

SUMTER COUNTY

TOURISM STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2022



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INTRODUCTION

Sumter County is a beautiful natural landscape of lakes, rivers, forests, parks, farms, and preserves close to the urban corridor of Interstate 75, US Highway 301, and Florida's Turnpike, and an hour drive from either Orlando or Tampa. This geographic location coupled with its features and activities offers a market to draw visitors traveling in and through Central Florida. The Villages® community is a strong international market attraction and compliments the national identity of pride and remembrance with the Florida National Cemetery. Additional opportunities to increase visitors and overnight lodging are plentiful in the regional marketplace.

BACKGROUND

The Sumter County Tourism strategy focuses primarily on promoting existing events and facilities for their growth in attracting visitors. The Villages® community has a wide variety of excellent events and superbly maintained facilities which draw both in-state, national, and international visitors for overnight and day visits.

Ecotourism and agritourism are two of the fastest-growing segments of the Florida marketplace. Sumter County has a unique opportunity to blend these segments with other facilities and attractions to build a successful regional visitor program. The history, culture, festivals, special events and recreational facilities of the area, highlighted by ecotourism and agritourism programs, enhance the unique draw of The Villages® community and combined are a successful formula for tourism growth.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Sumter County strives to improve its position as a tourist destination on a continuous basis. The goal is to increase the number of visitors and the number of nights spent in Sumter County. This can be accomplished by focusing on increasing visits, which attract tourism-related businesses such as lodging, restaurants, recreational facilities, and special festival events. There are opportunities for visitors to spend a few days exploring Sumter County at its various attractions and historical sites.



STRATEGIC LOCATION

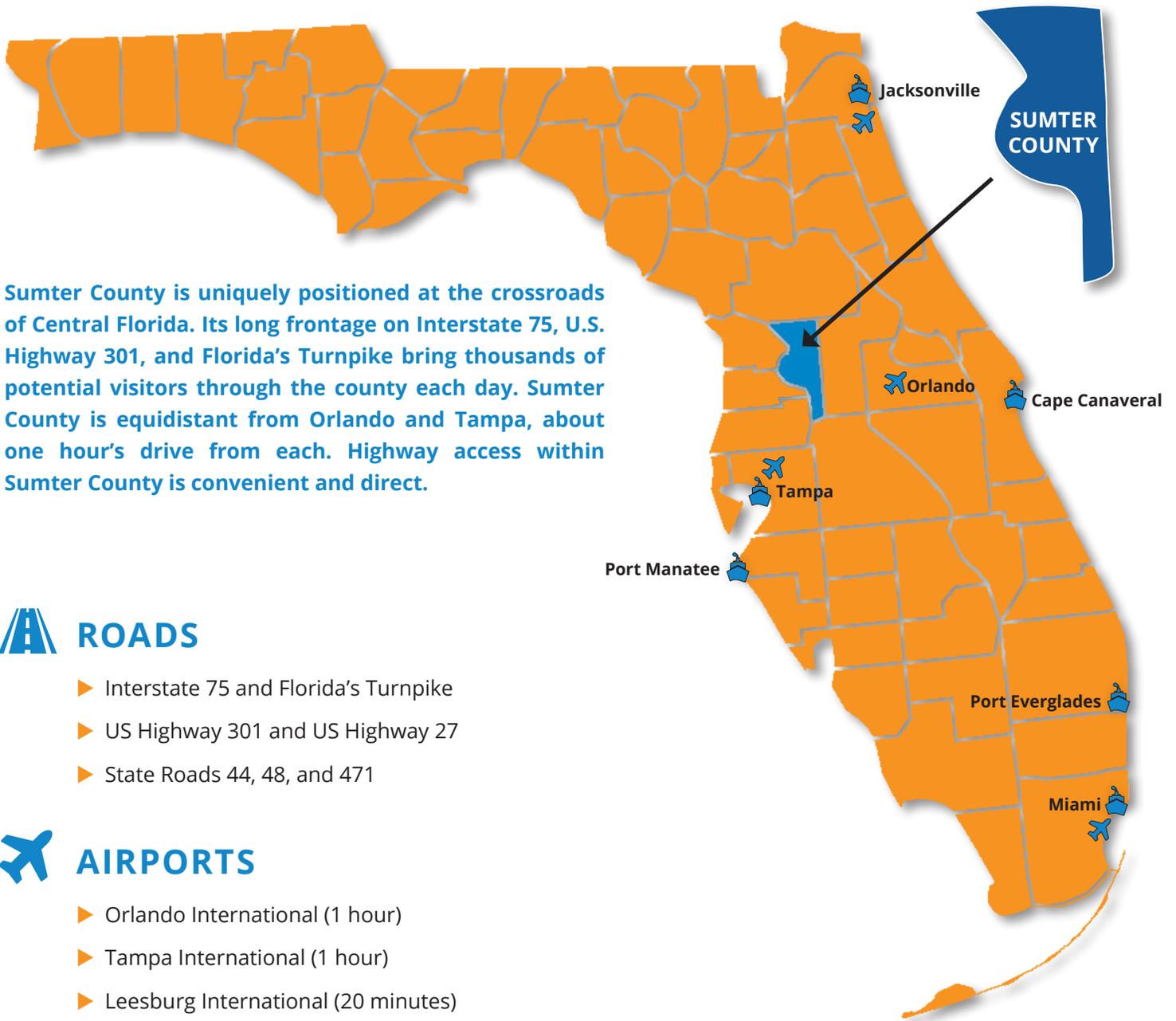
Sumter County is a dynamic combination of assets. It is a beautiful landscape with lakes, rivers, numerous parks and preserves bisected by winding tree-shaded roads traversing farm and cattle raising properties. It is also a unique collection of communities including The Villages® community, Wildwood, Bushnell, Coleman, Webster, and Center Hill. The communities are both diverse and charming, from the historic charm to the large micro-urban success of The Villages® age-restricted development.

Sumter County is uniquely positioned at major intersections of roads and rail in Central Florida. Its long frontage on Interstate 75, U.S. Highway 301, and Florida's Turnpike bring thousands of potential visitors through the county each day. Sumter County is equidistant from Orlando and Tampa, about one hour's drive from each. Highway access within Sumter County is convenient and direct.

Florida welcomed 126.1 million overnight visitors during the 2017 calendar year according to Visit Florida's most recent tourism study. Since more than 35% of all domestic Florida leisure trips aim for Central Florida, which includes Sumter County, the county is geographically well positioned in the heart of Florida's tourism. Being well located is a starting point of advantage, but the fierce competition of Orlando's theme parks and Tampa Bay's theme parks and beaches requires Sumter County to create a special and unique appeal in the most competitive tourism market in the country.

Visit Florida reported that Florida's domestic visitors stayed an average of 4.2 nights in the state during 2017. This positive data lends itself to short-term (day, overnight, weekend) pleasure trips to Sumter County as a target area of focus. Sumter County should shape itself as a regional market destination for in-state travelers with the possibility of drawing some out-of-state travelers with the major national and international identity of The Villages® community.





Sumter County is uniquely positioned at the crossroads of Central Florida. Its long frontage on Interstate 75, U.S. Highway 301, and Florida's Turnpike bring thousands of potential visitors through the county each day. Sumter County is equidistant from Orlando and Tampa, about one hour's drive from each. Highway access within Sumter County is convenient and direct.

ROADS

- ▶ Interstate 75 and Florida's Turnpike
- ▶ US Highway 301 and US Highway 27
- ▶ State Roads 44, 48, and 471

AIRPORTS

- ▶ Orlando International (1 hour)
- ▶ Tampa International (1 hour)
- ▶ Leesburg International (20 minutes)

SEAPORTS

- ▶ Port of Tampa (1 hour)
- ▶ Port Manatee (1.25 hours)
- ▶ Port Canaveral (1.75 hours)
- ▶ Port of Jacksonville (2.5 hours)
- ▶ Port Everglades (3.5 hours)
- ▶ Port of Miami (4 hours)



TARGET MARKETS

The core assets for attracting tourists include: the natural setting of the county seasoned by a diverse group of cities, the Florida Bass Conservation Center, the Florida National Cemetery, birding and biking trails, agritourism events and facilities, eco-tourism events and facilities, equestrian events and facilities, the Dade Battlefield Park, farms and ranches, the Green Swamp and other preserves, The Villages® community, and the Sumter County Fairgrounds.

Sumter County should focus on a regional market attracting day trips from a 150-mile radius, pass-through travelers, overnight trips of one or two nights and extended overnight vacation trips.

Domestic tourists visiting Florida are as diverse, and no single message reaches or attracts the attention of every potential visitor to Sumter County. According to research reported by Visit Florida for 2017 travel data, the average Florida domestic tourist visitor was a couple (2.1 persons), spending an average of 4.2 nights, with an average age of 49.1 years, an average household income of \$117,900, and spending an average of \$158.90 per day per person including transportation.

HIGHLIGHTS

▶ **4.2** NIGHTS
Average Visitor Stay

▶ **\$117,900**
AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME

▶ **49.1** YEARS
Average Age of Visitors

▶ **\$158.90**
AVERAGE SPEND PER DAY
(Including Transportation)



Most domestic visitors to Florida enjoy beach/waterfront activities, culinary/dining experiences, visiting friends/relatives, shopping and experiencing theme/amusement parks. Sumter County's marketing message needs to segment into niche promotions that interest smaller, targeted demographic groups with varied interests and expectations such as freshwater fishing enthusiasts, families searching for equestrian competitions or history buffs of the Seminole Wars and Florida "Crackers."

Domestic and international patients traveling to Sumter County for medical procedures at highly renowned medical facilities is an opportunity to garner overnight visitors for patient visitors and their families. According to a 2016 report by the Florida Chamber Foundation, each year, Florida generally sees between 300,000 and 400,000 medical tourists who generate almost \$6 billion in medical expenses. These expenses do not take into account money that these tourists spend on lodging, food, shopping and visits to local attractions and cultural events during the patient's recovery time. The county should focus on a multi-faceted community angle to promote the other tourist attractions while visitors may be here for medical treatment and recovery.





SUMTER COUNTY'S MAIN ATTRACTIONS

A GROUP OF UNIQUE COMMUNITIES

The Villages® development is one of the most successful planned retirement communities in the United States filled with premier golf courses, outstanding entertainment events, and diverse retail and restaurant offerings. The Villages® community already has a wide and effective marketing outreach that minimizes the need for broad tourism marketing expenditures by Sumter County. Identifying and promoting events and facilities in the other unique areas of the county can significantly increase “day trippers” and “overnight stay” visitors. Sumter County also offers rural charm in cities like Webster, home to one of the oldest cattle auction and largest continuous flea markets in the country.

A RICH NATURAL ENVIRONMENT WITH PROXIMITY TO MAJOR URBAN AREAS

Sumter County offers several potential ecotourism possibilities, from the mysteries of Green Swamp to the big bass of Lake Panasoffkee to long winding scenic roads. Fishing, kayaking/canoeing, biking, walking/hiking, camping, bird watching, sightseeing, hunting, and other outdoor activities are all regional attractions located in Sumter County.

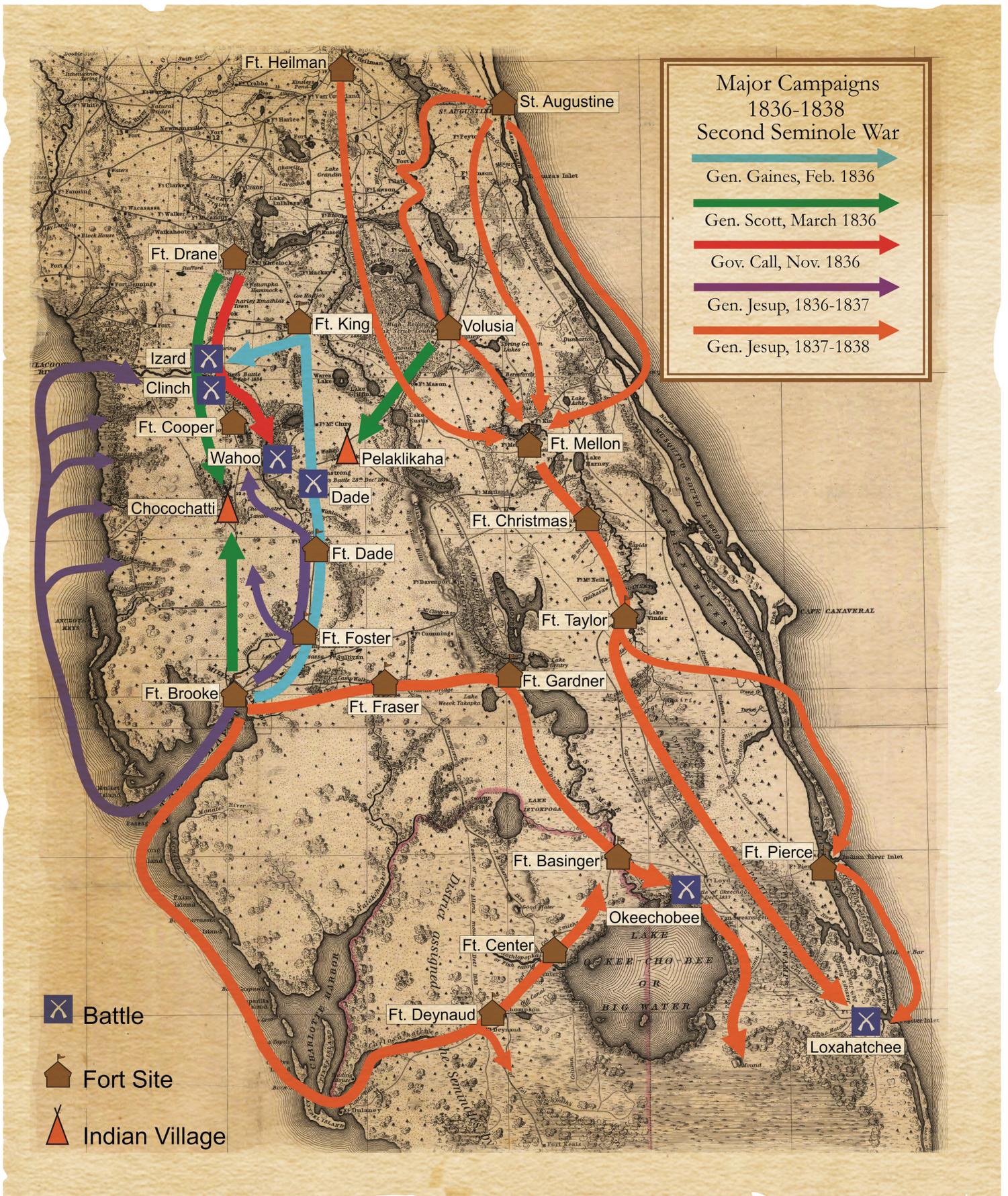
A SPECIAL PLACE IN AMERICAN REMEMBRANCE AND HISTORY

The Florida National Cemetery, Dade Battlefield Park, and sites along the Florida Seminole Wars Heritage Trail (See map on Page 7) offer rich historic and cultural visitor attractions. Visitors can also find markers and monuments throughout the county memorializing historical locations and important figures.

AN ACTIVE COLLECTION OF WORKING FARMS AND CATTLE RANCHES

Sumter County offers urban visitors direct connections to agricultural experiences including a wide variety of homegrown and home-raised products.





This image is courtesy of the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, flheritage.com

SCENIC SUMTER HERITAGE BYWAY

The roads that comprise the Scenic Sumter Heritage Byway traverse pastoral farmlands, cattle ranches, and horse farms. The corridor passes through several of the most attractive small country towns in the region and travels through the lush hardwood hammock and floodplain parklands that are part of the Withlacoochee Watershed.

Byway attractions include:

1. Half Moon Wildlife Management Area
2. Lake Panasoffkee & Lake Panasoffkee Wildlife Management Area
3. Downtown Bushnell and Sumter County Historic Courthouse
4. Dade Battlefield Historic State Park
5. Florida National Cemetery
6. Downtown Webster and Webster Flea Market
7. Green Swamp Wildlife Management Area
8. General James Van Fleet Trail State Park







SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- ▶ Home to The Villages® development, one of the most successful planned retirement communities in the United States, and ranked multiple times as the fastest growing metropolitan statistical area in the country by the U.S. Census Bureau. This community is both a national and an international identifier and offers many unique opportunities such as state-of-the-art medical facilities for medical tourism.
- ▶ Beautiful natural environment with lakes, rivers, forests, nature preserves, state, county and local parks connected by long winding roads through scenic farms and ranches. This natural and agrarian landscape presents many opportunities for ecotourism and agritourism events and activities.
- ▶ Webster Westside Flea Market: one of the oldest and largest continuous flea markets in the United States.
- ▶ Home to the Florida National Cemetery: donated by the people of Sumter County after the Civil War to provide an honorable resting place for both Union and Confederate soldiers. It is the second most active cemetery in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Cemetery Administration, according to Visit Florida.
- ▶ Great geographical positioning: outstanding highway systems including Interstate 75 along the western border further enhanced by US Highway 301 and Florida's Turnpike. Sumter County is geographically well positioned at the apex of Central Florida and has an excellent road transportation system in place for access and easy movement throughout the state.
- ▶ Good out-of-state visitor geographic positioning: at the northern apex of the Central Florida triangle, about a one-hour drive from both the theme parks mecca of Orlando and the theme parks and beaches of the Tampa Bay area. The majority of out-of-state visitors pass through the 100- or 150-mile radius of Sumter County.
- ▶ Good in-state geographic positioning: within a 150-mile radius of Sumter County, there are approximately 13 million residents. Sumter County, with the right mix of events, facilities, and marketing, can become a successful regional destination.
- ▶ The Tourist Development Council along with strong leadership on the Sumter Board of County Commissioners, seek the benefits of tourism to provide a higher quality of life for residents, attract new businesses related to tourism, enhance revenues for existing businesses and create a stronger market identity for the county, which will assist in the recruitment of new businesses.

WEAKNESSES

- ▶ Aside from The Villages® community, Sumter County's attractions, facilities, and events are not marketed significantly at the regional or state levels. Sharing the unique attractions of Sumter County with new visitors is an ongoing effort, but once they become knowledgeable about the tourism attractors, visitations increase.
- ▶ Sumter County currently has a shortage of adequate lodging accommodations to support growth as a visitor destination.
- ▶ Sumter County lacks tourism market data associated with the number of tourists visiting the county during seasonal and non-seasonal periods.



SWOT ANALYSIS

OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ **Proximity and access to Orlando and Tampa:** Capitalize on the wide range and number of tourists visiting the theme parks and coast by marketing opportunities for these tourists to experience a different part of the region in Sumter County.
- ▶ Sumter County maintains a comprehensive map highlighting facilities, attractions, parks, and other historical venues in the county. This map could be expanded to include regional attractions to highlight Sumter County's proximity and driving time to those venues.
- ▶ **Access to east and west coast beaches:** An hour drive to the west coast and less than a two-hour drive to the east coast, Sumter County offers unique attractions that are only a short drive away.
- ▶ **International visitors:** Marketing to more international visitors that are coming to Florida for other tourism destinations is an opportunity to gain more exposure and increase the number of tourists that visit the county.
- ▶ **The Villages® community:** Encourage the tourists that are visiting the community to explore other attractions the county offers.
- ▶ **Medical tourism:** With more advanced medical facilities coming online, Sumter County can be a premier destination for patients to experience top-notch medical care all while exploring the other attractions in the area.
- ▶ The Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood and adjacent 151-room Brownwood Hotel & Spa scheduled to be operational in 2020 will result in overnight stays for patients and their families. More and higher-grade lodging experiences like this one will bring more people to visit the county for multiple days and thus experience more of Sumter County. Additional hotel lodging facilities will result in a greater tax base, which can be reinvested into tourism marketing and supporting local tourism events through tourist development grants. The result is a virtuous cycle of business and private enterprise benefiting both the tourist industry and the residents of Sumter County. The first step in attracting new lodging construction is simply building total visitor traffic, both day and overnight visitors.
- ▶ **Small or specialized business conferences and corporate retreats:** Sumter County offers beautiful venues for business conferences and team building activities for corporate functions.

THREATS

- ▶ **Regional competition:** The Central Florida region is full of large theme park attractions and coastal beaches that overshadow Sumter County's attractions.
- ▶ **Location awareness:** Outside of The Villages® development, Sumter County is not well known for its tourism destinations to domestic and international visitors due to its smaller presence in the state's marketing message.



STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

Sumter County's main priority is to market and communicate Sumter County's historical and ecological attractions, facilities, and events. The county promotes current events and attractions such as the growing number of events year-round at the Sumter County Fairgrounds, and the already successful events of The Villages® community.

The second priority of the county is to encourage local groups, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to host events in Sumter County. Events such as the Annual Western Hoedown, Bushnell Fall Festival, Dade Battlefield Re-enactment, recreational and sporting tournaments, attract visitors to the area. Blackjack Sporting Clays and Shooters World, are two great examples of recreational venues that encourage visitors to visit Sumter County for group activities.

In 2015, Sumter County installed wayfinding signage on all the main county roads to assist residents and visitors in finding tourism attractions and facilities. This has been a great addition to the overall visitor experience in the county. Additional signage and updates to the existing signage should be added as major tourism venues open.

ACTIVITIES

- ▶ Maintain the Sumter County tourism logo, branding, and theme—Discover Sumter.
- ▶ Maintain a compelling, intuitive and interactive website containing very current information about events and activities, stakeholder facilities, lodging locations, and unique visitation possibilities: www.DiscoverSumterFL.com
- ▶ Maintain a printable map with the main attractions in the county for tourists.
- ▶ Maintain a tourism mobile application that can be used by visitors and residents alike. It showcases venues around the county such as bed and breakfasts, restaurants, attractions, events, etc. It also includes a map for easy navigation and “nearby” options for the user.
- ▶ Populate a calendar database with tourism-related events data.
- ▶ Assist agritourism businesses that are interested in developing in the county.
- ▶ Participate in state partner opportunities such as the How to Do Florida video series to promote the diverse assets of the county to a larger audience.





BUDGET RESOURCES

Tourism is Florida's largest industry. Central Florida is the most successful regional destination in the state and is blessed with many transportation and tourism assets. To gain and maintain a successful destination program, Sumter County faces the dual challenges of overcoming current low recognition/identity among existing tourists and limited long-term resources to gain initial market penetration and drive annual visitation growth. Sumter County has been successful in other highly competitive regional issues by embracing new, innovative but cost-conscious alternatives. A similar approach in expanding the tourism program is recommended.

Sumter County's funding source for tourism promotion is the tourist development tax (TDT) which currently levies a 2% tax on short-term lodging. The tourist development tax averages \$566,784 per year since 2010.

TDT REVENUE RECEIVED FROM STATE BY YEAR (2010 - 2018)

YEAR	REVENUE RECEIVED
2010/2011	\$403,935.27
2011/2012	\$396,683.23
2012/2013	\$424,944.06
2013/2014	\$515,116.30
2014/2015	\$617,731.74
2015/2016	\$662,686.65
2016/2017	\$719,517.76
2017/2018	\$793,657.02



TOURISM ACTIVITIES & PROGRAM COSTS

Program costs associated with tourism functions in the county vary based on activity. The following is a snapshot of current activities funded through a tourist development tax grant for the 2018-2019 fiscal year. The first two activities are managed by county staff and have matching funds in the county's general fund.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

1. Basic monitoring actions can help program administrators and policymakers measure the effectiveness of the county's tourism programs.
2. Monitor collection amounts of the tourist tax revenues and compare/contrast those revenues to previous months and years.
3. Monitor, collect and value any public relations articles or columns appearing in the print or electronic media.
4. Monitor stakeholders' attendance report at Sumter County facilities and events and compare/contrast to previous periods.
5. Monitor the number of hotel/RV stays per event and occupancy rates.
6. Conduct tourism stakeholder surveys to include the feedback of the community.

Activity	Tourist Development Grant Funds
TOURISM MOBILE APPLICATION AND WEBSITE MAINTENANCE	\$15,288
HOW TO DO FLORIDA VIDEO PROJECT	\$14,884
COUNTRY WESTERN HOEDOWN	\$50,000
64TH ANNUAL FLORIDA ATHLETIC COACH ASSOCIATION ALL-STAR CLASSIC	\$16,000
BATTLE AT THE VILLAGES	\$55,100
BUSHNELL FALL FESTIVAL	\$10,600
DADE BATTLEFIELD 39TH RE-ENACTMENT	\$9,545
DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT IN THE VILLAGES® COMMUNITY	\$80,000
HEARTS FOR OUR HOSPITAL	\$8,000
SUMTER COUNTY FAIR AND 4-H BUILDING IMPROVEMENTS	\$52,250
SOUTHERN DRAFT HORSE ASSOCIATION PULLS	\$50,000
BLACKJACK OPEN SERIES	\$24,000



SUMTER COUNTY FL
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

P: 352.689.4400

www.sumterbusiness.com