

# Sumter County Tourism Strategic Plan

## *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 the county is a one-hour drive from either Orlando or Tampa. This geographic location coupled with its features and activities offers a market opportunity to draw visitors traveling in our regional area. The county has a strong international market attraction in The Villages® community and a national identity of pride and remembrance in The Florida National Cemetery. Additional opportunities to increase visitors and overnight lodging are plentiful in the regional marketplace.

## *Sumter County's Main Attractions*

**A group of unique communities:** The Villages® community, one of the most successful planned retirement communities in the United States filled with premier golf courses, outstanding evening events, and diverse retail and restaurant offerings. The Villages® community already has wide and effective marketing outreach that minimizes the need for broad tourism marketing expenditures. 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 auctions and largest continuous flea markets in the country.



**A rich natural environment with proximity to major urban areas:** From the mysteries of Green Swamp to the big bass of Lake Panasoffkee to long winding scenic roads, Sumter County offers several potential ecotourism possibilities. Fishing, kayaking/canoeing, biking, walking/hiking, camping, bird watching, sightseeing, hunting and other outdoor activities are all regional attractions.

**A special place in American remembrance and history:** important facilities such as the Florida National Cemetery and Dade Battlefield Park offer rich historical/cultural visitor attractions.

**An active collection of working farms and cattle ranches:** Sumter County offers urban visitors direct connections to agricultural experiences and a wide variety of homegrown and home raised products.



## *Background*

The Sumter County Tourism strategy focuses primarily on existing events and facilities. The Villages® community has a wide variety of excellent events and superbly maintained facilities which draw both in-state and national visitors for overnight visits 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® and combine as a successful formula for tourism growth.

The roads that comprise our *Scenic Sumter Heritage Byway* traverse pastoral farmlands, cattle ranches, and horse farms. The corridor then passes through several of the most attractive small country towns in the region and finally 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



## *Goals and Objectives*

Sumter County strives to continuously improve its position as a tourist destination.

Our goal is to increase the number of visitors and the number of nights they spend 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.

## Location

Sumter County is a dynamic combination of assets. It is 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® development.



Sumter County is uniquely positioned at the major intersection of road and rail in Central Florida. Its long frontage on Interstate 75, US 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 106.6 million overnight visitors during the 2015 calendar year according to Visit Florida. 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 tourism. Being well located is certainly a starting point of advantage, but the fierce competition of Orlando's theme parks and Tampa Bay's beaches mean Sumter County must 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 2015, a slight decrease from the previous year. 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/international identity of The Villages® community.

## Target Markets

The core assets for attracting tourists include: the natural setting of the county seasoned by a diverse group of cities, the state fish hatchery, the Florida National Cemetery, birding and biking trails, agritourism events and facilities, eco-tourism events and facilities, equestrian events and facilities, 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 up to 150-mile radius, pass-through travelers, overnight trips of one or two nights (most likely weekends) and extended overnight vacation trips.



Domestic tourists visiting Florida are as diverse as our population in general. No single message reaches or attracts the attention of every potential visitor to Sumter County. According to research reported by Visit Florida for 2015 travel data, the average Florida domestic tourist visitor was a couple (2.1 persons), they will spend an average of 4.2 nights, their average age was 47.5 years, they have an average household income of \$101,600, and they will spend an average of \$156.40 per day per person including travel.

Florida offers a variety of activities to keep visitors entertained while here. Most domestic visitors enjoy beach/waterfront activities, culinary/dining, visiting friends/relatives, shopping and theme/amusement parks. Our 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 Indian wars.

### *Strengths of the Sumter County Tourism Market*

- 1) Home to The Villages® development, the most successful and attractive planned retirement community in the United States—ranked the fastest growing MSA in the country for the fourth year in a row by the U.S. Census Bureau. This community is both a national and an international identifier.
- 2) Beautiful natural environment with lakes, rivers, forests, national 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.

- 3) Home to the Webster livestock market and flea market: one of the oldest and largest continuous flea markets in the United States.



- 4) 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.

- 5) Great geographical positioning with outstanding highway systems including Interstate 75 along the western border further enhanced by US Highway 301 and Florida's Turnpike. Sumter County is not only geographically well-positioned at the apex of Central Florida, but already has an excellent road transportation system in place for access, egress, and easy movement throughout the state.



- 6) 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 lovely beaches of the Tampa Bay Area.

The majority of out-of-state visitors pass through the 100-mile radius of Sumter County.

- 7) Good in-state geographic positioning. Within a 150-mile radius of Sumter County, there are approximately 13.9 million residents. Sumter County, with the right mix of events, facilities and marketing, can become a successful regional destination.
- 8) The TDC along with strong leadership on the 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 recruitment of other new businesses.
- 9) A stable local economy supported by a pro-business county commission practicing fiscal conservatism for all citizens in Sumter County.



### *Weaknesses of the Sumter County Tourism Market*

- 1) Aside from The Villages® community, Sumter County's attractions/facilities/events are relatively unknown at the regional or statewide 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.
- 2) Sumter County currently has a shortage of adequate lodging accommodations to support growth as a visitor destination. More and higher grade lodging experiences will bring more people to visit the county for multi-day visits and thus experience more of Sumter County. Additional hotel rooms will result in additional tax base which can then be reinvested into marketing of tourism. 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.

### *Strategy Implementation*

Our main priority is to market and communicate Sumter County's existing 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. Events such as the Annual Western Hoedown, Bushnell Fall Festival, Dade Battlefield Re-enactment, recreational and sporting tournaments, attract visitors to the area. Gator World, located in the Wildwood area, is a great example of an area attraction that encourages highway travelers to make a drive through Sumter County to see alligators.



Sumter County is planning to build a combination state-of-the-art shotgun and outdoor recreation and sport facility that will attract tourists from the target market of 100 miles and nationally.

Sumter County maintains a comprehensive map showcasing facilities, contact information, web information and calendar information.

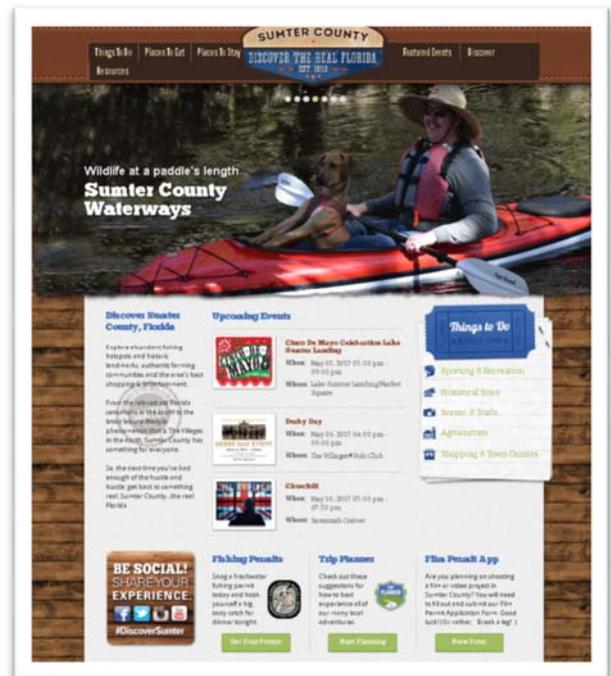
In 2015, Sumter County installed wayfinding signage on all the main county roads to assist residents and visitors in finding tourism attractions and facilities. This has been a great addition to the overall visitor experience in the county. Additional signage should be added if major tourism venues open.

### Activities

- Maintain 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](http://www.DiscoverSumterFL.com)
- 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 calendar database with tourism related events data
- Assist new agritourism businesses that are interested in developing in the county.

### 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. We recommend a similar approach in expanding the tourism program.



Sumter County’s funding source for tourism promotion is the tourist development tax (TDT) which currently levies a 2% tax on lodging. The tourist development tax has annually garnered an average of \$503,516 per year since 2010.

Year	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
<b>TDT Revenue Received from State</b>	\$403,935.27	\$396,683.23	\$424,944.06	\$515,116.30	\$617,731.74	\$662,686.65

### *Tourism Activities and Program Costs*

Program costs associated with Tourism functions in the county vary based on activity. The following is a snapshot of current activities occurring in the county. All of these activities are supported through a TDC grant.

Activity	Tourist Development Grant Funds	County Funds
<b>Tourism Mobile Application Development and Maintenance</b>	\$22,200	14,800
<b>Tourism Website Maintenance</b>	\$11,350	\$7,550
<b>Tourism Digital Media Production</b>	\$10,800	\$7,200
<b>Downtown Entertainment in The Villages® Development</b>	\$20,000	N/A
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Annual Country Western Hoedown</b>	\$40,000	N/A
<b>62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Florida Athletic Coach Association All Star Classic</b>	\$15,000	N/A
<b>Battle at The Villages</b>	\$32,500	N/A
<b>Bushnell Fall Festival</b>	\$9,000	N/A
<b>Dade Battlefield 37<sup>th</sup> Re-enactment</b>	\$10,000	N/A
<b>Downtown Entertainment in The Villages</b>	\$80,000	N/A
<b>Hearts for Our Hospital</b>	\$8,000	N/A

<b>Lake Miona Park Aquatic and Fisheries Management Plan</b>	\$21,200	N/A
<b>Lake Okahumpka Park Improvements</b>	\$2,500	N/A
<b>Tourism Website Maintenance</b>	\$54,500	N/A

***Monitoring/Evaluation***

Basic monitoring actions can help program administrators and policymakers measure the effectiveness of the county’s tourism program:

- 1) Monitor collection amounts of the tourist tax revenues and compare/contrast those revenues to previous months and years.
- 2) Monitor, collect and value any public relations articles or columns appearing in the print or electronic media.
- 3) Monitor stakeholders’ attendance report at Sumter County facilities and events and compare/contrast to previous periods.
- 4) Monitor the number of hotel/RV stays per event and occupancy rates.