

Charleston SC. Responsible tourism initiative. Bloomberg Associates' recommendations to Mayor Cogswell

A. The Goals of our Engagement

At Mayor Cogswell's request, Bloomberg Associates has been engaged to provide an outside perspective on how Charleston can manage its growing tourism industry while also meeting the needs of residents.

Bloomberg Associates is a pro bono municipal consultancy with deep experience in the global tourism industry. The team conducted extensive research and reviewed relevant best practices. They analyzed available data and held one-on-one interviews with more than 70 recommended stakeholders. Together, these efforts created a robust community engagement process.

The output of this work is the set of recommendations presented in this document, which will be considered for contribution to Charleston's Future Livability and Responsible Tourism long-term plan.

B. The context

- **Tourism Is a Vital Economic Engine.** The Charleston Region's tourism sector underpins a substantial portion of its economy—accounting for a record-high \$14 billion in economic impact in 2024, up 7% from the prior year, despite only a modest 1.2% growth in visitors.
- That year, the region welcomed approximately 7.9 million visitors, with each adult spending on average \$1,105 per trip, up from \$878 in 2019.
- Tourism now represents almost 25 percent of regional sales and sustains tens of thousands of jobs—54,900 in 2024, the highest ever.
- **Institutional and Budget Impacts.** The downtown peninsula—though home to only 37,064 residents—generates the bulk of the city's tourism revenue and hosts ~100,000 people daily—including visitors, hospitality staff, students, and medical workers. This disproportionate burden strains infrastructure and services.
- Tourism revenues are funneled through capped taxes.
- **Negative Impacts on Residents' Quality of Life.** Residents report that Charleston's vibrancy is increasingly being overshadowed by congestion, degraded livability, and overstressed infrastructure. Enforcement, transit, parking, deferred maintenance, and budgeting all lag behind the pace of tourism growth.
- Looking to the future, unchecked tourism will undermine housing affordability, negatively impact neighborhood businesses, accelerate congestion, and threaten resident livability

- **Pressure on Housing, Infrastructure & Cultural Heritage.** Rising property values and growing tourism demand have increased pressure on long-standing neighborhoods. Many historic Black communities and multigenerational residents have experienced rising affordability concerns, while current zoning and development approaches have offered only limited support in maintaining community stability.
- Cultural organizations, historic sites, and Black- and locally owned businesses are navigating higher operating costs and varying levels of visibility, which can make it harder to sustain and share local heritage. As cultural offerings become more oriented towards visitors, there is a risk that broader commercial interests may outpace opportunities for deeper community-rooted storytelling
- **Outlook.** Tourism undeniably propels Charleston’s economy—creating jobs, funding preservation, and attracting investment. Yet, its unchecked growth threatens the very character and culture it relies on, particularly on the sensitive peninsula.
- Charleston is at a pivotal crossroads: it must do better at managing tourists, while also investing in the people who live here—through transit infrastructure, affordable housing, meaningful revenue mechanisms, equitable budgeting, and honest cultural representation.
- Only by balancing economic vitality with resident well-being and cultural integrity can Charleston avoid losing its heritage and sense of place.

C. Our recommendations

Overarching themes

Based on our research findings, interviews, and our knowledge of best practices and tourism trends, we have uncovered and developed a number of overarching imperative themes. They are directly related to achieving Mayor Cogswell’s stated goals. “Put locals first, expand the visitor experience, and mandate that tourists act like they live here.”

They include:

- Preserving authenticity, heritage and culture
- Balancing tourism benefits and residents’ experiences/ quality of life
- Respecting the peninsula’s limits
- Visitor civility
- Dispersal
- Communications to address perception/reality gaps
- Engaging residents, and
- Black heritage.

While many of our insights and findings may not be surprising, they surface important challenges that require direct and honest attention. Success will ultimately be measured by the City’s ability to respond with clear, actionable policies and initiatives.

We are making specific recommendations in the following 7 areas:

1. Destination marketing and management

a) Target High-Spending Cultural Travelers and Highlight Black Heritage as a Cornerstone of Charleston's story

- Charleston's tourism economy depends not just on visitor volume, but on the quality of spending and the alignment between tourism and community priorities.
- **Explore Charleston should:**
 - Continue to position Charleston as the premier cultural destination of the American South, where visitors invest in high-quality experiences rooted in the city's layered history—particularly its African American heritage—while enjoying its cuisine, architecture, historic preservation and arts.
 - Continue to develop campaigns that connect Charleston's cuisine, music, and arts directly to Black heritage narratives.
 - Package and promote cultural tourism experiences that highlight both established attractions and lesser-known community assets off the peninsula.
 - Use data analytics and market research to identify traveler segments that value cultural depth and spend more per trip and prioritize markets where these travelers are most concentrated.
- This approach should increase the economic return per visitor while reducing pressure on infrastructure and neighborhoods.
- Moreover, elevating Charleston's Black heritage is both an economic and social imperative. It responds to a growing traveler demand for authentic cultural experiences and supports more inclusive narratives that can strengthen resident pride and community trust in tourism development.

b) Expand Tourism Beyond the Peninsula to Strengthen Communities and Reduce Pressure

- Charleston's visitor economy is heavily concentrated on the lower peninsula. This creates congestion, overcrowding, and resident frustration, while leaving many neighborhoods and communities outside downtown under-recognized and under-benefited.
- At the same time, there are untapped assets—local restaurants, art, festivals, and the rich Black and Gullah Geechee cultural heritage—that could attract visitors if promoted and developed.
- **The City and Explore Charleston should:**
 - Designate a "Neighborhood & Regional Tourism Director" within Explore Charleston responsible for developing and promoting off-peninsula cultural assets.
 - Support the creation of neighborhood art tours, festivals, and cultural programming beyond downtown.

- Curate “neighborhood dining guides” that highlight off-peninsula restaurants, with a focus on local and Black-owned establishments.
- Partner with community organizations to build heritage experiences in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. (Start by supporting one or two community-led heritage offerings - e.g., storytelling trail, cultural meal series, music workshops. Offer small grants and training packages. Involve universities, philanthropy, and technical advisors in long-term facilitation. Ensure community ownership and governance remains in place.)
- Track and report how visitor spending flows into neighborhoods, reinforcing the message that tourism is spreading benefits fairly.
- By expanding tourism beyond the peninsula, Explore Charleston can spread economic benefits, strengthen community pride, and create a more balanced and sustainable visitor experience.

c) Partner to Elevate Black- and Locally owned Businesses in Charleston’s Visitor Economy

- Tourism in Charleston thrives when it reflects and supports the local community. By giving Black- and locally owned businesses visibility and direct access to tourist audiences, Explore Charleston can help generate revenue growth, diversify the tourism economy, and ensure that more residents benefit from visitor spending.
- However, success requires partnerships and capacity building. Many small businesses need support to become “tourist-ready” and to deliver at scale while maintaining quality.
- Past collaborations with business support providers have laid groundwork but also revealed gaps in support.
- **The City and Explore Charleston should:**
 - Create a capacity-building grant program for intermediaries like Lowcountry Local and the Gullah Geechee Chamber of Commerce.
 - Co-fund technical assistance programs (legal, financial planning, HR, marketing) so these groups can better support businesses.
 - Match city resources with philanthropy or CDFIs to provide working capital for Black- and locally owned businesses graduating from these programs.
 - Reserve a portion of city contracts and tourism vendor opportunities for these businesses.
 - Bundle Black- and locally owned businesses into tours, festivals, and neighborhood itineraries to drive visitor spending.
 - Invest in shared training (hospitality standards, e-commerce, digital marketing) to help local/Black-owned businesses scale.
 - Develop quality and service standards for tourism promotion and offer training to help local/Black-owned businesses meet them.
 - Explore sector-specific accelerators (e.g., food and beverage, cultural tourism) run by local partners.
 - Regularly report back to residents on how tourism dollars are supporting historically underrepresented communities.

- This approach can help to spread the benefits of tourism more equitably, strengthen Charleston’s cultural brand, and build community trust.

d) Reconnect Charleston Residents to Their City’s Cultural Life

- Tourism success depends on resident support and pride. If locals feel excluded—unable to dine in their own restaurants, priced out of cultural offerings, or pushed out of the peninsula—then resentment builds, undermining both tourism’s legitimacy and the city’s long-term appeal.
- By creating pathways for residents to re-engage with their own city, Explore Charleston can build stronger community ties, reinforce Charleston’s cultural vibrancy, and show that tourism enriches, rather than displaces, local life.
- **The City and Explore Charleston should:**
 - Develop a resident-focused brand and digital hub promoting special events, ticket blocks, and dining options reserved for locals.
 - Offer exclusive “locals-only” passes or discounts to cultural attractions, tours, or off-peak restaurant bookings (e.g., NYC’s culture pass for library card holders).
 - Promote cultural events in neighborhoods beyond the peninsula, spreading activity and making it easier for locals to participate.
 - Curate fun, low-cost tourist activities—block parties, neighborhood festivals, or heritage walks designed with residents in mind.
- This approach can help to rebuild trust and ensure Charleston remains a place where people are proud to live—and proud to share with visitors.

e) Reduce Resident Disruption and Strengthen Tourism Enforcement

- Charleston’s peninsula is the heart of its cultural and tourism economy—but it is also home to more than 37,064 residents. Currently, residents often feel disrupted by tourist misbehavior, noise, events, and road closures. At the same time, while the city has established thoughtful rules to help guide tourism, consistent enforcement has been challenging. As a result, some issues may go unaddressed, which can create a sense that guidelines are not always followed and make it harder for the city to fully balance tourism activity with overall community well-being.
- **The City should:**
 - Create a nightlife management plan which reduces resident frustration by tackling noise, drunkenness, parties, and overcrowding through rules, monitoring, and noise sensors; protects cultural vibrancy by supporting music, food, and nightlife with fair standards (like an “agent of change” rule which makes new developments responsible for managing impacts on existing neighbors); balances tourism and community by diversifying nightlife with cultural events and late transit; and coordinates enforcement by uniting police, regulators, businesses, and residents.
 - Grow enforcement teams, funded partly through tourism tax revenues or event permit fees.

- Require hotels and platforms like Airbnb to share data on guests, groups, or repeated violations. Require Airbnb to deactivate repeat offender properties when notified by the city and automatically block bookings in areas where the city imposes special event restrictions.
- Standardize road closures and rotate routes for parades, festivals, and races to avoid repeatedly burdening the same neighborhoods. Appoint event liaisons for affected neighborhoods to explain event plans and gather feedback.
- **The City and Explore Charleston should:**
 - Develop a communications campaign to inform visitors about local values, customs, and expectations for respectful, responsible behavior toward residents.
 - Develop a campaign aimed specifically at visitors known for rowdy behavior. Encourage visitors to behave as locals would - reinforcing that visitors share the city temporarily, so they should honor its rules and culture. Offer a pre-visit promise to respect local spaces and norms. Use targeted digital ads to address specific challenges and clearly communicate expectations. Use signs to remind tourists that misbehavior will result in on-the-spot fines.
- This approach should help to ensure that residents feel respected, informed, and protected.

f) Make Investments to Improve Safety, Security and Sanitation

- Downtown Charleston, especially along King Street, faces ongoing nightlife safety and sanitation challenges, prompting initiatives such as the King Street Safety Initiative to enhance enforcement, lighting, and pedestrian safety.
- The city and King Street Business Improvement District have also expanded the King Street Ambassador Program to strengthen cleaning, hospitality, and street presence, though coordination and visibility of sanitation services remain areas for improvement.
- **The City should:**
 - Provide additional funding to the King Street Business Improvement District and relevant partners to soften/ streamline visible security hardware; fix lighting “dark spots” and improve night-time crossings across the peninsula; expand Ambassador-style teams and late-night cleaning along King Street and other key corridors; and publish street-level updates on safety and sanitation efforts.

2. Arts and culture

a) Reposition the City’s Office of Cultural Affairs to Serve as a More Effective Liaison to the Arts and Culture Sector

- Interviews with Charleston cultural leaders repeatedly highlighted the need for the City’s Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA) to be a stronger champion for the cultural sector. Currently, as both a funder and programmer of its own festivals, OCA is viewed as a competitor for scarce public resources, rather than a champion or facilitator.

- Charleston arts and culture organizations described working in silos and feeling disempowered when attempting to access City support. What is needed most is a proactive liaison that can help organizations navigate City processes and elevate the arts as a civic priority.
- **The City should:**
 - Reposition OCA within the City's organizational structure to elevate its role, better support cross-agency collaboration, and signal that the arts are a municipal priority.
 - Rebrand the office as a service-oriented navigator for cultural organizations, guiding them through regulatory processes and expanding access to City support. As a first step, OCA could develop written guidance or a road map that clarifies and streamlines regulatory reviews for public art, signage, and event permitting that currently lack transparency.
 - Host annual workshops for cultural organizations to highlight the full range of City services and support available to the sector, with particular focus on small, grassroots groups that have historically had limited access to funding and visibility.

b) Identify Public Funding that Facilitates the City's Objectives for Culture as a Benefit for Residents, rather than Continuing to Rely only on Accommodations Tax and its Focus on Tourists

- Charleston's reliance on state-controlled Accommodations Tax (A-tax) funding to support cultural institutions creates major challenges. Because A-tax dollars are tied to tourism impact and restricted to marketing or tourism-related expenses, many organizations cannot use them for core operations, education, or community programs. Funding also tends to concentrate among legacy institutions, putting smaller, Black-led, Indigenous, and grassroots organizations at a disadvantage.
- To remain competitive and support the City's objective of positioning culture as a benefit for residents, Charleston must diversify its funding streams for the sector.
- **The City should** establish a City General Fund allocation for culture, separate from A-tax, with more flexible uses such as general operating support, resident-facing programs and benefits (e.g., free community events, youth education initiatives, neighborhood festivals) and organizational capacity building (e.g., fundraising, governance practices).

c) Strengthen Culture as a Small Business Sector by Convening Arts and Culture Organizations to Collaborate and Build Capacity for Fundraising, Marketing, and Governance

- Charleston cultural organizations of various disciplines face operational pressures and inequitable access to City resources. While local philanthropy has taken an interest in supporting collaboration and advocacy, the City of Charleston has not played a visible role in advancing the sector.
- **The City should** join local institutions like the College of Charleston and area philanthropies to convene stakeholders to identify shared objectives, expand access to city resources, and elevate arts.

- Early actions might include:
 - Convening quarterly roundtables where arts leaders can share strategies on financial sustainability, board governance, and collaborative projects.
 - Formalizing a capacity building program in partnership with the College of Charleston's Arts Management Program and local foundations with a focus on board training, fundraising and governance best practices
 - Developing a joint plan to promote cultural organizations.

d) Establish Data Collection Practices for the Sector to Better Capture Challenges and Opportunities for Economic and Social Impact in Charleston

- Many cultural institutions lack consistent, reliable data on audience demographics, economic impact, and community benefit, limiting their ability to advocate effectively for resources. Stronger data would allow cultural organizations to more readily demonstrate their contributions to economic development, tourism, community wellbeing, and education, and improve casemaking for cultural investment to policymakers and residents.
- **The City should:**
 - Require A-tax and City-funded organizations to submit a uniform cultural data template to OCA that includes statistics on attendance, geographic reach and programming outcomes, and provide technical assistance to organizations that need support with the template.
 - Partner with a research institution like the College of Charleston to strengthen data collection and develop a comprehensive impact report on Charleston's arts and culture sector.

e) Ensure that Arts and Culture Organizations are Included in Cross-Sector Initiatives and Public Private Partnerships, Including Tourism, Planning and Economic Development

- Cultural institutions report that limited visibility and weak collaboration between the City, Explore Charleston, and cultural institutions can constrain their ability to benefit from branding and economic development opportunities.
- The City can encourage cross-sector collaborations that amplify marketing reach, increase funding opportunities, and integrate culture into city planning and business development.
- **The City should:**
 - Explore opportunities with Explore Charleston to ensure greater representation of non-profit cultural organizations in shaping the City's tourism strategy.
 - Collaborate with Explore Charleston on a joint marketing campaign with arts and culture organizations as a core part of Charleston's brand.
 - Prioritize arts and culture venues in planning and zoning decisions, offering incentives for developers who include performance spaces, galleries, or rehearsal studios in mixed-use projects.

3. Funding for tourism-related infrastructure

a) Advocate for State Authorization of a Tourism-Focused Sales Tax Increase

- The Charleston region welcomed 8 million visitors last year, but under current law it cannot raise its sales tax beyond a 9% cap (6% state + 3% local). As a result, tourists are not contributing enough to the cost of city services they consume — from sanitation and policing to road maintenance and tourism infrastructure — and residents are effectively subsidizing millions of visitors, straining city finances.
- **The City should** seek state authorization to increase the sales tax cap by 0.5% for designated tourism-heavy communities, allowing Charleston to generate sustainable revenue to fund tourism-related infrastructure and services—without disproportionately burdening residents. In particular, it should:
 - Partner with tourism-dependent cities (Myrtle Beach, North Myrtle Beach, Columbia, Lexington, Sumter) to present a united front
 - Highlight other U.S. cities where sales tax is higher, yet tourism thrives (e.g., New Orleans 9.95%, Memphis 9.75%, Seattle 10.25-10.6%).
 - Propose exemptions for essentials like groceries, medicine, and utilities, ensuring the burden falls primarily on visitors.
 - Commit new funds to tourism infrastructure, policing, and cultural heritage preservation.
 - Pledge annual transparency reports showing how revenue is spent.
- By earmarking revenues for tourism-related services, Charleston can generate sustainable funding while strengthening community support for tourism

b) Advocate for Higher Accommodation & Hospitality Tax Limits with Greater Local Control

- Charleston attracts around 8 million visitors annually, yet the city collects only about \$51–54 million per year from the three main tourism taxes:
 - State accommodations tax (2%) – about \$11M; 30% must go to promotion via Explore Charleston, and by law only 15% can go to workforce housing.
 - Municipal accommodations tax (up to 3%) – about \$12.5M, more flexible but capped statewide. Hospitality tax (up to 2%) – about \$28–31M.
- For a destination of Charleston’s scale, this revenue is modest. For comparison: New Orleans levies a combined hotel tax of over 15%, generating more than \$200M annually. Savannah uses a 6% local hotel tax, collecting over \$25M. Nashville combines high hotel occupancy taxes with event surcharges, generating hundreds of millions each year.
- The City is leaving significant tourism revenue on the table, and it should seek state approval to raise the caps on accommodations and hospitality taxes and expand the flexibility of how revenues can be spent—ensuring that funds support not only cultural promotion but also the infrastructure, housing, and enforcement needed to manage tourism responsibly.
- **In particular, the City should:**

- Frame this as a South Carolina competitiveness issue: if peer cities elsewhere can levy higher taxes without harming visitation, Charleston and its peers should have the same tools.
- Highlight that this reduces the pressure on neighborhoods while sustaining Charleston's hospitality industry.
- Publish an annual tourism revenue report detailing exactly how taxes are spent and create a resident advisory process to shape spending priorities.
- By showing that visitors in other U.S. destinations already pay more without discouraging tourism, and by promising transparency and reinvestment into housing, infrastructure, and enforcement, the City benefits both residents and the visitor economy.

c) Create an Explore Charleston Community Foundation

- Explore Charleston currently operates as a destination marketing organization (DMO) with affiliated 501(c)(3) entities, but it lacks a dedicated foundation focused on channeling tourism benefits directly back into the community.
- Other DMOs have demonstrated how a foundation can help to bridge the gap between tourism growth and local benefit. For example:
 - A foundation can award funding across neighborhoods—for workforce housing, cultural events in historically underserved areas, resident education, and tourism infrastructure upgrades.
 - It can be structured with a board that includes community leaders and residents to ensure equitable allocation and build trust.
 - It can attract donations, corporate sponsorships (hotel partners, airlines, restaurants), and grants in ways that marketing-focused nonprofits cannot.
 - It can create signature programs, such as a “Tourism Gives Back” grant round funding Black-owned business growth, or neighborhood cultural events.
- **Explore Charleston should** explore the creation of such a foundation. In this way, it would tangibly demonstrate its commitment to local well-being, strengthening community trust and long-term support for the industry.

4. Transportation

a) Implement Parking Reforms

- A reliable, well-managed parking system is essential for mobility, quality of life, and the functioning of Charleston's historic core. Today, parking pressures, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient enforcement undermine both resident experience and visitor circulation.
- **The City should:**
 - Replace single-space meters with a modern, pay-by-plate, app-based system.
 - Redo the garage occupancy study, as the most recent data is from 2019.
 - Implement a new pricing program that:

- Sets standard garage rates below on-street rates and establishes a maximum two-hour limit for on-street spaces.
- Based on-street rates on each block's percentage of occupied spaces, targeting 85% occupancy.
- Consider extending parking meter hours to 10:00 p.m.
- Use new revenue to expand parking capacity and fund additional parking enforcement agents.
- Enforce the existing residential parking permit program, with an initial focus on the peninsula.
- Partner with the College of Charleston to reduce or eliminate on-street parking by commuting students.
- Develop a communications campaign to educate visitors about parking and mobility options in the historic core.
- These actions respond to several clear dynamics. Public garages have available capacity, yet current pricing and communication fail to direct drivers there. College of Charleston students routinely use metered on-street parking without consequence, reducing turnover. And the residential permit system—if enforced—would meaningfully reduce spillover parking. Together, these recommendations would shift demand to the appropriate facilities, support residents, and reduce unnecessary congestion.

b) Upgrade Transit Options for Downtown Commuters

- Charleston's long-term mobility depends on credible transit options that give commuters and visitors alternatives to driving. Yet ridership remains extremely low and continues to decline, even as major employment sectors—healthcare, hospitality and education—include workers who could shift to transit if service were reliable, convenient, and supported by adequate park-and-ride options.
- Meanwhile, the cost of car ownership in Charleston consumes a disproportionately high share of household income, with an average of 1.87 cars per household.
- **The City, COG, and CARTA should:**
 - Deliver the Lowcountry Rapid Transit (LCRT) program on budget and on schedule.
 - Reinstate the HOP Shuttle.
 - Secure new park-and-ride lots serving both LCRT and HOP.
 - Extend transit service hours to 10 p.m., enabled by the flexibility of the new parking program to allow spot extensions.
- These actions would expand access for the commuting sectors most likely to use transit, stabilize declining ridership, and provide cost-effective alternatives in a city where driving is increasingly expensive. Reliable service, complemented by accessible park-and-ride options, is essential to shifting travel behavior.

c) Improve Cycling Conditions for Visitors and Commuters

- A well-designed bike share system, combined with safe and connected bike infrastructure, can reduce local vehicle trips, improve safety, and offer both residents and visitors a practical alternative to driving—especially in and around the historic core.
- **The City should:**
 - Issue a new RFP for a revamped bike share program.
 - Structure the RFP around a docked system, which keeps bikes off sidewalks and allows service to be shut down if necessary.
 - Design the system around core audiences: visitors and commuters.
 - Locate docks in residential neighborhoods with high (or anticipated) cyclist activity—such as areas near the Ashley Bridge.
 - Site docks in major “park-once” locations, including the Visitors Center and Union Pier.
 - Implement SCDOT safety projects that include protected bike facilities (e.g., Saint Philip Street, Upper Meeting Street) using temporary materials if needed.
- The rationale is clear. Bike lanes improve street safety and create a reliable commuting option for residents in relevant neighborhoods. When implemented effectively, bike share provides a viable alternative to point-to-point driving and reduces tourists’ reliance on personal vehicles. Together, these investments would strengthen mobility, enhance safety, and support a healthier transportation network.

d) Develop an Integrated Wayfinding and Signage Program

- Visitors default to driving/taxis when distances, travel times on foot/bike or transit are not clear or predictable. Clear wayfinding and signage can encourage and incentivize active transportation and transit use.
- **The City should:**
 - Invest in a comprehensive wayfinding and signage plan
 - Phase 1: wayfinding and orientation tools which strengthen walkability/bikeability on the peninsula
 - Phase 2: a coordinated wayfinding system for visitors at points of egress off the peninsula, including the airport, visitors center and other and in high-tourism traffic areas off the peninsula.

These measures will only be effective when combined with improvement to the sidewalks, bike routes and lanes and transit service.

5. Accommodation

a) Increase Number of Residents Living on the Peninsula

- It would be beneficial for the City to encourage the repopulation of the peninsula with long-term residents, particularly those employed in hospitality and other service sectors.
- The City is planning to update its zoning code next year, following completion of a more technical rewrite this year. The forthcoming update will introduce strategic increases in

density and relax regulations that currently constrain new development and the redevelopment of underutilized sites on the peninsula.

- In parallel, the City is developing strategies to redevelop City-owned properties and sites held by institutional partners (e.g., MUSC, the College of Charleston, and others) for housing and complementary uses.
- As these efforts advance, **the City should** ensure that a substantial share of housing is incorporated, leveraging available subsidies to either expand the total number of units or enhance affordability for lower-income households. The inclusion of affordable housing within new developments will ultimately depend on the Mayor and City's ability to secure public or philanthropic funding to support these subsidies.

b) Encourage Hotel Development on Transit Corridors

- Tourism growth has placed increasing pressure on Charleston's limited transportation infrastructure, particularly on the peninsula where nearly 4,000 additional hotel rooms are permitted or under construction.
- Aligning future visitor accommodation with planned transit corridors—especially the forthcoming Lowcountry Rapid Transit (LCRT) system - would help reduce traffic congestion, support sustainable mobility, and integrate tourism growth with broader urban and environmental goals.
- While this concept is not yet reflected in current planning or zoning frameworks, the City Planning Department has expressed support for applying such a policy to the LCRT corridors on the peninsula and to future development areas off the peninsula where hotel entitlements are not yet finalized.
- This approach would encourage new hotels to locate near high-capacity transit routes, reducing private-vehicle dependency and improving access for workers and visitors alike.
- **The City should:**
 - Incorporate transit proximity criteria into hotel development policies by amending zoning overlays or design guidelines to encourage or require that new hotels be sited along established or planned LCRT and HOP shuttle routes.
 - Revisit and consolidate hotel accommodation overlays, avoiding the creation of new overlays in areas not served by current or planned transit infrastructure.
 - Coordinate with CARTA and the LCRT project team to map eligible development zones within walking distance of transit corridors, ensuring alignment with regional mobility plans.
 - Continue to encourage smaller-scale hotel formats, maintaining the 50-room cap where appropriate.
 - Prioritize off-peninsula hotel development in transit-accessible mixed-use areas to distribute visitor activity more evenly across the city and region.
- Implementing this policy should strengthen the link between tourism development and Charleston's mobility and sustainability objectives and encourage more balanced growth between the peninsula and surrounding areas.

c) Encourage Hotel Owners to Contribute Funding Towards Worker Housing

- **The City should** ask hotel owners and developers to contribute voluntarily to an independently managed impact fund that would support subsidizing housing programs that created affordable housing, with a focus on housing on the peninsula or in proximity to transit and commercial nodes off the peninsula.

6. Transparency and communications

a) Build and Maintain a Charleston Tourism & Livability Dashboard

- Currently, Explore Charleston publishes positive visitor statistics (visitor volumes, economic impacts), but does not provide equally visible data on the quality-of-life impacts for residents (congestion, parking stress, nuisance incidents, etc.).
- This imbalance fuels resident frustration, as the narrative is incomplete and tourism management appears one-sided.
- **The City should** hire an independent data partner to build and maintain a “Tourism & Livability Dashboard” that helps the city move from simply promoting tourism to actively managing it as part of Charleston’s overall livability strategy.
- The dashboard should:
 - Provide a balanced view, by integrating benefits (jobs, spending, cultural vitality, infrastructure, lower taxes) and impacts (traffic, housing, safety, livability concerns).
 - Be updated quarterly (or more frequently) via automated data pipelines and APIs, ensuring freshness and credibility.
 - Not only present data, but actively inform decision-making across:
 - City Government — adjust zoning, parking, and transit policies based on congestion and visitor/resident mix; target public safety interventions where nuisance incidents correlate with tourism activity; guide cultural investment by tracking which attractions are under/over-visited
 - Resident Groups & Neighborhood Associations — Advocate for mitigations (e.g., noise ordinances, better pedestrian infrastructure, parking relief in hot spots); Track progress against promises made by city and tourism bodies.
 - Hospitality, retail, and attractions Industry — Adjust operating hours, staffing, or transportation support based on demand patterns; co-invest in solutions (e.g., shuttle services, cultural programming).
 - Be publicly accessible online, supporting transparency and trust.
- Examples of datasets include:
 - Congestion & Mobility: pedestrian counts, parking demand heat maps, commuter vs. visitor vehicle volumes.
 - Resident vs. Visitor Mix: day trippers, overnight guests, and locals by time of day and season.
 - Livability Indicators: nuisance complaints, 311/911 calls, sanitation impacts, public safety reports.

- Cultural & Economic Indicators: visitor spend at cultural sites vs. retail/dining; business type and ownership benefiting.
- Equity & Distribution: spending patterns by neighborhood, ownership demographics (e.g., minority-owned businesses).

b) Strengthen Transparency & Accountability at Explore Charleston

- Destination Marketing Organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate accountability and transparency to their stakeholders and the public. Many leading DMOs (e.g., Visit California, Visit Orlando, VisitScotland) publish detailed information on budgets, governance, strategy, and board activity.
- Explore Charleston currently discloses some information — such as board membership, staff, funding sources, and its DEI commitments — but lacks comprehensive public reporting on finances, governance, and decision-making processes.
- **Explore Charleston should:**
 - Establish a dedicated “Transparency” page on its website and publish the following:
 - Annual Budgets & Financials - including revenues and expenditures by category in accessible, reader-friendly formats.
 - Governance & Policies
 - Board & Leadership Information - including an organization chart of senior staff.
 - Strategic Plans & Reports - sharing *what* the organization is aiming to achieve, not *how* it will execute specific campaigns
 - Board Meeting Materials
 - Partner & Membership Transparency
- By publishing core information in a structured, easily accessible way, Explore Charleston can enhance trust, demonstrate accountability, pre-empt scrutiny, and showcase leadership.

7. The City’s and Explore Charleston’s roles and governance arrangements

a) Establish a Senior Economic Development Leader for Charleston

- Charleston has a Livability and Tourism Department, but its focus is primarily on enforcement, not on broader economic integration, infrastructure, or inclusion of small and minority-owned businesses in tourism benefits.
- At the same time, there is no centralized office responsible for broader economic growth, mobility, or business-facing coordination at the city level. As a result, there is no coordinated strategy for economic growth or economic mobility, and tourism’s role in the wider economy is not being addressed.
- **The City should:**
 - Establish a senior economic development leader, housed in the Mayor’s Office, with a mandate to:
 - Lead and coordinate a comprehensive economic growth strategy (in partnership with the county’s economic development office)

- Oversee and align the city’s tourism and economic-related functions, ensuring coherence across departments and partners.
- Integrate tourism into the wider economy, balancing promotion with livability and inclusive growth
- Represent the city to investors and businesses, serving as a single, senior point of contact.
- A dedicated communications resource should be provided to the role, given the strong feelings residents have about tourism.
- This role would bring strategic leadership, visibility, and accountability to how Charleston manages both tourism and the broader economy, ensuring that growth is both sustainable and inclusive.

b) Explore the Creation of a Resident-Facing Tourism & Livability Task Force

- With the planned establishment of a senior economic development leader, the City has a chance to build more integrated governance for tourism in Charleston.
- **The City should:**
 - Consider creating a Resident-Facing Tourism & Livability Task Force, chaired by the senior economic development leader
 - Include standing representatives from: Livability & Tourism; Explore Charleston; Planning, Preservation & Sustainability; Traffic & Transportation; CARTA; Housing Authority; and others as needed.
 - Incorporate neighborhood residents (especially from high-impact areas) and representatives from local/ Black-owned businesses to ensure diverse perspectives.
- The task force would
 - Serve as a forum for discussing tourism's positive contributions and livability impacts.
 - Provide recommendations to the Mayor, City Council, and relevant departments on tourism-related policies—including infrastructure, noise, congestion, and economic inclusivity.
- This approach can give residents meaningful representation in decisions affecting their quality of life.

D. Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation	High/ Low	High/ Low	Quick/ Longer	Owner/s
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	Impact	Cost	Term	
1. Destination marketing and management				
a) Target High-Spending Cultural Travelers and highlight Black heritage as a cornerstone of Charleston's story	High	Low	Quick	Explore Charleston
Continue to position Charleston as the premier cultural destination of the American South, where visitors invest in high-quality experiences rooted in the city's layered history—particularly its African American heritage—while enjoying its cuisine, architectures, historic preservation and arts.				
Continue to develop campaigns that connect Charleston's cuisine, music, and arts directly to Black heritage narratives.				
Package and promote cultural tourism experiences that highlight both established attractions and lesser-known community assets off the peninsula.				
Use data analytics and market research to identify traveler segments that value cultural depth and spend more per trip and prioritize markets where these travelers are most concentrated.				
b) Expand Tourism Beyond the Peninsula to Strengthen Communities and Reduce Pressure	High	High	Longer Term	Explore Charleston, Livability & Tourism
Designate a "Neighborhood & Regional Tourism Director" within Explore Charleston responsible for developing and promoting off-peninsula cultural assets.				
Support the creation of neighborhood art tours, festivals, and cultural programming beyond downtown.				
Curate "neighborhood dining guides" that highlight off-peninsula restaurants, with a focus on local and Black-owned establishments.				
Partner with community organizations to build heritage experiences in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Corridor. (Start by supporting one or two community-led heritage offerings—e.g., storytelling trail, cultural meal series, music workshops. Offer small grants and training packages. Involve universities, philanthropy, and technical advisors in long-term facilitation. Ensure community ownership and governance remains in place.				
Track and report how visitor spending flows into neighborhoods, reinforcing the message that tourism is spreading benefits fairly.				
c) Partner to Elevate Black- and locally owned Businesses in Charleston's Visitor Economy	High	High	Longer Term	New City Econ Dev Director & Explore Charleston
Create a capacity-building grant program for intermediaries like Lowcountry Local and the Gullah Geechee Chamber of Commerce.				
Co-fund technical assistance programs (legal, financial planning, HR, marketing) so these groups can better support businesses.				
Match city resources with philanthropy or CDFIs to provide working capital for Black- and locally owned businesses graduating from these programs.				
Reserve a portion of city contracts and tourism vendor opportunities for these businesses.				
Bundle Black- and locally owned businesses into tours, festivals, and neighborhood itineraries.				

Invest in shared training (hospitality standards for tourism promotion and offer training to help local/Black owned businesses meet them.				
Develop quality and service standards for tourism promotion and offer training to help local/Black-owned businesses meet them.				
Explore sector-specific accelerators (e.g., food and beverage, cultural tourism) run by local partners.				
Regularly report back to residents on how tourism dollars are supporting historically underrepresented communities.				
d) Reconnect Charleston Residents to Their City's Cultural Life	High	Medium	Quick	Explore Charleston, Livability & Tourism
Develop a resident-focused brand and digital hub promoting special events, ticket blocks, and dining options reserved for locals.				
Offer exclusive "locals-only" passes or discounts to cultural attractions, tours, or off-peak restaurant bookings (e.g., NYC's culture pass for library card holders).				
Promote cultural events in neighborhoods beyond the peninsula, spreading activity and making it easier for locals to participate.				
Curate fun, low-cost tourism activities- block parties, neighborhood festivals, or heritage walks designed with residents in mind.				
e) Reduce Resident Disruption and Strengthen Tourism Enforcement	High	Medium	Quick	New City Econ Dev Director, Explore Charleston, Livability & Tourism
Create a nightlife management plan which reduces resident frustration by tracking noise, drunkenness, parties, and overcrowding through rules, monitoring, and noise sensors; protects cultural vibrancy by supporting music, food, and nightlife with fair standards (like an "agent of change" rule which makes new developments responsible for managing impacts on existing neighbors); balances tourism and community by diversifying nightlife with cultural events and late transit; and coordinates enforcement by uniting police, regulators, businesses, and residents.				
Grow enforcement teams, funded partly through tourism tax revenues or event permit fees.				
Require hotels and platforms like Airbnb to share data on guests, groups, or repeated violations. Require Airbnb to deactivate repeat offender properties when notified by the city and automatically block bookings in areas where the city imposes special event restrictions.				
Standardize road closures and rotate routes for parades, festivals, and races to avoid repeatedly burdening the same neighborhoods. Appoint event liaisons for affected neighborhoods to explain event plans and gather feedback.				
Develop a communications campaign to inform visitors about local values, customs, and expectations for respectful, responsible behavior toward residents.				
Develop a campaign aimed specifically at visitors known for rowdy behavior. Encourage visitors to behave as locals				

would - reinforcing that visitors share the city temporarily, so they should honor its rules and culture. Offer a pre-visit promise to respect local spaces and norms. Use targeted digital ads to address specific challenges and clearly communicate expectations. Use signs to remind tourists that misbehavior will result in on-the-spot fines.				
f) Make investments to improve safety, security and sanitation	Medium	Low	Mixed	King Street BID, Explore Charleston
Provide additional funding to the King Street Business Improvement District and relevant partners to soften/streamline visible security hardware; fix lighting "dark spots" and improve night-time crossings across the peninsula; expand Ambassador-style teams and late-night cleaning along King Street and other key corridors; and publish street-level updates on safety and sanitation efforts.				
2. Arts and culture				
a) Reposition the City's Office of Cultural Affairs to serve as a more effective liaison to the arts and culture sector	High	Low	Quick	Mayor & Office of Cultural Affairs
Rebrand the office as a service-oriented navigator for cultural organizations, guiding them through regulatory processes and expanding access to City support. As a first step, OCA could develop written guidance or a road map that clarifies and streamlines regulatory reviews for public art, signage, and event permitting that currently lack transparency.				
Host annual workshops for cultural organizations to highlight the full range of City services and support available to the sector, with particular focus on small, grassroots groups that have historically had limited access to funding and visibility.				
b) Identify public funding that facilitates the City's objectives for culture as a benefit for residents, rather than continuing to rely only on A-tax and its focus on tourists	High	High	Longer Term	Mayor & Councilmember
Establish a City General Fund allocation for culture, separate from A-tax, with more flexible uses such as general operating support, resident-facing programs and benefits (e.g., free community events, youth education initiatives, neighborhood festivals) and organizational capacity building (e.g., fundraising, governance practices).				
c) Strengthen culture as a small business sector by convening non-profit organizations to build capacity for fundraising, marketing, and governance	High	Medium	Quick	Office of Cultural Affairs College of Charleston & Private philanthropy
Join local institutions like the College of Charleston and area philanthropies to convene stakeholders to identify shared objectives, expand access to city resources, and elevate arts.				
d) Establish data collection practices for the sector to better capture challenges and opportunities for economic and social impact in Charleston	Medium	Medium	Longer Term	Office of Cultural Affairs & College of Charleston
Require A-tax and City-funded organizations to submit a uniform cultural data template to OCA that includes statistics on attendance, geographic reach and programming outcomes, and provide technical assistance to organizations that need support with the template.				

Partner with a research institution like the College of Charleston to strengthen data collection and develop a comprehensive impact report on Charleston's arts and culture sector.				
e) Ensure that cultural organization leaders are included in cross-sector initiatives and public private partnerships	High	Low	Quick	Mayor Office of Cultural Affairs & Explore Charleston
Explore opportunities with Explore Charleston to ensure greater representation of non-profit cultural organizations in shaping the City's tourism strategy.				
Collaborate with Explore Charleston on a joint marketing campaign with arts and culture organizations as a core part of Charleston's brand.				
Prioritize arts and culture venues in planning and zoning decisions, offering incentives for developers who include performance spaces, galleries, or rehearsal studios in mixed-use projects.				
3. Funding for tourism-related infrastructure				
a) Advocate for State Authorization of a Tourism-Focused Sales Tax Increase	High	High	Longer Term	Mayor
Seek state authorization to increase the sales tax cap by 0.5% for designated tourism-heavy communities, allowing Charleston to generate sustainable revenue to fund tourism-related infrastructure and services—without disproportionately burdening residents.				
b) Advocate for Higher Accommodation & Hospitality Tax Limits with Greater Local Control	High	High	Longer Term	Mayor
Frame this as a South Carolina competitiveness issue: if peer cities elsewhere can levy higher taxes without harming visitation, Charleston and its peers should have the same tools.				
Highlight that this reduces the pressure on neighborhoods while sustaining Charleston's hospitality industry.				
Publish an annual tourism revenue report detailing exactly how taxes are spent and create a resident advisory process to shape spending priorities.				
c) Create an Explore Charleston Community Foundation	High	Low	Quick	Explore Charleston
Explore the creation of such a foundation. In this way, it would tangibly demonstrate its commitment to local well-being, strengthening community trust and long-term support for the industry.				
4. Transportation				
a) Implement Parking Reform	High	Medium	Mixed	Traffic & Transportation
Replace single-space meters with a modern, pay-by-plate, app-based system.				
Redo the garage occupancy study, as the most recent data is from 2019.				

<p>Implement a new pricing program that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sets standard garage rates below on-street rates and establishes a maximum two-hour limit for on-street spaces. - Based on-street rates on each block's percentage of occupied spaces, targeting 85% occupancy. - Consider extending parking meter hours to 10:00 p.m. - Uses new revenue to expand parking capacity and fund additional parking enforcement agents. 				
Enforce the existing residential parking permit program, with an initial focus on the peninsula				
Partner with the College of Charleston to reduce or eliminate on-street parking by commuting students.				
Develop a communications campaign to educate visitors about parking and mobility options in the historic core.				
b) Upgrade Transit Options for Downtown Commuters	High	High	Quick	Traffic & Transportation, COG, CARTA
Deliver the Lowcountry Rapid Transit (LCRT) program on budget and on schedule				
Reinstate the HOP Shuttle.				
Secure new park-and-ride lots serving both LCRT and HOP.				
Extend transit service hours to 10 p.m., enabled by the flexibility of the new parking program to allow spot extensions.				
c) Improve Cycling Conditions for Visitors and Commuters	Medium	Medium	Longer Term	Traffic & Transportation
<p>Issue a new RFP for a revamped bike share program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structure the RFP around a docked system, which keeps bikes off sidewalks and allows service to be shut down if necessary. - Design the system around core audiences: visitors and commuters. - Locate docks in residential neighborhoods with high (or anticipated) cyclist activity—such as areas near the Ashley Bridge. - Site docks in major “park-once” locations, including the Visitors Center and Union Pier. 				
Implement SCDOT safety projects that include protected bike facilities (e.g., Saint Philip Street, Upper Meeting Street) using temporary materials if needed.				
d) Introduce Integrated Wayfinding and Signage	Medium	Medium	Mixed	Traffic & Transportation

Invest in a comprehensive wayfinding and signage plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Phase 1: wayfinding and orientation tools which strengthen walkability/bikeability on the peninsula - Phase 2: a coordinated wayfinding system for visitors at points of egress off the peninsula, including the airport, visitors center and other and in high-tourism traffic areas off the peninsula. 				
5. Accommodation				
a) Increase Number of Residents Living on the Peninsula	High	High	Longer Term	Planning, Preservation & Sustainability
b) Encourage Hotel Development on Transit Corridors	High	Low	Longer Term	Planning, Preservation & Sustainability
Incorporate transit proximity criteria into hotel development policies by amending zoning overlays or design guidelines to encourage or require that new hotels be sited along established or planned LCRT and HOP shuttle routes.				
Revisit and consolidate hotel accommodation overlays, avoiding the creation of new overlays in areas not served by current or planned transit infrastructure.				
Coordinate with CARTA and the LCRT project team to map eligible development zones within walking distance of transit corridors, ensuring alignment with regional mobility plans.				
Continue to encourage smaller-scale hotel formats, maintaining the 50-room cap where appropriate..				
Prioritize off-peninsula hotel development in transit-accessible mixed-use areas to distribute visitor activity more evenly across the city and region.				
c) Encourage Hotel Owners to Contribute Funding Towards Worker Housing	Medium	Low	Quick	Explore Charleston, Executive Office
Ask hotel owners and developers to contribute voluntarily to an independently managed impact fund that would support subsidizing housing programs that created affordable housing, with a focus on housing on the peninsula or in proximity to transit and commercial nodes off the peninsula.				
6. Transparency and communications				
a) Build and Maintain a Charleston Tourism & Livability Dashboard	High	Low	Quick	Livability & Tourism, Explore Charleston
Hire an independent data partner to build and maintain a "Tourism & Livability Dashboard" that helps the city move from simply promoting tourism to actively managing it as part of Charleston's overall livability strategy				
b) Strengthen Transparency & Accountability at Explore Charleston	Medium	Low	Quick	Explore Charleston
Establish a dedicated "Transparency" page on its website and publish the following:				

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual Budgets & Financials - including revenues and expenditures by category in accessible, reader-friendly formats. - Governance & Policies - Board & Leadership Information - including an organization chart of senior staff. - Strategic Plans & Reports - sharing <i>what</i> the organization is aiming to achieve, not <i>how</i> it will execute specific campaigns - Board Meeting Materials - Partner & Membership Transparency 				
7. The City's and Explore Charleston's roles and governance arrangements				
a) Establish a Senior Economic Development Leader for Charleston with access to communications resources	High	Low	Quick	Executive Office
<p>Establish a senior economic development leader, housed in the Mayor's Office, with a mandate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lead and coordinate a comprehensive economic growth strategy (in partnership with the county's economic development office) - Oversee and align the city's tourism and economic-related functions, ensuring coherence across departments and partners. - Integrate tourism into the wider economy, balancing promotion with livability and inclusive growth - Represent the city to investors and businesses, serving as a single, senior point of contact. 				
b) Explore the Creation of a Resident-Facing Tourism & Livability Task Force	Medium	Low	Quick	New City Econ Dev Director & Explore Charleston
Consider creating a Resident-Facing Tourism & Livability Task Force, chaired by the senior economic development leader				
Include standing representatives from: Livability & Tourism; Explore Charleston; Planning, Preservation & Sustainability; Traffic & Transportation; CARTA; Housing Authority; and others as needed.				
Incorporate neighborhood residents (especially from high-impact areas) and representatives from local/ Black-owned businesses to ensure diverse perspectives.				

E. Next steps

- **Early Dec 2025.** BA sends recommendations and appendices (data and consultations) to Charleston

- **Mid Dec 2025.** BA discusses recommendations with Mayor
- **Mid Dec 2025.** City/BA discuss recommendations with their respective owners, and ask owners to identify quick wins
- **31 Dec 2025.** BA engagement ends
- **Jan-Feb 2026.** City socializes recommendations with stakeholders
- **Jan-Mar 2026.** City publishes JD and hires econ dev leader
- **Feb 2025.** City fundraises and contracts with Neighborhood Nexus to build tourism data dashboard
- **Mar 2026.** City asks econ dev leader to kick off process to create tourism management plan to implement BA recommendations
 - Leader stands up steering committee to track implementation progress

F. Appendices

See separate document.