

From Alignment to Impact

Arkansas Regional Tourism Associations Playbook



“Establishing Arkansas

as a leading year-round destination requires more than strong places - it requires strong partnerships. By uniting with our Natural State Partners, we amplify the distinct stories of our regions, present Arkansas with one bold voice, extend visitation beyond peak seasons, and fuel continued growth of a tourism economy that supports communities statewide.”

DALANEY THOMAS, DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF TOURISM



A Shared Purpose, A Shared Future

ARKANSAS IS AT AN INFLECTION POINT.

Arkansas' economy benefits from billions in visitor spending and job creation annually. To fuel a solid foundation for continued growth, the Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism continues to focus on long-term destination building, not short bursts — promoting year-round experiences, authentic places, and deep engagement with local lifestyles and heritage. In order to manifest this, the State of Arkansas has set two ambitious goals to achieve by 2034: Double the 2% tourism tax from \$27 million to \$50 million, and grow the outdoor recreation economy to \$8 billion in state GDP.

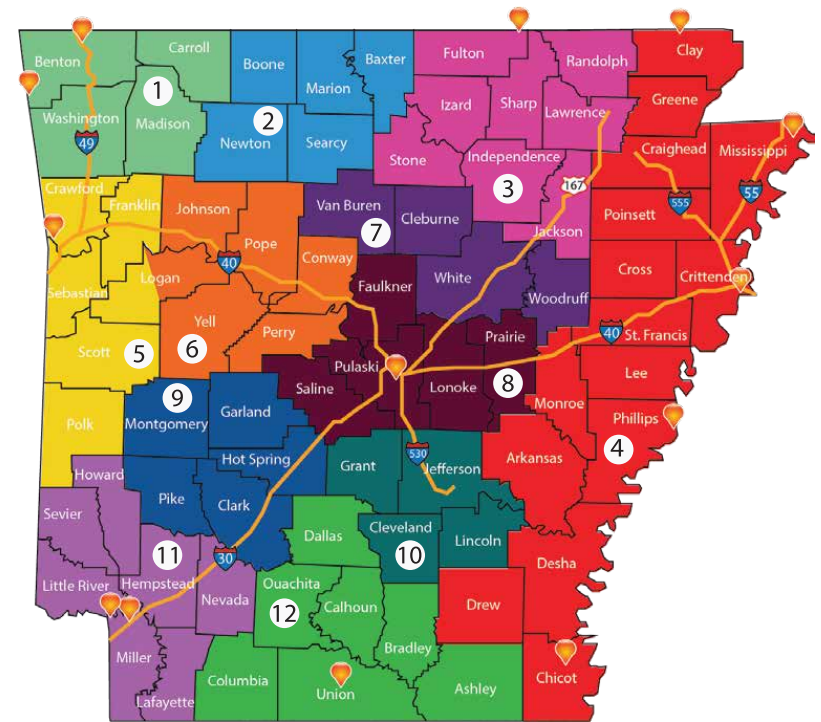
These are not abstract financial benchmarks. They are signals of a deeper ambition—one that depends on people choosing Arkansas to visit, return, invest, build businesses, relocate, and stay.

They are shaped by the quality of experiences people have in our towns, on our trails, in our parks, at our events, and through the stories they carry home. They are influenced by how well Arkansas' natural, cultural, and historic assets are stewarded, connected, and brought to life. And they are ultimately delivered through a complex system of regional tourism associations, local communities, state parks, destination marketing organizations, tourism businesses, and industry allies working together.

At the center of that system – and vital to accomplishing these great goals - are the Arkansas Regional Tourism Associations.

Arkansas does not need to be everything to everyone. It needs to be deeply itself—region by region, story by story, experience by experience.

ARKANSAS REGIONAL TOURIST ASSOCIATIONS



1. Northwest Arkansas Tourist Association
2. Ozark Mountain Region
3. Ozark Gateway Tourist Council
4. Arkansas Delta Byways
5. Western Arkansas' Mountain Frontier
6. Arkansas River Valley Tri-Peaks
7. Greers Ferry Lake/Little Red River
8. Heart of Arkansas Travel Association
9. Diamond Lakes Travel Association
10. Arkansas' Land of Legends
11. Arkansas' Great Southwest
12. Arkansas' South Tourism Association

Deeply Arkansas

Building on Authenticity, Experience, and Regional Strength

Thinking Systems

WEAVING EXPERIENCE, HOSPITALITY, AND PUBLIC VALUE

Visitors do not simply consume destinations—they engage with places, people, and stories. Arkansas competitive advantage lies in designing experiences that are authentic, welcoming, and deeply human.

An ethos of unreasonable hospitality—care that goes beyond expectations—must be embedded across the tourism system, from visitor centers and events to digital touchpoints and community partnerships. This mindset transforms visitors into advocates and strengthens Arkansas' reputation far beyond any single campaign.

Tourism in Arkansas is no longer just about attracting visitors. It is about shaping destinies—for communities, businesses, landscapes, and the state as a whole.

By embracing place-based economic development, experience-driven strategy, and intentional alignment with the Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism, the Arkansas Regional Tourism Associations (RTA) are uniquely positioned to lead this next chapter—together building a stronger, more resilient, and more meaningful Arkansas.

Why RTAs Matter:

Regional Tourism Associations are where Arkansas' 2034 tourism goals become lived experience—turning statewide strategies into measurable regional impact.



The Powerful Role of the Arkansas Tourism Associations

RTAs serve as the connective tissue between community-level assets, regional collaboration, and the Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism's statewide strategy. They translate Arkansas' brand promise into lived experience—aligning promotion with placemaking, marketing with stewardship, and economic impact with community benefit. When RTAs are effective, tourism growth strengthens the places that make Arkansas special.

The Arkansas brand is strongest when:

- Regions are distinct
- Stories are authentic
- Experiences are high quality
- Messaging is aligned, not identical

RTAs are brand builders—not just brand users.

From Goals to Experiences

RTAs ensure Arkansas is not just seen, but remembered—turning experiences into lasting economic value.



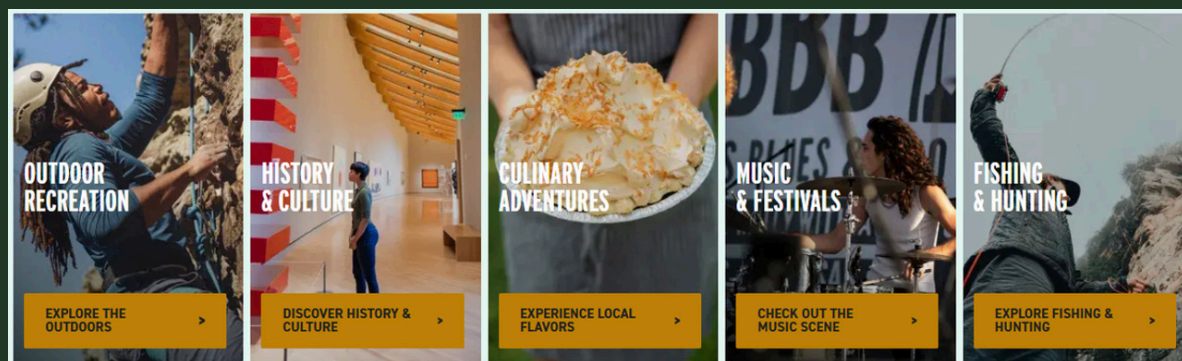
Alignment as Strategy

Clear and intentional alignment between Regional Tourism Associations and the Department's five tourism pillars reflects a place-based economic development approach rooted in Arkansas' greatest strengths: its landscapes, parks, heritage, and people.

When RTAs align their strategies, grant investments, and partnerships with these pillars, they move beyond promotion alone. They help build durable tourism ecosystems that support local economies, protect natural and cultural assets, and reinforce Arkansas' long-term competitiveness as both a destination and a place to live.

Alignment allows limited resources to work harder. It enables regional creativity within a shared framework. And it ensures that tourism growth remains rooted in local identity while advancing statewide goals.

Regional Tourism Associations align place, people, and partners—ensuring tourism growth strengthens communities as much as it attracts visitors.



The role of the Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism Regional Tourism

The State Tourism Associations' annual grant resources—**approximately \$1.8M statewide**—play a critical role in this system. Directly linked to the impact of the 2% tourism tax, these funds are an opportunity to deliver public value by:

- Strengthening regional collaboration
- Improving the quality of visitor experiences
- Deepening place-based storytelling
- Supporting park-adjacent communities
- Generating measurable economic and social return

The RTA grant is not just funding—it is how the state invests in aligned strategy, stronger experiences, and measurable regional impact.

How to Use This Playbook

This playbook is designed as a collaborative tool—created to support, not direct, the work of the Arkansas Regional Tourism Associations (RTAs). The Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism recognizes RTAs as trusted partners in shaping Arkansas' tourism future. This guide provides a shared language, set of frameworks, and practical models to support annual planning, strategic decision-making, and grant development.

The playbook is organized around a continuous strategy-to-impact model. The strategies and tools within it are not intended to function as a linear checklist or a one-time plan. Instead, the model reflects how meaningful, place-based tourism work actually happens: through alignment, action, learning, and refinement—repeated over time.

By using the tools in this playbook, RTAs can:

- Better align local strengths with statewide priorities
- Clearly articulate purpose, outcomes, and impact in grant applications
- Strengthen coordination across partners and regions
- Grow both the resources and impact of regional tourism efforts

The circular nature of the model emphasizes that learning and refinement continually inform future alignment and decision-making. Used together, these tools are intended to strengthen the quality, impact, and long-term sustainability of tourism across Arkansas.

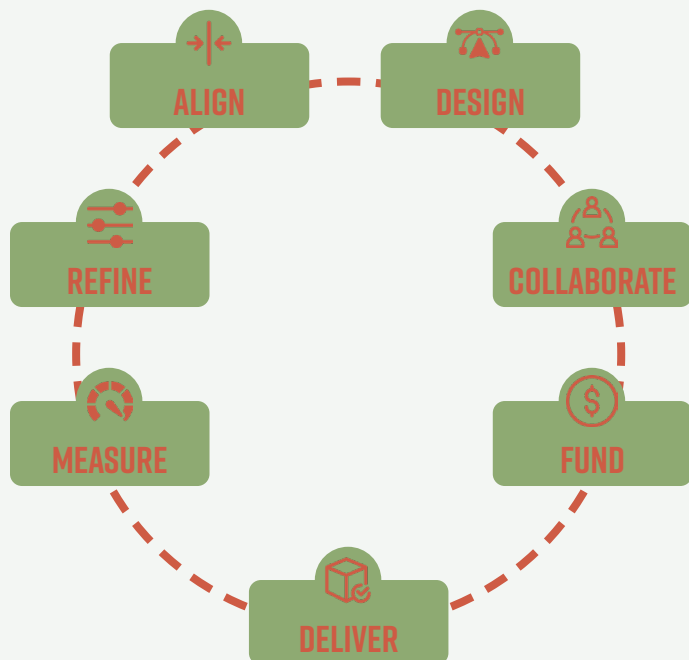


By aligning local strengths with statewide priorities, this playbook helps RTAs grow resources, articulate impact, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of tourism across Arkansas.

Why This Model Matters

This continuous approach reinforces discipline without rigidity—providing clear structure while remaining flexible enough to respond to change. By emphasizing shared roles and clear expectations, it encourages ownership and accountability across partners, rather than concentrating responsibility in any single organization. Most importantly, this model allows tourism strategies to evolve alongside the places they serve—adapting as communities grow, markets shift, and opportunities emerge—while remaining grounded in shared purpose and long-term value.

A CONTINUOUS STRATEGY-TO-IMPACT MODEL



ALIGN | Pillars • Place • Partners

Start with shared priorities, clear identity, and aligned partners. Alignment ensures that tourism strategies reinforce local values, regional goals, and long-term vision.

DESIGN | Experiences • Stories • Hospitality

Translate alignment into compelling experiences and authentic storytelling. Design focuses on how visitors engage with place—through culture, food, nature, and human connection.

COLLABORATE | Communities • Parks • Industry

Effective tourism is co-created. Collaboration brings together municipalities, nonprofits, parks, businesses, and industry partners to deliver more than any single entity could alone.

FUND | Grants • Leverage • Value

Funding follows clarity and confidence. This stage blends public, private, earned, and philanthropic resources—leveraging dollars toward shared outcomes rather than isolated efforts.

DELIVER | Quality • Consistency • Care

Execution matters. Delivery emphasizes reliable operations, hospitality standards, and care for both visitors and residents—building trust through performance.

MEASURE | Impact • Learning • Trust

Measurement goes beyond attendance. It tracks economic impact, community benefit, and organizational learning—strengthening credibility and trust with partners and investors.

REFINE | Adapt • Improve • Scale

Insights from measurement inform improvement. What works is strengthened and scaled; what doesn't is adjusted—closing the loop and returning the process to alignment.

Turning Strategy into Real Impact

Systems Thinking and Placemaking in Action

Maura Gast's often quoted and deeply impactful words

illustrate the virtuous cycle between visitation, livability, workforce, and economic development. It makes clear that tourism outcomes are not isolated—they are the result of intentional design, collaboration, and long-term thinking about place.

Chapter 2 builds directly on this insight. The models, tools, and strategies introduced here are designed to help Regional Tourism Associations move from this philosophy into practice—by shaping experiences, aligning partners, guiding investments, and measuring outcomes that strengthen both visitor appeal and community well-being.

This chapter introduces modes of strategic thinking and practical tools that bring brands to life through a place-based approach to tourism. Designed to be practical, adaptable, and collaborative, these resources can help Regional Tourism Associations translate shared priorities into clear plans, informed decisions, and measurable outcomes.

Rather than prescribing a single approach, the tools in this chapter are meant to be used flexibly—individually or together—to support planning, partnership development, grant applications, and the ongoing refinement of regional tourism efforts.

“If you build a place people want to visit, you build a place where people want to live. If you build a place where people want to live, you’ll build a place where people want to work. If you build a place where people want to work, you build a place where business needs to be. If you build a place where business has to be, you’ll build a place where people have to visit.”

—MAURA GAST, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT IRVING CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

SYSTEMS-BASED STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? How does our approach strengthen the experience of place for both visitors and residents?

? How is our work plan distinctly rooted in our region and difficult to replicate elsewhere?

? How does this effort advance livability, workforce, and local economic vitality—not just visitation?

? How does this proposal align with statewide tourism priorities while expressing regional identity?

? What do we need to measure, learn, and refine to improve experience quality and long-term impact?

What Is Place—

AND THE WORK OF PLACEMAKING?

People search for places they can relate to, where they feel a sense of belonging. Place is more than a location—it is the cumulative result of experiences, stories, landscapes, and relationships that shape how a destination is felt and remembered.

The value of place emerges at the intersection of personal journeys and collective narratives. It is defined both by how individuals experience a destination and by the shared stories communities tell about who they are, where they've been, and what they stand for.

Placemaking is the intentional work of curating, cultivating, and crafting these experiences. It is not a single project or asset, but an ongoing practice—shaping environments, programming, storytelling, and hospitality in ways that foster emotional connection, pride, and affinity among both residents and visitors.

HOW TOURISM ENTITIES LEVERAGE PLACEMAKING

Tourism entities play a critical role in placemaking by translating local identity into meaningful experiences. Through thoughtful design, collaboration, and stewardship, they help ensure that tourism does not dilute place—but strengthens it.

When tourism organizations align promotion with placemaking:

- Visitors experience destinations as authentic and welcoming
- Communities see tourism as additive, not extractive
- Experiences generate loyalty, advocacy, and long-term value

At its best, tourism-led placemaking builds places people want to visit, return to, and belong to—while reinforcing the qualities that make communities proud to call them home.



Think Like a Placemaker

- ➔ **Design for residents first** — great visitor experiences follow
- ➔ **Curate experiences**, not just promote assets
- ➔ **Treat storytelling as infrastructure**, not marketing
- ➔ **Partner beyond tourism** to shape shared spaces and systems
- ➔ **Use funding as a placemaking lever**, not a promotional spend
- ➔ **Measure value**, not just volume (quality, pride, trust)
- ➔ **Practice hospitality** as a regional culture
- ➔ **Think in cycles**, not campaigns—refine and realign over time

PLACEMAKING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? How are we intentionally directing place-based investments to attract new tourism opportunities, strengthen existing assets, and positively influence how our community grows and develops?

? Which experiences need to be cultivated over time rather than launched as one-time projects?
(Practices, traditions, seasonal rhythms, partnerships, talent)

? What must be intentionally crafted to turn local assets into a cohesive economic offering?
(Packaging, sequencing, interpretation, design standards, hospitality norms)

? How does this strategy grow local capacity—not just demand?
(Skills, workforce readiness, business readiness, creative leadership, stewardship)

? What behaviors, investments, or partnerships will this work unlock that would not happen otherwise?
(New collaborations, longer stays, local entrepreneurship, reinvestment)

What is the Experience Economy?

The Experience Economy recognizes that people no longer seek goods or services alone—they seek memorable, meaningful experiences that create emotional connection and personal value. In tourism, this means visitors are not simply consuming destinations; they are participating in stories, relationships, and moments that shape how they remember a place.

Experiences sit at the intersection of:

- Place (landscape, culture, community)
- People (hospitality, interaction, belonging)
- Story (meaning, identity, narrative)

In the Experience Economy, value is created not by volume alone, but by depth of engagement, quality of interaction, and lasting impact—for both visitors and communities.

Regional Tourism Associations are uniquely positioned to turn the Experience Economy into clear, place-based strategy. By acting as placemakers, connectors, and stewards, RTAs can translate experience-driven thinking into regional advantage.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS TO ADVANCE AN EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

- ➔ **Design for seamless experience + story**
Reduce friction across the visitor journey so experiences feel intuitive, connected, and effortless—from arrival to departure.
- ➔ **Prioritize personalization**
Tailor experiences to individual interests and needs, using customization to create connection, relevance, and a sense of adventure.
- ➔ **Align the hardware of place**
Ensure physical conditions support positive experiences—well-lit streets, clear wayfinding, active storefronts, cared-for public spaces, and the removal of negative physical cues.
- ➔ **Strengthen the software of place**
Align policies, ordinances, business practices, activations, storytelling, and workforce training to reinforce hospitality, quality, and ease of use.
- ➔ **Invest in experience continuity**
Coordinate assets, partners, and programming so visitors experience the region as a coherent whole—not a series of disconnected stops.
- ➔ **Train for hospitality as culture**
Equip frontline staff, partners, and ambassadors to consistently deliver welcoming, human-centered interactions.
- ➔ **Design for effortlessness**
Make it easy to navigate, understand, and engage with a place—clarity builds trust and enjoyment.

EXPERIENCE ECONOMY STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? What specific moments along the visitor journey are we intentionally designing—and where are we leaving experience to chance?
(Arrival, navigation, welcome, participation, departure, follow-up)

? Where does friction exist today, and what would it take to make engagement effortless?
(Physical access, information clarity, hospitality, coordination across partners)

? Which local stories, voices, and cultural practices are underrepresented—and how will this plan elevate them?
(Whose story is being told, and by whom?)

? What systems must work better together for this experience to succeed?
(Parks, downtowns, events, businesses, policies, workforce, digital platforms)

? If this initiative is successful, what will feel meaningfully different about the region in three years?
(Not just metrics—reputation, pride, confidence, and lived experience)

What Is Blue Ocean Thinking?

Blue Ocean Thinking is a strategic approach focused on creating new, uncontested market space rather than competing head-to-head in crowded, “red ocean” markets. Instead of trying to outperform similar destinations on the same attributes, Blue Ocean Thinking asks organizations to redefine value—by elevating what truly matters, eliminating what does not, and combining elements in new ways.

In tourism, this means:

- Moving beyond “more attractions” or “bigger campaigns”
- Designing experiences that are meaningfully different, not just better marketed
- Competing on distinctiveness, relevance, and meaning, not scale

The Regional Tourism Associations are uniquely positioned to apply Blue Ocean Thinking because they sit at the intersection of place, story, and experience. The goal is not to differentiate from the state brand, but to strengthen it through regional distinctiveness.

BLUE OCEAN STRATEGIES FOR REGIONAL DISTINCTION

Compete on meaning, not magnitude

Shift from volume and amenities to experience quality, identity, and belonging.

Eliminate “me-too” tourism

Stop investing in experiences or messages that could exist anywhere.

Recombine what already exists

Blend parks + culture, heritage + creativity, outdoors + hospitality, industry + story.

Elevate what visitors feel, not just what they do

Prioritize hospitality, ease, story, personal connection, and quality over scale.

Create shared value

Design experiences that strengthen community pride, stewardship, and local economies.

BLUE OCEAN STRATEGY: KEY QUESTIONS FOR REGIONAL TOURISM ASSOCIATIONS

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? What can our region offer that feels deeply rooted here—and difficult for any other place to replicate?
(Identity, landscape, culture, story, lived experience)

? Which current investments or messages blend into the tourism “noise,” and what would happen if we stopped funding them?
(Eliminating “me-too” experiences to sharpen focus and impact)

? How can we recombine existing assets in new ways to create experiences that feel fresh but authentic?
(Parks + culture, heritage + creativity, outdoors + hospitality, industry + story)

? What elements of the visitor experience should we elevate to create emotional connection—not just activity?
(Hospitality, ease, interpretation, personal connection, quality over scale)

? How does this initiative create shared value for both visitors and residents over time?
(Community pride, stewardship, workforce stability, and local economic resilience)

Placemaking as Strategy

How Communities Turn Identity into Value

Placemaking Case Studies

The most successful destinations are built by creating places people want to belong to—when identity and everyday experience come first, tourism follows. Arkansas communities win in the experience economy by being unmistakably themselves, proving that distinction does not require scale and that identity matters more than attraction counts.

Across these examples, placemaking precedes promotion, authentic experiences emerge from daily life, and low-volume, high-value tourism is both viable and sustainable. Community pride consistently signals success. The following case studies illustrate different but aligned approaches to building strong, place-based tourism economies rooted in belonging.

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

POP.
191,000

From industrial decline to experience-led destination

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Invested in riverfront public spaces, trails, and cultural assets
- Integrated outdoor recreation, arts, and storytelling
- Focused on livability first, visitation second

IMPACT

- Transformed national perception from “polluted city” to outdoor + innovation hub
- Significant growth in visitation, talent attraction, and downtown reinvestment
- Tourism became a driver of quality of life, not just economic activity

WHY IT MATTERS

Placemaking investments aligned tourism with community renewal.

GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

POP.
70,720

Designing place before promoting place

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Removed highway to reconnect downtown to river
- Designed Falls Park as a shared civic experience
- Curated walkability, hospitality, and programming

IMPACT

- Downtown revitalization and major private investment
- Strong resident pride and repeat visitation
- National recognition as a “most livable” and “best downtown” city

WHY IT MATTERS

Experience quality, not attraction count, drove success.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

POP.
1.36 MIL.

Turning heritage into immersive experience

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Shifted from factory tours to storytelling-rich experiences
- Connected rural distilleries, towns, and hospitality
- Elevated interpretation, design, and visitor flow

IMPACT

- Millions in annual visitor spending
- Extended stays and rural economic benefit
- Bourbon became an experience, not just a product

WHY IT MATTERS

Experience design unlocked value in existing assets.

MARFA, TEXAS

POP.
2,200

Small place, outsized identity

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Embraced art, landscape, and remoteness as assets
- Avoided over-programming or mass appeal
- Let story, mystery, and scale shape experience

IMPACT

- Global cultural recognition
- High-value, low-volume visitation
- Strong identity without dilution

WHY IT MATTERS

Not every place needs scale—some need clarity.

DECORAH, IOWA

POP.
7,500

Nature, culture, and local pride

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Integrated trails, river access, downtown vitality, and Nordic heritage
- Prioritized livability and outdoor experience
- Aligned tourism with environmental stewardship

IMPACT

- Strong tourism economy tied to outdoor recreation
- Community pride and talent attraction
- Balanced growth without losing identity

WHY IT MATTERS

Tourism succeeds when it strengthens everyday life.

PADUCAH, KENTUCKY

POP.
27,000

Arts-based placemaking as economic strategy

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Created the Artist Relocation Program, pairing affordable historic housing with studio space
- Invested in downtown walkability, riverfront access, and cultural programming
- Positioned creativity and authenticity—not scale—as the value proposition

IMPACT

- Revitalized a declining downtown
- Attracted artists, entrepreneurs, and visitors
- Tourism and quality of life improved simultaneously

WHY IT MATTERS

Placemaking created a new identity, not just new marketing.

LANESBORO, MINNESOTA

POP.
750

Small town → national arts destination

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Built a cohesive arts + outdoor recreation experience
- Anchored placemaking around the Commonweal Theatre
- Integrated trails, river access, lodging, and storytelling

IMPACT

- Tourism became the primary economic driver
- High visitor loyalty and repeat visitation
- Strong resident pride and volunteerism

WHY IT MATTERS

Experience design—not population—created impact.

FLOYD, VIRGINIA

POP.
450

Music and culture as place anchors

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Centered placemaking around music, arts, and Appalachian culture
- Supported local venues, markets, and weekly gatherings
- Focused on participation, not performance

IMPACT

- National recognition disproportionate to size
- Consistent visitor flow tied to authentic experience
- Strong local ownership of tourism

WHY IT MATTERS

Culture is infrastructure in small places.

FRUITA, COLORADO

POP.
13,000

Outdoor recreation as identity

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Designed town around biking culture (trails, events, downtown access)
- Integrated wayfinding, festivals, and business alignment
- Positioned lifestyle as the experience

IMPACT

- Became a nationally known biking destination
- Tourism growth supported downtown revitalization
- Strong alignment between visitor experience and resident life

WHY IT MATTERS

Recombining assets can redefine a region's role.

CROSBY / CUYUNA LAKES, MN

POP.
4,000

Reinventing a mining landscape into a recreation destination

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Transformed former mine lands into a state recreation area
- Built a nationally competitive mountain biking network
- Aligned downtown businesses to outdoor users

IMPACT

- Attracted a new visitor market that didn't previously exist
- Reversed population decline trends
- Sparked new business formation and reinvestment

WHY IT MATTERS

Reframing legacy assets can create entirely new demand.

LEAVENWORTH, WASHINGTON

POP.
2,400

Intentional theming as identity strategy

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Adopted Bavarian architecture and cultural programming
- Coordinated aesthetics, events, and business alignment
- Created an immersive, walkable town experience

IMPACT

- Became one of Washington's most visited small towns
- Strong year-round tourism economy
- Highly recognizable and differentiated brand

WHY IT MATTERS

Clear identity—when well executed—creates uncontested market space.

ASTORIA, OREGON

POP.
10,000

Working waterfront + culture as identity

PLACEMAKING & EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

- Reclaimed industrial waterfront for public access and storytelling
- Integrated maritime history, arts, film culture, and food
- Positioned authenticity and grit as strengths

IMPACT

- Became a cultural gateway to the Oregon Coast
- Strong tourism growth without resort-style development
- Reinforced local pride and working-waterfront identity

WHY IT MATTERS

Honest stories and lived culture create durable distinction.

One Brand, Many Places

How a Shared Identity Flows from State to Street

Arkansas' strength as a destination lies not in a single brand expression, but in a shared identity that flows seamlessly from statewide vision to everyday experience. When brand architecture is aligned—from the Big Brand to the street level—it creates clarity, efficiency, and momentum across the entire tourism ecosystem.

This is the alignment imperative: to ensure that strategy, storytelling, investment, and experience reinforce one another at every scale. When alignment is strong, Arkansas does not compete as fragmented destinations—it advances as a connected system of places that feel coherent, authentic, and alive.

The Alignment Imperative

FROM STATE TO STREET

To reach Arkansas' ambitious fiscal and impact goals, strategies must be intentionally aligned and coordinated across four interconnected levels:

State Level

The state defines the vision and overarching brand—The Natural State—positioning Arkansas as a place of authenticity, nature, and opportunity. This shared framework establishes direction, values, and a unifying promise.

Regional Tourism Associations

RTAs translate the statewide vision into distinct regional narratives and aligned visitor experiences. They connect local strengths to state priorities, ensuring that regional differentiation strengthens—not fragments—the Big Brand.

Community Level

Communities bring the brand to life through placemaking, public realm design, events, and cultural programming. This is where identity becomes tangible—felt in streets, parks, festivals, and everyday interactions.

Business Level

Local businesses deliver daily on the brand promise through hospitality, products, service, and storytelling. These street-level experiences ultimately determine whether the brand feels real, welcoming, and worth returning to.

NESTED BRAND FRAMEWORK



STRATEGIC QUESTION TO SUPPORT NESTED BRAND FRAMEWORK

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

-  How do we translate the state's brand vision into a clear regional narrative that adds value—rather than duplicating or competing with local efforts? (What is uniquely the RTA's role in moving the Big Brand closer to lived experience?)
-  How do we support and amplify community and business-level placemaking without overriding local identity or authority? (What does collaboration look like with A&P Commissions, Chambers, Main Street programs, and local governments?)
-  How can our strategies and funding decisions help local organizations deliver more consistent, higher-quality brand experiences at the street level? (How do we strengthen execution, not just promotion?)
-  How will we know that alignment is working—from state vision to business delivery—and what is our role in refining it over time? (What signals show coherence, momentum, and shared success across the system?)

The Big Brand

THE BRAND OF ARKANSAS

At the state level, the Arkansas brand serves as the core identity and unifying story for the entire tourism ecosystem. It expresses not just what Arkansas offers, but what Arkansas stands for—its promise, values, and character—providing a shared foundation that all regions, communities, and businesses build upon.

The Big Brand defines the essence of place, positioning Arkansas as a destination rooted in nature, innovation, community, and authenticity. It establishes the emotional connection that individual strategies, stories, and experiences ladder up to, ensuring that diverse expressions across the state feel coherent rather than fragmented.

Most importantly, the state brand acts as the North Star. It does not dictate local stories or experiences, but it provides a clear direction—guiding how sub-brands, regional narratives, and street-level experiences align around a shared identity while remaining distinctly local.

Through tools such as a statewide brand platform, a core narrative like **The Natural State**, and shared brand principles, the Big Brand creates the conditions for alignment, efficiency, and momentum across Arkansas' tourism system.

The state brand sets direction, not destination—its power comes from how clearly and consistently it is brought to life by regions, communities, and businesses.



THE POWER OF A SHARED NORTH STAR:

ALIGNMENT QUESTIONS FOR REGIONAL TOURISM ASSOCIATIONS

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? How does our regional story clearly ladder up to the Arkansas brand promise—without repeating it?

? Which elements of the Arkansas brand should be consistently expressed—and where should our region lead with its own identity?

? How do our experiences and placemaking efforts bring the Arkansas brand to life at the street level?

? How do we enable local partners to tell their own stories in ways that still feel unmistakably “Arkansas”?

? How do we measure success in ways that reinforce both the Arkansas brand and our region’s long-term value?

The Regional Level

TOURISM ASSOCIATIONS

At the regional level, Tourism Associations serve as the critical bridge between the state's Big Brand and the lived experience of place. Their role is to translate the Arkansas brand and its five pillars into distinct, compelling regional identities—while ensuring those identities connect seamlessly to neighboring regions and the broader statewide story.

Regional Tourism Associations are not just representatives of individual communities; they are connectors, conveners, and curators. By building cohesion across multiple towns, landscapes, and partners, RTAs help visitors experience Arkansas as a series of interconnected regions, not isolated destinations.

STRENGTHENING REGIONAL STRATEGY THROUGH ALIGNMENT

As RTAs strengthen their own strategies, the opportunity is not simply to stand out—but to stand together.

Effective regional alignment allows Tourism Associations to:

- Extend visitor stays by linking complementary experiences across regions
- Deepen travel itineraries that encourage exploration beyond a single stop
- Cross-pollinate resources, campaigns, and expertise
- Reduce duplication while increasing collective impact

When regional strategies align, Arkansas becomes easier to explore, richer to experience, and more rewarding to revisit.

Regional Tourism Associations create value not just by telling their own story—but by connecting their story to others, turning destinations into journeys and visits into longer stays.

COORDINATING ACROSS REGIONS TO BUILD MOMENTUM

Regional Tourism Associations play a unique role in coordinating across geographies that visitors naturally move through. **This includes working with peer RTAs to:**

- Identify thematic overlaps (outdoor recreation, culinary trails, heritage routes, festivals, hunting and fishing experiences)
- Co-create multi-region itineraries and campaigns
- Share assets, content, and best practices
- Align calendars and promotions to encourage longer, more immersive trips

This collaborative approach turns adjacent regions into complementary chapters of a larger journey, rather than competitors for attention.

THE REGIONAL LEVEL: TOURISM ASSOCIATIONS (CONTINUED)

STEWARDSHIP, ADVOCACY, AND PLACEMAKING

RTAs also act as brand stewards and placemaking advocates—ensuring that regional growth strengthens both experience quality and community value. By championing local and regional assets, supporting placemaking efforts, and encouraging design, storytelling, and hospitality standards, RTAs help ensure that regional tourism development reinforces Arkansas’ long-term competitiveness.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATION

To fully realize the value of alignment, RTAs must also identify and measure the impact of working together. **This includes tracking:**

- Extended length of stay across regions
- Cross-regional itinerary usage
- Shared campaign performance
- Partner engagement and investment leverage
- Qualitative outcomes such as trust, consistency, and brand clarity

Measurement ensures that collaboration is not just aspirational—but strategic, accountable, and continuously improving.

REGIONAL OUTPUTS THAT ADVANCE THE STATEWIDE SYSTEM

When alignment is working well, regional efforts produce:

- Regional campaigns that ladder up to the Arkansas brand
- Compelling itineraries that connect communities and regions
- Cross-community events and experiences
- Shared advocacy for placemaking and experience quality

Together, these outputs extend the reach of the state brand, deepen visitor engagement, and strengthen Arkansas’ tourism ecosystem—region by region, working as one.



TOP 5 STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR REGIONAL ALIGNMENT & COLLABORATION

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? Where do our regional experiences naturally connect with neighboring regions to create longer, more compelling visitor journeys?
(How do we extend stays by designing across boundaries rather than within them?)

? What stories, themes, or pillars do we share with other regions—and how can we co-create itineraries or campaigns around them?
(Outdoor recreation, culinary, festivals and events, hunting and fishing, history and culture)

? Which resources, assets, or capabilities can we share or align to reduce duplication and increase collective impact?
(Content, media, partnerships, funding, expertise)

? How do we ensure consistency with the Arkansas brand while allowing regional and local identity to remain distinct?
(What are the guardrails versus the flex points?)

? How will we measure the success of collaboration—not just individual regional performance?
(Length of stay, cross-region itinerary use, shared campaign outcomes, partner engagement)

Collaborating at the Local Level

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY BRANDS

At the local level, community brands are where the Arkansas brand becomes real, personal, and lived. Cities, towns, and neighborhoods express the brand through streets, storefronts, festivals, policies, and daily interactions. This work is led by Advertising and Promotions Commissions, Chambers, city and county governments, Main Street and downtown organizations, and local partners.

The role of Regional Tourism Associations (RTAs) is not to replace or direct this work—but to support, align, and amplify it, ensuring local efforts ladder up to a coherent regional and statewide experience.

HOW RTAS CAN PLAY THEIR ROLE EFFECTIVELY

Act as Translators, Not Owners

RTAs help translate the state brand and regional strategy into guidance that local partners can use—without prescribing outcomes.

What this looks like:

- Interpreting statewide brand values into locally relevant language
- Helping communities see how their distinct identity fits within “The Natural State”
- Providing clarity on alignment, not control

Strong regional tourism is built locally—when communities lead, and regions connect.

SUPPORT LOCAL BRAND EXPRESSION WHILE PROTECTING COHERENCE

Local organizations define what makes each community distinct. RTAs help ensure those expressions feel “of Arkansas” rather than disconnected or generic.

How RTAs help:

- Share brand principles, tone, and storytelling frameworks
- Encourage consistency in hospitality, quality, and experience standards
- Highlight best practices from peer communities

ALIGN HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE OF PLACEMAKING

Strong community brands require alignment between:

Hardware: streets, signage, public spaces, buildings

Software: policies, codes, programming, business practices, workforce culture

RTA role:

- Convene conversations across silos (planning, tourism, economic development)
- Advocate for experience-aware decisions in zoning, design, and public realm investments
- Support communities in seeing tourism as part of smart growth—not separate from it

COLLABORATING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY BRANDS (CONTINUED)

ELEVATE AND CONNECT LOCAL EFFORTS REGIONALLY

RTAs extend the impact of local placemaking by connecting communities to each other and to the state.

Ways to do this:

- Package local festivals, markets, and experiences into regional itineraries
- Cross-promote Main Street and downtown initiatives across communities
- Share content, assets, and calendars to increase reach and efficiency

BUILD CAPACITY, NOT JUST VISIBILITY

RTAs can strengthen community brands by helping local partners succeed—not just by promoting them.

Support may include:

- Hospitality and storytelling training
- Guidance on experience design and visitor readiness
- Tools for measuring impact and improving quality over time

USE COLLABORATION TO UNLOCK RESOURCES

RTAs can help local partners access opportunities they may not reach alone.

Examples:

- Coordinated grant strategies
- Shared data and insights
- Joint advocacy for placemaking investments
- Alignment that strengthens funding applications and outcomes



When collaboration works, communities own their identity, tourism strengthens rather than extracts, and experiences feel authentic and welcoming. Local policies and investments reinforce long-term place value, while visitors encounter a shared Arkansas ethos—expressed uniquely in every community.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL ALIGNMENT

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? What aspects of your community's identity are you most proud of—and how would you want that story reflected regionally and statewide?
(Centers local voice and ownership.)

? Where do you see tourism adding the most value to your current priorities?
(Placemaking, downtown vitality, events, workforce, quality of life.)

? What experiences, places, or moments best express who you are—and how can we help amplify them as part of a larger regional journey?
(Connects local assets to itineraries and storytelling.)

? Where do alignment or coordination gaps exist that we could help bridge?
(Messaging, calendars, wayfinding, hospitality standards, funding, data.)

? What support from the region would most strengthen your ability to deliver high-quality, authentic experiences?
(Capacity, training, promotion, funding alignment, advocacy.)

The Street Level

BUSINESS & EXPERIENCE BRANDS

At the street level, tourism-focused businesses are where the Arkansas brand becomes real, personal, and believable. Small businesses, cultural venues, restaurants, shops, outfitters, and guides are the everyday touchpoints that visitors remember most. Their spaces, service, and stories determine whether the brand promise feels authentic—or abstract.

These businesses are not just service providers; they are brand ambassadors. Through hospitality, quality, and local storytelling, they translate the values of The Natural State into lived experience. When aligned, their individual efforts accumulate into brand momentum, shaping how a place is felt and trusted over time.

THE ROLE OF ON-THE-GROUND TOURISM BUSINESSES

Their role is to:

- Deliver high-quality, human-scale experiences
- Reflect local identity through product, service, and storytelling
- Create emotional connection and trust with visitors
- Turn visits into advocacy, loyalty, and return travel

When businesses succeed, they strengthen both place identity and economic vitality—making tourism a lived asset rather than a promotional exercise.



Brands are built
on the street—
one interaction,
one story, one
experience at a
time.

HOW RTAS CAN SUPPORT AND ALIGN STREET-LEVEL BUSINESSES

Regional Tourism Associations do not manage or market individual businesses—but they play a critical role in capturing stories, fostering alignment, and building systems that help businesses thrive together.

Capture and Elevate Authentic Stories

RTAs can act as story collectors and amplifiers, working with community partners to surface real voices from the street level.

How:

- Highlight business stories in regional and statewide narratives
- Use business voices to bring campaigns and itineraries to life
- Ensure storytelling reflects lived experience, not just messaging
- This builds trust and grounds the Big Brand in reality.

THE STREET LEVEL: BUSINESS & EXPERIENCE BRANDS (CONTINUED)

ALIGN EXPERIENCE QUALITY WITHOUT HOMOGENIZING

RTAs help establish shared expectations around hospitality, care, and experience quality—without flattening individuality.

How:

- Promote hospitality norms and best practices
- Support training in service, storytelling, and visitor readiness
- Encourage consistency in welcome, wayfinding, and information
- Alignment improves experience quality while preserving local flavor.

This alignment raises the overall quality of experience while preserving each community's local flavor and character.

CONNECT BUSINESSES INTO COHESIVE EXPERIENCES

Individual businesses become more powerful when experienced as part of a designed journey.

How:

- Package businesses into regional itineraries and trails
- Coordinate across communities and sectors
- Help businesses see their role within a larger experience ecosystem

This supports longer stays and deeper engagement.

SUPPORT PLACE-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

RTAs can help businesses thrive by aligning tourism with placemaking, policy, and investment.

How:

- Work with local governments and Main Street programs to advocate for experience-supportive design, zoning, and public realm investments
- Help businesses understand how tourism strategy connects to community development
- Align grant funding and resources around experience quality and place value

This creates a more efficient and intentional system.

APPLY BLUE OCEAN THINKING AT THE STREET LEVEL

RTAs help businesses move beyond competition toward collective distinction.

How:

- Encourage differentiation rooted in place, not imitation
- Help identify what experiences are truly unique and worth elevating
- Support recombination of assets (food + culture, outdoors + hospitality, craft + story)

This creates new value rather than competing for the same demand.

When Regional Tourism Associations, community partners, and local businesses are aligned, businesses clearly understand their role in the larger brand story. Experiences feel coherent, authentic, and human—grounded in place and delivered with care. Visitors encounter a consistent Arkansas ethos, expressed uniquely at every stop, while tourism strengthens local pride, resilience, and long-term economic value.

STRATEGIC QUESTION TO SUPPORT THE STREET LEVEL WORK

These questions are intended to guide collaborative dialogue during regional tourism strategic planning sessions.

? Are we clear—and consistent—about the role we play in the larger Arkansas brand system? (Do our staff, board, and partners understand how we translate the Big Brand into regional and local action?) Are businesses clear and consistent about the role they play in the Arkansas brand system?

? How well do our strategies, funding decisions, and partnerships reinforce a coherent experience across communities and businesses? (Are we designing a system—or supporting disconnected efforts?)

? What are we doing to help local businesses see themselves as brand ambassadors, not just beneficiaries of promotion? (How are we communicating expectations around experience quality, hospitality, and storytelling?)

? Where are we enabling authentic local expression while still protecting consistency with the Arkansas ethos? (Do we provide clear guardrails and flexibility—or leave alignment to chance?)

? How are we measuring whether alignment is strengthening pride, experience quality, and long-term economic value—not just short-term visitation? (What signals tell us the system is working for communities and businesses alike?)

Program Purpose and Grant Framework

Policies, Procedures, and Expectations

Aligning Strategy, Regional Action, and Grant Investment

Arkansas' Regional Tourism Association Grant Program is rooted in a clear purpose: to strengthen the state's economy and quality of life by investing in tourism infrastructure, marketing, heritage, and experience development. The strategic thinking and planning frameworks outlined in this playbook are designed to help Regional Tourism Associations (RTAs) move toward state-aligned, place-based actions—ensuring a shared direction, stronger strategic decision-making, and grant applications that are clearer, more competitive, and fully aligned with updated guidelines and reporting requirements.

When used consistently, these placemaking and strategy tools ensure that regional priorities, projects, and partnerships directly support statewide tourism strategies, and that grant investments advance shared goals rather than fragmented or duplicative efforts.

GRANT APPLICATION ALIGNMENT & EVALUATION CRITERIA

When developing future grant applications, RTAs must demonstrate alignment with the following criteria. Applications will be evaluated based on how clearly and effectively they address these expectations.

TRANSLATING STATE STRATEGY INTO REGIONAL ACTION

The state defines the vision and priorities of The Natural State brand. Grant applications must clearly show how RTAs are translating that vision into regionally relevant strategies—ensuring that local projects, campaigns, and investments reinforce statewide goals while expressing authentic regional identity.

CONNECTING PLANNING TO GRANT INTENT

The grant program is not simply a funding mechanism; it is a strategic investment tool.

Competitive applications will:

- Identify projects that strengthen place and experience quality
- Prioritize investments that generate long-term value
- Clearly articulate how regional initiatives contribute to statewide outcomes

Whether funding park improvements, trail development, cultural assets, marketing efforts, or feasibility studies, applications must demonstrate clear alignment between need, strategy, and impact.

When strategy and funding are aligned, tourism investment becomes a catalyst for lasting place-based value—not just short-term promotion.



Strengthening Key Grant Focus Areas

RTAs should clearly show how grant-funded projects advance the program's core purposes:



Outdoor Recreation

Planning tools support the development and enhancement of parks, trails, and recreational facilities that improve livability while attracting visitors.



Tourism Infrastructure

Strategic frameworks guide investments in welcome centers, signage, historic sites, and other infrastructure that improves experience quality and accessibility.



Economic Development

Experience-led planning ensures that marketing, media, and business-support efforts are tied to authentic place-based value and increased visitor spending.



Heritage & Culture

The playbook reinforces storytelling, cultural programming, and heritage promotion as essential components of Arkansas' brand and visitor appeal.



Feasibility & Readiness

Strategic planning supports feasibility studies that assess readiness, sustainability, and long-term impact before major tourism investments are pursued.



Ensuring Efficient and Effective Use of Public Funds

Because grant funds are divided equally among the 12 regions and focused on advertising and promotion, alignment and coordination are essential. Grant requests must:

- Avoid duplication of local or regional efforts
- Demonstrate coordination with local partners and neighboring regions
- Leverage grant funding alongside other public and private investments
- Ensure marketing and promotion are grounded in real, high-quality visitor experiences

This alignment creates a waterfall effect, where state investment fuels regional action, local activation, and business-level delivery.

From Strategy to Stewardship

At its core, the Regional Tourism Association Grant Program is an investment in Arkansas' brand, places, and people. By applying the strategic thinking and planning frameworks in this playbook, **RTAs can clearly demonstrate that grant-funded activities:**

- Strengthen regional identity
- Support statewide tourism priorities
- Improve experience quality
- Generate lasting economic and community value

This approach ensures that regional actions and state grant goals move forward together—building a more coherent, competitive, and sustainable tourism system for Arkansas.



REGIONAL TOURISM ASSOCIATION GRANT PROGRAM

1

Statewide Alignment & Brand Integration (20 pts)

Measures how well the proposal aligns with The Natural State brand and statewide priorities.

- Clearly translates state brand vision into regional action (0–10)
- Reinforces statewide tourism pillars while expressing regional identity (0–10)

STRONG APPLICATIONS: Demonstrate clear brand alignment without duplicating state efforts or diluting regional character.

2

Place-Based Strategy & Experience Quality (25 pts)

Assesses how effectively the project strengthens place and visitor experience.

- Advances placemaking, experience design, or visitor readiness (0–10)
- Improves authenticity, hospitality, accessibility, or coherence of experience (0–10)
- Demonstrates resident and community benefit (0–5)

STRONG APPLICATIONS: Show intentional design that benefits both visitors and the community.

3

Strategic Use of Grant Funds & Resource Leverage (20 pts)

Evaluates stewardship and efficiency of public investment.

- Clear connection between funding request, strategy, and outcomes (0–10)
- Leverages additional public, private, or partner resources (0–5)
- Avoids duplication and coordinates with local or regional efforts (0–5)

STRONG APPLICATIONS: Show grant funds as a catalyst—not a standalone spend.

4

Collaboration & System Alignment (20 pts)

Measures the quality of partnerships and alignment across levels.

- Demonstrates coordination with local partners (A&P, Chambers, Main Street, local government) (0–10)
- Supports cross-regional or statewide collaboration where appropriate (0–5)
- Clarifies the RTA's role as convener, connector, or steward (0–5)

STRONG APPLICATIONS: Strengthen the tourism ecosystem rather than operating in isolation.

5

Outcomes, Measurement & Long-Term Value (15 pts)

Assesses accountability and future impact.

- Identifies clear outcomes and success indicators (0–5)
- Includes plans for learning, refinement, or sustained impact (0–5)
- Demonstrates contribution to long-term economic and community value (0–5)

STRONG APPLICATIONS: Measures value beyond volume and show how learning informs future strategy.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES:

REGIONAL TOURIST ASSOCIATION PROGRAM

Submission Requirements

- All official reports, pre-approvals, and RFPs (Requests for Payment) must be typed and submitted digitally to the designated Box folder for each Regional Tourism Association (RTA).
- Each Box account will include a dedicated Resource Folder containing all official forms and vetted marketing vendor opportunities.

Signatures & Approvals

- All official reports and RFP submissions must include authorized signatures from both the Chairperson of the Board and the Advertising Chairperson.

Invoice Timelines

- All invoices must be submitted within 90 days of work completion or within 90 days of payment date—whichever occurs first.

Official Association Email Requirement

- Each RTA must maintain an official association email address that includes the name or abbreviation of the Regional Tourism Association.
- Personal email addresses may no longer be used for official correspondence.

Board Composition

- At least 50% of the Board of Directors must be currently employed in the hospitality or tourism industry.

Annual Board Information Submission

- All board member names and contact information must be updated annually.
- This information must be submitted with the Mid-Year Report (due the third Friday of December) and the Year-End Report (due the third Friday of May).

Monthly Reports

- All Monthly Reports must be typed using the official fillable form and uploaded to the Box folder by the mandated deadline.
- No RFPs will be considered for payment until all required Monthly Reports have been submitted on time.



This playbook is a guide for building a more aligned, intentional, and resilient tourism system across Arkansas—one where strategy, place, experience, and investment work together to create lasting value. By grounding decisions in shared purpose, strengthening regional and local collaboration, and stewarding public resources with care, Regional Tourism Associations play a critical role in translating statewide vision into meaningful, place-based impact.

Used consistently, the frameworks and tools in this playbook support clearer strategy, stronger partnerships, and more effective grant investments—ensuring that tourism continues to strengthen Arkansas’ communities, economy, and sense of place for generations to come.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the many partners, leaders, businesses, and professionals whose dedication advances hospitality and tourism across Arkansas. Your work brings The Natural State to life every day.

APPENDIX A:

FOLLOW-UP RESOURCES

The Experience Economy, *B. Joseph Pine II & James H. Gilmore*

A foundational text on why experiences—not products or services—drive value and how places can design for memory, meaning, and differentiation.

Blue Ocean Strategy, *W. Chan Kim & Renée Mauborgne*

A practical framework for creating unique value propositions by redefining what you compete on—essential for regions seeking distinction without scale.

The Art of Placemaking, *Mark A. Wyckoff*

A clear, accessible introduction to placemaking concepts and how communities shape identity, pride, and economic vitality.

The Place Advantage, *Chuck Wolfe*

Explores how authenticity, culture, and sense of place create lasting economic and brand advantage.

Destination Thinking, *Gail Parsonage*

Examines how destinations can move from promotion to stewardship by integrating community, governance, and experience design.

Tourism and Community Development, *Dallen J. Timothy*

Provides insight into balancing tourism growth with community benefit and local identity.

Unreasonable Hospitality, *Will Guidara*

A powerful exploration of hospitality as a mindset and culture—highly relevant for experience-led destinations.

Storytelling for Place, *Bernadette Jiwa*

Demonstrates how meaningful stories create emotional connection and differentiate places and brands.

Designing for the Digital Age, *Kim Goodwin*

Useful for understanding how service design and user experience thinking apply to places and public-facing systems.

Measure What Matters, *John Doerr*

Introduces goal-setting and measurement frameworks (OKRs) adaptable to tourism impact and public value.

The Responsible Tourist, *Jost Krippendorf*

A classic perspective on tourism stewardship, sustainability, and long-term place health.

**This Arkansas Regional Tourism
Association Playbook was prepared for the
Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism
by:**



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From Alignment to Impact

Arkansas Regional Tourism Associations Playbook

JANUARY 2026

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