

EXPLORE ASHEVILLE

POWERED BY

Buncombe County Tourism
Development Authority

**TOWARD DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP:
A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**

2024-2026



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We value and respect the interplay between place and people, which is at the very heart of what we do as a destination marketing and management organization. It is important to recognize the Cherokee as the native people and original stewards of this land now called Asheville and Buncombe County. The Cherokee called this region *Sa-koh-na-gas*, land of the blue mountains, which informs the name of the Blue Ridge Mountains today. Geologists consider the Appalachians, of which the Blue Ridge Mountains are a segment, to be among the oldest on the planet, and the French Broad, called *Tah-kee-os-tee* by the Cherokee, as the world's third-oldest river. We must acknowledge the painful past attempts to displace the Cherokee people from this place in order to move forward, together.

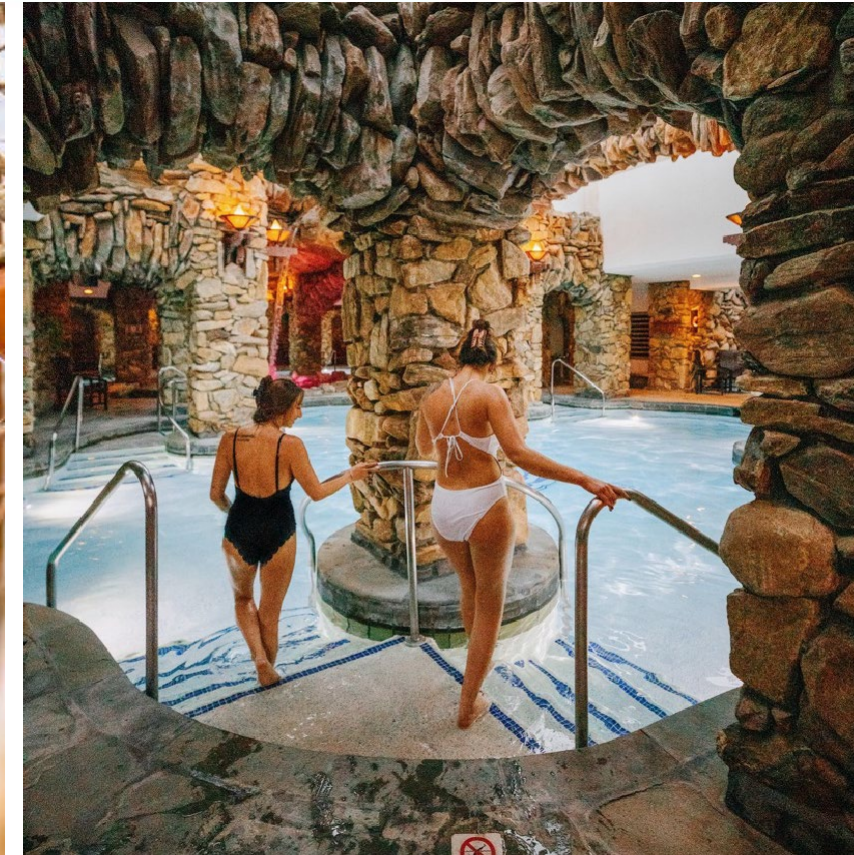
Some of the world's oldest mountains and one of the world's most ancient rivers have been home to the Cherokee for thousands of years. This extraordinary landscape has been drawing visitors to Asheville for generations.

WHAT IS DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP?

ALIGNING WITH AND INVESTING IN BROADER COMMUNITY PRIORITIES THROUGH TOURISM

Travel and hospitality plays an essential role in stimulating economic growth, cultivating diverse communities, fueling entrepreneurship, and improving the places we call home.

As travel has grown and matured around the world, destination marketing and management efforts are evolving in turn. According to the [World Travel & Tourism Council](#), destination stewardship is an approach that works in balancing and meeting the needs of a destination and its communities—in economic, cultural, and environmental terms.



DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP IS COMMUNITY CENTERED

BALANCING VISITOR EXPERIENCES AND RESIDENT QUALITY OF LIFE

In 2021, the waning of the COVID-19 pandemic and new leadership at Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) created an opportunity to craft a more inclusive, community-centered approach to destination management.

Leadership dedicated more than 100 hours to community listening and planning efforts. Board and staff worked carefully to align BCTDA priorities with those of community, local business, municipal, and nonprofit partners.

Explore Asheville's Strategic Imperatives, born out of these efforts, synthesize these priorities and guide every aspect of our work. They reflect Explore Asheville's commitment to stewarding a sustainable and inclusive future for Asheville and Buncombe County.



EXPLORE ASHEVILLE'S STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

DEVELOPED FROM COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS AND ALIGNED WITH BROADER COMMUNITY GOALS

DELIVERING BALANCED & SUSTAINABLE GROWTH	ENCOURAGING SAFE & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL	ENGAGING & INVITING MORE DIVERSE AUDIENCES	PROMOTING & SUPPORTING ASHEVILLE'S CREATIVE SPIRIT
<p>Balancing resident and visitor needs, recognizing the necessary role that sustainable, long-term growth of travel has in achieving a healthy, collective economy.</p> <p>Focusing on the quality of each visit to our community – balancing growth across the seasons, business and leisure travel, and throughout Asheville and Buncombe County.</p>	<p>Engaging residents and visitors with shared values to care for and respect natural, cultural, and human resources vital in delivering quality guest experiences.</p> <p>Collaborating with community organizations, local businesses, and environmentally focused partners to support the sustainability and growth of our outdoor economy.</p>	<p>Extending a genuine invitation to BIPOC travelers and other diverse audiences including LGBTQIA+ visitors – connecting them with local neighborhoods, businesses, and entrepreneurs – creating more opportunities for all to win.</p> <p>Supporting product development, placemaking and community connections, enabling new experiences and business opportunities throughout our community.</p>	<p>Sharing stories of creators and makers who help differentiate our destination through food and drink, visual and performing arts, experiences, and more.</p> <p>Supporting product development, place making, and community connections, enabling new experiences and business opportunities throughout our community.</p>



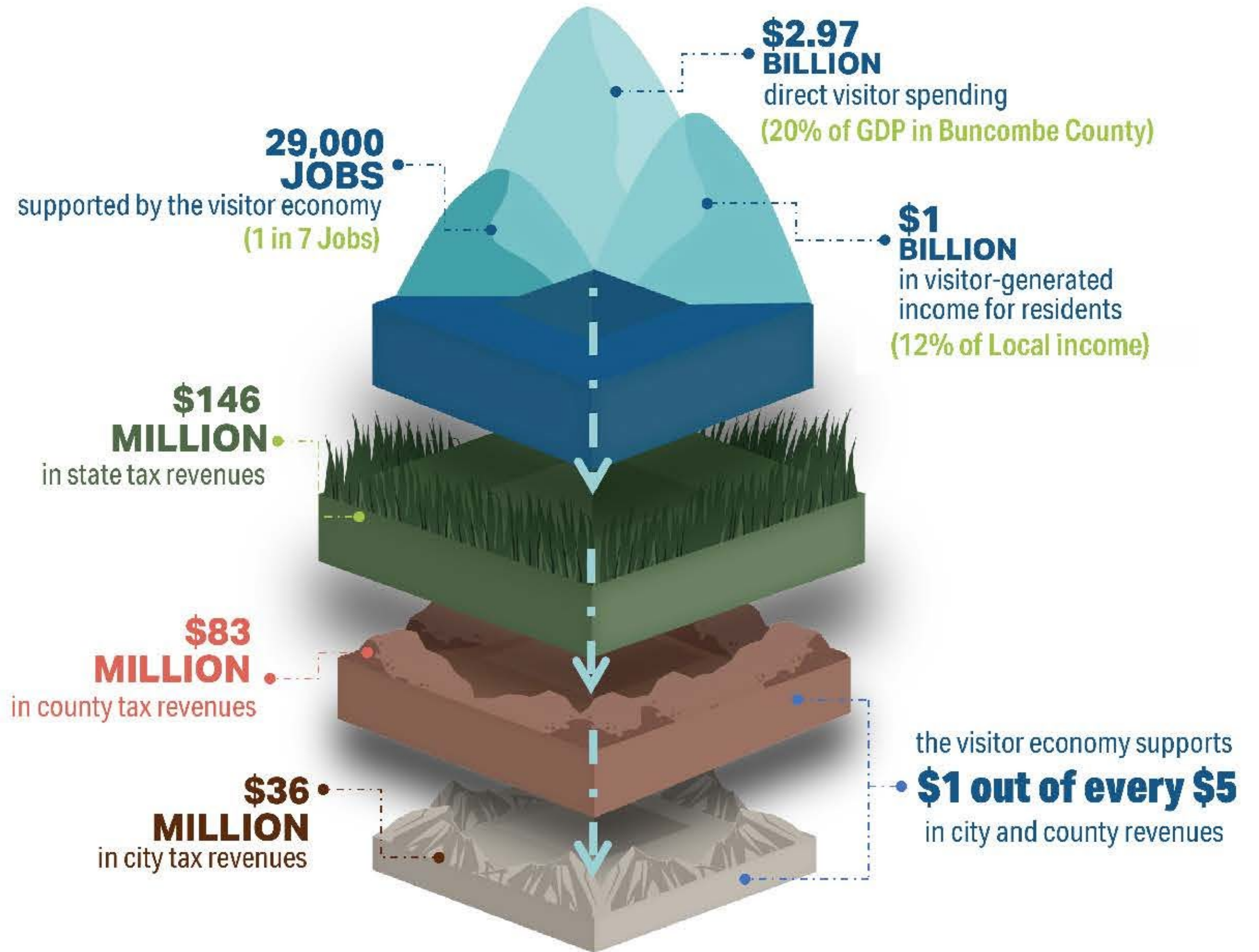
THE BENEFITS OF VISITORS IN ASHEVILLE & BUNCOMBE COUNTY RUN DEEP

The visitor economy supports local businesses and contributes to local government revenues.

\$265 Million

in state & local tax revenues are generated by the visitor economy.

Buncombe County households would need to pay an additional **\$2,600** in taxes annually to replace the visitor-generated taxes received by state and local governments.



Source: Tourism Economics - Economic Impact of Visitors in Asheville and Buncombe County 2023



DELIVERING BALANCED & SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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OUR APPROACH

Delivering balanced and sustainable growth for Asheville and Buncombe County's visitor economy means supporting diverse, local businesses by inspiring customers and guests to walk through their doors, leaving behind net new spending in our community to sustain local livelihoods. It means collaborating with broader economic development initiatives in our area to strengthen and diversify our economy. It means collaborating with city, county, and nonprofit partners to invest in cultural institutions, recreational amenities, and green spaces to ensure that Asheville and Buncombe County is a place that's great to both visit and live.



OUR STRATEGIES

- Investing one third of lodging tax into **tourism-related community projects** through the **Tourism Product Development Fund (TPDF)** and **Legacy Investment from Tourism (LIFT) Fund**
- Convening the **Asheville Business Events Council** to collaborate with business executives from **aligned industries** to host **meetings** and explore **possible business expansion**
- Creating and maintaining an **authentic storytelling foundation** that celebrates the many people and places in our creative community
- Spotlighting our diverse neighborhoods and communities to inspire visitors to **stay longer, experience more, and extend their spending throughout the county**
- Balancing visitation by **booking meetings, events, and groups during slower times** such as weekdays and January through March



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

Since 2001, Explore Asheville has invested more than \$80 million in 46 community projects through [TPDF](#). These investments have contributed to greenways, public art, and other placemaking initiatives. They have supported family attractions such as the WNC Nature Center and Asheville Museum of Science, creative spaces like the Center for Craft and Asheville Community Theatre, sports facilities such as the John B. Lewis Soccer Fields and the Karl Straus Track at UNC Asheville, and community organizations such as the YMI Cultural Center, one of the oldest Black cultural centers in the U.S.

The new [LIFT Fund](#) expands Explore Asheville's ability to invest in community projects. In 2024, the first LIFT cycle provided nearly \$10 million of investment in 12 community projects ranging from arts and events spaces to recreational and conservational assets including greenways and trails for affordable housing.

To date, the tourism development authority has committed nearly \$96 million, supporting 51 community projects. Seventy-nine percent of all funds, totaling \$76 million, have been committed to city or county-owned projects.



HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS



Results of an annual
*Resident Perspectives on
Tourism* survey



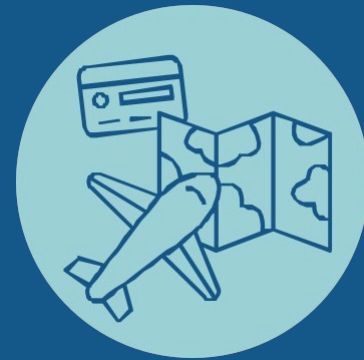
Annual investment in TPDF and
LIFT projects



Monitoring visitor/local use of
community investments sites



National spotlights achieved
through public relations



Airport passengers and
lodging demand



Hotel rooms booked as a result
of meetings/events influenced
by Explore Asheville



Monitoring length of stay



**ENCOURAGING
SAFE
&
RESPONSIBLE
TRAVEL**

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OUR APPROACH

Encouraging safe and responsible travel for Asheville and Buncombe County means inspiring residents and visitors to care for and respect our natural, cultural, and human resources. This means we invest in our outdoor economy, spotlight local outdoor products and tour providers, and collaborate with community organizations and environmentally focused partners. We strive to deliver exceptional experiences while investing in projects that enhance the integrity of area resources.



OUR STRATEGIES

- Influencing visitors to **respect, protect, and preserve natural, cultural, and human resources** through national campaigns such as Leave No Trace and state partnerships with Visit North Carolina
- Increasing the number of conferences and groups participating in **community projects through voluntourism**
- Recruiting **right-sized meetings** that align with our **community's values**
- Encouraging partners to **embrace sustainable and responsible tourism practices**



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

We embrace [Leave No Trace](#) principles and weave them into visitor communications and experiences. From messaging on visitor information kiosks throughout the county, in our annual visitor guide, and on ExploreAsheville.com, we encourage guests to tread lightly on our trails and in our neighborhoods as the foundation for responsible recreation.

We participate in the [Outdoor NC Trail Town Stewardship Program](#), a designation program that recognizes communities throughout North Carolina for their diversity of trail experiences, and celebrates stewardship efforts that champion accessible outdoors, responsible visitation, and sustainable tourism.

We partner with local environmental organizations, such as [RiverLink](#) and [Asheville GreenWorks](#), to champion our destination's commitment to environmental stewardship. These partnerships involve investment in expanding open spaces, conserving natural resources, and leading cleanups with our team and travel and hospitality partners.



HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS



Responsible Travel
page views on
ExploreAsheville.com



Partner participation in
Leave No Trace



Encouraging group
participation in voluntourism
opportunities



Number of outdoor, wellness, climate,
and cause-driven meetings hosted in
Buncombe County



Partner participation in
sustainability and cleanup
initiatives



**ENGAGING
&
INVITING
MORE DIVERSE
AUDIENCES**

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OUR APPROACH

Engaging and inviting more diverse audiences in Asheville and Buncombe County means we extend a genuine invitation to non-majority, diverse visitors to our vibrant destination. We aim to foster connections between visitors and our neighborhoods, businesses, and entrepreneurial ventures through product development, placemaking initiatives, and targeted promotion, creating more opportunities for more people to win through travel to our destination.



OUR STRATEGIES

- Extending a genuine invitation to **diverse audiences**, contracting with **diverse-owned media** and **content creators**
- Developing and investing in **community projects** that **attract** and **engage diverse audiences**
- Increasing our **recruitment of diverse meetings** and **events**
- Promoting **non-majority-owned businesses** through **group sales** initiatives
- Increasing the **diversity** of the **partner network**



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

Between 2018 and 2023, Explore Asheville invested in and managed the creation of the [Asheville Black Cultural Heritage Trail](#) in partnership with River Front Development Group and a 19-member community advisory group. The trail celebrates the dignity, humanity, and agency of Black people from all backgrounds who built resilient communities and fostered social change in Asheville. The self-guided interpretive trail comprises 14 stops and 20 panels, spread across three historically significant Black neighborhoods. Phase II of this project, launched in 2024, invites local BIPOC creatives to enhance the trail through public art.

The BCTDA's [Festival & Cultural Event Support Fund](#) supports diverse community cultural celebrations such as the Blue Ridge Pride Festival and Grindfest. This fund and our Event Sponsorships are designed to provide financial support for events that draw both residents and visitors.

Since 2021, Explore Asheville has committed nearly \$1 million annually to dedicated marketing extending a genuine invitation to diverse audiences. These efforts include contracting with diverse-owned media and local content creators.



HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS



Performance of Black Asheville, LGBTQIA+, and Latinx landing pages on ExploreAsheville.com



Earned placements with non-majority publications



Number of partners offering accessible experiences



Internal trainings focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging



Number of partners who identify as a non-majority-owned business on ExploreAsheville.com



PROMOTING & SUPPORTING ASHEVILLE'S CREATIVE SPIRIT

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OUR APPROACH

Promoting and supporting creative spirit in Asheville and Buncombe County means we are passionate about celebrating our creative community. This means our storytelling is inspired and built by local videographers, filmmakers, writers, and musicians. We spotlight and celebrate our innovative creators and makers—from culinary artisans to visual and performing artists—in what we produce and share across and beyond our community.



OUR STRATEGIES

- Elevating Asheville's creative experiences to differentiate and inspire visits **by intentionally engaging local creatives** throughout our work
- Actively promoting our creative community and resources to groups and events through **event sponsorships** and our **Festivals & Cultural Events Support Fund**
- Creating opportunities for partners to learn about and support local creative organizations through **networking events, trainings, and focus groups**



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

We spotlight local visual artists, specialty food and beverage, outdoor product, tableware, and other creative industries through our [Welcome Bag Gift Guide](#). The guide invites meeting planners to welcome their guests with one-of-a-kind gifts from Asheville's creative community and brings new customers to these businesses.

Through our project funds, we invest in creative and cultural spaces, programming, organizations, and initiatives such as the Asheville Symphony Orchestra, Asheville Art Museum, the Wortham Center for the Performing Arts, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, LEAF Global Arts Center, and the North Carolina Glass Center in Black Mountain, among others.

We consistently hire local performing artists and groups for partner and client event engagements to support and promote them.



HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS



Visitor and community attendance at ticketed entertainment venues, creative businesses, and relevant points of interest



Investments in local creative organizations and programming



Number of collaborations with local creative organizations that occur through partner events, listening sessions, and collaborative initiatives



COMMUNITY INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority celebrate our collaboration and partnership with organizations for community capital projects throughout the county. We look to deepen and expand our active partnerships as opportunities develop.

- African-American Heritage Museum at Stephens-Lee Community Center
- Aston Park Tennis Center
- Asheville Area Wayfinding Program
- Asheville Art Museum
- Asheville Black Cultural Heritage Trail
- Asheville Botanical Garden
- Asheville Community Theatre
- Asheville Municipal Golf Course
- Asheville Museum of Science (AMOS)
- Asheville Visitor Center
- AVL Unpaved
- Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center
- Black Wall Street AVL
- Blue Note Junction
- Bob Lewis Ballpark
- Buncombe County Civil War Trails
- Buncombe County Sports Park (Enka Recreation Destination)
- Craggy Gardens Visitor Center & Picnic Area
- Center for Craft (National Craft Innovation Hub)
- Coxe Avenue Complete Street
- Ferry Road Community
- Gateway Park
- Grove Arcade
- Harrah's Cherokee Center - Asheville
- Highland Brewing Company
- John B. Lewis Soccer Complex at Azalea Park
- Karen Cragolin Park
- LEAF Global Arts Center
- McCormick Field
- Montreat College Pulliam Stadium
- Navitat Canopy Adventures
- North Carolina Glass Center - Black Mountain Facility
- Pack Square Park
- Pearson Bridge River Access
- Riverfront Destination Development (River Arts District)
- Smoky Mountain Adventure Center
- Supernova Immersive Experience
- Swannanoa River Greenway
- Red House Gallery and Studios
- The Collider
- The Orange Peel
- The Wortham Center
- UNC Asheville Karl Straus Track
- UNC Asheville Sports Field Lighting
- WNC Agriculture Center
- WNC Farmers Market
- WNC Nature Center
- WNC Veterans' Memorial at Pack Square Park
- Woodfin Greenway & Blueway
- YMI Cultural Center

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