

RURAL TOURISM RECOVERY PILOT PROGRAM

The Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina is coordinating the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program with the Department of Commerce and other interested public and private stakeholders. The goal of the program is bring visitation and potential workforce to the selected 16 counties named in the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program legislation. Though as of March 30, 2022, no funds have been allocated to the Department of Commerce for the program, several steps have been taken to prepare for the undertaking. Based on the estimated funding allocation timing, the Program will be launched to the public on April 19, 2022.

The EDPNC's Visit NC division has formulated a marketing and promotion campaign called Dream Big in Small Town NC to promote these areas for visitors who are also potentially interested in relocating to the 16 counties who are facing population loss. This pilot program will focus on showcasing the people, places, and businesses that make this part of rural North Carolina a collection of unique destinations. It will feature 16 rural counties throughout the state grouped into three regions: NC's Scenic Mountains, the Northeast, and the Inner Banks. Throughout the year, campaigns will feature the distinct regions, showcasing local landmarks, off-the-beaten-path sights and adventures, unique/fun lodging opportunities, local businesses, and more of what makes rural North Carolina a great place to visit or to select as a place to live and work.

Each quarter will feature a themed campaign package that focuses on one of North Carolina's three distinct regions by season, with an underlying year-long campaign promoting rural North Carolina as a destination for tourism, employment opportunities, and long-term stays.

Visit NC will be partnering with other lodging and media organizations to promote the Program. A major partner in the effort will be Airbnb. As a result of the travel revolution and work-from-anywhere mentality spurred by the pandemic, travelers have greatly increased their use of vacation rentals to visit thousands of towns and cities, staying for weeks, months, or even longer. Some 6,000 towns and cities had their first-ever Airbnb booking during the pandemic. This has created particularly significant opportunities for rural communities, allowing many to directly benefit from the tourism economy by hosting on Airbnb. In 2021, domestic nights booked by guests in the United States on Airbnb for stays in rural areas grew 110 percent, compared to 2019.

The EDPNC's Visit NC team is partnering with Airbnb to take advantage of the platform's ability to support tourism recovery, the promotion of local job opportunities, remote work and destination promotion in these select rural areas featured in the Program. As part of the partnership, Airbnb is offering \$20,000 in Airbnb gift cards for promotional use. Airbnb is also creating a special landing page on their site to promote the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program.

Visit NC will also partner with Flip.to, a destination marketing platform, for a campaign with commercial lodging establishments in the Program areas. Flip. creates powerful interactions and connections between lodging properties and potential visitors and tracks measurable impact in real time to revenue. This collaboration will allow lodging properties in the Program areas to grow their audiences and directly drive revenue for their property and their community. The Flip.to platform provides first-of-its-kind insights to every member that joins, and that data, along with behavioral insights, will inform decisions about the best investments of marketing dollars in the future.

PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to funding not being distributed, we cannot at this point offer a full recommendation on expansion of the Program to other counties in the State or regarding legislative proposals or additional funding needed to execute or expand the Program; and whether the Program should be expanded. Our initial recommendation for future programs would be to include counties that are contiguous. Marketing efforts typically gain greater influence by joining counties into mini-regions, and it is difficult to promote these groups when not all the counties in the area are represented. We have also heard from several other rural counties who are not included in the program, but who are interested in participating in the future.

Though the program hasn't started, we are designing it to be able to provide data that will help to illustrate if the program is successful. We will track visits to the website, media impressions and visits to job sites in the participating counties. Flip.to will provide data on bookings and expenditures as well as contact information for future marketing efforts. We are asking Airbnb to track visits, clicks, impressions on the landing page, and rentals booked through the program. Those metrics together with input from officials in the 16 participating counties will be used to evaluate and make recommendations on the effectiveness of the program.

RURAL TOURISM RECOVERY PILOT PROGRAM DETAIL

Launch Date

Funding for the program is anticipated to be released in early April. While we have been able to begin design and implementation of the website, we cannot promote the effort until the funding is available for advertising. In order to gain as much of the benefit of the spring travel planning season as possible, we are going to launch before the funding is allocated with earned media efforts and a vacation sweepstakes as our primary promotion. For that reason, we have set the kick-off date to April 19th. We will launch with:

- Visit NC landing page
- Vacation Sweepstakes promotion
- Jobs resources page
- Satellite media tour from a location in NC's Scenic Mountains
- Press releases from Visit NC and Airbnb
- Airbnb landing page with maps and accompanying promotional content

Landing Pages

The Dream Big in Small Town NC website landing page and related pages on VisitNC.com and on Airbnb's website and through the Flip.to program will inspire travel to and exploration within North Carolina while strengthening consideration of relocating to any of the 16 counties named in the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program.

The page will primarily feature a sweepstakes promotion for potential travelers to spark interest in the three subregions, and lower barriers to travel there. This will help all potential visitors as those who are selected will have assistance in paying for their trip, and those who aren't selected will still get access to trip ideas and inspiration through the site's content and email follow-up.

The page will link to the Airbnb map landing page for the featured region, and Airbnb's map page will link back to the Visit NC page. The page also will include a link to job listings in the 16 counties, with the context of visit first, and when you do, think about relocating. Website visitors will still

have access to the full breadth and depth of inspiring travel and regional content on VisitNC.com as well as all the lodging and activities that are available.

Vacation Sweepstakes Promotions

As part of Visit NC's collaboration with Airbnb on the development and promotion of the Rural Tourism Recovery Program, Airbnb is offering free stays at North Carolina Airbnbs. These will be used through a sweepstakes promotion to incentivize job seekers to make rural NC their new home, with the goal of earning press coverage and positioning rural NC as a top destination to consider for relocation.

- Airbnb will provide \$20,000 (in-kind) in vouchers for participants to book housing during their stay.
- Visit NC will promote the sweepstakes promotion on the Dream Big in Small Town NC landing page and through paid and earned media campaigns. Campaigns will rely on digital and social media advertising as well as communications efforts.
- Airbnb will promote the program on a Rural NC campaign landing page on Airbnb, through media coverage and other paid and earned media efforts.

Satellite Media Tour

We will produce satellite media tours (SMTs) from the three Program regions as a communications strategy to promote the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program. SMTs allow Visit NC to reach media in key target markets without having to get them to travel to these rural areas. The first tour will take place in April from Haywood County in NC's Scenic Mountains region and showcase the start of the overall Recovery Program. The second will be from the Northeast area near Kerr Lake in June or July; and the third SMT will take place along the Inner Banks near Edenton. Our spokesperson will perform 20-25 interviews with regional and national broadcast outlets to spread the word about the allure of small towns and rural areas across the state that are part of the Program.

Announcement Press Release

The Program will be announced via a press release with an accompanying satellite media tour the following week. The press release will detail the North Carolina Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program and the featured 16 rural counties. It will include information on the marketing campaigns and other communication strategies as well as the unique partnership with Airbnb.

Hiring Positions to Assist with Program

The EDPNC will add two positions that will support the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program in collaboration with public and private sector partners. One position will focus on workforce development in rural communities and the other will focus on tourism recovery in those areas. The positions will support the day-to-day coordination of deliverables for the Project as well as reporting requirements of the Pilot. Our office has interviewed candidates and hiring is on track, but cannot occur until funding is in place.

Influencer Communications Campaign Activation

Many of the small communities in the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program have a challenge in getting major media outlets to visit their areas due to their distance from population centers. To combat this issue, the marketing campaign will also feature media influencer activations. Through a three-phase approach, the campaign will focus on different regions that are in the Program and all they can offer. The first phase will feature the NC's Scenic Mountains region. Talent will travel throughout the Program area mountain ranges documenting their hikes and showing off the stunning views. Phase two will feature content in Northeast North Carolina with its sparkling lakes

and up-an-coming towns. And finally, Phase three will feature the charming Inner Banks and showcase these coastal towns. The influencers will book their stays for all three phases through short term rentals with Airbnb suppling the inventory. We have bid out the project to national companies that work with influencers to select the brand ambassadors that will amplify our Program message and reach a diverse group of communities who are eager to explore North Carolina for themselves.

Airbnb Academy

Visit NC has requested that Airbnb also host as many “Airbnb Academy” programs in the state as possible. The Airbnb Academy is a skills development program for people in rural communities who are interested in tourism. The Academy gives them skills, practical tools and the support they need to use technology to access and succeed on the Airbnb platform as tourism entrepreneurs. Airbnb has an upcoming Academy with Beaufort County Community College on May 2nd and 9th. The location is in Washington NC, which is very close to the Inner Banks program area. We are hoping to secure Academy programs in the NC Scenic Mountains and Northeast areas as well.

ESTIMATED PROJECT BUDGET:

Spend Category/Item	Description	Vendor(s)	Cost (est.)
Social media promotion	Promotion for the regional maps, contest, jobs page, and communications initiatives through the duration of the campaign	Facebook/Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn	\$200,000
Paid media	Programmatic, paid search, digital ads on relevant sites	Various TBD	\$765,000
Art direction and design for Airbnb partnership page	Creative for maps and accompanying components, contest, paid media promotion materials, and any creative for communications needs	Freelance illustrator	\$75,000
Communications media campaigns (ex: satellite media tours, advertorials)			\$100,000
Communications partnerships/activations (through 3rd parties) + Influencer engagement	Work w/ Visit NC agency to deploy activations		\$200,000
State employee in EDPNC			\$70,000
State employee in Visit NC			\$70,000
State Employee Travel & Expenditures			\$20,000
Total:			\$1,500,000.00

WEBSITE LANDING PAGE FRAMEWORK:

<div><div>Site Title</div><div>DREAM BIG IN SMALL TOWN, NC Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc maximus, nulla ut commodo sagittis, sapien dui mattis dui, non pulvinar lorem felis nec erat</div><div>HEADLINE Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc maximus, nulla ut commodo sagittis, sapien dui mattis dui, non pulvinar lorem felis nec erat</div><div><div></div><div>VISIT THE NC MOUNTAINS, ON US Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc maximus, nulla ut commodo sagittis, sapien dui mattis dui, non pulvinar lorem felis nec erat</div><div>EMAILENTER</div></div></div>	<p>In this day and age, where you can work from anywhere, every trip can be a test drive</p> <p>ALT: remove and get right to "Enter to Win" - see existing sweeps layouts - depends on Airbnb - how will they be pointing to us?</p> <p>Headline and subhead - devoted to mountains, indicate "this season's featured destination" or similar, to put in the context of multiple sweeps</p> <p>Tease future giveaways and prompt sign up for this one</p> <p>Thank-you window includes link to Airbnb map page</p>
<div><div>HEADLINE Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc maximus, nulla ut commodo sagittis, sapien dui mattis dui, non pulvinar lorem felis nec erat</div><div><div></div><div></div><div>LOREM IPSUM DOLOR SIT AMET, CONSECTETUR ADIPISCING ELIT.</div><div>SIGN UP</div></div></div>	<p>Introduce the other two regions, link to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">VNC overview pages for each region (initially)(optional) replace with links to Airbnb map pages when they are ready and live <p>Copy should tease future giveaways and prompt sign up for email reminders and trip inspiration</p>
<div><div>HEADLINE - JOBS Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc maximus, nulla ut commodo sagittis, sapien dui mattis dui, non pulvinar lorem felis nec erat</div><div>Button</div></div>	<p>Copy ties travel to work - in this world, where you can work anywhere, why not live somewhere that feel like a year-round vacation?</p> <p>Explore Job opportunities (job listings page - TBD)</p> <p>Could add: Cost of living calculator (optional) idea being - You don't have to wait til retirement to live like it</p>
<div>FOOTER</div>	