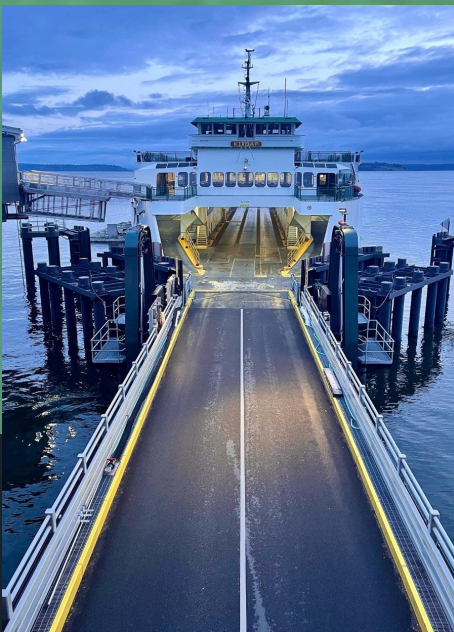


Snohomish County Strategic Tourism Plan

PARTNER SUMMARY

2023 to 2027



Dear Community Leader:

Tourism is a core component of Snohomish County's economy. People from across the world travel here to explore our beautiful and diverse natural resources, thriving small business community, and cutting-edge aerospace sector. In 2022, visitors traveling to Snohomish County provided a \$1.45 billion boost to our economy. The tourism industry also accounts for more than 15,000 jobs and represents about five percent of all employment countywide.

It's critical that we have a comprehensive, data-driven, sustainable strategy to guide Snohomish County's tourism efforts and initiatives. That's why every four years, we review and update our Strategic Tourism Plan (STP) with support from tourism partners from across the county. The updated STP serves as a key point of reference for all sectors of the tourism economy, from chambers of commerce, to municipalities, to hoteliers, to tour guides, among many other partners.

This is the first time Snohomish County has ever developed the Strategic Tourism Plan as its own Destination Marketing Organization. This means we were able to center the plan around our core priority of environmental stewardship and sustainability. Going forward, tourism will be a key component of our Climate Economy Initiative; we are not seeking just to generate visits and revenue, but ensure we are making decisions that reflect best practices, ensuring what we love most about Snohomish County is protected.

Snohomish County has a unique identity and spirit, and we're making that clear with this new plan. We're much more than a place that's "north of" somewhere else. We're a singular county with strong assets—particularly our stunning natural landscapes—that can't be found anywhere else.

Prioritizing sustainable tourism practices is critical as we continue our efforts to combat climate change while protecting our economic vitality. The Strategic Tourism Plan charts our path forward for destination development and sustainable experiences that can help ensure we're preserving what makes our county so special.

I want to thank all of the County staff and external partners who worked so hard to make this new, innovative Strategic Tourism Plan a reality. Our goal is to create a comprehensive, centralized tool that tourism partners across the county can use. We thrive through collaboration, partnership, and a shared focus on sustainability.

Sincerely,



Dave Somers
Snohomish County Executive

Executive Summary

This document summarizes the key elements of the full Strategic Tourism Plan (STP), in order to more quickly connect tourism and hospitality partners directly to countywide goals and strategies. Please reference the complete plan for all the background, research and fully detailed goals and outcomes. The update of the Strategic Tourism Plan (STP) has been a collaborative and iterative process and we believe implementation of the plan should be no different. While the Destination Management & Marketing Organization (DMMO) holds the responsibility of plan integration, the success of the DMMO is directly linked to the success of our partners across the county. We hope that this document serves as a guide for how partners can connect their local tourism efforts to countrywide strategies, and ultimately to funding opportunities to make those efforts a reality.

The Plan Framework

VISION

To build a distinct, recognized, and sustainable worldclass tourism experience that highlights Snohomish County as a unique Pacific Northwest Destination.

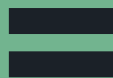
MISSION

The Snohomish County tourism plan convenes and works collaboratively with tourism partners, residents, and visitors to elevate and steward Snohomish County for the benefit of all.



CENTERING PRINCIPLES

Climate Economy, Sustainable Tourism



GOALS

1. Evolve and Advance the Tourism Product
2. Elevate the Visitor Experience
3. Advance Regional Partnerships

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

To achieve the goals, the full STP outlines a series of initiatives that will ensure tourism strategies implemented support economic vitality but also promote environmental conservation and cultural respect.

The Future of Tourism

Through this strategic plan, Snohomish County aims to enhance its status as a key player in the regional tourism landscape but also seeks to set a benchmark for sustainable and inclusive tourism practices nationwide.



Centering Principles: Climate Economy & Sustainable Tourism

Climate Economy

Executive Dave Somers launched the Climate Economy Initiative to position Snohomish County as a leader in the development, manufacturing and adoption of new technologies to reduce the economy's dependence on carbon-based fuels. While Snohomish County has always sought to manage its economic, cultural, and natural resources consciously, an increased focus on developing investments and jobs in environmentally responsible and sustainable sectors has emerged in recent years. Estimated globally at \$500 billion, the climate economy provides a perfect fit for an area that can benefit from the economic gains of sustainability but also from a long-term emphasis on natural resource stewardship and quality of life.

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism underscores the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental factors to ensure tourism can continue to thrive while safeguarding the wellbeing of communities, preserving natural resources, and respecting cultural heritage. Sustainable tourism is typically comprised of three fundamental pillars: social, environmental, and economic sustainability.

- » Social sustainability is tied to fostering an enhanced quality of life for residents and cultivating a tourism industry that instills pride in the local community that is inclusive and welcoming to all.
- » Environmental sustainability focuses on conscientious environmental practices and the preservation of natural resources.
- » Economic sustainability is tied to fostering a robust local economy through tourism spending and creating jobs that support meaningful livelihoods.

Sustainable tourism relies on equal emphasis of each element outlined above and requires that all are considered at the outset of all marketing and management initiatives.



Plan Development

As part of the Snohomish County tourism STP update, Snohomish County and the planning team collected a variety of feedback from a diverse set of interests in the tourism industry. A series of focus group sessions were held to capture a wide range of feedback from tourism sub-sectors.

Third-party vendors, in partnership with the County also gathered input from the project steering committee on key issues. Participants shared feedback on topics such as:

- » Snohomish County's current tourism marketing and branding strategy;
- » Opportunities and challenges for tourism within Snohomish County;
- » Considerations related to sustainable tourism; and
- » Additional priorities related to tourism in Snohomish County.

This input was foundational in shaping the vision, mission, goals, and initiatives.

Common Themes

Several common themes arose during the steering committee and focus group sessions.

Tourism Infrastructure and the Economy

- » Despite a challenging recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has been a resilient sector of the economy—2022 visitation spending levels surpassed pre-pandemic levels in 2019.
- » Some rural areas of the county are experiencing capacity issues due to an increase in traffic and visitation numbers specifically seen during popular hiking and skiing months.
- » Various forms of funding are needed to support the growth of tourism and infrastructure improvements are needed to support certain national and international events (including conferences and sporting).
- » More tourism opportunities will be available with the expansion of Seattle-Paine Field International Airport and Link light rail.
- » Affordable housing for those working in various sectors of the tourism industry can be challenging in many locations.

Environmental Sustainability

- » Snohomish County prioritizes environmental sustainability.
- » There is a strong need to increase guest and resident awareness of sustainable tourism and how to visit sustainably through more education and outreach through industry roundtables, marketing, and social channels.
- » Marketing and promotion of themes around “Leave No Trace” and “Recreate Responsibly” should be increased to internal and external audiences.
- » There is a need to define and differentiate sustainability related to outdoor recreation from sustainability related to other forms of tourism activities.
- » Policies differ between communities and companies, and there is a need an overarching set of policies or best practices that can be promoted countywide.

Social and Cultural Opportunities

- » Tribal relationships are important to the future of well-coordinated tourism but need further development.
- » Agritourism and agricultural opportunities can be leveraged more in the future with tourism development.
- » Events and history of Snohomish County present opportunities that could be leveraged to a greater level in the future.
- » Aerospace and aviation past, present, and future are important to locals and an economic driver.

Key Challenges by Topic Identified in Focus Group Sessions

In addition to the common themes summarized on the previous pages, the following key challenges were identified by steering committee and focus group participants.

URBAN CHALLENGES

- » *Visitor awareness of tourism assets and opportunities in Snohomish County's Urban Basecamp, compared to awareness of opportunities in other surrounding urban areas*
- » *Perception that Snohomish County cities are more industrial*
- » *Concerns about unhoused people, drug use, and other issues*
- » *Capacity of hotels and availability of lodging in certain communities*

RURAL CHALLENGES

- » *Outdoor recreation capacity and visitor behavior; the need for responsible recreation*
- » *Perceptions about the lack of amenities and services to support tourism*
- » *Visitors that tend to drive through rural areas rather than stopping to enjoy these places*

JOINT CHALLENGES

- » *Transportation to and from key destinations and within/throughout the county*
- » *Lack of awareness of the diverse visitor attractions and opportunities throughout the county (lack of what is available in urban areas by rural partners and what is available in rural areas by urban partners)*
- » *Traffic and congestion, especially on I-5, State Route 2, and other corridors, as well as to/from SeaTac International Airport*
- » *Economic leakage from Snohomish County to other areas*

Snohomish County Tourism Product

A visit to Snohomish County provides a True PNW experience, from urban centers, to small towns, a vibrant waterfront, vast swaths of wilderness and National Forest, 80 miles of coastline, and indigenous cultural richness. The following represent the key tourism products of Snohomish County.

Waterfront Destinations

90-miles of coastline and large-scale development of waterfront areas for recreation and dining.

Arts and Culture

The county features both an Indigenous and Western vibrant arts scene with galleries, museums, theaters, and cultural events.

Festivals and Events

Snohomish County hosts numerous festivals and events throughout the year, and convention, group, and sports facilities are looking at expanding capacity.

Small Towns and Agritourism

Small towns provide an inviting atmosphere with historic downtown areas, boutique shops, and cozy eateries. Agritourism opportunities including u-pick destinations, farmers markets, farm stands, and event spaces.

Casino Resorts & Shopping

4-star hotel/resort casinos offer gaming, dining, and spa options. Those seeking retail therapy will find luxury outlets and eclectic locally owned shops.



Urban Cities



Rural Cities
and Towns



Outdoor
Recreation



Aviation
Attractions



Goals

Goal 1

EVOLVE AND ADVANCE THE TOURISM PRODUCT IN SNOHOMISH COUNTY

Snohomish County's tourism product will evolve from the interplay of sustainable tourism practices, the Climate Economy Initiative, and the vision and mission statement. And as the product evolves, we'll use economic markers and qualitative research to help identify the success of the effort.

Initiatives:

- » **Create a baseline of understanding:** Using visitor and resident surveys, understand what moves and motivates these communities. The reflections and learnings will orient the destination and will become a reference point for future analysis.
- » **Update Tourism Product:** Ensure that individual aspects and overarching strategies of the tourism product and subsequent messaging pillars in align and cultivate the ethos set forth by the STP, while also helping to differentiate the destination from local and regional competitors.
- » **Economic Impact:** Continue to track and report on the economic impacts of tourism, but more specifically, the direct impacts of tourism-related impacts to lodging and County communities.
- » **Inclusivity:** Continue to foster, collaborate, celebrate, and invest in developing a destination that is welcoming and respectful. Ensure that visitors and residents contribute to a culture of inclusivity, where everyone feels valued.



Goal 2

ELEVATE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE IN SNOHOMISH COUNTY

Elevating the visitor experience will help the County compete and make lasting memories with both new and returning visitors to the region. By integrating the initiatives below, we seek to enhance visitor satisfaction but also reinforce our destination's brand image and commitment to sustainability, ultimately ensuring memorable and impactful experiences for all who visit.

Initiatives to support this goal include:

- » **Build an inclusive brand:** Develop a new and/or refresh the current brand, and concept a subsequent campaign, that aligns with the direction outlined in the STP.
- » **Placemaking:** This effort will focus on two aspects of placemaking - helping visitors understand where Snohomish County is located, and how to navigate the destination once they arrive. Both efforts will have pre-, during, and post-visitation initiatives in order to maximize visitor enjoyment and reduce frustration.
- » **Planning Tools:** Curating well-rounded itineraries that highlight key attractions, activities, and experiences. These itineraries will incorporate sustainable practices, such as promoting eco-friendly transportation options, supporting local businesses and artisans, and showcasing cultural sites with sensitivity and respect.
- » **Travel trade & group sales:** The travel trade and group sales initiatives provide the County with a powerful opportunity to enhance visitor experiences, reinforce our branding efforts, and effectively communicate our sustainability messages. Collaborating with travel professionals allows us to showcase our unique offerings through tailored marketing campaigns, emphasizing sustainable practices to attract environmentally-conscious travelers. Integrating sustainability into our group packages demonstrates our commitment to environmental stewardship, enhancing our brand image and attracting like-minded travelers seeking meaningful experiences.



Goal 3

ADVANCE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH COLLABORATION

Establish a comprehensive network of partnerships and engagement strategies across Snohomish County to address key tourism-related issues and enhance visitor experiences while supporting and collaborating with local communities.

Initiatives to support this goal include:

- » **Serve as a central hub for collaboration:** The County will act as a central point for engagement, providing resources, advice, and support to local DMOs, tourism agencies, and other stakeholders to facilitate collaboration and address tourism-related challenges.
- » **Outreach to key partners:** Establish partnerships with key stakeholders including Tribal nations, local cultural resources, Snohomish County's Office of Social Justice, the Economic Alliance of Snohomish County (EASC), the Snohomish County Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), the Snohomish County Arts Commission, other regional municipal DMOs, tourism agencies, and various small businesses.
- » **Facilitate awareness:** Provide platforms and opportunities for partners to share information, best practices, and resources related to tourism management.
- » **Support funding efforts:** Assist partners in securing funds through sources such as the Tourism Promotion Area (TPA) and Lodging Tax Advisory Committee (LTAC) to support tourism-related projects, infrastructure improvements, and community initiatives that benefit both visitors and residents.
- » **Foster inclusive planning:** Encourage inclusive planning processes that involve input from diverse stakeholders, including residents, businesses, community organizations, and local governments, to ensure that tourism initiatives are aligned with community needs and values.



Plan Implementation

Messaging Themes

The messaging themes of Snohomish County are a direct reflection of the Tourism Products, highlighted previously, and serve to support the destination marketing and management messaging required to achieve the STP goals. These themes will be supported through dedicated content, including long- and short-form written/photo and video, distributed through digital and traditional media opportunities. All content will include all applicable language related to sustainable tourism.

- » **Cultural and Artistic Offerings and Events:** Showcase specific, hyperlocal arts, culture, and events by promoting galleries, theaters, performances, and cultural events in Snohomish County.
- » **Natural Beauty and Outdoor Recreation:** Highlight the County's stunning natural landscapes, including its proximity to the Cascade Mountains and the Puget Sound.
- » **Historic and Heritage Sites:** Promote the aerospace and aviation-based history and related museums.
- » **Small Town Charm:** Promote the county's small towns and communities, each with its own unique character and local attractions.
- » **Farm-to-Table Dining:** Highlight the county's culinary scene, emphasizing farm-to-table dining experiences and local produce and seafood.
- » **Family-Friendly Activities:** Promote unique family-friendly attractions (i.e. the Imagine Children's Museum, farms and U-Pick, the Reptile Zoo, etc.), and activities that make Snohomish County an ideal destination for travelers with children.
- » **Unique Events:** Snohomish County hosts special events and festivals that are unique and distinctive experiences that travelers won't find in Seattle.
- » **Accessibility:** Highlight the convenience of reaching Snohomish County, both via Link light rail and Seattle-Paine Field International Airport.
- » **Scenic Drives and Byways:** Promote scenic routes and drives within the county, showcasing picturesque landscapes and points of interest along the way.
- » **Adventure Tourism:** Market adventurous activities such as kayaking, rock climbing, or hot air ballooning.

County tourism partners are encouraged to engage with the DMMO around content sharing opportunities, as they relate to the messaging themes.

Marketing

The following marketing and communication elements will allow the county to leverage the messaging themes across multiple markets and audiences.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Earned media efforts will continue to play a key role in marketing and communication efforts. Applying the unique messaging themes of the destination against key media outlets will align audiences and subject matter for destination awareness and building interest and intent.

Influencer and other digital opportunities will be put through the same filter criteria, to ensure audiences and topical alignment.

PAID MEDIA

Blending a mix of traditional – out-of-home and print – and digital, the paid media seeks to engage audiences through a content-forward advertising strategy, underpinned by a dynamic and creative brand campaign. This multi-faceted approach allows the DMMO’s messages to meet visitors where they are, positioning destination content adjacent to other contextually relevant content and information.

MARKETS

In-Market

Messages of destination stewardship and sustainable visitation practices will be promoted, during high visitor volume periods. The goal of these in-market messages is to encourage visitors to love the destination as if they were local.

Domestic Markets

While historical drive markets (Greater Puget Sound and major metros east of the Cascades) provide the bulk of visitors, the Snohomish County Tourism team will continue efforts in direct flight markets to Seattle Paine Field International Airport. Namely, San Diego, Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

International Markets

Vancouver, British Columbia will continue to remain a focus, as will Japan and Korea. All three markets have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Possible market expansion could include the United Kingdom and some Northern European countries. China, once a big market for the region, is struggling with several internal factors, which may continue to delay travel trends returning to normal.

AUDIENCES

Leisure

As has been the case historically, the primary focus on the DMMO’s work in destination attraction will be the leisure travel market.

Group and Business Travel

As part of the evolution of the DMMO, the county is investing in a group sales liaison. This role will help market and sale the destination. Additionally, this role will help provide other group and sales leaders in the county with resources and tools to help encourage business travelers to stay longer.

Get Involved

Snohomish County encourages tourism and hospitality partners, including City economic development staff, event centers, businesses, and community organizations to engage with the Strategic Tourism Plan. The STP can help tourism and hospitality partners:

- » Implement sustainable tourism and managed recreation practices;
- » Plan and refresh their own tourism offerings to align with the STP-informed updated tourism product; and
- » Pursue complementary marketing strategies by better understanding what markets the County is focused on.

Additionally, future tourism-focused funding opportunities from Snohomish County, including those administered by the Lodging Tax Advisory Council (LTAC) and Tourism Promotion Area (TPA) will explicitly look for projects that align with the updated STP. The County's ability to continue advancing a sustainable, robust tourism sector is directly connected to the success of our partners across the county.

CONTENT AND EVENT PROMOTION

Currently the County Tourism team works with the LTAC funding board to support seasonal event promotion. Municipalities and event promoters can work with DMMO staff to put paid promotion behind their events to broader destination audiences. Further, a seasonal event page and subsequent listings on the city's microsite page can further the message.

Contact the DMMO staff at tourism@snoco.org for more information.

LODGING INTEGRATIONS

If your property has an Infotainment channel, the DMMO could provide you with video footage to showcase the region's activities, businesses, and experiences; a complete video itinerary for each season. In addition, videos would include messages related to sustainability and local business support.

FUNDING SUPPORT

Between the Tourism Promotion Area (TPA) and the Lodging Tax Advisory Committee (LTAC), there are over \$1.5M, available, annually, through grants, to help support tourism in Snohomish County. The STP's identified Tourism Products and Messaging Themes will help determine if applicants' requests align with the county's initiatives. Some examples of these integrations could include:

Farm-to-Table Dining

- » Restaurants: Seek grant funds to support the purchase of, or supplementing resources, to procure locally grown produce or meats.
- » Growers: Seek grant funds to help bring your goods to market within the restaurant sector

Cultural and Artistic Offerings and Events & Small Town Charm

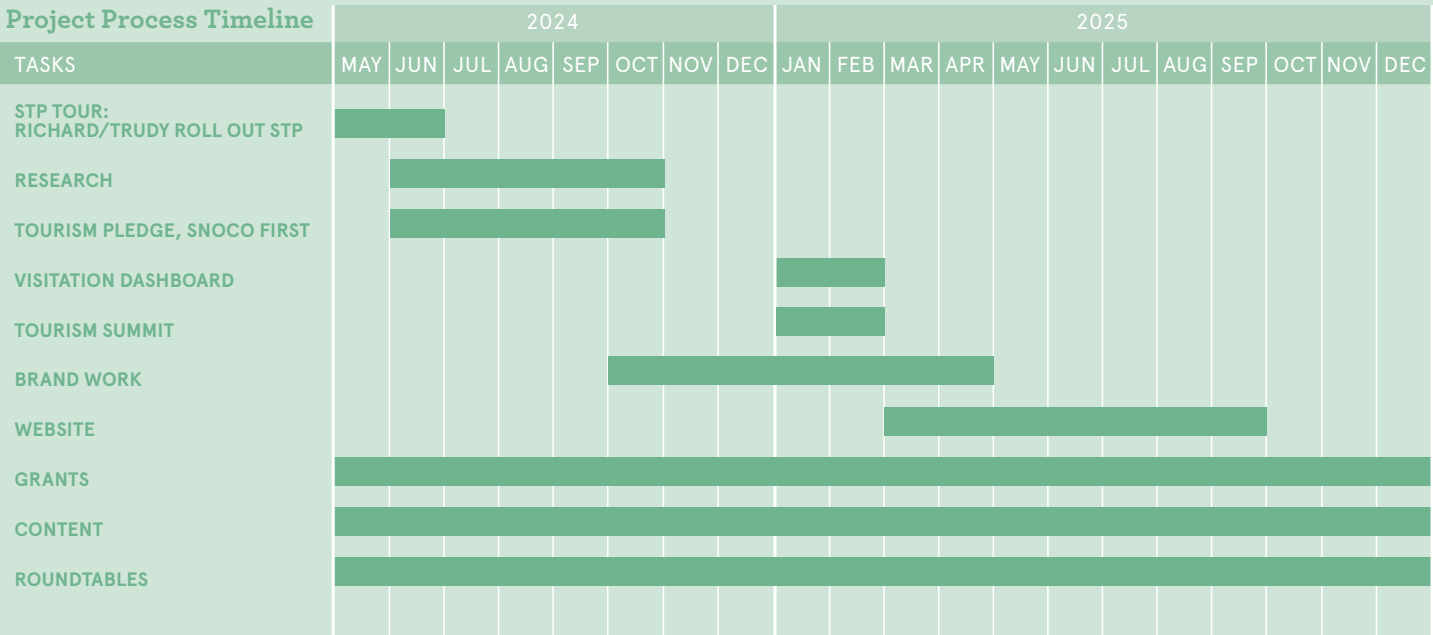
- » Municipalities: Seek funding to support event marketing via the DMMO's channels of communication.

Family-Friendly Activities

- » Growers: Seek funding and support through County Ag offices for development of spring and summer agritourism product development, such as a Flower Trail.

Next Steps & Timeline

Project Process Timeline



If you want to learn more about the full STP or how your business can engage with the county tourism team, please contact Trudy Soriano at: trudy.soriano@co.snohomish.wa.us

