

Haywood County Tourism Development Authority

Budget Narrative | FY 2025–2026

INTRODUCTION

The FY 2025–2026 budget outlines how the Haywood County Tourism Development Authority (HCTDA) will invest lodging tax revenues to drive tourism and economic growth throughout the county. This year’s budget reflects a transition from disaster recovery to long-term destination development, with targeted investments in marketing, visitor infrastructure, product development, and community partnerships.

Each budgeted item directly supports priorities in the 2026–2035 Haywood County Destination Master Plan. The narrative that follows explains where revenues come from and how they will be used to achieve measurable outcomes across all five communities—Canton, Clyde, Lake Junaluska, Maggie Valley and Waynesville.

REVENUE OVERVIEW

The proposed FY 2025–2026 budget is fully balanced, with projected revenues and expenses totaling \$3,925,380. The majority of funding comes from Haywood County’s occupancy tax collections, with additional support from one-time use of fund balance and previously approved rollover funds.

Revenue Sources:

- **Occupancy Tax Revenue: \$3,000,000**

This estimate reflects a return to pre-Hurricane Helene collection levels. It is a conservative forecast based on stable recovery trends, with no assumptions for increased collections.

- **Project-Specific Fund Balance Use: \$395,000**

The proposed budget includes strategic one-time allocations from HCTDA’s fund balance for high-priority initiatives:

- \$175,000 – Website redevelopment
- \$100,000 – National brand partnership
- \$45,000 – Public relations strategy enhancement
- \$75,000 – “Open Haywood” summer marketing campaign

- **Rollover Funds: \$226,380**

These are unspent but previously approved funds that will be carried into the new fiscal year:

- \$50,000 – Final payment for video production project
- \$26,380 – Remaining balance from 2025 Ice Fest Weekend
- \$150,000 – One-Time Project Fund allocation for Haywood County Bike Park

- **Waynesville Restricted Funds: \$75,000**

Of the \$195,000 available in Waynesville’s restricted promotional fund balance, \$75,000 is proposed to support the town’s Parks & Recreation Master Plan grant application.

EXPENDITURES BY CATEGORY

The FY 2025–2026 budget allocates \$3,925,380 in expenditures across six primary categories. Each aligns with HCTDA’s strategic direction and supports implementation of the 2026–2035 Destination Master Plan. The narrative below explains how each category contributes to long-term tourism development, short-term recovery, and community-wide benefit.

1. Restricted Town 1% Funds – \$740,000

This category supports projects in each of the five lodging tax collection areas: Canton, Clyde, Lake Junaluska, Maggie Valley, and Waynesville. In compliance with our legislative mandate, at least two-thirds of these funds are used to promote travel and tourism, while the remainder is earmarked for tourism-related capital improvements in each town.

- **\$218,711** is budgeted for tourism promotion grants, which will be awarded based on town-specific availability and grant requests.
- **\$246,664** is earmarked for future capital projects aligned with the Master Plan; applications will be evaluated later in the fiscal year.
- **\$102,500** supports the Ice Fest Weekend.
- **\$172,125** will support destination advertising, public relations efforts, and other local tourism initiatives.

2. Wages & Benefits – \$553,300

This category funds compensation and benefits for five full-time and two part-time staff, including salaries, payroll taxes, LGERS retirement contributions, and health insurance for full-time employees. It also supports 6-day operations of the Haywood County Welcome Center.

An 8% increase is proposed to bring HCTDA staff salaries in line with comparable tourism development authorities across the region and to remain competitive in retaining and attracting talent.

3. Administration & Operations – \$292,375

This category includes essential costs required to operate the organization effectively, such as office rent, liability insurance, accounting and audit fees, IT support, office supplies, and legal services.

Included in this total is \$64,600 in contingency funding, which is reserved for unplanned needs or strategic opportunities that may arise during the year.

4. Capital Outlay – \$180,000

This category supports major one-time investments. For FY 2025–2026:

- **\$175,000** is allocated for the design, development, and launch of a new Visit Haywood website, a critical digital infrastructure upgrade that supports branding, visitor experience, and destination storytelling.
- **\$5,000** is reserved for minor capital needs, such as equipment replacement or technology updates.

5. Marketing & Sales – \$1,869,330

This category supports a comprehensive, multi-platform strategy to drive year-round visitation, strengthen Haywood County's destination brand, and expand reach to high-value visitor segments. Marketing remains HCTDA's largest investment area and is tightly aligned with several strategic goals of the Destination Master Plan.

Key initiatives in FY 2025–2026 include:

- **Year-round advertising and creative campaign execution (\$919,000)** – In partnership with DCI, our agency of record, this budget supports digital, social, print, and targeted broadcast placements, including cooperative programs with Visit NC and select placements in *Our State* magazine to extend reach and brand visibility.
- **Public relations and media outreach (\$128,747)** – Led by MMGY Global, including hosting travel journalists, developing story pitches, and securing national media coverage.
- **Video & Photography Asset Development (\$100,000)** – Continued professional media collection to build a high-quality content library for seasonal campaigns, story-based marketing, and partner use.
- **"Open Haywood" Summer Campaign (\$75,000)** – A Helene-recovery initiative designed to position Haywood County as open for visitors, with targeted messaging to attract drive-market travelers this 2025 summer season.
- **National Brand Partnership (\$100,000)** – A co-branded marketing activation with a nationally recognized travel or lifestyle brand to introduce Haywood County to new audiences and elevate visibility in high-opportunity markets.
- **Strategic Public Relations Enhancement (\$45,000)** – Supports creative PR activations and media partnerships designed to generate national attention. Proposed initiatives include hosting regional media events in key drive markets and securing broadcast features through outdoor travel programming on networks like PBS and Discovery Channel.
- **Ice Fest Weekend (\$152,500)** – Continued investment in one of Haywood County's flagship events, with marketing support spanning digital ads, content creation, PR, and event promotion.
- **Research and Visitor Analytics (\$49,000)** – Continued subscription to AirDNA to track short-term rental trends and the addition of Datafy, a newly recommended visitor research platform that provides anonymized, real-time insights into traveler behavior, demographics, and origin markets.
- **Print Collateral, Maps, and Fulfillment (\$99,500)** – Covers the design, printing, and distribution of key visitor materials including the annual Visitor Guide, a new Haywood Hiking Guide, a wildlife safety brochure, a regional motorcycle routes map, and other informational pieces. This budget also supports shipping visitor guides to regional welcome centers and directly to potential travelers who request them.
- **Support Tools & Systems (\$98,833)** – Covers \$51,021 in essential technology and creative infrastructure such as website hosting, email marketing, design software, and digital asset management to ensure effective campaign execution and content distribution in addition to \$47,812 in advertising contingency.
- **General Marketing & Sales Support (\$93,500)** – Covers a range of additional needs including trade show registration and fees, professional memberships and subscriptions, county-wide tourism grant programs, promotional merchandise, and other marketing-related expenses.

6. Product Development – \$490,000

This category supports the development of new or enhanced tourism products and infrastructure. It includes:

- **\$340,000** in new earmarked funding to support eligible projects that emerge during the fiscal year and align with Master Plan goals (e.g., outdoor recreation access, placemaking, cultural assets).
- **\$150,000** in previously approved funding for the Haywood County Bike Park, which will advance outdoor recreation development and visitor engagement.

All projects supported through this category will be evaluated for alignment with strategic priorities, sustainability, and countywide impact.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

The FY 2025–2026 budget supports several near-term priorities identified in both the Haywood County Destination Master Plan (2026–2035) and the Hurricane Helene Recovery Transition Plan. HCTDA staff have prioritized the following objectives and strategies for implementation this year. Some of these have direct funding allocated in the budget; others represent planning and partnership efforts that will be advanced through staff time and coordination.

4.3 [Pillar One] *Strengthen Awareness and Perception of the Haywood County Tourism Brand*

4.4 [Pillar Two] *Diversify Tourism Product Offerings and Experiences that Enhance the Destination Appeal for All*

4.5 [Pillar Three] *Support and Promote Stewardship of Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Opportunities*

4.6 [Pillar Four] *Enhance HCTDA's Evolution While Cultivating Community Engagement and Collaboration*

FY 2025–2026 Focus Areas:

- **4.3 Objective 1** – Launch the *Visit Haywood* brand and *Unfiltered* campaign through internal and partner-facing outreach.
- **4.3 Objective 2** – Strengthen external awareness and perceptions of Haywood County across all visitor communications, advertising, public relations, and the upcoming website redesign.
- **4.3 Objective 3** – Target high-value visitor segments, including younger and off-season travelers, using new research tools and updated messaging.
- **4.3 Objective 6** – Integrate stewardship messaging throughout all marketing and PR to promote responsible travel.
- **4.4 Objective 1** – Strengthen collaboration among businesses and communities through the HCTDA Product Development Committee and coordinated promotional initiatives.
- **4.4 Objective 2** – Use insights from the Pigeon River Access Evaluation to prioritize future water-based recreation projects.

- **4.4 Objective 7** – Continue to engage with stakeholders on the future of the Canton Mill site, ensuring tourism and visitor needs are part of the conversation.
- **4.5 Objective 4** – Begin development of an emergency communication and response plan to ensure visitor safety and coordinated crisis messaging.
- **4.6 Objective 1** – Advance internal planning for a comprehensive multi-year strategy covering marketing, product development, stewardship, and funding.
- **4.6 Objective 3** – Explore opportunities for new public and private partnerships to support future tourism development.
- **4.6 Objective 4** – Allocate budget resources based on Master Plan priorities and prepare for improved performance tracking.
- **4.6 Objective 7** – Assess the need and scope for a visitor experience center as part of a broader service strategy.

This focus ensures HCTDA continues to make progress on foundational goals while remaining responsive to current needs and opportunities.

CONCLUSION & IMPACT SUMMARY

This balanced budget reflects HCTDA's commitment to responsibly managing public tourism revenues while advancing strategic priorities that benefit all of Haywood County. The FY 2025–2026 spending plan supports high-impact marketing, long-term product development, and operational readiness—all guided by the 2026–2035 Destination Master Plan and the county's ongoing recovery from Hurricane Helene.

By investing in brand awareness, visitor research, stewardship messaging, and destination infrastructure, HCTDA is strengthening the tourism economy and positioning Haywood County as a more resilient, connected, and competitive destination.