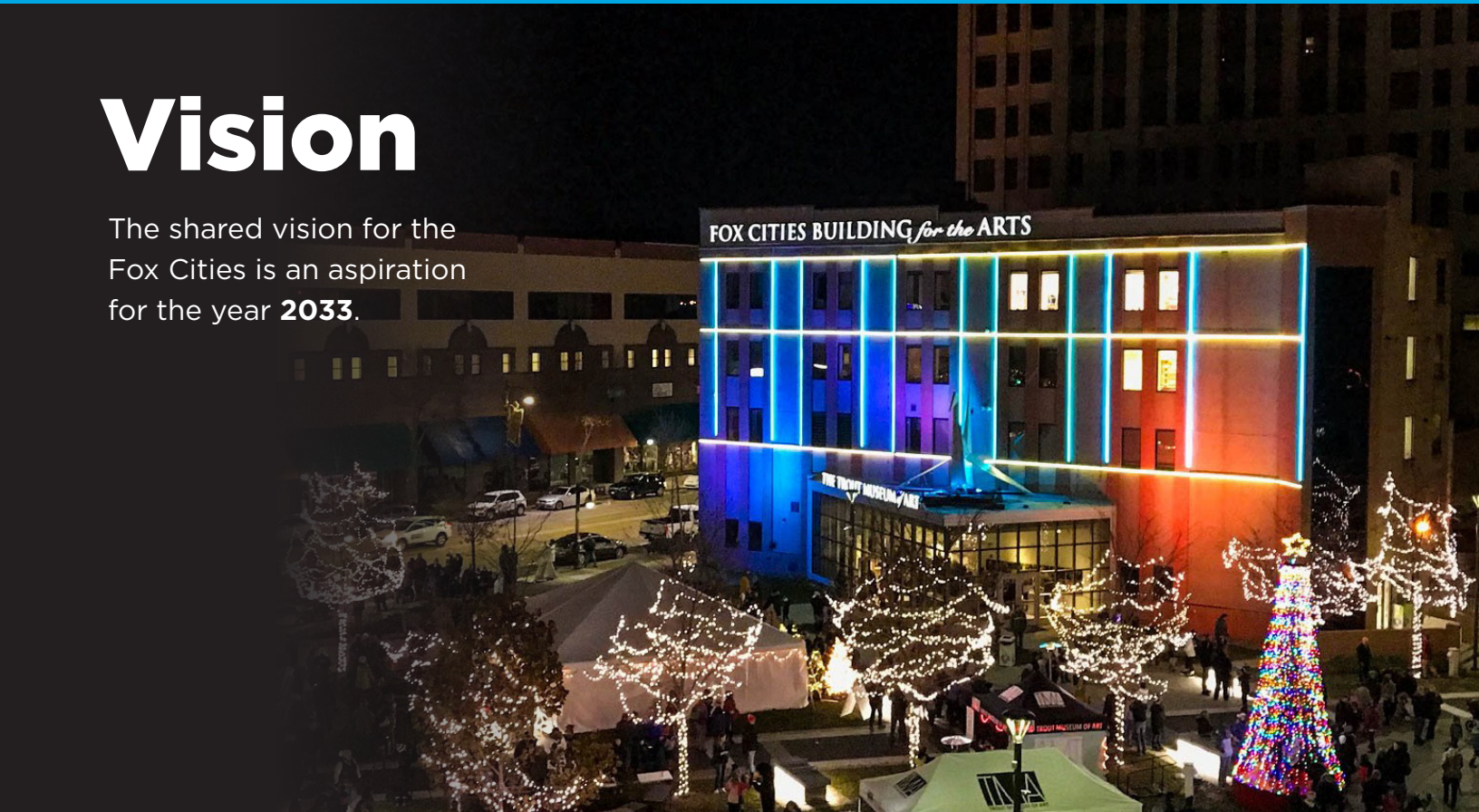
The results and insights gleaned from these research activities were then used in a visioning workshop with the Task Force to envision the future of the visitor economy in the Fox Cities and to develop priorities to be addressed by the project.

Validation Session

The results of the workshop were then compiled into a Draft Recommendations Report, which was presented to the Task Force and Fox Cities CVB team for feedback and validation.

Vision

The shared vision for the Fox Cities is an aspiration for the year **2033**.



In 2033, the Fox Cities will be:

A vibrant, year-round destination with a mix of experiences fueled by original thinking.

As the destination brand celebrates, the Fox Cities is a region of originals; original thinking, original products and original people. By 2033, that originality will be shared with the visitor economy and celebrated through our experiences.

The vision to make the Fox Cities a vibrant year-round destination emerged from the current success of the summer season. Our lakes and waterways are actively used for fishing, kayaking and other recreational activities, our shops and downtowns are busy, and Mile of Music brings visitors from around the midwest.

With the aspiration to expand that vibrancy into the rest of the year, we see great opportunity to support year-round outdoor recreational activities and develop a Fox Cities original winter festival that runs over multiple weekends.

We also aspire to include the original thinkers from our community in showcasing and celebrating the Fox Cities. The region produces so many unique products for our country — including paper products, fire engines, manhole covers and dairy products — that we have a real opportunity to showcase our ingenuity, particularly as we look to grow the number of conventions we host.

Sport tourism will continue to play a key role in achieving our vision of vibrancy and year-round activities. When visiting teams and their families are in town, there is a significant increase in revenues to our restaurants, retailers and hotels. By ensuring we have the services and experiences to further support and entertain this market, we will benefit businesses and create jobs. To do this, we will continue to grow the success of the Community First Champion Center and other venues for the benefit of our entire region.

Strategic Goals

The strategic goals provide the framework for decision making regarding efforts and investments to enhance the visitor economy in the Fox Cities. These five goals offer guidance on how to achieve the overarching vision and develop a competitive positioning for the Fox Cities as a destination.



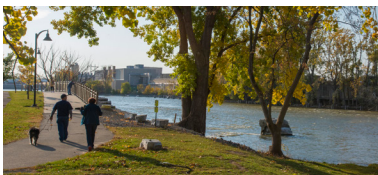
1

**Strengthen the Brand
through Iconic Festivals**



2

**Develop Communities
as Experiences**



3

**Enhance Outdoor
Recreation Opportunities**



4

**Expand Strategic
Regional Collaboration**



5

**Improve Access
and Connectivity**

1

Strengthen the Brand through Iconic Festivals



Increasingly, reputation, quality of place and the perceived brand of a city is determining where talent, capital, and tourism flow. Effective place brands bring diverse stakeholders together, building local community and external awareness.

Good work has been done in the Fox Cities over the past several years to build the foundation for a place brand strategy that is authentic to the community rather than one that is merely aspirational and unlikely to be sustained or successful over time. The spirit of originality, authenticity and creativity runs deep in the Fox Cities and is celebrated through live music, culinary arts, rich history, and cultural events. However, activating the place brand strategy and communicating the Fox Cities' unique stories must be strengthened in a constant and coordinated manner to be able to build a reputation that gives added value to all residents of the region and positions the destination as a desirable place to live, work, visit, learn and invest.

1. Develop new festival experiences

- a) Align with Fox Cities destination brand to identify potential event themes
- b) Develop an iconic winter festival / carnival (minimum two weeks)

2. Encourage visitors to explore the region

- a) Expand and enhance the promotion of the regional calendar of events
- b) Identify gap periods for longer-term festivals or grouping of events

3. Capitalize on existing opportunities

- a) Collaborate to build packaging around existing attractions & events (PAC, FCEC, Champion Center, etc.)
- b) Consider expanding Mile of Music to other municipalities



2

Develop Communities as Experiences



Experiential travel isn't particularly new. There's been a growing demand around cultural exploration and activity-based travel experiences for several years. It is a well-researched and quantifiable trend, and the demand for experiential travel shows no signs of slowing down. Travelers today are seeking depth of experience, rather than a simple visit to a new destination. Today, experiences that transform people in ways they may not even be aware of are attracting a growing number of visitors to destinations.

Experiential travel focuses on immersing oneself in the destination, interacting with the people, engaging the senses, and learning about the history and the stories of the place. Tourism experiences that best exemplify this transformative travel experience meet at least one of the following criteria: they integrate multiple areas of tourism (such as cultural tourism, adventure tourism, culinary tourism, etc.); they have a hands-on learning aspect; and they are social.

Our research identified opportunities for the Fox Cities to develop and enhance tourism experiences that meet the needs of these contemporary travelers.

1. Create space

- a) Develop a regional, indoor concert / event venue
- b) Address infrastructure gaps for hosting larger events (expand Champion Center, acoustic improvements at FCEC)

2. Create connection

- a) Develop an iconic art trail as a connector
- b) Incorporate communities in regional festivals (experiences, culinary, makers and vendors, etc.)
- c) Support free WIFI in all communities (example: downtown Neenah)
- d) Develop a regional "deal" program to encourage visitors and locals to explore

3. Create opportunity

- a) Re-evaluate Tourism Development Grant Guidelines to allow for more flexibility in providing on-going investment/sponsorships, large art and support for projects that align with overall tourism development strategy

3

Enhance Outdoor Recreation Opportunities



People love the Fox Cities for the nature. People on the trails, in the parks and on the river—whether visiting, working, or living—are here for nature and find kinship and connection in their love and appreciation of natural beauty and outdoor life. In a post-pandemic era, there is an even greater demand for dynamic outdoor experiences globally, and the Fox Cities are well-positioned to capitalize on this trend.

While the recreation trails of the region hold great promise for growing tourism to the destination, the lock system is both a blessing and a challenge for the Fox Cities. As the nation's only hand-operated, fully restored lock system, it holds a wealth of historical and recreational potential. However, significant planning and investment will be needed to ensure the locks remain navigable along the 39-mile river and, at the same time, protect the environment from invasive species. Ensuring the path forward delivers sustainable and desirable environmental outcomes will be an important aspect of maintaining a resilient visitor economy for the long term.

1. Support and amplify recreation opportunities

- a) Incorporate recreation options and highlights into brand promise and marketing
- b) Embrace and amplify winter recreation opportunities

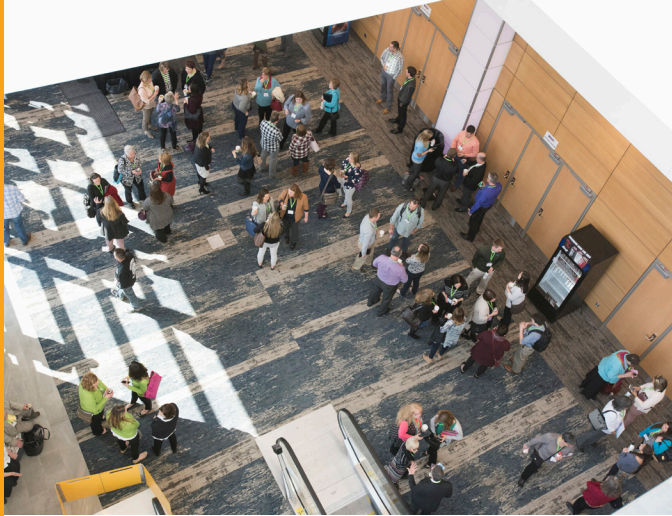
2. Focus on waterways

- a) Advocate for opening of all river locks
- b) Support small business development for outfitters / equipment rentals



4

Expand Strategic Regional Collaboration



Destinations of all sizes are more competitive in the global visitor economy when government, community, and industry priorities are aligned as much as possible. A whole-of-destination approach, where the public, private, and civic sectors are all speaking to each other, creates stronger communities that elevate the visitor experience, supports sustainable and economic development across all sectors, and improves the quality of life for residents.

The Fox Cities have led the way statewide in strategic regional collaboration, notably around tourism development projects. Tourism helps shape the perception and reputation of the Fox Cities, which is critical to the region's economy. It is the front door to economic development, and the region's future prosperity depends on a thriving visitor economy.

Guided by this plan, the Fox Cities will continue to collaborate with regional partners to advance the collective goals. Ultimately, the success of this plan will come from ongoing meaningful, mutually beneficial participation and alliances with regional stakeholders and industry partners. By working together, more will be accomplished for the benefit of the entire Fox Cities region.

1. Leverage local innovators/companies to attract meetings & conventions

- a) Develop consistent, regionwide event / group pageantry
- b) Align the "Bring It Home" campaign with the brand focus of originality to amplify awareness
- c) Develop a local expert directory for convention program speakers

2. Build awareness of local industry

- a) Partner with Fox River Mall to use vacant spaces to showcase behind-the scenes access to local industry (draw for locals, visitors and meeting planners)
- b) Collaborate with other Economic Development organizations to highlight and leverage local industry to attract additional business opportunities

5

Improve Access and Connectivity



As the Fox Cities visitor economy grows, how visitors move around the destination needs to evolve to meet the needs of travelers. A vibrant visitor economy must contain connections that are equally vibrant, creating a sense of continuity of the visitor experience throughout the entire region.

All aspects of our research identified destination access, mobility, and connectivity among the most significant challenges to be addressed in improving the Fox Cities visitor experience, and in turn, driving the region's visitor economy.

We must ensure that the visitor perspective is considered in transportation planning, including:

- Connectivity between the destination and the rest of the world, including air access as well as rail and road
- Connectivity between visitor activities within a destination
- The modes of transportation that help visitors connect to places and to one another

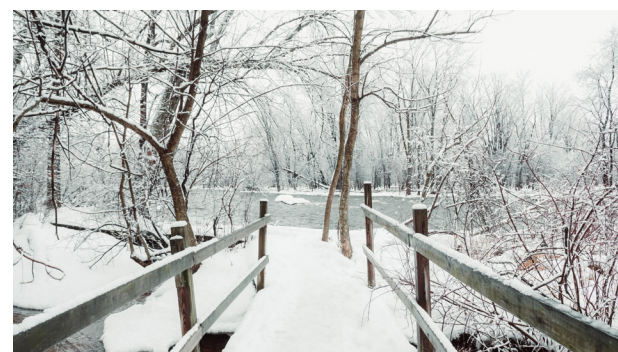
Addressing destination mobility and connectivity has been identified as a significant opportunity for the Fox Cities to focus on and will be an important aspect of maximizing tourism growth potential in the region.

1. Incorporate transportation and accessibility options

- a) Use bike and pedestrian plan to advocate for completion of gaps in connectivity and support initiatives to fully complete the regional trail system
- b) Investigate air service grants to provide risk mitigation funding for airline services
- c) Ensure viable and consistent options for transportation from the airport to final destination
- d) Address the pockets of walkability gaps
- e) Advocate for Amtrak service to the Fox Cities
- f) Advocate for the connectivity of Bird scooters throughout the Fox Cities

2. Expand public transportation options

- a) Improve public transportation route options (e.g. no service on Sundays)



Next Steps

From the outset of the Destination Master Planning process, the community was engaged and excited to support the implementation of the strategic recommendations.

The Fox Cities CVB doesn't own the assets and experiences related to the visitor economy, and therefore, they cannot single-handedly move this Master Plan forward. Their roles in the implementation of the Destination Master Plan will take several forms including:

ADVOCATE
There will be instances where the CVB will advocate for strategic initiatives that will advance the Fox Cities for the benefit of visitors and residents.

CONVENER
The CVB may be the conveners of groups and those in positions to advance initiatives.

LEADER
There will be instances where the CVB takes the lead as the organization to advance initiatives.

SUPPORT
Finally, the CVB will be the supporting or partnering organization on initiatives with other leading organizations.

Several initiatives within the plan will be incorporated into the Fox Cities CVB strategic plan to ensure implementation is giving organizational focus, support and resources.

Members of the Task Force have agreed to continue to be involved with the Destination Master Plan to support its implementation. Subcommittees and working groups will be tasked with guiding implementation, collaborating to execute on initiatives and report on progress and other performance measures.

With a collaborative, focused and original approach to the implementation of this Destination Master Plan, it will result in the growth of the visitor economy and its widespread benefits for the entire region.

The visitor economy in the Fox Cities has unlimited potential and we're excited to welcome more visitors to our great region!

