

Appendix 1: Data Supporting Charleston Responsible Tourism Recommendations

This appendix compiles recent statistics and evidence underpinning the main recommendations of the Charleston Responsible Tourism Initiative. Data are drawn from local government and industry reports, academic studies, and credible news sources (2023–2025 where available) to illustrate the economic and social context of tourism in Charleston. Numeric figures (visitor counts, spending, employment, etc.) are included to substantiate the need for each measure. Gaps in publicly available data are noted where relevant.

1. Destination Marketing and Management

1a. Target high-spending cultural travelers; highlight Black heritage

- Charleston’s tourism industry grew from 7.43 million visitors in 2019 (\$9.7 billion impact) to ~7.79 million in 2023 (\$13.1 billion). In 2024 it reached \$14.03 billion with 7.89 million visitors (~\$1,105 spent per visitor).
- Over half (53.8%) of 2022 visitors had household incomes above \$100,000, confirming the appeal of higher-value travelers.
- Most of Charleston’s tourism spend is concentrated in lodging, dining, attractions, and shopping on the peninsula, from which more than half of the Black population present in 2020 has been displaced.
- Between 2020 and 2025, retail rents rose 15-17% in Charleston, and 30-35% in the tourist area downtown
- The U.S. Black leisure travel market is valued at ~\$145 billion annually; 87% of Black travelers say they will pay for premium experiences.
- In SC, African American tourism contributes ~\$2.4 billion annually and 26,300 jobs.
- Explore Charleston has created a separate website, Explore Black Charleston, which it promotes on Google, YouTube and Meta.

1b. Expand tourism beyond the peninsula

- On an average day, there are 21,903 visitors on the Charleston peninsula. For context, the resident population is about 22,500.
- There is currently no public breakdown of visitor spending by Charleston neighborhood.
- Charleston County has ~19,000 hotel rooms; ~75% are located off the peninsula, showing existing capacity outside downtown.
- Charleston city has 5,188 hotel rooms, with 312 rooms under construction and 3,629 rooms entitled. All, except 250 entitled rooms, are located on the peninsula.

1c. Partner to elevate Black-owned businesses

- 23% of Charleston-North Charleston MSA residents and 25% of SC residents are Black or African American (2023)

- Charleston’s Black-owned employer firms are, on average, smaller by receipts and headcount than White-owned employer firms. Many Black-owned businesses are non-employers. Their credit access and approval rates are consistently lower for Black-owned firms, which correlates with lower revenues, slower hiring, and higher closure risk.
- There is one remaining Black-owned tourism business on King Street, which is the peninsula’s main retail corridor for visitors.
- Black-owned tourism businesses in Charleston are not systematically tracked; new data collection would be needed.

1d. Reconnect residents to cultural life

- In 2015, Charleston nonprofit arts generated 3.1 million audience visits and \$186.5 million in economic activity. (There is no publicly published update)
- In 2023, Charleston Museum’s attendance was ~127,000 (including its historic houses).
- In 2024, the International African American Museum drew ~187,657 visitors.
- Piccolo Spoleto draws ~75,000 attendees annually, including many locals.

1e. Reduce resident disruption and strengthen enforcement

- The Department of Livability & Tourism has 10 tourism enforcement officers.
- In 2023, the department received 726 hotline complaints, issued 1,484 warnings, and filed 172 summons in Livability Court.
- In 2023, the department permitted 35,256 carriage tours and 9,357 coaches. It also permitted 276 events in 2023, including 163 classified as major.
- Between 2018 and 2025, it issued 802 permits for short term rentals.

1f. Improve safety, security and sanitation

- Between January 2024 and April 2025, police recorded over 40 serious late-night incidents involving juveniles in the central King Street district, including assaults, thefts, and weapon or drug charges
- In a 2021 city-state corridor study, lighting gaps along King Street were identified, prompting installation of new lights in some dimly lit areas and parking lots as part of the King Street Safety Initiative to enhance nighttime safety. Recent reports have found that lighting improvements are still needed along the northern and southern ends of King Street, as well as sections of Meeting Street, St. Philip Street, and Calhoun Street, where pedestrian-level lighting remains limited or inconsistent.
- In a 2023 city survey, 32.4% of respondents listed “Trash” among the top three problems detracting from King Street’s appearance, and 16.2% cited bio-hazards.
- The King Street BID cleaning and ambassador team logged 21,622 trash-can cleanings from March–December 2023. They completed 1,417 sticker/bill removals and 283 graffiti removals in that same period. The team also handled 1,535 bio-hazard cleanup incidents involving human or animal waste.

2. Arts and Culture

2a. Reposition the Office of Cultural Affairs

- Charleston's nonprofit arts sector generated \$186.5 million and 6,744 jobs in 2015. (There is no publicly published update)
- Local arts and culture organizations often lack a clear liaison to navigate city processes.

2b. Identify public funding for residents' benefit

- Charleston County collected ~\$30.9 million in lodging taxes in FY2024, nearly all restricted to tourism promotion by state law.
- Diversifying funding for the cultural sector (beyond A-tax) would allow resident-facing programs and general operating support.

2c. Strengthen culture as a small business sector

- In 2015, Charleston County had 1,141 arts-related businesses employing 4,313 people. (There is no publicly published update)
- Capacity-building for local arts nonprofit organizations in fundraising, marketing, and governance would help to strengthen the sector.

2d. Establish data collection practices

- No consistent data exist on Charleston's arts participation and impact since 2015.
- Developing uniform templates for reporting attendance and impact would position cultural organizations for more effective advocacy.
- An updated economic impact study would quantify the sector's contribution to the local economy, tourism, and community wellbeing.

2e. Include cultural leaders in cross-sector initiatives

- Arts and culture organizations report limited visibility and weak collaboration between the City, Explore Charleston, and the cultural sector.
- Including representation for cultural institution leaders in tourism and development entities would help ensure integration of arts and culture into Charleston's economic strategy.

3. Funding for Tourism-Related Infrastructure

3a. Advocate for sales tax increase

- Charleston County's \$30.9 million in 2024 lodging tax collections qualifies the region for SC's tourism development sales tax option (up to 1%).
- A 1% tax could raise ~\$30 million annually, funding infrastructure and tourism services.

3b. Advocate for higher accommodation & hospitality tax limits

- Charleston collects ~\$51–54 million annually from tourism taxes; peer cities like New Orleans collect \$200M+ with higher rates.
- Raising caps could generate \$15M+ annually in new revenue for infrastructure and housing.

3c. Create an Explore Charleston Community Foundation

- Tourism foundations in other cities (e.g. NYC) provide millions in grants to community organizations.
- Such a foundation could direct funds to heritage preservation, housing, and neighborhood cultural programs.

4. Transportation

4a. Implement parking reform

- A dynamic, pay-by-plate system and improved enforcement to reduce illegal parking south of Calhoun St could reduce congestion and circling.
- 23% of downtown land is used for parking; a 2019 study found garages only ~75% full at peak, below the 85% efficiency benchmark.
- There is anecdotal evidence that single-space parking meters allow commuting students to abuse metered street parking. Work with college to reinforce off-site parking.

4b. Upgrade transit options

- The Lowcountry Rapid Transit program and HOP shuttle are essential to any reduction in core traffic volume.
- Three sectors - health, hospitality and education - make up most of the commuters--opportunity here to reach specific cohorts to encourage park-and-ride options.
- Only 0.8% of Charleston-North Charleston MSA commuters use public transit, this is low even compared to other comparable southeastern US cities (ex. Gainesville, Tallahassee, Charlotte, Richmond).

4c. Improve cycling conditions

- Bike share (Lime) is massively under-performing. Commuters and tourists are core users and would reduce vehicle congestion.
- SCDOT safety projects are not getting built – many of these are reasonable and include bike infrastructure that won't increase congestion. More infrastructure = more cycling, fewer cars and safer walking environment.
- Charleston-North Charleston MSA is the 9th most dangerous metro area for pedestrian fatalities, with an average annual pedestrian fatality rate of 3.66 per 100,000 people. The long term trend in fatality rate is +1.05.

4d. Introduce wayfinding and signage

- From 2018-22 the Charleston metro recorded 147 pedestrian fatalities, an increase from 97 in the prior five-year period.
- The metro area ranks #9 nationwide for pedestrian fatality rate in the latest analysis of U.S. metro areas.
- Within the city, vulnerable road users (pedestrians & cyclists) account for only ~4% of all crashes but represent 47% of all fatal & serious-injury crashes.
- Walking trips in the Charleston–North Charleston–Summerville region dropped 35% between 2019–22.
- On the peninsula, the downtown “walk score” is 99/100, signaling very high potential for walkability — making enhanced signage/wayfinding more impactful.

5. Accommodation

5a. Increase residents on the peninsula

- Peninsula population is ~22,500. In 1950, it was ~75,000.

5b. Encourage hotels on transit corridors

- Charleston city has 5,188 hotel rooms, with 312 rooms under construction and 3,629 rooms entitled. All, except 250 entitled rooms, are located on the peninsula.
- The 26-mile Lowcountry Rapid Transit project is slated to open by 2026, serving major growth corridors.
- Locating hotels along this line would reduce car dependence.

5c. Encourage hotel owners to fund worker housing

- Hospitality workers earn ~\$27,980 annually, while fair-market rent for a 2-bedroom is ~\$19,188/year, which exceeds what many hospitality workers can afford.
- Hotel impact contributions could help subsidize affordable housing near transit.

6. Transparency and Communications

6a. Tourism & Livability Dashboard

- Charleston lacks a centralized dashboard combining visitor stats, transit use, and resident sentiment.
- Other cities (e.g. Seattle) publish quarterly dashboards that guide policy.

6b. Transparency at Explore Charleston

- Explore Charleston’s annual budget is approximately \$24m
- It publishes positive visitor statistics but limited financial/governance data.
- Best practice DMOs publish bylaws, budgets, strategies, partners, procurement rules, and meeting materials.

7. Roles and Governance

7a. Establish a senior economic development leader

- Charleston lacks a single executive responsible for integrating tourism, housing, and economic growth.
- The city government has three communications officers.
- Peer cities appoint 'Chief Tourism Officers' or similar roles to coordinate strategy.

7b. Resident-facing task force

- The Department of Livability & Tourism's Tourism Commission is being disbanded.
- Cities like Barcelona and Dubrovnik have resident tourism boards to address community concerns.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Interview List

Our discovery and research process included interviews with 85+ city stakeholders to gather their thoughts, experiences, and hopes for the future of Charleston. These insights have been extremely important for our work and represent viewpoints of city officials, tourism operators, long-time residents, recent transplants, restaurant and small business owners, and more.

1. Amy Southerland
2. Amy Wharton
3. Andy Gowder
4. Ann Marshall
5. Becca Hopkins
6. Bernie Mazyck
7. Bernie Powers
8. Betsy Cahill
9. Boston DiMattia
10. Brian Turner
11. Camela Guevara
12. Carolina Jewett
13. Carrie Morey
14. Casey Lavin
15. Chappy McKay
16. Chloe Stuber
17. Chris Campbell
18. Chris Price
19. Christian Bryant
20. Christina Dodd
21. Corrie and Shuai Wang
22. Dan Riccio
23. Daniel (Dan) Blumenstock
24. Daniel Guttentag
25. Dean Andrews
26. Deja McMillan
27. Edward Crouse
28. Elizabeth Hagood
29. Eric Jackson
30. Femi Oyediran
31. Gerry Schauer
32. Hampton Logan
33. Harlan Greene
34. Helen Hill
35. Henry Ravenel
36. Jacquie Berger
37. Jess Nichols & Eric Holmberg
38. Joey Ryan
39. John Darby
40. John LaVerne
41. Jonathan Green
42. Jonathan Kish
43. Jonathan Sanchez
44. Josh Martin
45. Karalee Nielsen
46. Lindsey Barrow, Jr.
47. Lisa Jones
48. Liz Fort
49. Lori Beth Holt
50. Mandi Herring
51. Marilyn Hemingway
52. Michael Allen
53. Michael Mathis
54. Mike Seekings
55. Millicent Brown
56. Mimi Striplin
57. Mini Hay
58. Reba Hough-Martin
59. Robert Somerville
60. Roy Owen
61. Stephen Hammond
62. Ted Dombrowski
63. Thaddeus Daise
64. Tim Keane
65. Winslow Hastie
66. Mayor Cogswell
67. Liz Dieck
68. Becca Hopkins
69. Tim Keane
70. Daniel Riccio
71. Scott Watson
72. Amy Barrett
73. Tatjana Beylotte
74. Carl Borickr
75. Jason Crowley
76. Ame Gasque
77. Alicia Gregory
78. Mena Mark Hanna
79. Darlene Heater
80. Susan McKellar
81. Laura Pelzer
82. Lee Pringle
83. Elise Reagan
84. Tim Rogers
85. Michael Smith

Supporting Quotes

Though the initial focus of these discussions was the effect of tourism on Charleston, our conversations quickly uncovered many other topics, tangentially related to tourism, that residents feel are negatively affecting Charleston. These topics were discussed in our overall findings. Below are the subject areas along with quotes from our interviews that reflect some of the views of the interviews.

Tourism Is a Vital Economic Engine

“I believe [tourism] has solely been a positive thing — it’s helped Charleston thrive. From culinary things to cultural to events. All of those things provide locals with greater and better opportunities.”

“When I first got here you couldn’t even get a coffee. Now there’s everything.”

“What I would tell anybody who’s whining about [tourism] is, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’”

“Without tourism you’d still be shopping at the Piggly Wiggly.”

Negative Impacts on Residents’ Quality of Life

“Tourism is very important, it’s crucial. But we’ve gotten to a point that we have too many tourists.”

“There is no way to separate tourism from everything else. The money is good, but every decision has a consequence.”

“It smells bad... People pee on the streets. It’s gross. And it’s just too crowded.”

“Upper King is off-putting—why are there hundreds of policemen on the street?”

“My shop wouldn’t have been possible 20 years ago — I’m completely dependent on tourism. But the romantic small-town Charleston that brought me here is gone.”

“It’s been incredible for the businesses of Charleston. People want to be here. But as a resident, it’s a little hard — you can’t live where you want to live anymore.”

“It’s no longer the downtown for the community... we’ve lost a little bit of our soul.”

“Tourism is a huge industry. But residents are not a priority, and that has to change.”

“If I didn’t have to work downtown, I would never go downtown.”

“If Charleston doesn’t bring back authenticity, it risks losing more tourism. Natives used to visit downtown. Now, it doesn’t even have a Southern footprint.”

Pressure on Housing, Infrastructure & Cultural Heritage

“We need to manage tourism and defend the character of Charleston. If you don’t protect the sense of place, you lose it.”

“Southern Charm has made it TV fodder. It’s made Charleston a mockery of itself.”

“My son is an attorney but cannot afford to live in Charleston. All his friends have already left or are planning to leave.”

“What had once been a very sizeable Black population that has now been pushed out... Somebody is letting it be known over time that we don’t care whether or not Blacks are on the peninsula.”

“All the mom-and-pop shops are gone. All that southern charm and old Black culture — you can’t bring it back.”

“There have been stark changes in the peninsula population because of Black residents and businesses leaving post-COVID. This is seen as a huge loss because of the loss of Black history in Charleston.”