

## **Town of Ashland FY21 – FY25 Tourism Marketing Plan**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As Central Virginia's only town, the Town of Ashland is uniquely positioned to differentiate itself from other localities in the region. The objective of the Tourism Marketing Plan is to clearly identify tourism goals for the next five years, as well as articulate the strategy and tactics that we will deploy to achieve them.

**Vision** – To position Ashland as a critical travel destination within the Richmond Region by promoting and marketing our authentic character, assets, and amenities to increase visitors and stimulate economic growth.

### **TOWN OF ASHLAND TOURISM STAFF & PARTNERS**

#### **Assistant Town Manager**

The Assistant Town Manager is the primary staff person for the Town's tourism activities, including, but not limited to, developing and maintaining relationships with partner organizations, developing and implementing marketing strategies, coordinating advertising and public announcements from all Town departments, and providing guidance to the Town's tourism staff and contractors.

#### **Visitors Center Manager**

The Visitors Center Manager is responsible for operating the Visitors Center as a central hub of tourism-related information for the Town and Hanover County. The Manager is also charged with appropriately staffing the Visitors Center to be open every day of the year except New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and maintaining relationships with business operators and event organizers in the Town and County.

#### **Downtown Ashland Association**

[Downtown Ashland Association](#) (formerly Ashland Main Street Association) is a community non-profit organization that works to enhance and promote Downtown Ashland by cultivating downtown businesses, celebrating historic character, and forging community partnerships. The Town of Ashland and DAA partner frequently on special events and initiatives, and DAA's website and social media channels are primarily visitor-focused.

#### **Hanover County Economic Development**

Hanover County's Economic Development Office works with the Town to coordinate joint ad campaigns, to contract professional services (ie: photography), and to liaise with businesses and historic sites for inclusion in visitor communications.

#### **Randolph-Macon College**

Randolph-Macon College (R-MC) plays a significant role in bringing visitors to the Town through its student population, their families, and the many events held on campus each year. The Town works with R-MC to share assets that can bolster the Town's efforts, including

partnerships with faculty and students, facility rentals, and promotion of R-MC's athletics and arts program offerings.

### **Richmond Region Tourism**

Richmond Region Tourism (RRT) is the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) for the Richmond region. Ashland's visitor site is hosted by RRT as a microsite nested within their main tourism site for the region. This partnership supports marketing of the Town's assets, including the ability to cooperatively purchase ads, and connecting the Town's assets with regional events.

### **ASSETS**

**Downtown Ashland** – A small town with a big personality, railroad tracks run the length of Ashland's unique and historic north-south main street, which is lined with shops, restaurants, a historic inn, and brewery. Its east-west thoroughfare drag, Route 54, includes the Ashland Theatre, the entrance to Randolph-Macon College, additional shops and restaurants, and connects the downtown to Route 1 and Interstate 95.

**Ashland Theatre** – Fully restored and reopened in 2018, Ashland Theatre is an art deco gem and premier entertainment venue featuring the finest in film, live music, and performance.

**Randolph-Macon College** – A private, coeducational liberal arts and sciences college, R-MC's 125-acre campus is located right along the tracks in Ashland. The College enrolls nearly 1,500 undergraduate students and has hundreds of student organizations, a robust athletics schedule, and growing arts program.

**Rail & Virginia History** – The development of rail in Virginia lies at the heart of Ashland's origin story, which is still on full display downtown at Ashland's historic train station and the Ashland Museum. Ashland is also proximal to several historic Civil War battlefields in Hanover County, Patrick Henry's Scotchtown, Hanover Tavern, and the Secretariat Heritage Center at Meadow Event Park.

**Cycling** – Nestled among the rural farmlands of Hanover County, Ashland is well-positioned as a destination for cyclists on day rides out from the City of Richmond and surrounding counties. Bike routes 1 and 76 intersect in downtown Ashland providing a convenient layover for cyclists.

**Amtrak** – With daily service to and from Ashland's historic train station, Amtrak not only improves Ashland's accessibility, but also helps to enhance and improve Ashland's charm and appeal by exposing the Town to rail travelers from across the U.S.

**Interstate 95** – Bringing thousands of travelers through Ashland daily, I-95 is the primary north-south travel corridor on the East Coast, and Ashland is a popular pitstop for meals and refueling. Interstate 95 also provides a quick connection for Kings Dominion's two million visitors to eat, sleep and shop in Town on their way to and from the amusement park.

## **CHALLENGES**

**Lack of Tourism Infrastructure** – Special events often bring thousands of visitors into our historic downtown, which has finite public parking options. Parking can also be a challenge on weekend evenings as restaurants fill up with date night-ers or a popular event is scheduled at Ashland Theatre. The Town should identify new parking assets for visitors and improve wayfinding signage in the tourism corridor (Route 54). The Town should also develop plans to expand the number of rooms and price point range of lodging assets.

**Underutilized Properties** – Due to changes in property ownership and/or conditions of the buildings themselves, several long-term commercial vacancies in Ashland continue to pose a challenge to Ashland’s welcoming environment and its potential for economic growth. In addition, significant portions of commercial real estate within the Town’s tourism corridor are occupied by non-transactional professional businesses (i.e. legal, insurance, and real estate offices), which provide a valuable service to residents but do not attract visitors and generate tourism-related revenue. The Town should develop incentives that encourage these businesses to locate either outside of the corridor or to locations within the corridor that do not occupy first floor storefronts.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

**Branding** – Slated for completion, adoption, and roll out in 2020, the Town’s new brand and “Worth a Date” marketing campaign will give the Town the brand identity, messaging, and tools needed to attract visitors. However, for the branding to “stick” and be effective, brand guidelines and messaging will need to be consistent and adopted across all channels.

**Trolley Line Trail / Ashland to Petersburg Trail (ATP)** – Similar to Virginia’s Capital Trail, this proposed multi-use trail from the Virginia Department of Transportation would run approximately 41 miles through seven localities, with the Trolley Line Trail and Town of Ashland serving as the northern trailhead. As the northern trailhead for ATP, the Town can capitalize on its position as the beginning and ending destination for users of this multi-use trail. Portions of this trail may also be aligned with the East Coast Greenway, which will provide national exposure for the region and Town.

**Location** – Thanks to Ashland’s convenient location along I-95, the Town is an easy drive (or train ride) from Richmond and its surrounding counties, Fredericksburg, and even Northern Virginia. Further, as our partners at Richmond Region Tourism increase their efforts to become a tourist destination for conventions, entertainment, leisure travel and sports tournaments, there are opportunities for Ashland to showcase our unique assets to these markets as well.

**Special Events** – The Town is blessed to host special events throughout the year, including two parades, five road races, Off the Rails Brewfest, the Strawberry Faire, Train Day, Light Up the Tracks, and Ashland Street Parties. These events require significant effort from the organizing entities and their volunteers. It could benefit the execution of these events if one organization was formed to assume the responsibility to manage these events. Combining efforts into one

central organization may result in the development of new events to attract even more visitors to Ashland.

## **RESEARCH**

The following research was compiled from statistical reports and summaries published by [Richmond Region Tourism](#) (RRT) and [Virginia Tourism Corporation](#) (VTC). These numbers provide valuable insight into visitor spending and travel trends both locally and statewide, and demonstrate that investment in tourism marketing programs results in economic benefits to localities.

### **Visitor Spending**

In 2018, tourism was responsible for \$73 million in local taxes collected in the United States.<sup>1</sup> More than 7 million people visit the Richmond Region annually, contributing more than \$2 billion to the local economy. Tourism generates more than 20,000 jobs in the Richmond Region. If not for tourism spending, Richmond Region households would pay an additional \$585 per year in taxes.<sup>2</sup>

Local governments in Virginia directly benefit from domestic travel. During 2018, domestic travel spending generated \$701.5 million in local tax revenue for municipal governments, 20.1 percent of total domestic travel-generated tax revenue in the state. Each domestic travel dollar produced 2.7 cents for local tax coffers.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to visitor spending, Hanover/Ashland ranks fourth in the Richmond region behind Henrico, City of Richmond, and Chesterfield. Visitors spent \$258.75 million in Hanover/Ashland in 2018, a number we believe is poised for growth with proper investment in tourism marketing.<sup>4</sup> In Town this translates to \$787,839 collected for just lodging taxes in FY2019.

### **Travel Trends**

#### *Richmond is Virginia's Most Visited City*

Pulling in 52 percent of the state's visitors in 2018, Richmond is Virginia's most popular city among tourists.<sup>5</sup> This fact represents excellent tourism growth potential for Ashland due to our proximity to the city.

#### *Travel Planning is Last Minute*

Fifty-six percent of travelers to Virginia decide to visit less than one month before their trip, which means that having compelling travel planning resources easily accessible and up-to-date should be a priority for Ashland.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: U.S. Travel Association

<sup>2</sup> Source: Richmond Region Tourism, Economic Impact Report

<sup>3</sup> Source: U.S. Travel Association

<sup>4</sup> Source: Richmond Region Tourism

<sup>5</sup> Source: Virginia Tourism Corporation

### *Shopping is #1*

While the initial impetus for visiting Virginia is often to see relatives, these visitors also report shopping as their primary activity, with visits to rural areas, historic sites, and dining falling not far behind.<sup>6</sup> Retail shopping is one of the major activities of people traveling in Virginia. In 2018, domestic travelers spent more than \$2.4 billion on purchases at retail stores. Retail shopping accounted for 9.4 percent of domestic traveler trip spending in Virginia.<sup>7</sup>

### **OUR VISITORS**

According to RRT, approximately half of the region's visitors are family-oriented travelers. This group has an interest in multigenerational family vacations and they find safety, proximity to home, cost and favorable climate important in their travel planning decisions.

RRT's research also showed that 20 percent of the region's travelers are active adventurers. This group is younger than the average traveler and less likely to involve a family. They also have a greater interest in being outside and participating in sports. The future completion of the Trolley Line Trail / Ashland to Petersburg Trail (ATP) beyond our corporate limits should increase our exposure to the active adventurer market.

### **Target Market**

The consumer target market for the Town of Ashland visit Ashland for a daytrip or an overnight visit. They live in the City of Richmond and its surrounding counties, or in localities along I-95 such as, Fredericksburg, Woodbridge, and Northern Virginia. These visitors are looking for an escape from the pace and expense of Northern Virginia, and they generally enjoy supporting local businesses.

### **Visitor Profile**

Age 30-55  
Individuals and couples, with or without children  
Work full time, generally white-collar profession  
Moderate to upper income  
Visiting Ashland for an "experience"

## **MARKETING STRATEGY**

### **Goals**

- To build a distinct presence in the tourism marketplace by establishing a recognizable and easily marketable "brand" for Ashland.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Virginia Tourism Corporation

<sup>7</sup> Source: U.S. Travel Association

- To increase the demand in Ashland for hotel rooms, retail and restaurant sales, and attendance at special events that improve economic vitality and the quality of life for residents.
- To gain regional media exposure for Ashland’s attractions, outdoor recreational opportunities, rich history, and unique personality to bolster awareness and understanding of Ashland’s brand.
- To support the enrichment of Ashland’s multicultural, performing and visual arts, historic, recreation, business and entertainment communities.
- To build and leverage community partnerships that contribute to the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry in Ashland.

## Strategy

**“Worth a Date”** – The Town will incorporate its new brand into the marketing campaign “Worth a Date”, which was conceptualized by the VCU Brand Center in 2018. With the assistance of a design firm, the campaign will be tailored for special events and permanent assets. Every three years the ad campaign will be refreshed by staff with the assistance of an ad agency.

**Content Creation** – With the assistance of consultants, the Town will develop a library of content (ie. images, video, written content, etc.) that can be used more than once in the Town’s marketing efforts, and it can be shared with our partner organizations. This library and sharing will allow the Town to have consistent messaging across platforms and organizations.

## Methods

### Advertising

*Social Media* – In FY2020, we will initiate a trial run of social media marketing to compare the success of general ads versus ads focused on special events. Ad performance will be analyzed and compared to other media to determine future year campaigns and expenditures.

*Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC)* – The Town will discontinue print ads in the Virginia Travel guide and solely focus on digital ads through Leisure Media to VTC’s site ([www.Virginia.org](http://www.Virginia.org)) and VTC’s Digital CO-OP for FY2020. The ads will run in October to highlight Train Day, Holiday Parade and Light Up the Tracks, and again in May to highlight the Strawberry Faire and other outdoor events. October and May have historically been two of our lowest months for visitors at the Visitor Center.

*Richmond Magazine* – The Town will advertise in *Richmond Magazine* once per year, typically the Best and Worst edition unless the Town is featured in an article in a separate edition. The goal of this ad is to reinforce Ashland’s proximity to the rest of the Richmond region.

*Altria Theatre Playbill* – The Town will selectively advertise in playbills for the shows held at Altria Theatre. The Altria Theatre has approximately 3,500 seats and generally pulls attendees

from the central Virginia market, one of the Town's targeted markets. The average two-week show reaches 32,000 attendees.

### **Digital**

*Visitor Website* ([www.VisitAshlandVA.com](http://www.VisitAshlandVA.com)) – The Town's RRT-hosted microsite will capitalize on RRT's built-in web and digital marketing resources around design, maintenance, and search engine optimization (SEO) to drive visitors from the main RRT site to the Ashland subsite. Consisting of a simple navigator geared toward travelers' interests and a directory for easy browsing, the Town's visitor site will serve as a chief marketing tool and planning guide for visitors.

The site will also link to Downtown Ashland Association's site ([www.ashlandvirginia.com](http://www.ashlandvirginia.com)) to further showcase our historic downtown and its draws. Key to the success of the site will be the Town's ability keep the information current. Photographs should reflect the season, events should be populated six months or more in advance, and listings should be routinely inspected for accuracy.

### **Media Outreach**

*Earned Media* – Local and regional lifestyle and travel publications (print and online) will be approached with targeted feature pitches and story development aimed at increasing Ashland's profile as a small-town getaway destination. The Town will also help facilitate and organize one FAM trip per year.

*Influencer Relations* – Social media, specifically Instagram, has become a valuable travel and lifestyle resource for a large portion of our target visitor demographic. Therefore, the Town will identify and establish relationships with local and regional social media influencers in the travel and lifestyle sphere, invite them to visit and experience Ashland, and encourage them to share their experiences with their followers.

### **Printed Materials**

*Visitor Guide* – The Town will continue to publish the annual Visitor and Events Guide and share it with our partner visitor centers across Virginia. Future iterations will be reduced in scope and eventually phased out to be only a rack card by FY2025. No additional brochures will be printed except single sheet maps that have a specific focus, such as biking, recreation or downtown.

*Direct Mail Post Cards* – As a one-year trial, the Town will mail post cards to select visitors who sign in at the Visitor Center to thank them for their visit, and to encourage them to return and to share their positive experience with friends and family. These post cards may include a feature such as a small value Town gift certificate if turned in at the Visitor Center within a specific date range. Performance of these post cards being returned will determine their future use.

## **Visitor Experience**

*Visitor Center* – The Visitor Center will continue to operate as a central location to provide information. As visitors continue to transition from print media to digital media the content housed at the Visitor Center will evolve from primarily brochures to displays and interactive devices. Collaboration with Downtown Ashland Association, Ashland Museum, and Hanover County will be explored to build on areas of common interest and share resources.

*Interstate 95/England Street Corridor* – As the primary entrance to Ashland, the Town must maintain the Interstate 95/England Street *tourism* corridor area as a clean and welcoming environment. The Town’s primary effort will be providing an attractive area that includes a well-manicured landscape plan, relevant wayfinding signage and coordination with local business operators to replicate the Town’s effort. The Town will also continue its effort to work with VDOT on improving the visual appeal of VDOT’s right-of-way at the interchange, which could include a decorative sign identifying Ashland for Interstate 95 travelers.