

ADVOCACY AMPLIFIED

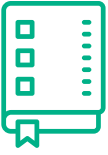
A GUIDE FOR TOURISM ADVOCACY



SOUTHEAST
TOURISM SOCIETY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
ACTION ITEMS	4
BUILDING A COALITION	6
ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS	8
LOCAL ADVOCACY STRATEGY TIPS	10
TELLING YOUR STORY	14
GET TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS	16
HELPFUL HINTS	18
PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER	20
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	22
RESOURCES/SPONSORS	19



INTRODUCTION

Advocacy is defined as speaking up and educating elected officials on the issues that matter.

Many elected officials don't understand that tourism doesn't just happen. They need to be educated that an effective tourism program requires strong research, creative marketing, and targeted outreach.

Tourism has frequently been an easy target for budget cuts and criticisms of its economic importance, research, and the need for public funding. These attacks are often unexpected. The best way for tourism community leaders to avoid a potential cut to their programs is to develop an advocacy strategy and proactively promote the positive impacts on their community. Waiting until you are facing a crisis is often too late.

In some ways, an advocacy strategy is like a marketing strategy with the target audience comprised of elected officials and the public. An advocacy strategy does not have to be as detailed as a marketing strategy but it does require research, message development, and strategic targeting.

ADVOCACY AMPLIFIED is an effort to provide you, our tourism community leader, with the framework and ideas to develop your own advocacy strategy and ensure your voice resonates with elected officials.

“ **The more (community tourism leaders) become advocates, the more these programs succeed. And ultimately this is about success for smaller communities.** ”

BILL CASSIDY
U.S. Senator (R-LA)



ACTION ITEMS

Securing and maintaining funding is a top priority being the funding fuels your work. Often the first question you will be asked from a legislator is “How will this affect my community/district/state?” Therefore, there are a few action items to implement to ensure you have all the answers when meeting with your legislator.

1 IDENTIFY YOUR PARTNERS

Putting in place a network of friends and supporters is a great way to amplify your voice when it comes to tourism advocacy. What organizations help tell the story of your community? What are the signature festivals and events in your community?

2 KNOW YOUR TOURISM RESOURCES AND DATA

Where do you go for your statistics and data? You can certainly rely on industry associations, such as Southeast Tourism Society or U.S. Travel Association to have information with regards to pending legislation, fact sheets, talking points and additional materials. This will help you determine what programs might be on the discussion board for funding cuts or what new programs you are in need of for your community.

When reviewing association priorities, it is important to be aware of issues that are industry priorities but may not affect local communities. Be sure that a local connection can be emphasized. Taking up issues that directly impact the community ensures you can speak with authenticity about issues and can easily provide a compelling reason for addressing the issue.

3 SET YOUR PRIORITIES

Ideally, your priority list should be comprised of 3-5 issues that can be quickly and clearly described when shared with staff, board members, partners, and elected officials.

The goal is to produce a list that outlines your needs for your tourism office/community, the challenges you are currently facing, and where you see your organization in the future.

EXAMPLES OF TOURISM COMMUNITIES' PRIORITIES INCLUDE:

- Move the National Travel & Tourism Office from the International Trade Administration to an independent agency with the Department of Commerce that addresses both domestic and international policies and programs
- Policies to encourage the growth of culinary small businesses such as craft distilleries and breweries and restaurants
- Investments in policies and programs to ensure that all communities can engage in the celebration of America's 250th birthday in 2026 and that the economic benefits of tourism are fully leveraged and shared broadly
- Modernize management of the National Heritage Areas Program, which would allow communities to better leverage this vital program for community and economic development

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

Visit the *Advocacy Amplified* page at SoutheastTourism.org.



BUILDING A COALITION

A community coalition does not have to be a formal organization. It can be an informal gathering that meets regularly, where community leaders get together to share political insights and ideas.



ATTRACTIONS



LIBRARIES



OUTDOOR RECREATION



HISTORIC SOCIETIES



RESTAURANTS



TRANSPORTATION



HUMANITIES & THE ARTS



HOTELS

Use your list of tourism assets and partners as a starting point. Think broadly about the people and organizations that help tell your stories and build your community into a dynamic place people want to visit and reside.

BUILDING A COALITION: REBRANDING A CITY

A great example of building a community coalition is **Lexington, Kentucky**. In 2017, when the mayor wanted to rebrand the city, he knew that it would require difficult conversations about the role and place of Confederate memorials in the center of the city. Using tourism as the cornerstone of the effort, he held community meetings and developed a plan to move two statues to a military cemetery and in their place build a welcome center, bourbon tasting room, and restaurant. Undoubtedly, not everyone agreed with this decision but a broad coalition of the community was engaged in the decision and recognized the shared vision of the city's future that is being advanced. Perhaps most importantly, the Confederate statues were removed without the threat of violence that has impacted other communities, further burnishing Lexington's new image.

BUILDING A COALITION: GAINING POLITICAL INSIGHT

Leveraging the collective knowledge of the community coalition can make tackling difficult political issues less of a challenge. When **Visit Winchester**, the convention and visitor's bureau for Winchester-Frederick County, Virginia decided to offer visitors a true taste of the community by selling locally-produced craft beers and wines at their welcome center. They knew that securing approval for the sales was going to be a tough ask. A politically connected member of the community recommended to the executive director that they first seek approval from the Winchester City Council first because once secured it would make it difficult for the county board to reject the proposal. That is the type of political insight that makes an advocacy program more effective and can only come by being connected to the community.



ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

When it comes to advocacy, partnering with a state, regional, or national tourism organization, not only gives you access to current information and advocacy tools, but also provides the opportunity to offer input for policy priorities, ensuring the voice of grassroots tourism is heard within the industry.

SOUTHEAST TOURISM SOCIETY provides essential information on the Advocacy Resource Center section of its website, including state fact sheets and economic impact data of the National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other federal agency partners. In addition, STS organizes an annual Congressional Summit on Travel and Tourism in Washington, D.C. – all with the goal of amplifying the voice of tourism community leaders.

U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION has a section on its website pertaining to tourism issues that details tourism policy priorities and talking points. U.S. Travel also organizes an annual advocacy event: Destination Capitol Hill. Their *Power of Travel Coalition* provides economic impact data by state and congressional district.



NEARLY EVERY STATE has a statewide tourism/travel/hospitality association that serves as the voice of tourism at the state capitol and with the congressional delegation. Visit the Advocacy Amplified page on SoutheastTourism.org to see a list of STS states that have an association.

ADDITIONAL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS INCLUDE:

- Americans for the Arts
- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
- Destinations International
- Meetings Mean Business Campaign
- National Parks Conservation Association
- Outdoor Industry Association
- Scenic America

With limited time to read, the key is to find a few information resources to keep you up to date on your tourism priorities and timely calls to action.



LOCAL ADVOCACY STRATEGY TIPS

Tourism is Economic Development! Be sure you have a strategy to regularly engage and communicate with your Community and Economic Development officials.

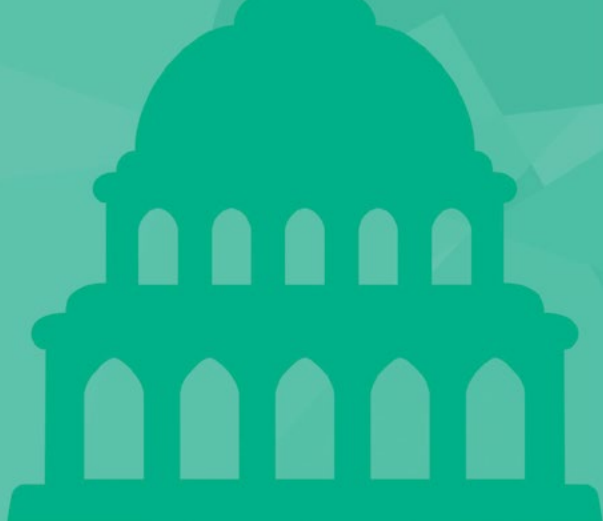
ELECTED OFFICIALS & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICIALS

- County Commissions & Judge Executive (including County Manager)
- City Council & Mayor (including City Manager)
- Economic Development & Planning Commission
- Local School Board (sometimes a pathway to City Council or Commission)
- Chamber of Commerce
- Sports Commission/Council
- Parks & Recreation Department
- Area Colleges & Universities
- Local Transit Authority

#1

Share regular updates on the: big wins, new opportunities, and request community support in a customized format for with the following leaders:

- Mayor, City Manager, Head of the Council Finance Committee
- County Commission, County Manager, Head of the Council Finance Committee



- #2 Ensure that the key leaders and staff contacts receive at least quarterly updates on the work of your organization.
- #3 Monitor the City Council/ County Commission meeting agendas to ensure that you or a member of your team are present for discussions involving tourism or tourism stakeholders.
- #4 Invite key officials to the annual tourism meeting, press conferences, client events etc., when appropriate.
- #5 Ensure that a tourism staff representative attends the major community events hosted by key elected officials.
- #6 Schedule one-on-one meetings and/or calls with each leader to establish an ongoing rapport, even if only annually.
- #7 Subscribe to their newsletter lists for regular updates.



LOCAL ADVOCACY STRATEGY TIPS

(CONT.)

Engaging with community leaders and key organizations builds your local advocacy strategy.

COMMUNITY LEADERS & PARTNERS.

- Influential Churches & Places of Worship
- Business Organizations
- Civic Organizations (i.e., Rotary, Kiwanis)
- Realtors Associations
- Lodging & Restaurant Associations
- Main Street Programs
- Arts Organizations & Alliance
- Festivals & Events Organizations
- Historical Societies
- Federal Lands Partners - National Parks, National Heritage Areas, Army Corps Lakes, U.S. Forest Service
- Area Colleges & Universities
- Local Transit Authority

“ 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

Visit Irving, TX

- #1 Allow staff to serve on the boards of community partner organizations or ask a board member to serve on behalf of your organization, when possible.
- #2 Invite community partners to the annual tourism meeting, press conferences, client events etc., when appropriate.
- #3 Ask to speak annually at their monthly meetings to provide tourism updates -- highlight successes, economic impact, and strategic initiatives.
- #4 Schedule one-on-one meetings and/or calls with each leader to establish an ongoing rapport, even if only annually.
- #5 Subscribe to their newsletter lists for regular updates, or assign a staff member to provide updates at staff meetings.



TELLING YOUR STORY

Compile the many ways that tourism has shaped and promoted the community and then get creative about pulling that into a tourism narrative.

- How has tourism contributed to the city's infrastructure and planning?
- What about the positive economic impact of your festivals and events?
- Are there local businesses the tourism office has pulled into a terrific visitor experience – such as an ale trail or a map of bike and hiking trails in the area?
- What are the special places and stories that the tourism office has played a role in preserving?

Share these success stories with elected officials and your network. **People are much more likely to remember and repeat a great story than a big statistic.**

TELLING YOUR STORY: MAPPING TOURISM'S IMPACT

Greenwood, South Carolina created a user-friendly map as a quick reference for elected officials and residents to recognize the positive impact tourism has within their community. The Greenwood economic development map is a visual representation of how tourism is the cornerstone of an economic development strategy. The map not only provides an update on all of the community's major economic development projects, it showcases key tourism attractions, and infrastructure, in addition to the projects funded by tourism dollars.

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS



STEP 1: DO YOUR HOMEWORK

To make meaningful contacts with elected officials in your district, do your homework. Find out who your elected representatives are and **read up on their biography, background and policy interests**. This information can be found on their websites.

There are some legislators that are particularly influential or hold a deep understanding of an issue and should also be engaged as a supporter.

Connections need to be developed with legislators that sit on authorizing committees, where the work of a program is approved, as well as those that sit on funding committees, also known as appropriations.

Other potential allies include the heads of caucuses. These are often informal organizations that allow elected officials to be engaged on issues of particular concern to their constituents.



STEP 2: STAY INFORMED

Once you become familiar with your legislators' backgrounds, it is important to stay informed of their activities and positions on issues. Information gathered on their **websites, public statements, votes taken on issues**, and print and broadcast media reports on the legislators' actions will be invaluable when you make personal contacts.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CONGRESSIONAL TRAVEL AND TOURISM CAUCUS

Visit the *Advocacy Amplified* page at SoutheastTourism.org



STEP 3: ENGAGE

Take advantage of every opportunity to meet and become better acquainted with your Representative and Senators. Opportunities may develop through professional meetings or local civic or charitable organizations. **Put your elected officials on your mailing list** to keep them informed of activities in the community. You also can create opportunities to meet your legislators by **inviting them and their staffs to the welcome center** or office.

A visit to your workplace can be very powerful and leave a lasting positive impression on them when they see what goes into making tourism an economic generator.



STEP 4: ALL POLITICS ARE LOCAL

A trip to D.C. isn't necessary. Relationships with elected officials are often best developed when the legislators are home in their district or state. All Members of Congress have **district offices and staff**. Local offices are listed on their websites. It is most important that you be positive and constructive in your remarks. Prepare well and always be factual. Make officials feel they are receiving some benefit from the relationship and are receiving **reliable information on issues**. Fostering this relationship will encourage elected officials to reach out when they have questions.

You will also benefit greatly by **getting to know your legislators' staff**, who often serve as key advisors. If the staffers are well-informed on tourism issues, their boss will be too. With demanding schedules, it can sometimes be difficult to reach a legislator directly, by having a relationship with the staff, you can relay a message and know that your input is received.



HELPFUL HINTS

#1 Another way to identify yourself as a voice for tourism advocacy, is to speak up in the media. Op-Eds and letters to the editor are powerful communication tools. Elected officials regularly read the local op-ed sections of the paper to learn community sentiment.

#2 Tourism associations will provide action alerts and some offer advocacy platforms that allow a grassroots advocate to submit their address and be connected with the elected official's email address and a set message. All that is required is to provide a signature and email address. These calls to action can be shared with the local tourism community. For advocates that don't like to use an online platform (it will usually result in you being added to the organizations database), you can send along the template messaging to be used in your own email. Visit the Advocacy Amplified page on SoutheastTourism.org to see a list of STS states that have an association.

#3 In addition to partnering with tourism associations, get to know the advocacy staff, such as Halle Czechowski at STS. They can keep tourism community leaders up to date on issues of specific concern to their communities, and provide insights and assistance in advancing their local tourism agenda.



“ You can’t assume that we know.
You have to communicate.
You have to speak up about the
issues that matter to you. ”

GARRET GRAVES

U.S. Representative (R-LA 6th District)

- #4 Post your news coverage to your website. Whether it’s a video, news release, or published piece, share the link with your advocacy partners and on social media. It will not only help with your website traffic, it will also bring you potential new partners and supporters.
- #5 Party affiliation is not a barrier. Your Representative or Senator represents the entire district or state. You don’t have to be a member of their political party to speak with them.
- #6 Legislators also provide regular updates. Subscribe to their newsletters through their websites.
- #7 Every state has a political newsletter that provides updates from the state capitol. Newspapers are also a great option. Out of Washington, D.C. subscription-free newspapers include: POLITICO, The Hill, and Roll Call.



PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Priorities have been set, the coalition organized, advocacy partnerships developed, and legislators identified. Now what?

Organize newsletters and email lists to ensure that your advocacy network is informed and engaged. It is easier to get people to act if they feel informed on an issue. Advocacy is a long process but at times votes can come up quickly and it is important that an advocacy network is primed and ready to speak up.

The goal is to have everyone, from the board chair to the receptionist at the welcome center, talking about tourism's key issues in the same way, which amplifies the message.

Regular communication also ensures your network understands the advocacy process and the progress being made. Unlike a marketing strategy, advocacy is a long-term endeavor. It is measured in small steps that add up to progress in the form of informed policymakers, stronger coalitions, and laws and government policies that drive economic growth and vibrant communities. Keeping the network informed of the progress being made



allows advocates to see their efforts are making a difference, which strengthens their connection to advocacy and their willingness to speak up.

Community-level tourism is increasingly recognized as an influential voice with elected officials. While these advocacy campaigns are important for the industry, it can be difficult for tourism community leaders to respond effectively to these calls to action without understanding how these issues connect to their local tourism program and the impact for their community.

An advocacy strategy allows you to provide your local colleagues with the knowledge to assess advocacy requests and then act. By ensuring tourism leaders are acting within the framework of their strategic priorities, they can speak persuasively and passionately about the key issues affecting tourism and effectively move the needle with elected officials.

Developing and implementing an advocacy strategy ensures the voice of tourism is not just heard but resonates with elected officials and the public.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our hope is that this publication will empower more tourism community leaders to speak about the important role tourism plays in their communities and to spark new ideas on how to better tell tourism's story. Although produced as a publication, *Advocacy Amplified* is intended to be an interactive tool, with ideas and success stories shared throughout the tourism industry, in order to expand participation in advocacy initiatives.

Advocacy Amplified is a collaborative project of the Southeast Tourism Society. Many people generously shared their ideas and time to develop this guide, most notably, **Timothy Bush** of Visit Lake Charles, **Whitney Knollenberg** of North Carolina State University, **Jim Harenchar** of Response Marketing Group, **Amy Duffy** of South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, **Stacy Brown** of Shreveport-Bossier Convention & Tourist Bureau, **Gary Blitzer** of Cox Media Group, **Jill Kidder** of Louisiana Travel Promotion Association, and **Patti Culp** of Alabama Travel Council.

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ADVOCACY RESOURCES:

Southeast Tourism Society's Advocacy Resource Center

<https://southeasttourism.org/advocacy-2>

Halle Czechowski, STS Public Affairs Advisor

halleczech@mac.com

US Travel Issues

<https://www.ustravel.org/issues>

Destinations International Advocacy Library

<https://destinationsinternational.org/advocacy-library>

Power of Travel Coalition

<https://www.travelcoalition.org>

U.S. House of Representatives

www.house.gov

U.S. Senate

www.senate.gov

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