

BIG JUNCTION  
ELEV. 5235

# GRAHAM COUNTY

*Strategic Tourism Plan Destination 2025*



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## STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW

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In fall 2014, the Graham Revitalization Economic Action Team (GREAT) contracted with Magellan Strategy Group of Asheville, North Carolina to facilitate the development of a strategic tourism plan for Graham County. Over a six-month period, Magellan received substantial feedback from tourism stakeholders, local residents, and elected officials via six public input workshops and an on-line survey from which 279 responses were received. Magellan is grateful to all of the people who shared their opinions and participated in the public workshops and in the on-line survey. This project received the support of many local residents, and Magellan is particularly thankful for the leadership of Rick Davis of GREAT, Beth Fields of Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center, and Tabitha Myler of Graham County Travel and Tourism during the course of the plan's development. Their overall enthusiasm, coordination of logistics, guidance on local issues, and insight and vision successfully helped move the plan to completion.

The generous financial support for the development of the plan provided by Graham County Travel and Tourism, the Town of Lake Santeetlah, the Town of Fontana Dam, and GREAT is also enthusiastically acknowledged.

In addition to the large amount of public feedback received, Magellan also incorporated secondary data showing the health of Graham County's tourism economy and larger insights into current trends in travel and tourism into the plan. This is, by design, intended to be a strategic plan. While there are a number of tactical elements included within it, the plan generally does not make detailed recommendations on items such as specific advertising media for destination marketing efforts. It is also not limited to what might be considered solely traditional destination marketing. There are recommendations that affect components of the visit experience, tourism funding, product development, and new business growth, and existing business expansion. It is also intended to be respectful of resource limits. As one of the poorer counties in North Carolina with relatively low levels of overnight visitation, Graham County tourism does not have access to substantial amounts of funding for product development and destination marketing. This plan is designed to make better use of the collective resources that the local tourism sector does possess, and identifies some potential sources of other funding for initiatives.

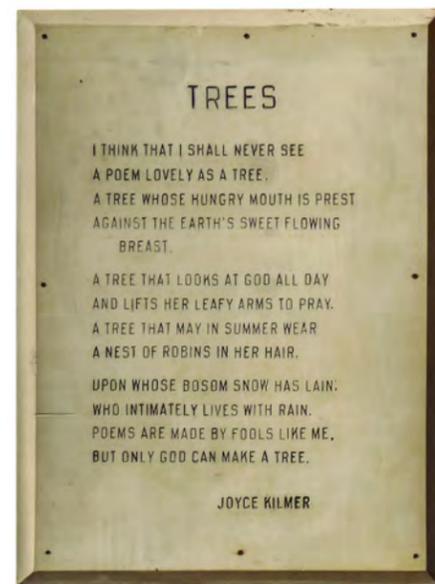
It is expected that the GREAT organization will support through its Tourism and Mountain Culture committee the implementation of the plan on behalf of the community, but nearly all of the steps outlined within will require action by stakeholders and organizations other than GREAT. As a community organization active in all parts of the county, GREAT is ideally placed, however, for coordinating the activities of those entities to achieve the plan and reporting on its success.

## INTRODUCTION

Located in far western North Carolina, Graham County is situated amidst some of the most rugged terrain of the entire Appalachian Mountain chain. With a population of only 8,700 full-time residents, Graham is one of the least-populated counties in all of the state. Geographically, the county is not far from several large and medium-sized metropolitan areas in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia, but its remote mountainous location means it is not always an easy drive from those same markets. Like every county in western North Carolina, however, Graham has been a destination for thousands of visitors for many years in spite of the occasional challenges of getting there.



Or, perhaps it is a destination precisely because of those same challenges. Graham County offers spectacular mountain scenery, unspoiled lakes and streams, and thousands of acres of forests and fields barely touched by man. Its inventory of well-known natural and scenic assets is nearly unrivaled in the eastern United States. The Appalachian Trail, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, Lake Fontana, Cherohala Skyway, and the Tail of the Dragon are both special visitor experiences as well as brand names with high levels of awareness among travelers. Even lesser-known scenic assets in the county such as the Cheoah River and Lake Santeetlah enjoy a special level of passion among visitors.



Despite those natural advantages, Graham County has struggled to keep up with many of its neighbors in western North Carolina in terms of visitor market share. As most of the region has surged in traveler popularity over the last two decades, Graham has not seen the same kinds of growth in visitation and tourism spending as most of its peers. It is true that Graham faces some unique challenges not found in many other destinations in western North Carolina. But those challenges can also be overcome with a combination of innovation, creativity, collaboration, and smarter uses of existing resources.

Graham County's strategic destination environment is further complicated by the county's current economic challenges. With one of the highest rates of unemployment in the state (due in part to the 2014 closing of the largest employer in the county, Stanley Furniture), Graham and its residents face a number of ongoing hurdles related to economic recovery. In addition, growth and development in the county is constrained by certain weaknesses in its infrastructure, such as a shortage of high-speed Internet and cell phone service.

Growth in the tourism sector will not address all of the county's economic woes. It is a part of the solution, not THE solution. But Graham has a foundation of natural advantages that would be the envy of many other counties trying to grow their own tourism economy. It's hardly starting from scratch, as it already attracts thousands of visitors annually from across the region and indeed even the world. In order to succeed, the county must leverage those natural advantages to make the tourism economy grow much faster. To do otherwise means risking the competitive position Graham currently enjoys and losing further market share to nearby destinations which have embraced tourism as one viable form of economic development. It's not a question of whether Graham County should be "in" the tourism business—it already is, and the county must commit to enhancing its competitiveness for the benefit of its residents, visitors, and future.



## GRAHAM COUNTY STRATEGIC TOURISM PLAN GOALS

There are six overall goals that have been identified for this plan as desired outcomes:

1. Increase overnight and daytrip visitation to Graham County.
2. Generate more tourism-related revenue.
3. Increase tourism-related employment.
4. Provide more small business opportunities.
5. Increase the local tax base.
6. Maximize travel, tourism, and sustainable recreation opportunities as core contributors to business growth and quality of life, while protecting cultural and natural resources.

The sixth goal, while not as easily measured as the others (but still potentially measurable), is perhaps the most critical as it enhances quality of life for Graham County residents while maintaining the assets and growing the opportunities that attract visitors. The plan will have failed if it accomplishes the first five objectives without achieving the sixth.

In addition to the overall goals of the plan, there are certain strategic aspirations that Graham County should embrace as the positive consequences of a strong tourism economy. Some are lofty—the “big hairy audacious goal,” or BHAG, of the plan. But that’s precisely what Graham County’s tourism sector needs—dramatic aspirations supported by planning and resources to help achieve them.

1. Transform Graham County into one of the premier destinations of the southern Appalachian Mountains.
2. Serve all of our valued guests with the highest possible level of hospitality.
3. Increase overnight visitation to the county.
4. Encourage expanded and new business activity.
5. Create more tourism-related jobs.
6. Retain more residents living within the county.
7. Attract new permanent residents, including entrepreneurs and retirees.
8. Generate higher local tax revenue directly and indirectly related to tourism.
9. Preserve the county’s natural, scenic, cultural, and historic assets.
10. Improve the quality of life for all Graham County residents.

## GRAHAM COUNTY’S TOURISM MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

The above strategic goals and aspirations are justification enough to pursue the execution of a robust plan that leverages Graham County’s asset and resources to produce a stronger local economy. But there are also five specific current market opportunities which can be leveraged by Graham County for maximum benefit:

1. **The Millennial generation is beginning to surpass the Baby Boomers in travel spending and activity.** Millennials (generally considered to be those Americans born between 1979 and 1999) have been much maligned and stereotyped, but they are beginning to enter their peak earning years. They are more likely to spend their money on experiences rather than material goods (with the exception of technology), and are more willing to travel to unique (even off the beaten path) destinations if those destinations offer the kinds of experiences they enjoy, including interesting food and beverage, outdoor recreation, WiFi, and a variety of accommodation types.
2. **Graham County is one of the last truly undiscovered places in the southern Appalachians.** Over the last two decades, many mountain communities in the southeastern U.S. have been “discovered” and have changed. Some of these changes have been for the better, while other changes have been a negative consequence of their growth and transformation. Although its economy has been much weaker than the local economies of many of its peers during this time period, Graham has seen fewer transformational changes and its natural, historic, and cultural assets are generally still well preserved. Graham has also yet to be “discovered” by much of the travel media, many of whom are always looking for stories yet to be told.
3. **The southeastern U.S. continues to surge in population.** While the recent economic downturn did temper population and economic growth in the Southeast somewhat over the last few years, certain nearby metropolitan areas have rebounded nicely and continue to attract large numbers of new residents. Urban areas such as Atlanta, Raleigh/Durham, and Charlotte are drivers of much of the region’s population gains, and even Florida (a longtime feeder market for the mountains of western North Carolina) has rebounded from the recession and the real estate market crash of 2008-2009.



4. **Graham County has an extraordinary wealth of natural assets.** The county is fortunate to have some spectacular landscapes formally preserved within its borders or nearby, in places like the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But the entire county is like a park, with dramatic vistas in every direction and beautiful lakes and rivers flowing through it. It is as unspoiled a land as can be found anywhere in this part of the world. And while those assets must be protected, they can also be leveraged in ways that foster economic activity that benefits local residents and businesses.
5. **There are more ways to connect with potential visitors than ever before.** The digital marketing environment has brought with it an array of media choices for reaching travelers and inviting them to visit. For a marketing resource-poor destination like Graham County that is still mostly unknown and relatively complex, on-line channels and social media allow the destination to better tell its story to many more people. Determining the right promotional vehicles out of millions of choices can be daunting, but the county's marketing must continue to evolve.



## GRAHAM COUNTY'S STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGES

The public input sessions and the stakeholder surveys conducted as a part of this study identified numerous barriers to growth of the tourism sector. Some are not easily addressed within the ten-year time-frame of this plan, and some requires resources and influence well beyond the scope of the tourism sector and its stakeholders. Others are more characteristic of larger community challenges faced by all residents and industry sectors. But most can be distilled into five broad strategic challenges which are addressed by this plan.

1. Lack of opportunities for visitor spending
2. No well-defined market image
3. Insufficient resources for destination marketing and tourism development
4. No cohesive destination experience
5. The need for a coordinated destination marketing effort

Each challenge will be analyzed and addressed with specific strategies and tactics appropriate to the influences and resources of the tourism sector.

### STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGE #1: Lack of opportunities for visitor spending

As a sparsely populated county with large amounts of rugged land controlled by the federal and state governments, Graham County will likely always have a relatively low amount of retail activity even when compared to other counties in far western North Carolina. This observation applies to retail spending that is either primarily resident-generated or visitor-related. What is most concerning about visitor spending in Graham County, though, is how it is failing to maintain even the same pace of growth as most of its peer destinations in western North Carolina, or even compared to the rate of inflation.

The Division of Tourism, Film, and Sports Development for the state of North Carolina publishes data each year from the U.S. Travel Association that measures the impact of visitation in each of the state's 100 counties. The Division has data for each county available for each years beginning in 1991. Using a combination of traveler surveys and other available data, USTA can estimate the amount of visitor spending for each county, the number of tourism jobs generated by that spending, and state and local tax receipts. The methodology provides an estimate of economic impact and is not perfect, but it does provide a sound historical look at tourism's impact and its strength relative to other destinations in North Carolina.

The chart below shows that data for Graham County for calendar year 2013, the most recent year for which data is available. It also compares Graham County to all 100 counties in North Carolina and to the 23 mountain counties in the western part of the state.

Lack of Opportunities for Visitor Spending			
Metric	2013 Data	Graham Rank Among All NC Counties	Rank Among All 23 NC Mountain Counties
Visitor Expenditures	\$24.84M	79	19*
Expenditures per Resident	\$2,803	14	7
Tourism Payroll	\$4.16M	72	19
Tourism Related Employment	0.25K	70	18
Tourism Employment as a Percentage of All Residents	2.8%	16	7
State Tax Receipts	\$1.14M	79	20
Local Tax Receipts	\$1.62M	56	16

\*Polk, Alleghany, Mitchell, and Clay counties rank lower.  
Source: Economic Impact Of Travel On NC Counties, NC Department of Commerce & USTA

Visitor spending amounted to nearly \$25 million in 2013, and direct tourism employment (not including indirect impacts created by the spending of tourism businesses or their employees) amounted to over \$4.1 million in payroll. Graham ranked 79th in the state and 19th among all mountain counties in visitor spending, with only Polk, Alleghany, Mitchell, and Clay counties ranking lower. (Two of those counties are poised to move higher in the rankings in future years because of significant new developments within or near them. The multi-million dollar Tryon International Equestrian Center just opened in Polk County, and Harrah's new casino and hotel in Cherokee County near Murphy will likely impact neighboring Clay County after it opens in fall 2015.)

Growth in Visitor Spending, 1991-2013					
County	1991 (millions)	2013 (millions)	% Change	Growth Rank Among All NC Counties	Growth Rank Among All 23 NC Mtn. Counties
Graham	\$10.61	\$24.84	134%	70	20
Swain	\$26.46	\$187.99	610%	2	1
Jackson	\$36.02	\$163.03	352%	5	2
Cherokee	\$13.43	\$37.03	176%	34	10
Clay	\$5.06	\$12.51	147%	59	15
Macon	\$58.76	\$140.85	140%	65	18

Source: Economic Impact Of Travel On NC Counties, NC Department of Commerce & USTA

Going back as far as 1991, the earliest year for which data is available from the state of North Carolina and USTA regarding the county-level impact of visitor spending, Graham County has seen an increase in visitor spending of 134% over the subsequent 22-year period. This rate of visitor spending growth was 70th highest in the state and only 20th out of 23 counties in western North Carolina. It is also lower than the rate of growth for all of Graham's regional neighbors in that part of the state. (Swain and Jackson counties have seen some of the strongest growth in visitor spending in the entire state, due to the opening and continued development of Harrah's Cherokee Casino and Hotel.)

The greatest concern for Graham County, however, lies in the data for the years 2000 to 2013. Visitor spending grew only 28% during this period, less than the rate of inflation for the same period (35%). Graham's rate of visitor spending growth was lower than all but two counties in the North Carolina mountain region—Mitchell and Caldwell—and all but five counties in the entire state.

Growth in Visitor Spending, 2000-2013					
County	2000 (millions)	2013 (millions)	% Change	Growth Rank Among All NC Counties	Growth Rank Among All 23 NC Mtn. Counties
Graham	\$19.38	\$24.84	28%*	95	21**
Swain	\$51.67	\$187.99	264%	1	1
Jackson	\$50.48	\$163.03	223%	2	2
Cherokee	\$25.02	\$37.03	45%	69	16
Clay	\$8.29	\$12.51	51%	55	13
Macon	\$89.68	\$140.85	57%	41	9

\* Rate of inflation for this period: 35%  
\*\* Mitchell and Caldwell counties rank lower.  
Source: Economic Impact Of Travel On NC Counties, NC Department of Commerce & USTA

This relative lack of growth during this particular period is particularly noteworthy for several reasons. Despite the deep recession of 2008-2009, the years from 2000 to 2013 represents one of the greatest overall growth periods of the travel and tourism sector that America has ever witnessed. It was the period when the Internet took over as the primary planning and transactional medium for travel, and more consumers were exposed to more new destinations than ever. Much of the Baby Boomer generation became empty nesters during these years and had more time and money to travel.

This period also saw continued strong population and economic growth in the southeastern U.S., especially the nearby large metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and Raleigh/Durham which feed leisure travel destinations like western North Carolina. Locally, it was also when access to Graham County from the rest of the state was improved by the widening and modernization of North Carolina state highway 28 from Almond (at the intersection of U.S. 19/74) to Stecoah.

In short, Graham County should have seen much stronger growth in visitor spending during the 13 years measured by this study. As one participant in the public feedback sessions observed when presented with the data, it represents “nothing less than a call to arms.”

Much of the reason for the anemic levels of visitor spending in Graham County is simply due to a lack of opportunities for travelers to spend their money. There are comparatively fewer places for spending in retail, lodging, food and beverage, and attractions. There are also surprisingly few opportunities in the county for visitors to spend money (and time) with commercial enterprises specializing in outdoor recreation, even though Graham’s greatest assets are nature-based.

Several participants in the public input sessions and in the stakeholder survey commented upon what they felt was a very challenging environment for small businesses in the county. (And travel and tourism is inherently a sector made up of small businesses, especially in western North Carolina.) Some of the barriers to business success cited by these participants include:

- A weak information technology and telecommunications infrastructure, with poor access to high speed Internet and cellular telephone service.
- A shortage of employees with skills needed by area businesses
- Poor support from local government for small businesses
- Dilapidated buildings in downtown Robbinsville
- Inability to sell alcoholic beverages
- Highly seasonal business trends
- Lack of available financial resources and training for small businesses
- A small base of residents, especially those willing to support local businesses
- Unnecessary state and federal regulations on the use of protected lands

**STRATEGY: Extend the average length of visit to Graham County among transient visitors (non-seasonal residents)**

One of the clearest ways of influencing the level of visitor spending in the county is to motivate longer visits, particularly those that result in overnight stays. Overnight stays create the greatest economic impact for the local economy, as they generate additional spending in hotels, stores, and restaurants as well as enabling visitors to enjoy more of the destination. Overnight visitors tend to be more knowledgeable about the destination, and are more likely to share their experiences with others once they return home.

The tactics for motivating increased overnight visitation include:

- Promoting the diversity of lodging in the destination, particularly cabins and other rentals which are conducive to longer length of stay and larger visitor parties. Graham County has a surprising amount of different lodging types for an area so lightly populated, and that diversity can help motivate a visitor to stay overnight who might otherwise look elsewhere. The availability of a variety of lodging types also helps sell the county to a greater variety of audiences, especially larger parties such as multi-generational travel parties. But potential visitors have to be made aware of these accommodations in a more significant way.
- Providing greater promotional connections between motoring enthusiasts and lodging options, so Graham County is considered more of an overnight destination for that market. Graham is well-established as a destination that motorcyclists and sports car enthusiasts will seek out to travel on the world-famous Tail of the Dragon or the emerging Moonshiner 28. This is a valuable audience in that they are already aware of Graham County as a destination, but many are only visiting as day-trip guests and staying overnight in other communities.



This audience must become more aware that there are indeed a variety of places to stay overnight in Graham County, in close proximity to the Tail of the Dragon, the Moonshiner 28, and other attractions. This is best achieved using a mix of on-line marketing (the destination website, search engine optimization, search engine marketing); packaging; and media outreach that tells the complete story of the county as being suitable as a motorcyclists and sports car enthusiasts overnight stay destination and not just a place to ride or drive.

- Continuing to invest in the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center as the destination’s primary cultural hub. Stecoah serves a number of very important roles for tourism in the community: it’s a visitor center (including restrooms—not an insignificant factor in a remote, sparsely populated region); a resource for preservation of and growing local arts and culture; and a driver of nighttime event activity in the summer and fall. The latter is particularly important for increasing overnight stays, since nighttime activity provides a built-in reason for remaining overnight in the destination.

- Bundling activities and attractors together to appeal to guests with similar interests, so that they more easily see there is a critical mass of activity in the destination that would encourage a longer stay (and so that they appear more easily in web searches). One of the themes that emerged early on in the public input sessions was that despite its small population and business base, Graham County is potentially appealing to a wide variety of audiences, especially niche or enthusiast audiences. These audience segments include:

- Visitors interested in Cherokee Indian history, culture, and genealogy
- Wildflower and other flora enthusiasts
- Fishing enthusiasts
- Whitewater and flat water sports participants
- Motorcycling and sports car enthusiasts

Directly targeting and focusing upon niches like these, rather than trying to be broadly appealing to everyone, is a more effective use of the county’s limited resources. Grouping like activities together creates a critical mass of attractors that helps Graham stand out among other destinations and stimulates interest.



## STRATEGY: Provide Visitors with More Spending Opportunities

The second strategy to support increased visitor spending in Graham County is to identify and implement ways of growing the number of opportunities where visitors can spend money. This is more than just better marketing, of course, although attracting more visitors to the county for longer stays should help grow opportunities for both new and existing businesses in the community.

One of the more innovative tactics to be used to stimulate growth in those small businesses is through micro-enterprise grants focused upon tourism entities. A few other communities are beginning to use this as a means of attracting new small businesses as well as enabling existing businesses to expand or renovate to attract more customers. These communities include nearby Dillsboro, North Carolina, where town leaders have grown concerned about the lack of shops and restaurants for visitors and would like to attract more spending opportunities for them.

Another community where this has been implemented is in Essex and Hamilton counties, New York, in the Adirondack Park region of the state. Parts of the Adirondack Mountains are very similar to Graham County—economically challenged small towns in a remote, rugged region with poor access to information technology and telecommunications. Additionally, development within the giant Adirondack Park boundary is highly regulated by the state, meaning that any future development will be relatively small and tightly focused.

The micro-enterprise grant program in Essex and Hamilton counties was initiated by a grant from the state of New York, with support from The Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy recognized it was in their best interest to encourage the growth of outdoor recreation businesses, which allow visitors to access and enjoy the spectacular scenery of the region while preserving it for future generations. The area’s destination marketing organizations have also supported the program with educational sessions on Adirondack tourism and how to access the grant fund.

The basic guidelines and criteria for such a program might include the following:

- An income test for applicants to encourage truly small businesses to apply
- Grants made available for capital costs, inventory, working capital, startup costs, and/or marketing via a competitive application process
- Grant sizes of between \$5,000 and \$25,000
- 1-5 employees in size
- Businesses must provide visitor-related products and services

Potential partners for the implementation of such a program in Graham County could include a number of organizations providing funding, startup assistance, and education, such as The Nature Conservancy, Western Carolina University, Tri-County Community College, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, Mountain BizWorks, AdvantageWest, Appalachian Regional Commission, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Potential funding sources also include the North Carolina Department of Commerce’s new Competitive Grant Program for Underserved and Limited Resource Communities (ULRC) and local governments. Local occupancy tax funds potentially could also be used to support this initiative, as they may fall under the North Carolina General Assembly’s mandate of tourism-related expenditures not related to tourism promotion.



Other recommended tactics for providing visitors with more spending opportunities in Graham County include:

- Develop a tourism-based partnership with Tri-County Community College and/or Western Carolina University to stimulate tourism-based small business growth and entrepreneurship. WCU’s College of Business is strategically focused upon entrepreneurship, and the Hospitality and Tourism program in the College is rapidly expanding under the leadership of Dr. Steve Morse. Tri-County is expanding its hospitality offerings, including culinary- based programming, in preparation for the opening of the new Harrah’s casino and hotel near Murphy. This is an excellent opportunity to engage their support for helping drive tourism-based small business expansion in Graham County as well.
- Implement the recommendations in the Reimagining Robbinsville study which will best stimulate the growth of new businesses in downtown Robbinsville and along the Rodney Orr Bypass. In particular, the report makes several recommendations for beautifying the downtown area and enhancing the ability of small businesses to attract customers to the commercial hub of the county. With the revitalization of downtowns across western North Carolina in recent years as centers of commerce and visitor activity, Robbinsville is one of only a few county seats without a vibrant downtown community.

- Work with non-tourism entities and stakeholders to eliminate barriers to small business success. If there is to be an increase in businesses serving visitors and residents alike, it won’t occur simply because of the influence of those working in tourism. Although more opportunities for visitor spending are highly desirable, there is a strong need for growth in small businesses offering products and services of all types regardless of whether they are recruited from outside Graham County or homegrown by current residents. Many of the barriers preventing business growth are not tourism-specific, but tourism can benefit from their elimination. This will require a concerted effort by individuals from all parts of the county.
- Recruit more restaurants to Graham County. Where dining used to be a minor factor in how travelers selected places to visit, food has become an increasingly major component of destination decisions. Increasingly, culinary entrepreneurs are willing to take a risk and open restaurants in tourist-centric locations off the beaten path, especially farm-to-table concepts like the acclaimed Knife & Fork in Spruce Pine, NC. It may actually be easier to incent a young culinarian to open a restaurant like Knife & Fork in a place like Graham County than it would be to recruit a national sit-down chain restaurant (and this would be more likely to benefit tourism anyway).
- It’s not that Graham County doesn’t have good restaurants—it just doesn’t have enough of them. There are a variety of reasons for this—low visitor volume, inability to sell alcoholic beverages, a weak economy, a shortage of trained staff, low permanent resident population, highly seasonal revenue stream. Addressing the situation will require partnerships with institutions like Tri-County Community College and creative solutions such as free rent or other incentives.

### STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGE #2: No Well-Defined Market Image

One of the observations that was made early in the public input sessions held for this project was that for such a lightly populated and remote location, Graham County attracts a multitude of different visitor audiences. As noted earlier, that diversity represents a solid opportunity for growing the visitor population by appealing to several niche segments, but it also means that the identity of the county as a destination is shaped by the perceptions and attitudes of travelers enjoying many different kinds of experiences.

And while Graham County enjoys some of the best preserved and most spectacular mountain scenery in the eastern United States, it also possesses a diverse range of destination assets. Indeed, some of these assets are far better known than the county or the communities within it. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, the Tail of the Dragon, Fontana Lake and Dam, and the Appalachian Trail all have international awareness that complements Graham

County, but also overshadow it and its communities. Indeed, most of these brand names are shared with other communities or even states and (with the exception of Joyce Kilmer and Fontana Dam) are not “owned” by Graham alone.

Plus, there are few characteristics that cause Graham to stand out from other similar mountain destinations in western North Carolina. The lack of a sharp image for Graham County as a destination is also attributable to a shortage of tourism marketing resources, with the destination marketing organizations lacking large budgets and most of the tourism businesses in the county being small. There is no one image of the county that is continuously being reinforced in the traveler’s mind.

So Graham County must create that image by developing and building upon a true *destination brand* for the entire county. Given the county’s geographic isolation, its current economic woes, and its potential, this image must be bold, distinctive, and differentiating from other nearby mountain communities. Frankly, most destination brands and identities are bland and plain vanilla. Graham County can’t follow that path because it is indeed dramatically different—and badly needs to cut through the clutter of the destination marketplace. It should also serve as a rallying point for all tourism stakeholders, and act as an aspirational guide for future messaging and tourism products and services.

The destination brand is different from a community brand. It is targeted at visitors only, and serves to reinforce the desired image of Graham County among its intended traveler audiences. For that reason, it must resonate with and be relevant to those audiences. The support of local residents is very much appreciated, but it’s not targeted at those who already live in Graham. What matters is whether it works to attract visitors who will generate an economic impact. That’s not to say there isn’t a halo benefit to attracting new non-tourism businesses or residents from such a brand. (Indeed, some of the county’s greatest natural assets for attracting visitors, such as the purity of its water, could also work to attract new businesses.)



So what’s a brand? In simple terms, it is the emotional connection that a consumer has with a product, service, event, person, or (for Graham County) a place. That emotional connection manifests itself in a variety of ways, including names, logos, slogans, advertising, social media, signage, events, and partnerships. The strategy behind the brand establishes the “intellectual guard rails” for the destination both now and in the future. These are the touchstones that guide everything from marketing communications to future tourism product development.

The brand strategy provides an understanding and careful articulation of a place’s emotional connection that distinguishes those elements of the experience that are on- and off-brand. It also helps ensure that the stakeholders deliver upon the experience expected by visitors, and competitively positions the community against other destinations in the consumer marketplace.



## Creating Graham County's Destination Brand

In the first public input session for this project, there was almost immediate discussion of one of Graham's County's greatest perceived weaknesses: the high percentage of land owned and managed by the state and federal governments. This barrier generally prevents large-scale development of land in the county. But it is also one of Graham County's greatest strengths. Its spectacularly rugged, unspoiled mountain terrain and difficult-to-access telecommunications and technology infrastructure means that it is the one place that's truly away from it all. It's not for everyone—Graham County will never be a destination that has mass tourism and high volume visitation, due to the challenges associated with visiting. But Graham County does welcome everyone.

*In many ways, Graham County is the last wild place in North Carolina.* Other places in the southern Appalachians have been “discovered” or have been transformed by casinos, gated residential communities, or highway construction. “Being the last wild place” anywhere is not necessarily a motivation to visit—there are many undeveloped communities in the mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia that completely lack a basic tourism infrastructure. But one need only look at the rush to visit Cuba “before it changes” to see how appealing places can be that have yet to be completely transformed by man.

A simple positioning statement format helps establish how a brand's owner wants to be perceived in the marketplace, including destination brands:

*To (This Target Audience), (This Brand Name) is the one (Category)  
that provides this (Specific Benefit)*

And for Graham County, a brand positioning could look like this:

*To adventure-seeking travelers, Graham County is the one North Carolina destination  
that provides a spectacular mountain experience still mostly untamed by man.*

“Adventure” need not be extreme outdoor recreation, or venturing into a dangerous or risky place. But visiting Graham County IS an adventure, whether the guest is on a motorcycle, on foot on the Appalachian Trail, or traveling by car to a place they've never visited.

(Since this project was never intended to be a creative development exercise resulting in a logo and tagline, the statement “Graham County is the last wild place in North Carolina” only serves as a suggested strategic guideline for further development following this study. Its primary purpose is to

provoke Graham's tourism stakeholders into pursuing a bold and different destination identity that will get noticed and position the county as a unique destination apart from every other.)

In part because this is a county-wide initiative with GREAT being the catalyst organization, the recommendation of this study is to develop and build upon a true destination brand for all of Graham County. But travelers generally don't visit “counties”—they visit cities, towns, lakes, attractions, parks, rivers, etc. Graham County has three incorporated communities—Robbinsville, Fontana Dam, and Lake Santeetlah—and at least two other unincorporated communities, Snowbird and Stecoah. A county-wide brand does not preclude each community from developing its own community brand, but those communities' brands should support the overall county brand and positioning.

Another tactic for raising Graham County's profile as a truly unique destination is to create a signature festival or event that also supports the brand positioning and further helps put Graham County “on the map” for visitors, travel writers, and on the Internet. The Heritage Festival that is staged in Robbinsville on or around July 4th is an important part of community life for the entire county. But it's not necessarily “unique” to Robbinsville—other destinations have similar kinds of events with similar names. To advance wider recognition of the county, Graham could use a festival or event that breaks through the very cluttered event marketplace (in both name and theme) and establishes the county for what it is—a place different from any other destination. The timing of such an event should be carefully considered as a potential tool to help stimulate off- or shoulder season visitation.



### **STRATEGY: Identify and implement more ways of communicating the destination's depth and breadth**

Given Graham County's relative complexity and lack of awareness as a destination, tourism stakeholders must find ways of communicating all there is to see and do, especially if the focus is upon niche and enthusiast audiences. The message to visit can't simply be a call to action. It has to demonstrate that there is a critical mass of activity and attractions to motivate a visit and justify the investment of the traveler's time and money.

Recommended tactics for communicating Graham County's depth and breadth include the following:

- Embrace public relations as the most cost effective means of marketing the diversity of the county as a destination. Media outreach has become more important than ever, given the explosion of channels promoting communities and telling destination stories. These outlets include traditional media like magazines and newspapers as well as new media such as blogs and other on-line-only channels. They are all more effective at telling a part of the larger destination story than traditional advertising, and can reach much broader audiences. Plus, the media is hungry for new stories and content that hasn't been widely shared.
- Do more to promote niche opportunities aggressively to special interest audiences, such as fishing, birding, and flora enthusiasts. These niche interests not only attract specific segments of enthusiasts, but they also provide content that can be shared on-line (on the destination website and in social media) showing the richness of the destination.
- Revamp the destination website to accomplish a greater range of marketing objectives, as reflected within this plan. The current Graham County destination website ([www.grahamcountytravel.com](http://www.grahamcountytravel.com)) is clean, simple, and colorful. But it needs to be overhauled as an outcome of this study, as a means of accomplishing many of the strategies and tactics outlined in the plan. The destination website is incredibly important for communicating depth and breadth, but it must be organized in such a way that the depth and breadth is readily apparent and contain content that is regularly updated and positions the county as a destination that meets traveler's needs by offering benefits they want.
- Implement more on-line marketing to drive potential visitors to that destination website, and to provide greater measurement of marketing effectiveness. The travel and tourism industry has increasingly moved towards digital marketing because of its great ability to create brand awareness while also driving conversion. Graham County's tourism marketing entities don't have robust budgets, but digital marketing can be done quite cost-effectively.

### **STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGE #3: Insufficient resources for destination marketing and tourism development**

One of the unfortunate consequences of having both a relatively low volume of visitation and few spending opportunities for visitors is that it leads to small destination marketing budgets. Since area tourism development authorities (TDA) are funded entirely by occupancy taxes, if more visitors stay in hotels and other accommodations longer, more tax dollars are generated which are then reinvested in destination marketing. Additionally, few local businesses are able to invest significant dollars in marketing to travelers. And while local governments are not engaged in tourism marketing, they have very limited ability to invest in public infrastructure that might help drive visitation or improve visitor satisfaction.

#### **STRATEGY: Identify new resources for increased destination marketing activity**

Destination marketing is a highly competitive category, with many communities, regions, and states investing tens of millions of dollars annually in promoting themselves to travelers. An increasing number of destinations have upped their investments in both marketing and tourism product development, recognizing the fiscal value of tourism to their local economies. This is also true for many communities in western North Carolina.

In order for Graham County to be more competitive and capture a larger share of travel, it must identify new sources of funding and promotional capability. These should include:

- Increasing the hotel occupancy tax to 6% across the entire county. An increase from 3% to 6% in the non-incorporated areas of the county would generate a minimum of an incremental \$60,000 in aggregate revenue annually. (Lodging properties in the towns of Robbinsville and Fontana Dam are already at 6%, and the town of Lake Santeetlah is in the process of forming a tourism development authority that would levy a total 6% tax.)
- It is also essential that the county enforce collection of the appropriate occupancy and sales taxes at every accommodation, regardless of location, ownership, and size. The rise in popularity of non-traditional lodging such as rental homes means there is an increasing amount of revenue available to both local governments and TDAs. For a county as economically challenged as Graham, it cannot afford to leave this money on the table.

- For Graham County to fully leverage its available marketing resources, it should develop more marketing partnerships among all of the tourism stakeholders in the county. This can be accomplished by creating co-op marketing programs (in the form of advertising, public relations outreach, or even promotional activities such as AAA office fam trips) and facilitating packaging among tourism partners. This also includes leveraging the tourism sector’s expertise and outreach in motorcycle and sports car tourism to do more to motivate overnight stays in Graham County.

These partnerships should also include continued work with two important regional organizations, Smoky Mountain Host and the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. Smoky Mountain Host has been a valuable destination marketing partner for the far western part of North Carolina for many years, and has provided numerous opportunities for cooperative promotion. These include initiatives such as the new Smoky Mountain Blueways program, connecting visitors to the region’s valuable water assets. The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area continues to provide both regional marketing opportunities such as the Blue Ridge Music Trails and grant opportunities for programs that preserve and interpret the region’s heritage.



#### **STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGE #4: The lack of a cohesive destination experience**

Stakeholders who participated in the public input sessions and in the on-line survey were outspoken about some of the disconnects they observed in the Graham County visitor experience. Concerns were expressed about the levels of hospitality and guest service delivered to visitors; poor way-finding signage across the county’s roadways; the poor availability of cell phone signals and high speed Internet access; and a general difficulty in connecting visitors to the county’s special experiences, with many of them difficult for visitors to find and enjoy.

Some of these, of course, represent larger hurdles than can be addressed by the tourism sector. Telecommunications and information technology challenges are significant barriers to quality of life and the growth of all businesses in Graham County, and will require solutions provided at the local, state, and federal levels. And because their impacts are so great, tourism stakeholders should be a part of solving those problems by advocating for greater access to fundamental technology. But it is largely outside of the function of tourism influencers to resolve.

#### **STRATEGY: Leverage opportunities to provide greater connectivity to visit experiences**

Some of the tactics required to support this strategic imperative will demand time, money, and/or collaboration with a number of other entities to accomplish. Others, however, are relatively easy to implement and can be achieved quickly and inexpensively.

- Work with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to enhance highway signage in the county. State and local highway signage is never as good as the tourism sector would like to see. Many destinations complain about the quality and quantity of signage directing residents and visitors alike to attractions, points of interest, and other amenities. But the NCDOT signage in Graham County appears to be worse than usual in many places— poorly located, inaccurate, too small, or generally unhelpful. In some Tar Heel communities, the NCDOT has been stubborn when approached with way-finding signage issues, but establishing a dialogue with them is helpful in trying to remediate signage issues where safety is not an immediate concern.
- Implement the Reimagining Robbinsville wayfinding suggestions. This plan includes a significant signage component that provides an aesthetic benefit to the community as well as a practical one. Way-finding signage programs that are not located on DOT-maintained highways are generally easier to implement, but they can be costly. (The NCDOT now has extensive experience in other communities across the state dealing with community-specific way-finding signage.)

- Develop detailed visitor itineraries for general interest travelers, hikers, motorcyclists and sports car enthusiasts, and other niche interest opportunities. Good itineraries require time and effort to create, but they are inexpensive and help position the destination as having a lot of activities and attractions. They also demonstrate to those special interest audiences that you understand their needs and, as an insider, want to share your knowledge about special experiences in Graham County.
- Develop a motor-coach itinerary. While the motor-coach industry is much smaller than what it was two or more decades ago, it is still a large business attracting millions of travelers annually. It is largely a relationship-driven industry, meaning that it may take several years for Graham County to begin appearing on tour company itineraries. But it starts with creating a destination-specific itinerary targeted at motor-coach visitors and their interests. That itinerary must reflect the ability of both the bus and its guests to access businesses and attractions—motor-coaches require parking and turnaround space, and guests tend to be older travelers. Typical examples of motor-coach itineraries can often be found on destination marketing websites.
- Suggest activities for multi-generational travel parties. One of the recommendations made earlier in this study is to highlight the availability of diverse types of accommodations throughout Graham County. Some of the more non-traditional types of lodging in the county, such as rental homes capable of accommodating larger parties, will be appealing to multi-generational travelers. As Baby Boomers age, they are increasingly traveling with their children and even grandchildren to unique destinations. These occasions often serve as informal family reunions, but planning a trip that appeals to a wide range of interests can be a challenge. Graham County can assist this travel planning by providing ideas for both lodging and activities that appeal to all segments of multi-generational travelers.



- Connect visitors to unique food and beverage experiences. As noted previously, food and beverage offerings have become an important driver of destination decisions and visitor satisfaction. Graham currently does very little to connect its visitors to its remarkable local culinary experiences, including places such as Wehrloom Honey and Yellow Branch Farmstead Cheese. The latter is already well-known for being on the menus of some of the South’s finest and most famous farm-to-table restaurants and in specialty grocery and cheese stores. (It’s another one of those brand names in the county which carries strong awareness among certain audience segments.)

This tactic is easily accomplished on-line (social media, destination website) as well as educating local front-line influencers about where these unique experiences can be found. And while they are not widely available in Graham County, alcoholic beverages can be found at a select few restaurants associated with hotels in the destination. At the least, there should be awareness of where to direct visitors to those venues as a demonstration of hospitality and guest service.

- Support greater access to Graham County’s destination experiences through more efficient transportation. Safe, well-designed and maintained roads leading to and within Graham County are essential to a good destination experience, particularly for the mountainous area where Graham is located. The improvements to NC 28 between Almond and Stecoah have enhanced the arrival into the destination from the east.

For years, there has been much discussion within the county about the future of Corridor K, the controversial road project that would bypass the Nantahala Gorge via Stecoah and Robbinsville. However, the completion of Corridor K (and probably even the start of construction if it were approved) is not expected within the 10-year time period covered by this plan and so it is unlikely to impact tourism. Advocates for the road have argued it would boost economic development within the county, while opponents fear any resulting damage to the scenic environment would not justify its construction.

**STRATEGY: Seek out ways to present a more cohesive visit experience**

Development of a new visitor-friendly “welcome center” would go a long way in enabling the tourism sector to showcase all of Graham County’s major communities and attractions. A new center will serve as the hub of all visitor activity, especially if it is located in a centrally-located part of the county like Robbinsville. The current visitor “center” is undersized, has no public restrooms, and does nothing to present the county favorably to visitors.

But in addition to providing badly needed public restrooms and visitor information, this building can serve many other purposes. A green environmentally-friendly facility can become an attraction itself, and tap into potential sources of green building funds. Many visitor centers become the meet-up location for car club events, bikers, and other groups visiting the area, or are used as civic meeting and event facilities. A new visitor center could help showcase the county's Cherokee Indian heritage and potentially leverage funding sources such as the Cherokee Preservation Foundation. It may also serve as to house a start-up outdoor recreation business that helps connect visitors to the majestic beauty of the region.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of a new center is that it would serve as a tangible demonstration to the community of the importance of tourism and visitor hospitality to the county, and a bricks-and-mortar symbol of the community's brighter future.



### **STRATEGIC TOURISM CHALLENGE #5: The need for a coordinated destination marketing effort**

For a small county with fewer than 9,000 permanent residents, Graham is somewhat unusual in having three different tourism development authorities (TDAs) authorized to collect and administer occupancy taxes. Graham County, Robbinsville, and Fontana Dam all have separate TDAs, and a bill has been introduced in the General Assembly in Raleigh to create a fourth for the town of Lake Santeetlah. Many counties in the state have only one TDA legislatively enabled to collect occupancy tax and market the destination.

But besides the duplication of effort represented by these entities, a greater concern is that there needs to be much more of a single formal, coordinated marketing plan among all of the destination marketing organizations. The TDAs are political entities legislatively established to collect occupancy taxes and reinvest them in destination promotion and tourism-related expenditures. It's perhaps not likely that they will be merged into a single TDA. But there are tactics that can be implemented to improve their effectiveness.

#### **STRATEGY: Overcome the challenge of having 3-4 different official destination marketing organizations within Graham County**

- Create a destination marketing council consisting of representatives from each of the tourism development authorities in Graham County, and develop a formal annual marketing plan for the entire county. This will not only make better use of the county's limited destination marketing resources, but will also represent a clear sign of the importance of collaboration among all partners.
- Ultimately, create a single formal marketing entity authorized to market the county as a single destination (while preserving each TDA if legally necessary). Models for this arrangement can be found elsewhere in North Carolina, in places such as Boone and Watauga County and Salisbury and Rowan County. In both examples there are separate TDAs for the city and county, but only a single destination marketing organization charged with promoting both.

#### **STRATEGY: Promote within the county the benefits of a vibrant tourism economy**

Many people outside the sector don't always understand how travel and tourism can help revitalize a community and deliver benefits such as increased tax revenue, jobs, and enhanced quality of life for residents. Traditionally, the category does a lousy job of selling itself as a viable form of economic development. But given Graham County's current economic situation and the potential for growth in the sector, tourism stakeholders should do more to rally the community around it by:

- Bringing community stakeholders together to make one intercity visit at least every two years to other nearby destinations that experienced similar challenges and can provide examples of potential solutions to Graham County. Some potential nearby communities for such intercity visits include West Jefferson, NC; Blue Ridge, GA; Damascus, VA; and Galax, VA. These all shared many similar challenges but have responded in different ways. Of course, there are also numerous other communities in the region which have success stories they are willing to share.
- Issuing a brief annual report (and posting it on-line) detailing the achievements of the Graham County tourism sector in the last year, and publicizing the benefits to the county in terms of economic impact, jobs provided, and tax revenue achieved. This doesn't have to be extensive or even printed--the objective is to make this information widely available and to act as a resource for elected officials, stakeholders, and others during the year.
- Leveraging tourism investment as a means of generating other economic activity. While destination promotion is a justifiable means of economic development by itself, recent research has indicated there can be a substantial halo effect of this marketing. It supports the brand and helps attract new residents, retirees, entrepreneurs, and other new businesses. Tourism is not going to be the only solution to Graham County's economic challenges. It is but one part of a larger effort. But it can be an extremely valuable asset in both direct economic benefit and building a brand image that generates other benefits to the community.
- Sharing case studies like the recent one featuring North Dakota and the benefits derived from its destination advertising ("Why Tourism Advertising Is More Powerful Than You Think," Forbes.com 3/19/2015) can help win the support of other community leaders and residents.

**STRATEGY: Recruit more advocates and ambassadors for the tourism sector**

There appears to be a small but enthusiastic group of active tourism supporters in Graham County. That group needs to be bigger. While it's difficult to take time off from running a small business to advocate for area tourism, the "big tent" of tourism supporters needs to be bigger. Here are the tactics for increasing the number of local residents involved in the sector:

- Get local residents and frequent visitors to Graham County involved in the destination's social media efforts. One of the benefits of the various social media channels—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and even YouTube—is that they enable the destination to tell a lot of different stories inexpensively and efficiently. Graham County is badly in need of more tourism ambassadors to tell its stories. By making local residents the stars of these promotional efforts, you gain their support (and many will then share these stories on their own social media channels).

Many local residents are "experts" in telling the destination's stories—where the best hiking trails are, how to find the best trout fishing streams, where to take the best view photos, etc. Frequent visitors to Graham are also ideal subjects for these kinds of testimonials, particularly for a destination that is not as well-known or off the beaten path. They provide reassurance to prospective visitors when viewed via social media or on the destination website.

- There needs to be more of a concerted effort to communicate more frequently with tourism stakeholders about important happenings within the local sector. There's no guarantee that stakeholders will read an email newsletter, peruse a local news story, or attend an annual meeting held to update them on what's happening in Graham County's tourism industry. But lack of coordination by tourism entities in both the public and private sectors can and must be avoided.

**STRATEGY: Support the preservation of the county's natural, historic, and cultural assets**

As noted earlier, one of the most important goals of this tourism plan is to grow the Graham County tourism economy and provide more opportunities for economic growth while preserving the many natural, historic, and cultural assets that make the county a special place for visitors and residents alike. Particularly for a relatively unspoiled environment like Graham County, if those assets are lost the destination will suffer immeasurably. They are essential to attracting and growing visitation and visitor spending.

But Graham's tourism stakeholders won't be able to do this alone. They must join with others to advocate for the growth of Graham County's tourism economy while supporting the protection of the natural, historic, and cultural assets which motivate visitation to the county and generate visitor satisfaction and referrals. It's easy to see the restrictions placed on development on state and federal lands as significant barriers to economic growth. And in some examples cited by county stakeholders, state and federal rules make it extremely difficult to even leverage those lands for complementary opportunities like outdoor recreation. That's why the sector must also advocate for easing the kinds of restrictions which restrict those opportunities which would create jobs while maintaining those protections.

Threats to Graham County's natural, historic, and cultural assets can exist in numerous places. The unwillingness to support institutions like Stecoah Valley Center and its preservation of cultural heritage through the support of local artisans. The lack of regulations or enforcement around maintaining the county's scenic beauty and aesthetics. Allowing incompatible development to occur which mars the spectacular landscape of the mountains. Even the failure to grow Graham's economy in a desirable manner--causing local officials and residents to then support policies harmful to these assets out of desperation—can be considered a potential threat.

Advocacy has always been a challenge for the tourism sector in nearly every community. It is a highly fragmented category consisting of small businesses and busy owners, many of whom lack political clout. This also appears to be true of Graham County, which is why the sector needs to grow “the big tent” of tourism supporters and join together with others to preserve these unique assets. Even with so much of the county protected by state and federal land use regulations, there are potential threats to the growing the tourism economy elsewhere through acts of both commission and omission. Those residents and stakeholders who care both about the preservation of Graham’s natural, historic, and cultural resources and economic growth must also band together to advocate for both.



## GRAHAM COUNTY STRATEGIC TOURISM PLAN’S OVERALL MEASURABLE OBJECTIVE

There are numerous metrics available for measuring the growth of Graham County’s tourism economy over the next decade. Many of these are visible in the strategic objectives and aspirations associated with this plan: tourism-related jobs (and even other areas of employment in the county), state and local tax revenue, new residents attracted, current residents retained, average length of stay, and occupancy taxes collected. There are others that are more destination marketing-related, such as the number of destination website visits and social media engagement.

But since so much of the economic impact of the tourism sector is a result of travelers making purchases in the local economy, and because that particular metric has been so anemic in recent years, the single best metric for assessing the achievement of this plan is visitor spending. As measured by the statistics provided by the North Carolina Department of Tourism, Film, and Sports Development and the U.S. Travel Association through its Tourism Economic Impact Model (TEIM), visitor spending in Graham County amounted to \$25 million in 2013.

*By 2025, the recommended objective is to grow visitor spending in Graham County to \$50 million or more.*

Doubling visitor spending in just over ten years won’t be easy. As shown previously in this report, visitor spending in Graham has actually grown less than the rate of inflation during the 21st century. But Graham County tourism needs a “big, hairy audacious goal” to make the changes necessary to move the sector and the entire local economy forward. While a section of the plan is devoted exclusively strategies and tactics for increasing visitor spending, all of the plan is dedicated to growing the overall tourism economy, improving the marketing of the destination, and enhancing the visitor experience.



## CONCLUSION

The development of this strategic tourism plan was the result of the successful funding of a grant proposal submitted by the GREAT organization after a team of Graham County representatives participated in the Appalachian Gateway Communities Regional Workshop. The goal of the workshop was for participating communities to develop a project which could be taken back to their communities to implement. Graham County's team project was the development of a strategic tourism plan. This plan is intended to influence a number of different audiences as a call to action. First and foremost are the residents of Graham County. Growth of the tourism economy will enhance their quality of life through new jobs, tourism product development, increased local tax revenues, a greater number of successful local businesses to shop and dine in, and preservation of the county's desirable natural, historic, and cultural assets. Local small businesses will benefit from larger numbers of visitors staying longer and spending more. Graham County visitors will enjoy an enhanced destination experience that also maintains the assets that now motivate them to visit. And local elected leaders and other stakeholders will benefit from a thriving tourism economy that also helps drive other economic development.

Graham County has limited financial resources, which is why this strategic plan needs to balance the aspirational with the practical. Grandiose marketing and building programs costing millions of dollars are not a part of this plan, especially given its ten-year time-frame. The plan is designed to provide leaders with a road-map that mostly uses existing resources found within the county or which are potentially attainable through other accessible sources. The overall measurable objective of achieving \$50 million in visitor spending by the year 2025 is quite aspirational. It is intended to motivate and create urgency, to start the process of becoming more competitive with other destinations and growing Graham County's economy.

Travel and tourism is usually cyclical by nature. The strong growth that the U.S. tourism economy is enjoying today won't last forever, which is another reason why Graham must start now to take the necessary steps which will move its tourism sector forward. While many of the action items outlined in this plan will require time and investment, travel and tourism is also one of the easier economic sectors to spark growth because it doesn't always demand investments in massive capital projects. For example, success can be achieved in part through strategies encompassing better marketing or reallocation of resources or developing partnerships.

As seen repeatedly throughout this plan, strong partnerships and collaboration are essential components to its success. The "official" destination marketing organizations like TDAs can't achieve this on their own, nor should they. There is too much at stake for the execution of this plan to be the sole responsibility of a handful of stakeholders. GREAT can be a good steward of the plan and coordinate its implementation, but it must also recruit new ambassadors, advocates, and achievers both in and out of the tourism sector. The future of Graham County depends upon it.





## APPENDIX A RECOMMENDED IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

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### Turning Strategic Vision into Reality

This schedule is intended to be a guideline for the implementation of the strategies and tactics outlined in the plan. The schedule is broken into three segments: “quick wins,” especially those tactics that can be implemented and executed within a year; within five years; and over the next 10 years. The achievement of these strategies and tactics within the given timetable will depend, of course, upon elements such as available resources (financial and human), external environmental factors, policy and legislative initiatives, and a variety of other factors. But they also require commitment and willfulness, and an expanded core of advocates and believers.

#### Strategic Plan Timing—Quick Wins (One Year)

These are action items that can generally be achieved with existing resources and/or within the current organizational framework of tourism in the county. Some may require a steeper learning curve than others, such as increasing the level of digital marketing for the destination. Others may require greater use of outside resources, and some may only be initiated during the next year and may require much longer to reap the benefits. All, however, can be started within the next 12 months and can represent tangible evidence of change and forward momentum.

1. Motivate increased overnight visitation to Graham County.
2. Develop and build upon a true destination brand for the entire county.
3. Embrace public relations as a cost-effective means of marketing the diversity of the county as a destination.
4. Do more to promote niche opportunities aggressively to special interest audiences, such as fishing, birding, and flora enthusiasts.
5. Revamp the destination website to accomplish a greater range of marketing objectives, as reflected within the plan.
6. Implement more on-line marketing to drive potential visitors to the destination website, and to provide greater measurement of marketing effectiveness.
7. Develop more marketing partnerships among tourism stakeholders in the county.
8. Develop detailed visitor itineraries for general interest travelers, hiking, motor-sports, and niche opportunities.

9. Develop a motor-coach itinerary.
10. Suggest activities for multi-generational travel parties.
11. Connect visitors to unique food and beverage experiences within the county.
12. Create a destination marketing council consisting of representatives from each of the tourism development authorities in Graham County, and develop a formal annual marketing plan for the entire county.
13. Issue a brief annual report detailing the achievements of the sector in the last year, and publicizing the benefits to the county in terms of economic impact, jobs, and tax revenue.
14. Engage local residents and frequent visitors involved in the destination's social media efforts.
15. Create and promote testimonials from residents and frequent visitors via social media and the destination website.
16. Communicate more frequently with tourism stakeholders about important happenings within the local sector.

#### Strategic Plan Timing—5 Years

These action items will all likely require more time to achieve, especially given that most require coordination or partnership with outside institutions or other stakeholders. Some will also require identification and investment of additional financial resources, such as the construction of a new visitors center. All will require that the work necessary for achieving them must begin now.

1. Stimulate growth in new and existing small businesses through tourism microenterprise grants.
2. Develop tourism-based partnerships with Tri-County Community College and/or Western Carolina University to stimulate tourism-based small business growth and entrepreneurship.
3. Create a truly signature festival or event that supports the brand positioning and helps put Graham County “on the map” as a unique destination.
4. Increase the total occupancy tax to 6% across the entire county.
5. Implement Reimagining Robbinsville suggestions for wayfinding.
6. Develop a new visitor-friendly welcome center.
7. Ultimately, create a single formal marketing entity authorized to market the county as a destination.
8. Bring stakeholders together to make one intercity visit at least every two years to other nearby destinations that offer similar challenges and examples of potential solutions.

#### Strategic Plan Timing—10 Years

The strategic plan action items in this section aren't necessarily going to require a decade to complete. (tourism sector) over the next ten years.

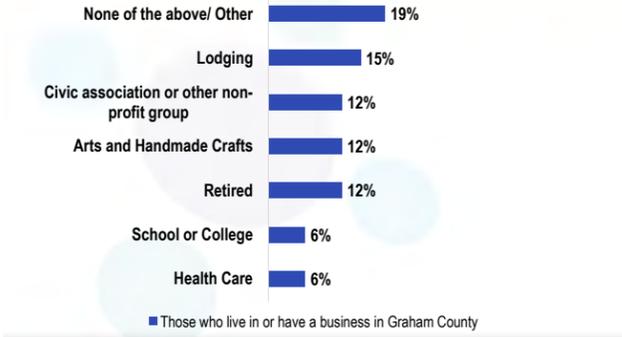
1. Continue to invest in Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center as the destination's cultural hub.
2. Work with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to enhance highway signage within the county.
3. Implement the Reimagining Robbinsville recommendations that will most likely stimulate the growth of new businesses in downtown Robbinsville and along the Rodney Orr Bypass.
4. Work with other non-tourism entities and stakeholders to eliminate barriers to small business success.
5. Recruit new restaurants to the county.
6. Leverage tourism investment as a means of generating other economic activity.





**Graham County Tourism Strategic Plan Stakeholder Survey Results**  
December 2014

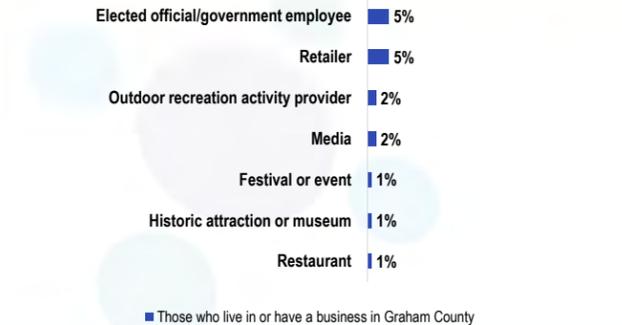
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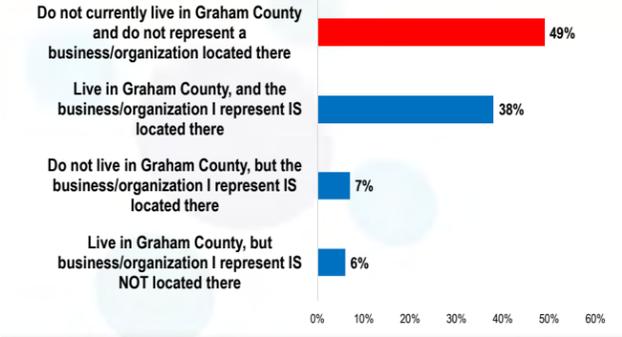
**Graham County Stakeholder Survey**

- Invitations to participate in an online survey sent to GREAT and Stecoah Valley Center e-mail mailing lists.
- Survey asked about their perceptions of Graham County tourism, competitive destinations, current assets, untapped assets, and marketing practices.
- A total of 279 valid survey responses were received.
- Residents and non-residents both allowed to participate, but responses have been segmented accordingly.

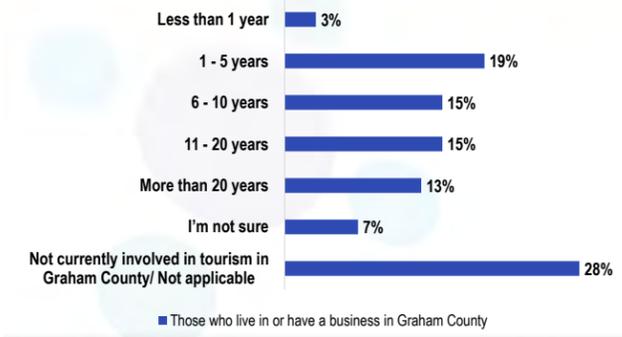
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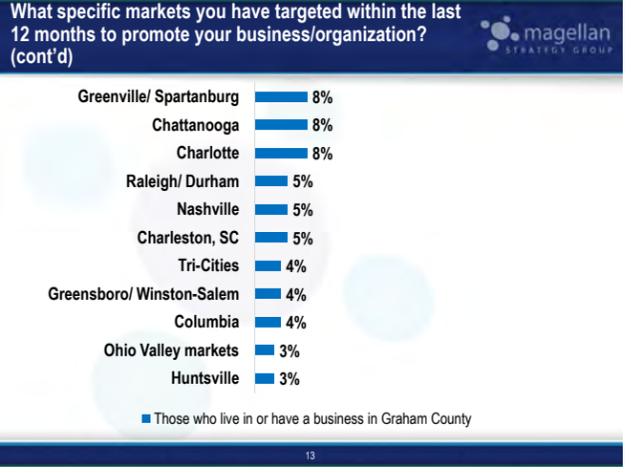
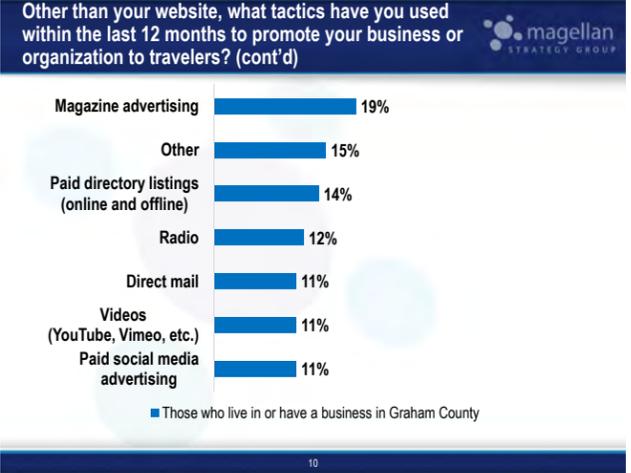
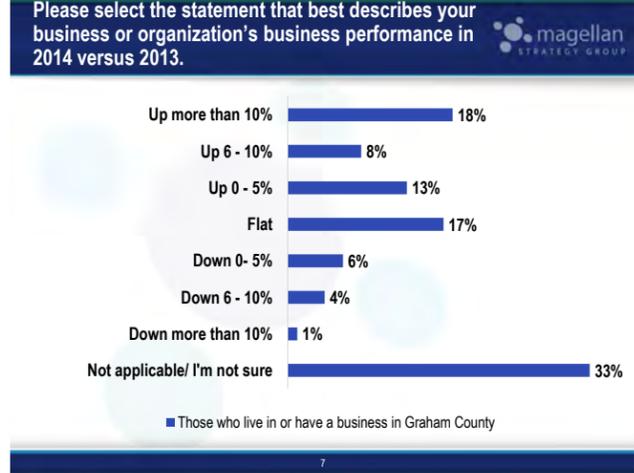
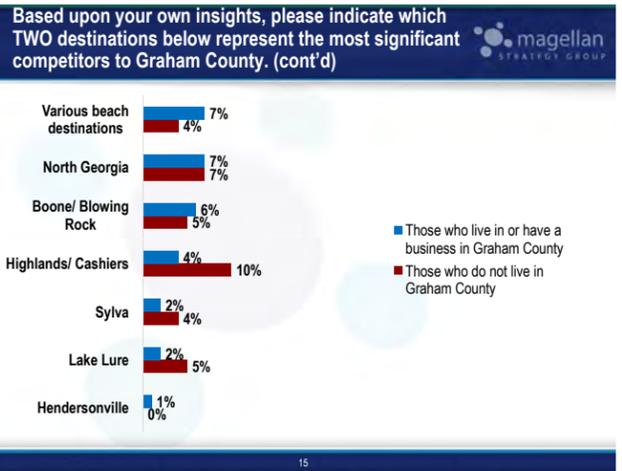
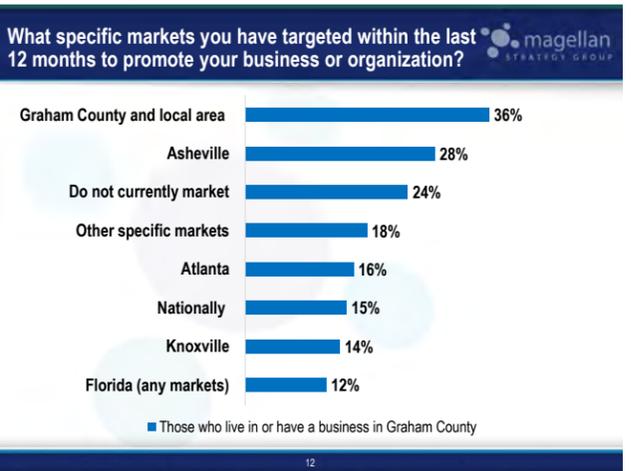
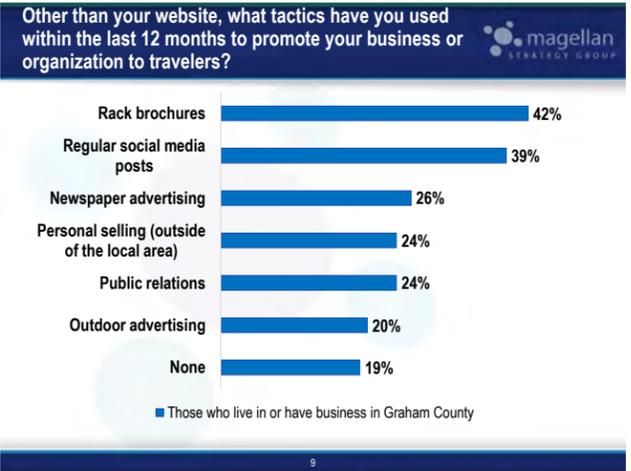


**Do you currently live in Graham County, NC or is your primary business located in the county?**



**How long has your business or organization been involved in tourism in Graham County?**

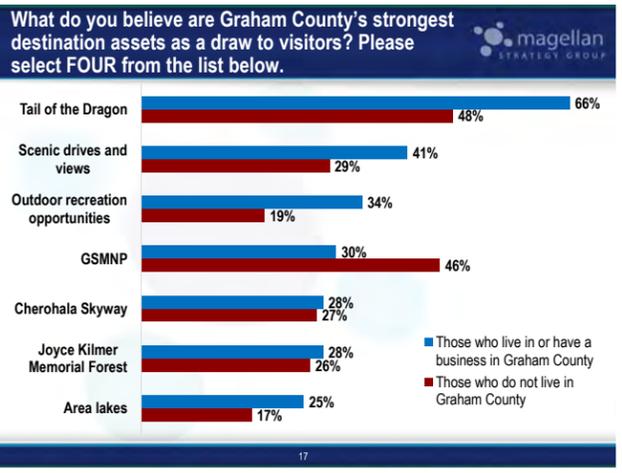
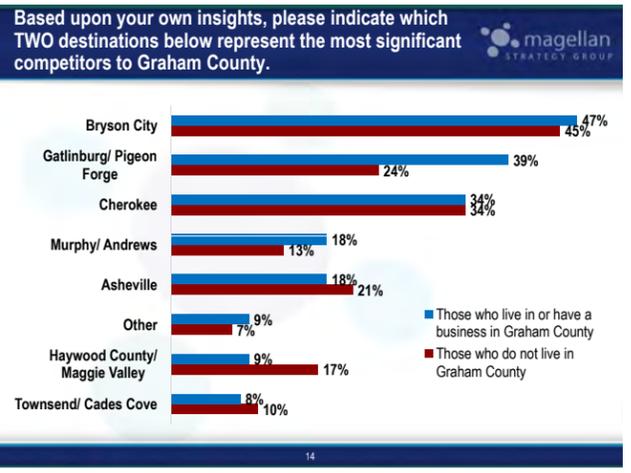
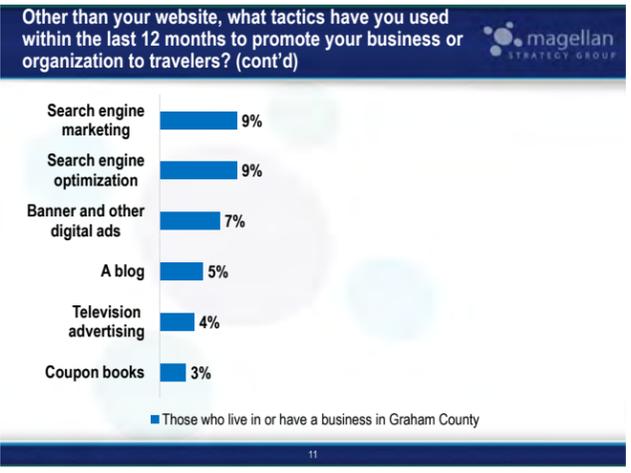
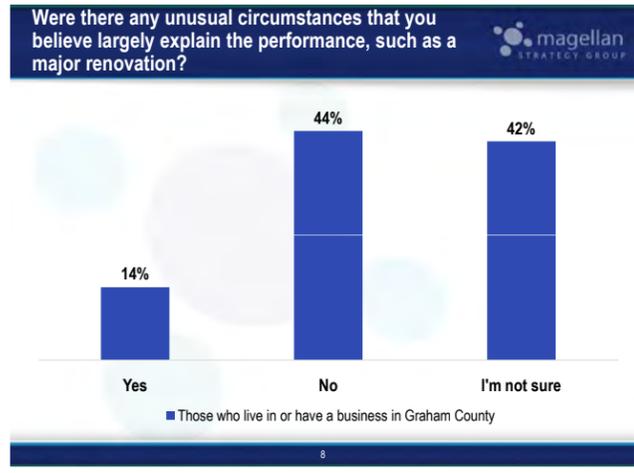




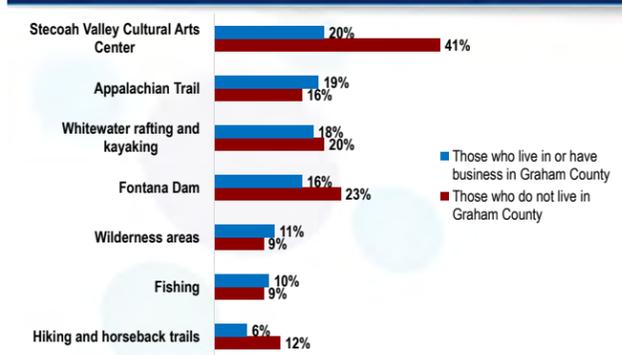
### Are there destinations that you believe have qualities and assets you'd like Graham County to emulate? And why? Please be specific.

Destination	Responses	Destination	Responses
Bryson City	33	Maggie Valley	2
Waynesville	8	Swain County	2
Asheville	6	Murphy	2
Sylva	4	Brevard	2
Helen, GA	4	Haywood County	2
Nantahala Outdoor Ctr.	4	Gatlinburg	2
Townsend, TN	3	Pigeon Forge	2
Boone/ Blowing Rock	2	Highlands, NC	2

1 response each: Saluda; Hendersonville; Franklin, NC; Cherokee; Hayesville; Andrews; Lake Burton; Whittier; Nashville; Blue Ridge, GA; Hiwassee, GA; Mt. Rainier National Park; Williamsburg, VA; Colonial Williamsburg, VA; Jackson County, AL; Breckenridge, CO; Vail, CO; Crested Butte, CO; New England; state of Maine; mountain towns of GSMNP

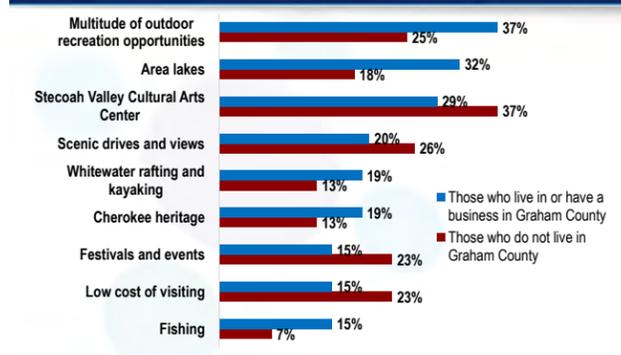


**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest destination assets as a draw to visitors? Please select FOUR from the list below. (cont'd)**



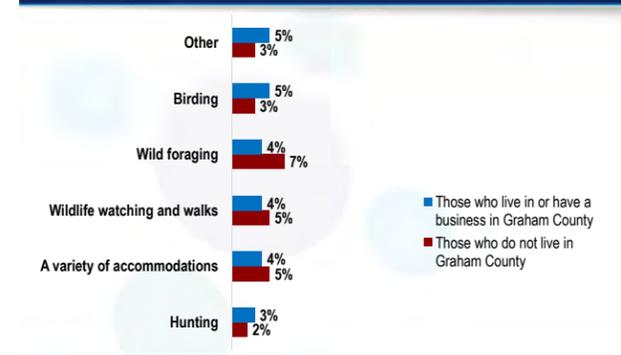
18

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest UNTAPPED destination assets?**



21

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest UNTAPPED destination assets? (cont'd)**



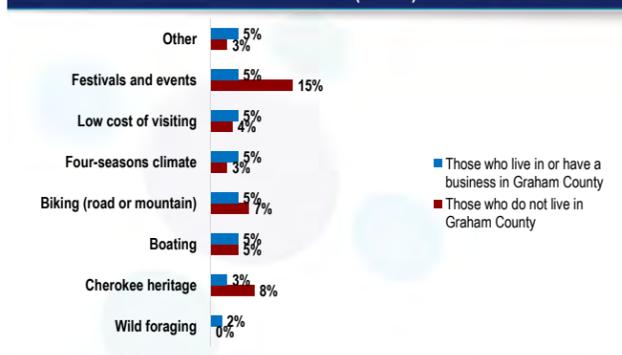
24

**What is the ONE thing that you believe is the greatest barrier to future growth of Graham County's tourism sector?**



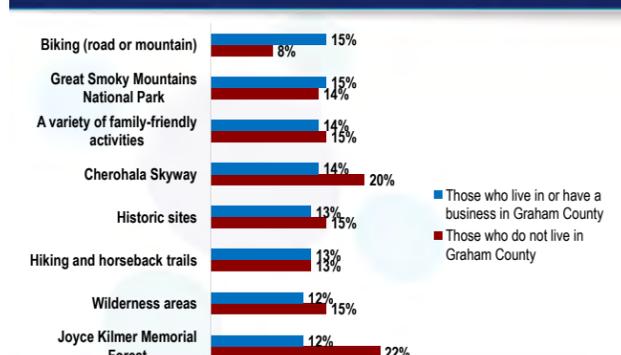
26

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest destination assets as a draw to visitors? Please select FOUR from the list below. (cont'd)**



19

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest UNTAPPED destination assets? (cont'd)**



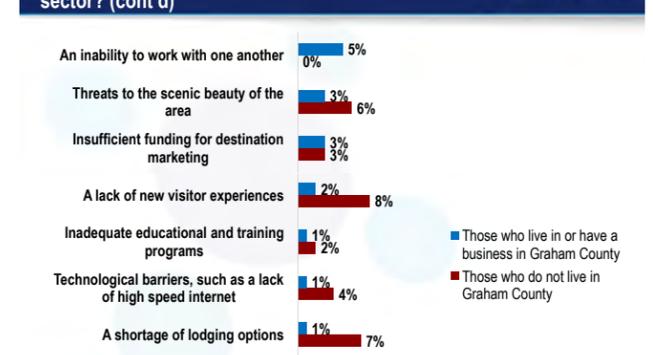
22

**How closely do you work with other tourism partners in the area (other than the TDA) to grow your business and visitation to Graham County?**



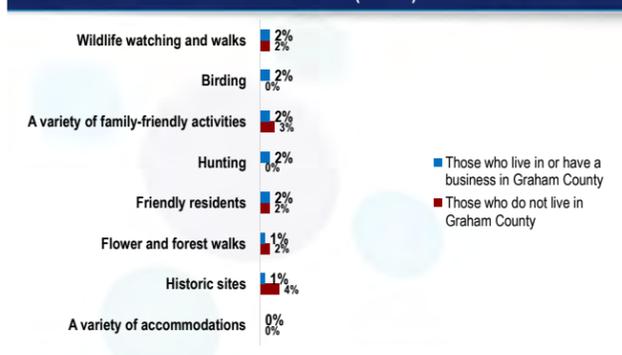
25

**What is the ONE thing that you believe is the greatest barrier to future growth of Graham County's tourism sector? (cont'd)**



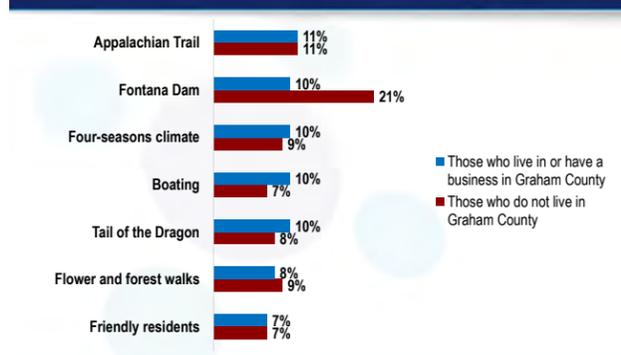
27

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest destination assets as a draw to visitors? Please select FOUR from the list below. (cont'd)**



20

**What do you believe are Graham County's strongest UNTAPPED destination assets? (cont'd)**



23



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STRATEGY GROUP