

Regional Action Plan

Regional Tourism

August 2018

Economic Development Committee on
Regional Tourism

Regional Community Institute

Dear Board Members of the Regional Community Institute,

In December 2005, the Regional Community Institute of Northeast Florida, Inc. (RCI) was formed by the Northeast Florida Regional Council (NEFRC) in response to a growing realization that Northeast Florida needed a broad-based organization that would initially have as its purpose to advance and promote the vision of regionalism, as it relates to the quality of Northeast Florida's natural, man-made, economic and social environments. Participating in a series of stakeholder-based studies with RCI has been an educational and gratifying experience for me and as fellow Board Members, I hope you agree. The 2014 work RCI did addressing "Thriving Small Business" identified a gap, in that no one entity "owned" regional tourism in Northeast Florida. While it was not clear then whether RCI, NEFRC or another entity should own regional tourism in Northeast Florida, as is RCI's usual approach, we set off to gather the smartest people we could find in the region who knew about the topic to advise us as to what, if anything, is doable and should be done. Starting in February of 2018, we convened monthly meetings to educate ourselves as to whether there was a need to approach tourism on a regional basis, and if so, how.

We found that while there are successful local tourism marketing efforts – Florida's Historic Coast comes to mind – and some niche regional efforts like Florida's First Coast of Golf, there are no broader efforts to market the region as a whole to visitors. Our committee believed in the value of stitching together counties and cities in the region so that visitors can plan multi-jurisdictional outings when they visit Northeast Florida. During this effort we developed a matrix of assets & attractions for cities and counties in Northeast Florida, and found that while jurisdictions had a diverse array of such assets, there was probably the most commonality for outdoor activities, particularly trail and greenway-related. This, then, is where we propose to begin our efforts.

The challenge for such an effort is always in setting up an approach and implementing mechanism that enhances the ongoing efforts of tourism professionals and local governments throughout the region. The final regional action plan, while straightforward and simple, addresses this practical concern. Clearly this is a first effort done at a high altitude, most importantly aligned with current branding and marketing. Over time, it may become clear that more work should be done to advance and promote tourism in the region. We hope the Regional Tourism Committee's work forms a healthy foundation for anything the region agrees to do in the future.

Please see the Acknowledgement List at the end of this plan. Many thanks are extended to Committee members for their participation and great ideas, and on behalf of the Committee, I am proud to share this report with the RCI Board and recommend it for transmittal to the Regional Council.

Sincerely yours,

Thad Crowe, AICP
Chair, Economic Development Committee on Regional Tourism, Regional Community Institute
Senior Planner, WGI, Inc.

Summary

In February, 2018, the Economic Development Committee on Regional Tourism of the Regional Community Institute (RCI) convened for the first time in Duval County. This meeting was a brainstorming session to address goals for the Committee. Using the format tested by the RCI in previous policy efforts, the March meeting, held in Clay County, covered creation of a work plan and the identification of experts to invite to participate in the effort. Following the work plan, the Committee met in April in Baker County to gather information and input on models of organizations that are addressing regional tourism, in Putnam County in May to discuss the tourism assets located in Northeast Florida, and in Nassau County in June to discuss the audience for regional tourism and current branding and marketing efforts. These information-gathering sessions were followed by two sessions, in St. Johns County in July and Flagler County in August, to discuss “What is doable?” This approach is consistent with RCI’s core tenant that its policy work will only recommend actions that are doable and agreed upon with a commitment to implementation by RCI and its partners.

Like other RCI policy efforts, what is ultimately recommended is never clear at the outset and there are moments when it is uncertain whether doable recommendations will ever emerge. The direction of regional tourism efforts began to crystalize once the need for a regional asset matrix was identified, and became clear when the existence of assets by county and municipality was added to the list. There had been concern about any regional effort that had the potential to distract from or diminish current branding and marketing efforts. Ultimately, the group agreed that regional efforts appropriate to Northeast Florida should not address branding but rather:

- Gather data on assets in Northeast Florida by category
- Allow counties access to information on regional assets so as to enhance their branding efforts
- Develop marketing materials on regional assets by category
- Monitor technology to determine if/when to develop an “experience planner” application based on regional asset category to be shared with all counties

Action Plan

- In consultation with county tourism professionals in Northeast Florida, the Northeast Florida Regional Council will create a spreadsheet to gather information about the first category of regional assets to be explored, outdoor assets. This will include greenways of all types, blueways of all types and assets ancillary to these outdoor assets. The amount of time that is reasonable to fill out the spreadsheet will be part of the consultation.
- The spreadsheet will be distributed to tourism professionals in all counties and to all municipalities, with a request to populate it with asset names, locations, and descriptions, at a minimum.
- Once the time deemed reasonable has passed, the spreadsheet will be shared with tourism professionals in all counties and with all municipalities. They have the option to use it to enhance their tourism efforts as they wish.
- The Council, on its own or in conjunction with partners, will seek funding to scope a marketing approach, create a map or perform other work to highlight regional outdoor assets.
- As staffing and time allows, the Council will issue spreadsheets on other categories of regional assets, and the process will be repeated.
- In consultation with county tourism professionals in Northeast Florida, the Council, on its own or in conjunction with partners, will seek funding to develop an application to allow the public to plan an experience in Northeast Florida, based on category of regional asset. This application, when available, will be made available to all counties and municipalities to use as they see fit.

Regional Tourism Committee Acknowledgement List

First Name	Last Name	Organization / Sector
Danielle	Anderson	Friends of A1A Scenic & Historic Coastal Byway
Jimmy	Anderson	Baker County Board of County Commissioners
Amy	Boek	Amelia Island Convention & Visitors Bureau
Lori	Boyer	Jacksonville City Council and Tourist Development Council
Sam	Carr	Putnam County Waterways and Trails Committee
Mike	Cella	Clay County Board of County Commissioners
Nicole	Chapman	Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association – NE FL Chapter
Andrea	Conover	Entrepreneur
Jenna	Craveh	Florida's First Coast of Golf
Thad	Crowe	WGI, Inc., Committee Chair, Regional Community Institute Board of Directors
Brenna	Dacks	VISIT FLORIDA
Arlene	Filkoff	Fernandina Beach Main Street
Richard	Goldman	St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & the Beaches Visitors & Convention Bureau
Paul	Haydt	East Coast Greenway Alliance
Herb	Hiller	St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop Alliance, Inc.
Michele	Hodges	City of Macclenny
Julie	Linton	Putnam County Chamber
Katie	Mitura	Visit Jacksonville
Kimberly	Morgan	Clay County Board of County Commissioners, Tourism
Terri	Newmans	Florida Park Service – Ravine Gardens & Dunns Creek State Park, Palatka to St. Augustine State Trail
Bob	Page	Regional Community Institute Board of Directors
Mary Alice	Phelan	Regional Community Institute Board of Directors
Dave	Reese	Florida's First Coast of Golf
Darryl	Register	Baker County Chamber of Commerce
Isabelle	Renault	St. Johns County Chamber of Commerce
Cathy	Rhoden	Baker County Board of County Commissioners
Lyndsay	Rossman	JAX USA Partnership
Monica	Smith	Visit Jacksonville
Brian	Teeple	Northeast Florida Regional Council