



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

Strategic Plan 2015-2020

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Table of Contents

- I. Mission
- II. Vision
- III. Sustainable Tourism Outcomes for the Blackstone Valley
- IV. Long Term Goals
- V. Core Values
- VI. What we learned from our community partners
- VII. Issues for development in this strategic plan
- VIII. Strategic plan measures of success
- IX. Five year goals and strategic objectives
- X. Implementation plan (attached)



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

I. Mission

The Mission of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council is to inspire and develop sustainable tourism in the Blackstone Valley.

II. Vision

Residents, businesses and visitors enjoy a responsibly developed destination through sustainable tourism, which enhances the economy, environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and well-being of its residents without compromising the Blackstone Valley for future generations.

III. Sustainable Tourism Outcomes for the Blackstone Valley

- The Blackstone Valley National Historic Park is completed and attracting visitors.
- The Blackstone River Bikeway is completed and connected to a bi-statewide network of bike paths.
- The Blackstone Valley story is valued and important to residents, Rhode Islanders and visitors alike.
- Blackstone Valley communities consider tourism as essential to their prosperity and quality of life such that it influences their planning and priorities.
- The Blackstone River is fishable, swimmable and accessible.
- Tourism resources are sensitive to and responsible for a low carbon/environmental footprint.
- Revitalized city and town centers attract tourists.
- Locally owned restaurants and retail are thriving.
- Cultural sites are well-attended and financially viable.
- The quirky, authentic characteristics of local culture and places are preserved.

IV. Long Term Goals

1. The Blackstone Valley is among top 10 tourist attractions in New England
2. The Blackstone Valley is a focal point for visitors to RI as result of the National Historic Park.
3. Community quality of life is improved
4. Blackstone Valley is a popular destination for individual tourists, group tours and a supporting location for the convention and meeting business in RI
5. Public perception of Rhode Island is greatly improved, and Blackstone Valley is an important contributor to that improvement
6. Blackstone Valley Tourism Council is a relevant, consistent and trusted resource
7. Blackstone Valley Tourism Council is a vibrant organization that attracts highly qualified staff and offers competitive compensation packages.



V. Core Values of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council:

- *Supports culturally authentic tourism* that reflects genuine roots in and connections to local cultures, communities, history, architecture and natural environments.
- *Fosters sustainable tourism* that strengthens and does not displace or detract from existing communities and resources.
- *Delivers high-quality* programs and services.
- *Works at the right scale* to have significant and measurable positive impact on local communities and businesses.
- *Collaborates in a spirit of partnership* with the people and organizations of the Blackstone Valley and any others who share our vision and values.
- *Reflects and learns* from its work using measureable, consistent, mission-related metrics to assess our impact.
- *Includes all Blackstone Valley residents and communities* to benefit from its tourism development plans and projects.
- *Advocates for the distinct needs* of the Blackstone Valley and *promotion of significant local* tourism investments.
- *Aligns with* the Rhode Island state tourism brand to gain maximum impact of its investments.



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

VI. What we learned from our community partners

Major opportunities

- Enhance awareness and interest in the Blackstone Valley as an outdoor recreational resource
- Coordinate programming to reflect key tourism resources (e.g. outdoors, cultural, Blackstone River, etc.).
- Capitalize on Blackstone Valley Tourism Council expertise in sustainable tourism – e.g. expand successful consulting pilot and its revenues.
- Expand the visitor focus and include more promotion of outdoor recreational activities.
- Develop and promote niche attractions and resources, e.g. equestrian, bouldering, farm to table, hunting resort, etc.
- Expertise in event planning and promotion - potentially marketable.
- Critical need for education and awareness-building with local officials and businesses.
- Many potential partners.

External trends and developments

- The growth of “placemaking,” an integrated approach to activating public spaces combining public and private investments, requires more collaboration and long-term commitment to projects.
- Technology has changed tourism. For example HomeAway, VHBO and Airbnb have introduced the “sharing economy” to lodging and Trip Advisor ratings and the use of mobile devices influences information-gathering. These present disruptions to traditional tourist institutions such as hotels, information centers, etc.
- Visitors are interested in the overall “visitor experience” as opposed to just seeking out individual attractions.
- There is a renewed attention and emphasis on tourism as an economic strategy by Rhode Island political leaders, economic development advocates and candidates for office.
- New leadership and municipal initiatives in Valley communities present opportunities: Central Falls, Cumberland, Woonsocket, Burrillville, etc.
- The boom in outdoor activities continues such as cycling, kayaking, paddle boarding, rock-climbing, hiking and bouldering with the BV as a destination for all of these.
- Farm to table, a new emphasis on local foods and cuisine, has exploded and continues to be a tourism draw. BV has many offerings to promote.
- Experts forecast a potential boom in Asian tourism and business travel to New England with new service from Logan to Beijing.

External perspectives on Blackstone Valley Tourism Council

- Tremendous respect for achievements, e.g. Blackstone Bike Path
- Perceived as creative, energetic, but spread too thin.



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

- Little external knowledge of what Blackstone Valley Tourism Council does today or what it achieves.
- Widespread interest by potential partners in more ongoing consultation, collaboration.

Internal issues and concerns

- Too many staff-led activities with limited scale or unclear alignment to Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's mission. (Mission-money matrix analysis).
- Ongoing progress toward meaningful cost centers showing the net cost of critical activities.
- Lack of succession planning for key staff and board leadership.
- Evolving reorganization of marketing and program functions.
- Some degree of financial vulnerability to fluctuations in hotel tax revenues, changes to the distribution of hotel tax and changes in the cost structure of the Polar Express event.

VII. Other issues for planning

The following issues emerged as important themes to be addressed in this strategic plan.

- As the plan was being developed, the U.S. Congress approved the creation of the Blackstone Valley National Historic Park. This approval recognizes the years of hard work by many partners within the Blackstone Valley, and recognizes the national importance of our story. The roll-out of the Park will create new opportunities for the Blackstone Valley and require significant focus from the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council as part of that roll-out and beyond.
- Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's unique concept of sustainable tourism aligned to cultural and environmental authenticity is an opportunity to be developed into a distinctive area of expertise and leadership on a regional or national scale.
- Increase Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's financial resiliency, with an eye to increasing non-public sources of revenue and a back-up for Polar Express.
- Transition from an entrepreneurial approach of launching many programs to a more deliberate choice of fewer activities tied to a few major organizational goals and a mission-money matrix assessment.
- Shift from creating attractions and launching programs independently toward more support of the work of others through training, consultation, collaboration and promotion.
- Find the right balance among three important program drivers:
 - High quality, bias for action, keeping costs low



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

VIII. Observable/Measurable Indicators of Success

Program

- The National Historic Park is operational, with rangers in the field, signage promoting the Park and properties under National Park Service management.
- Where appropriate, attendance increases to desired and sustainable levels for Blackstone Valley visitor attractions and events.
- 25% completion of sustainable tourism indicators as defined by Johnson and Wales University.
- Overnight stays increase sufficient to trigger new private investment in lodging.
- New investment is occurring in urban centers.
- Blackstone Valley has a vibrant restaurant sector.

Operations

- Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has gained legal standing in community and economic development planning
- Blackstone Valley Tourism Council programs are operating with earned income surplus.
- Blackstone Valley Tourism Council debt has been retired.

IX. Five year goals and objectives

MISSION and PROGRAM GOALS and OBJECTIVES

1. Advocate for completion of significant tourism resources in the Blackstone Valley

Objectives:

- Advance implementation of the Blackstone Valley National Historic Park in collaboration with National Park Service, Blackstone Heritage Corridor Inc. and other important partners.
- Advance the completion of the Blackstone River Bikeway

2. Attract visitors whose presence and commerce will make a significant impact on the profitability of local businesses, community prosperity and quality of life in the Blackstone Valley.

Objectives:

- Facilitate more commercial opportunities and connections between businesses and existing visitor attractions.
- Strategically expand visitor awareness of Blackstone Valley attractions and experiences through creative and cost effective promotion, partnerships, educating non-traditional advocates and increased use of online and social media.
- Continue Blackstone Valley Tourism Council programs that directly attract many visitors and increase visitor commerce in local communities.
- Evaluate, continue or develop productive regional partnerships to promote international tourism

3. Support local communities in developing accessible tourism resources that enhance commerce and quality of life

Objectives:

- Advise and assist communities in integrating a placemaking approach to their economic and community development (http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/)
- Embed consideration of tourism into the priorities of town planners and political leaders
- Encourage better day-to-day maintenance and cleanliness of public spaces throughout the Blackstone Valley
- Strengthen relationships and networks throughout the Blackstone Valley with Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.
- Expand or create new itineraries for visitors to the Blackstone Valley.



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

4. Help businesses, communities and state government develop and improve the Blackstone Valley's tourism services and tourism infrastructure.

Objectives:

- Encourage business and local government to explore opportunities and plan for visitor needs, including connecting to Blackstone Valley Tourism Council services and benefits.
 - Support professional development for the tourism and hospitality industries.
5. Advocate for Blackstone Valley tourism and environmental resources in critical deliberations and decision-making in local, state, regional and national policy.

Objectives:

- Generate significant action toward achieving the community goal (and Clean Water Act federal mandate) of a fishable, swimmable Blackstone River.
 - Advocate for retaining or expanding other significant tourism assets in BV.
 - Continue to participate in key policy development processes affecting Blackstone Valley tourism.
6. Provide tourism services to interested but currently unrepresented communities.

Objectives:

- Reach out to new communities to assess interest
- Integrate interested new communities into Blackstone Valley Tourism Council services
- Expand Northern RI Tourism District to contiguous communities as demand is displayed.

OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Develop the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council as a learning organization, committed to leadership as a robust, thoughtful, sustainable, resilient and relevant tourism development resource in RI

Objectives:

- Develop business plans for all projects and continuously assess implementation and outcomes.
- Upgrade technology and data management to support program objectives and facilitate internal planning and collaboration.
- Build staff expertise and capacity.
- Continue to enhance leadership with the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.



BLACKSTONE VALLEY
TOURISM COUNCIL

- Rigorously measure and evaluate current and new programming. Suspend nonviable projects. Rework projects to enhance viability.

2. Maintain the Council's operational and financial health and independence.

Objectives:

- Grow the Blackstone Valley Heritage and Environmental Fund to support the E.V. Blackstone Valley Explorer and other programs of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.
- Expand the geographic territory of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council as invited and strategic.
- Advocate for continued state investment in Blackstone Valley tourism through Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.
- Become revenue self-sufficient to maintain a solid set of programs and staffing.
- Ensure an accessible, sustainable and vibrant facility for Blackstone Valley Tourism Council operations.

3. Continue to build a 21st century board of directors

Objectives:

- Achieve successful leadership transitions in the board.
- Create a well-developed leadership pipeline for the board and its officers.
- Ensure ongoing, board-managed Finance and Governance Committees.
- Complete a succession audit for staff leadership and develop needed succession plans.