

**Public Policy Goals**

**118th Congress**

One of the pillars of the Southeast Tourism Society is to serve as a unified voice on matters of legislation, public policy and the future of the tourism sector. Through the leadership of the Advocacy Pillar Committee, STS sets a public policy agenda every two years to advance travel and tourism as a driving force for economic growth and job creation, a vital partner for preserving the culture and history of the Southeast, and showcasing the exceptional travel experiences of the region.

In order to ensure the tourism sector remains an engine of economic growth and community building, STS advances these policy priorities in the 118th Congress:

**Establish a Community Strategy for America’s 250th Birthday Celebration in 2026**

In 2026, America will celebrate its 250th birthday and the public will be encouraged to connect with the nation’s special places and experience its unique stories. It is a tremendous opportunity, especially for medium, small and rural communities, but that visitation may not happen without dedicated resources to plan, build and promote travel around the national birthday celebration.

The travel and tourism sector is an engine of economic growth. In 2022, direct travel spending in the U.S by domestic visitors was $1.07 trillion and comprised 89% of the U.S. travel and tourism market. At present, the federal government is focused on international tourism with the International Trade Administration’s National Travel & Tourism Office, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Travel and Tourism Advisory Board; and the national public/private destination marketing organization, Brand USA. However, few federal resources are available to build the domestic tourism market.

**STS calls for making needed Investments in policies and programs to ensure that all communities large and small are able to engage in the national celebration and ensure the economic benefits of tourism are fully leveraged and shared broadly.**

**Preserve and Promote America’s Cultural, Historic and**

**Natural Resources**

Each year more than two billion visits are made to the public lands that comprise the nation’s natural, cultural, historical, and wildlife resources. Some of the Southeastern states’ greatest tourism resources are its cultural and natural sites. One of the challenges in preserving and promoting these sites is that the management of these shared resources is the responsibility of an array of state and federal land agencies, including the National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, United States Forest Service, and United States Army Corps of Engineers. STS has developed partnerships with key federal agencies to provide a forum for better collaboration and understanding of the travel and tourism sector. Sound national investment strategies are needed to preserve, protect, and improve all of these public resources.

* Provide sufficient appropriations for federal public lands agencies to ensure public access to the national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, battlefields, monuments, historic sites and other public lands, enhance visitor facilities and services, and fulfill the mission to conserve critical natural, historic, and cultural resources.
* Implement consistent and user-friendly electronic systems for applying and paying entrance, recreation, and permit fees, as well as purchasing entrance passes. In addition, these systems must streamline permitting and allow for the processing of single and multiple permits. Effective utilization of technology is a challenge for organizations of all size and scope, but investing in technology solutions for the federal land agencies will produce immediate dividends of accountability, efficiency, and convenience, as well as facilitating visitor access to public lands venues.
* Improve coordination and cooperation with Gateway Communities. Hundreds of communities throughout the nation serve as gateways for the millions of visitors to our national parks, forests, and other federal public lands. STS supports efforts to strengthen collaborations with Gateway Communities by revitalizing the Preserve America grants program and directing the National Park Service to partner with Gateway Communities on promotional and educational programs.
* Support the National Heritage Areas Program. For two decades, the National Park Service has administered a National Heritage Areas program under its mission to preserve nationally significant natural and historic resources. Successful national heritage areas embody locally driven partnerships that emphasize local control of land use, and blend education, cultural conservation, resource preservation, and recreation and community revitalization. The Southeast has more national heritage areas than any other region, ensuring consistent staff and funding for the program would allow local communities to better leverage this vital program for community and economic development and for the Southeast to showcase its remarkable stories.
* Establish the National Oceans and Coastal Security Fund to provides grants to coastal and Great Lakes communities to respond to coastal erosion and sea-level rise, restore coastal habitat, and make improvements to coastal infrastructure.
* Reform the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) to allow for more equitable resource sharing between states and federal conservation programs.

**STS supports federal investments and programs to ensure our public lands and coastal communities are preserved and protected for future generations and that the health and growth of gateway communities is a priority.**

**Reinforce the Connection Between Food, Culture, and Tourism**

Food is an essential element in telling the story of a community. Drawing on history, culture, and local agriculture, chefs, restaurateurs, craft brewers, distillers, vintners, farmers markets, and culinary shops are illuminating the rich traditions and agricultural resources of their communities and the Southeast. By connecting with tourism, these small businesses and creative professionals are expanding their audience while helping to deliver extraordinary travel experiences.

**STS supports federal policies to help these dynamic businesses grow, foster collaboration, and promote their products and communities.**

**Advance Policies to Rebuild the Travel & Tourism Workforce**

America is experiencing a workforce crisis. Every segment of the travel and tourism economy is dependent on a strong workforce to deliver great customer service and exceptional visitor experiences. Nationally, the tourism sector employs 8 million workers, but has nearly 2 million job openings. The challenges faced by travel and tourism businesses are the most visible demonstration of what businesses across the economy and the nation are dealing with in hiring enough workers to return operations to pre-pandemic levels.

In the short term, expanding the H2-B visa, a temporary work visa program established in 1986 to focus on non-agriculture employers facing labor shortages in season jobs, can help to fill the employment gaps. Long term, as employment motivators continue to change the tourism sector needs to keep up by connecting potential employees with the benefits of working in travel and workforce development opportunities to help them to establish a career path.

**STS supports changes to the H2-B visa program to fill the tourism hiring gap in the short term and long-term programs to deliver capable employees to local industries offering jobs and economic stability.**

**Strong Investments in the Nation’s Transportation Infrastructure**

America’s economic vitality, ability to compete in the global economy, and a thriving tourism sector are dependent on dynamic and efficient transportation systems. While the current transportation infrastructure has served the nation and the tourism sector well, the challenges to our transportation system are numerous. Our vital transportation infrastructure shows signs of aging. Increased congestion on our highways, railways, airports and seaports reduces our nation’s economic productivity. Perhaps most troubling, the programs the tourism sector are directly dependent upon, such as enhancements, scenic byways, recreational trails and Federal land roads are consistently under-funded. America has built one of the greatest transportation infrastructures in the world, but much work remains to ensure that our national transportation policy connects communities, tourism, and the economy.

**STS supports federal transportation priorities that allow travelers to better navigate communities, prioritizes investments in important transportation corridors, and ensures that travel is an enjoyable experience.**

**Strengthen the Federal Voice on Tourism Issues**

STS is committed to educating Members of Congress on the economic importance of travel and tourism to local communities, states, and the nation, and ensuring the interests of tourism are heard and considered in major policy debates. The bipartisan Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus serves as a forum for the development and discussion of national policy to promotes domestic and international travel for leisure, business, educational, and medical purposes.

**STS encouraged all members of the Southeast congressional delegation to join the Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus as an excellent resource for information and collaboration on the key issues impact the tourism sector.**