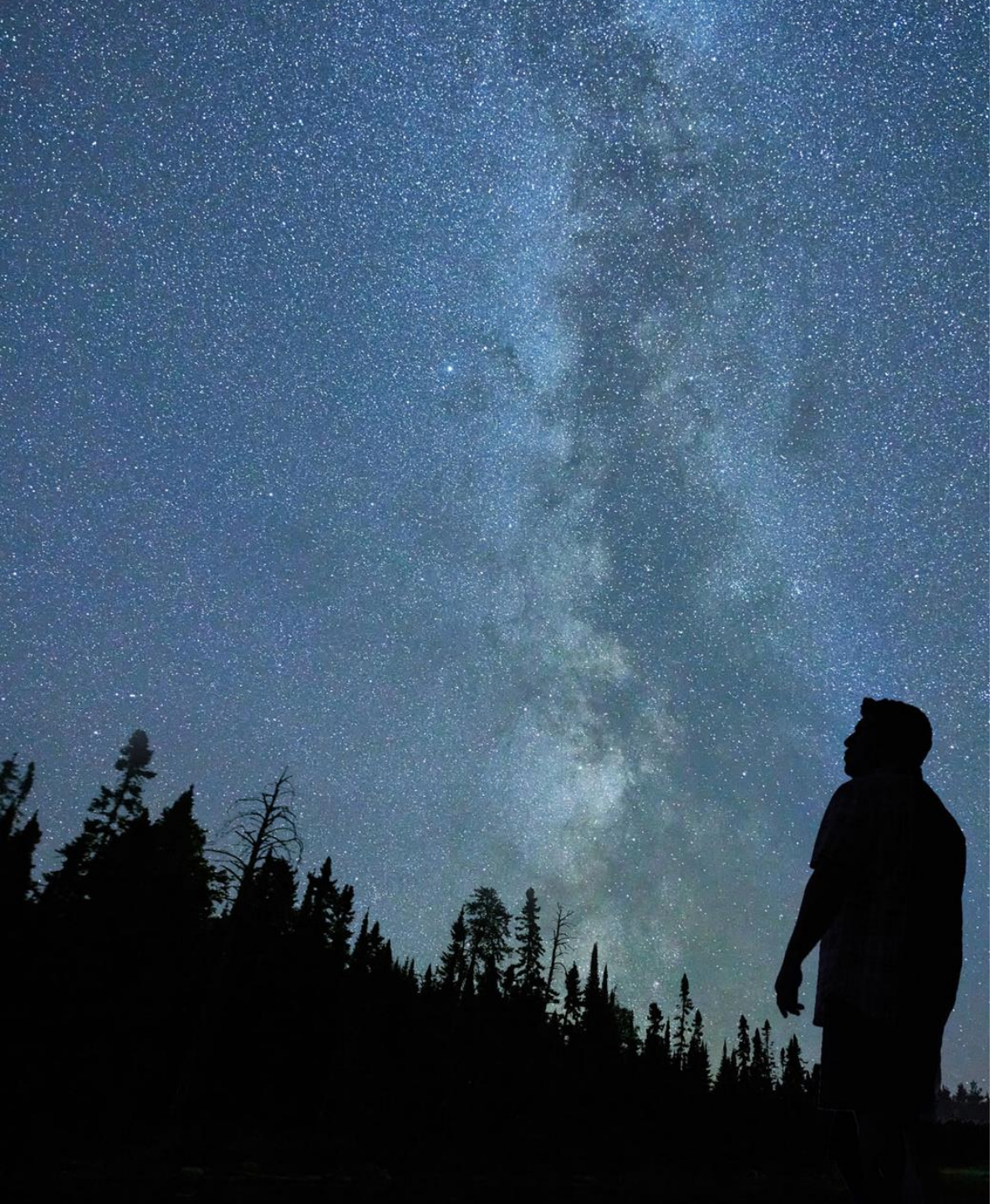
EXPLORE MINNESOTA℠

star of the north™

FY2026–2027 Strategic Plan

Plus, a look forward to FY2028–2029



overview

what is the star of the north strategy?

Star of the North is more than a marketing campaign— it reflects how Minnesota is a place that cultivates possibilities. At Explore Minnesota (EMN) we help visitors, current and future residents, and business leaders see themselves in our great state.

vision

Position Minnesota as the best state for travel, quality of life and economic opportunity.

mission

We sustainably grow Minnesota's economy by welcoming all through innovative and inclusive marketing, storytelling and industry partnerships.

position

We lead Minnesota's growth by fostering collaboration and marketing the state for the economic benefit of all Minnesotans.

values

Teamwork: We collaborate, harnessing unique talents and strengths, to share the workload and trust each other to deliver the best results.

Creativity: We challenge the status quo, find innovative ways to solve problems and use our talents for the benefit of Minnesota's visitor economy.

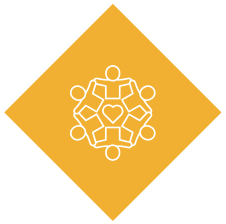
Agility: We remove roadblocks and respond quickly to new opportunities; we are nimble and dynamic.

Inclusivity: We welcome all, respect individuality, treat each other with dignity, and seek to ensure a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment at Explore Minnesota.

explore minnesota's strategic imperatives

Grow Minnesota's economy

Increase economic opportunity for Minnesotans by promoting the state for travel, livability and business development.



Advance and champion welcoming experiences for all

Engage with and support diverse vendors, increase spend in diverse markets, uplift content celebrating diverse cultures and foster relationships with underserved, cultural and heritage communities.

Provide industry leadership and maximize partner collaboration

Grow stakeholder participation in our programs, increase private and in-kind contributions and prioritize opportunistic marketing.

Foster state stewardship

Build partnerships to identify areas of growth and sustainability. Create educational opportunities related to maintaining the cultural, environmental and economic integrity of Minnesota's top destinations.

Ensure organizational excellence

Prioritize employee growth through educational opportunities and improve employee engagement and satisfaction.

current snapshot (2025)

explore minnesota — driving a strong economy

Explore Minnesota fuels the state's economy through tourism, outdoor recreation, film production and workforce attraction. Our programs produce a significant economic impact for the state while creating jobs, saving taxpayers money each year, and creating an unmatched quality of life.

visitor economy*

$24.7B total economic impact

86.1M visitors to Minnesota

$14.7B visitor spending

$8.3B total personal income

182,435 total jobs supported

$2.4B state and local taxes generated

outdoor recreation economy**

$13.5B contribution to GDP

$23.5B economic output

96,000 total jobs supported

Explore Minnesota has expanded its impact since 2021. We added Explore Minnesota for Business, Outdoor Recreation, and Explore Minnesota Film—broadening our work and growing the state's economy. We also leveraged once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that drove record awareness of Minnesota.

Since 2021, we've seen an...

▲ **14.4%** increase in total visitors

▲ **25.6%** increase in visitor spending

▲ **140.5%** increase in state and local taxes generated

**Visitor economic impact was calculated based on 2024 data analyzed by Tourism Economics and the report was released by Explore Minnesota in August 2025.*

***Outdoor recreation economic impact was calculated using data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account (ORSA), state agency sources, and original analysis by RRC. The report was released by Explore Minnesota in June 2025*

growth in the making

	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024	Change (2004–24)
Visitors	28.6M	39M	69.7M	75M	81.6M	+185.3%
Visitor spending	$10B	$11.2B	$13.6B	$16.6B	$14.7B	+47%
Sales tax generated	$600M	$694M	$878M	$1.07B	$2.4B	+300%

current snapshot (2025)

minnesota — a strong competitor

Explore Minnesota's vision is to position Minnesota as the best state for travel, quality of life and economic opportunity. Here's how we measured up against regional and national competitors in FY2025:

#2 lake life* (fishing, boating & paddling)

#2 least-stressed^

#3 state for health care^

#3 best park system†

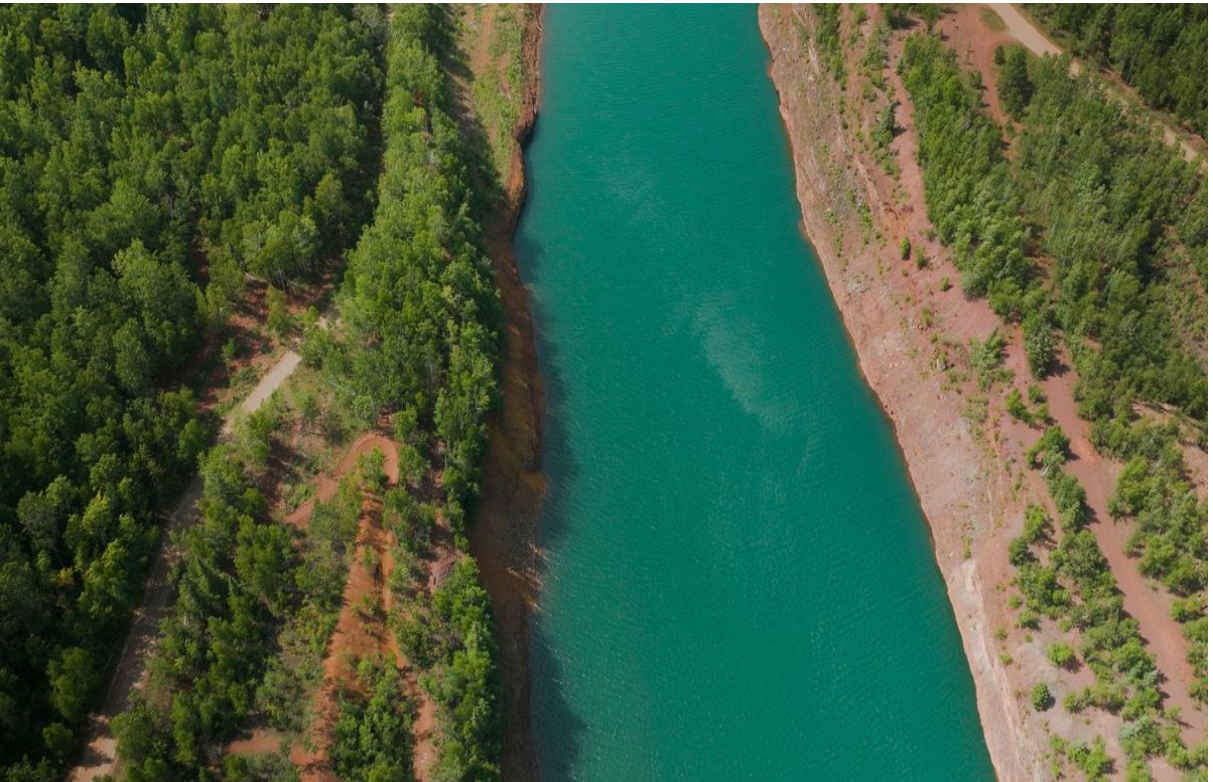
#4 shopping*

#4 winter outdoor recreation*

#4 best state overall†

#6 happiest state^

#6 for economic opportunity†



among regional* travelers, minnesota ranks as accessible, affordable and inclusive

#7 performing arts

#7 lgbtq+ friendly

#7 welcoming to all races & ethnicities

#8 outdoor recreation

#8 accessible travel

#10 professional sports

#10 affordable vacation

#10 concerts

**Regional travelers defined as travelers from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Nebraska, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Utah, Wyoming, Winnipeg, Canada and Thunder Bay, Canada. Source: SMARI 2025 Spring/Summer Ad Effectiveness Study*

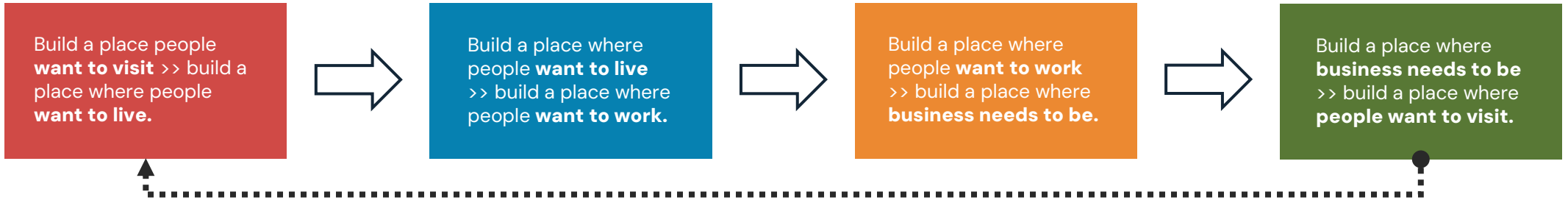
^ Source: WalletHub

† Source: U.S. News & World Report

an integrated marketing approach

Communities thrive when their experiences are authentic and connected. Tourism, outdoor recreation, film, business development, and quality of life aren't separate priorities — they reinforce each other and fuel a cycle of vibrancy and growth.

Tourism is the front door to economic development. Here's how Explore Minnesota's divisions work together to drive community impact:



Communities that invest in tourism, outdoor recreation, and film create destinations that spark curiosity and draw visitors. Scenic trails, vibrant main streets, and cultural experiences build a strong sense of place—and make people want to stay.

Tourism-driven amenities benefit residents, too. Restaurants, shops, events, trails, and parks enhance daily life and strengthen community pride.

These amenities create jobs, expand community resources, and strengthen quality of life.

Quality of life attracts talent. People choose places where they can enjoy outdoor recreation, arts and entertainment, and a balanced lifestyle. Communities that offer this are more competitive in recruiting and keeping a strong workforce.

Companies invest where workers want to live. A strong labor pool—paired with a positive community identity shaped by tourism, film, and outdoor recreation—signals a place where businesses can grow, innovate, and invest.

Attractive destinations fuel business and workforce growth.

Business growth adds amenities, infrastructure, dining, entertainment, and economic energy — all of which elevate the visitor experience.

That momentum attracts more travelers, filmmakers, outdoor enthusiasts, and cultural explorers. Their interest fuels further investment. A strong place identity boosts tourism and restarts the destination management cycle.

Each sector — tourism, outdoor recreation, film, business development, and livability — works together in a self-reinforcing loop that elevates the entire community. **When we invest in one, we strengthen them all.**

grow minnesota's economy

Explore Minnesota is strengthening the state's economy by expanding the Star of the North strategy and building pride among residents and visitors —seizing new marketing opportunities to amplify Minnesota's story. Better data and smarter digital platforms will sharpen our reach through targeted messaging to attract more travelers and engage current and future residents. The result: stronger tourism and a spotlight on Minnesota's exceptional quality of life.

objectives

- Improve national and global awareness of Minnesota through the Star of the North brand
- Strengthen resident and visitor sentiment
- Leverage data and digital tools to maximize reach and capture new opportunities

initiatives

Amplify the Star of the North brand through bold, integrated marketing in priority growth areas.

We'll elevate the brand through coordinated efforts that reach local, national, and global audiences. We will highlight Minnesota's authentic stories, outdoor recreation, and cultural and lifestyle strengths, drive increased tourism, and reinforce resident pride and attract new residents.

Expanded earned media, proactive film outreach, and targeted international tourism campaigns will boost visibility and open new opportunities.

Strengthen insights and analytics with expanded data and advanced internal tools.

Research will continue to capture the full impact of tourism, plus its links to livability, workforce attraction, outdoor recreation, and film. New studies and improved analytical tools will sharpen tourism campaign targeting, refine tourism and quality-of-life messaging, and deliver actionable insights for partners statewide.

This data-driven approach will help Minnesota tell a more compelling, evidence-based story about tourism's economic and community value.

Elevate digital platforms to deliver seamless, inspiring experiences for visitors and partners.

Digital channels are core to how we engage travelers and partners. We will continue to improve navigation, accessibility and overall user experience on exploreminnesota.com. We will also develop richer content on travel, outdoor recreation, and lifestyle. Plus, we'll make it easier for destinations to promote businesses and events in their communities.

These updates will position our digital platforms as both visitor inspiration and a partner hub—reinforcing the Star of the North experience.

advance and champion welcoming experiences for all

Minnesota's tourism story will reflect the full diversity of its people and communities. By elevating multicultural voices, partnering with underrepresented businesses, and deepening community engagement, Explore Minnesota will build a more inclusive brand that resonates with all audiences. These efforts ensure visitors experience a Minnesota that is as welcoming and diverse as the people who call it home.

objectives

- Increase community engagement to welcome more voices
- Advance authentic and inclusive storytelling

initiatives

Partner with communities to welcome and attract more diverse visitors and residents.

Explore Minnesota will commission intentional content, develop culturally specific stories with Tribal Nations, and highlight diverse Minnesotan stories.

We will see stronger campaign performance, increased earned media, and deeper engagement from diverse audiences.

Expand our asset library to reflect the full spectrum of Minnesota's cultures, communities, and abilities.

We'll grow our content library to better celebrate Minnesota's diverse people and places.

Working with Tribal Nations, we'll use community feedback to shape the Tribal Nations content plan and web framework — building a sustainable foundation for authentic storytelling.

Invest in inclusive marketing to reach broader audiences in key DMAs.

We'll expand our diverse marketing efforts in priority Designated Marketing Areas (DMAs) through event and cultural community partnerships, and we'll create new content that showcases diversity across all divisions.

Using digital platforms, newsletters, and podcasts, we'll track success through event engagement, audience awareness, and the volume of content produced.

Support tourism development through grant projects and in diverse communities.

Grant programs will continue to support Tribal Nations and Tribal Communities through targeted funding and partnerships.

Partnerships and grant programs will continue to support inclusive marketing and accessibility improvements — ensuring resources advance broader representation, accessibility, and equity in tourism promotion.

provide industry leadership and maximize partner collaboration

Communities statewide will benefit from expanded access to research, insights, and educational resources. Explore Minnesota will continue collaborating with destinations, associations, communities, and Tribal Nations to strengthen shared impact. Through international, national, regional, and state partnerships, we'll promote the value of tourism, film, and outdoor recreation—and provide strategic, innovative leadership to stakeholders.

objectives

- Ensure alignment with stakeholders and partners
- Increase awareness of Explore Minnesota's programs and the benefits of our work
- Expand tools and resources for stakeholders

initiatives

Strengthen stakeholder resources to support industry partner success.

We will enhance the tourism industry website, expand educational tools, create an outdoor recreation business toolkit and guidelines for film productions.

We'll grow the Film-Friendly Communities program, offer expanded training, and share timely legislative updates—reinforcing industry connections and demonstrating Explore Minnesota's value.

Create a more consistent visitor experience through training and streamlined traveler support.

Visitor Services will launch a quarterly partner email and use AI to speed up customer inquiries.

Explore Minnesota Film will expand production support with new training to improve accessibility, efficiency, and partner satisfaction.

Broaden stakeholder engagement through deeper collaboration to shape Minnesota's tourism future.

Engagement will expand through stronger co-op marketing programs, more stakeholder touchpoints, and continued participation in multi-state coalitions.

Annual surveys will guide new program development and simplified, frequent reporting will give partners clearer insights into results and impact.

Expand outreach to better integrate all communities in tourism development.

Explore Minnesota staff will increase participation in regional events, while leadership will broaden outreach through new communications and engagement opportunities.

Annual consultations with all 11 Tribal Nations will continue to be a core part of this work.

foster state stewardship

Embedding stewardship in Explore Minnesota's work will elevate local experiences, cultural and outdoor assets, and heritage sites for visitors, residents, and businesses. Campaigns, collaborations, and educational opportunities will spotlight Minnesota's commitment to sustainability, cultural and historical preservation, and responsible travel. These efforts will strengthen resident pride, deepen community engagement, and position Minnesota as a destination where stewardship and tourism thrive together.

objectives

- Establish Minnesota as a leader in sustainability and stewardship
- Drive year-round visitation to strengthen communities and regional economies

initiatives

Increase campaigns and organic content that highlight local experiences, cultural and outdoor assets, and heritage sites.

Campaigns will weave sustainability and stewardship into tourism messaging, including content expansion and a marketing push for the "Explore Minnesota More" podcast.

Expanded outdoor recreation messaging — developed with state agency partners — will showcase cultural and environmental assets as well as local businesses contributing to the outdoor recreation economy.

Film and TV promotion will connect experiential travelers to Minnesota filming locations.

Engage residents and communities to foster and sustain positive sentiment for Minnesota.

Local media outreach will highlight intrastate travel and build resident pride in exploring nearby destinations.

Partnerships with statewide associations, Tribal Nations, and the State of Minnesota ethnic councils will deepen cultural education and engagement for both visitors and residents.

Together, these efforts will elevate awareness of Minnesota's diversity and strengthen community connections to tourism.

ensure organizational excellence

Explore Minnesota is building a more resilient, effective workplace through clearer processes, stronger collaboration, and increased staff professional development opportunities. By expanding project management best practices, boosting employee engagement, and increasing our agility, the agency will increase efficiency, promote a positive employee culture, and foster collaboration across departments. These efforts will provide better service to partners, stakeholders, and residents of Minnesota.

objectives

- Strengthen employee satisfaction and workplace culture
- Deepen employee engagement in key organizational priorities

initiatives

Enhance staff effectiveness and organizational agility.

By reviewing and improving policies and procedures, providing more professional development opportunities, and implementing role backup plans and cross-training, the agency will equip staff with the tools and confidence to perform at their best. With widely accepted procedures and understanding of agency processes, staff will be better able to respond to challenges and opportunities.

Increase cross-functional communication and collaboration.

A unified editorial and event calendar, along with continued Asana training, will strengthen departmental accountability. Staff guest speaker sessions, cross-unit project involvement, and a new CRM system will boost internal communication. Together, these efforts will help the agency operate with stronger collaboration and greater effectiveness.

Increase participation in the agency's Employee Engagement Committee.

Expanding involvement in engagement committees will help staff feel welcomed and happy at work. An annual activity schedule and more frequent communications will make opportunities more visible and accessible, while recruiting new committee members will bring fresh energy and ideas. These efforts will build community, boost morale, and create a more connected, engaged workplace.

2026-2027 strategic plan at-a-glance

vision	mission	values	position
Position Minnesota as the best state for travel, quality of life and economic opportunity.	We sustainably grow Minnesota's economy by welcoming all through innovative and inclusive marketing, storytelling and industry partnerships.	At Explore Minnesota, we work together in service to the state of Minnesota through **teamwork**, **creativity**, **agility**, and **inclusivity**.	We lead Minnesota's growth by fostering collaboration and marketing the state for the economic benefit of all Minnesotans.

imperatives	Objectives	initiatives
Grow Minnesota's economy *Increase economic opportunity for Minnesotans by promoting the state for travel, livability and business development.*	• Improve national and global awareness of Minnesota through the Star of the North brand • Strengthen resident and visitor sentiment • Leverage data and digital tools to maximize reach and capture new opportunities	• Amplify the Star of the North brand with bold, integrated marketing in priority growth areas. • Strengthen insights and analytics with expanded data and advanced internal tools. • Elevate digital platforms to deliver seamless, inspiring experiences for visitors and partners.
Advance and champion welcoming experiences for all *Engage with and support diverse vendors, increase spend in diverse markets, uplift content celebrating diverse cultures and foster relationships with underserved, cultural and heritage communities.*	• Increase community engagement to welcome more voices • Advance authentic and inclusive storytelling	• Partner with communities to welcome and attract more diverse visitors and residents. • Expand our asset library to reflect the full spectrum of Minnesota's cultures, communities, and abilities. • Invest in inclusive marketing to reach broader audiences in key DMAs. • Support tourism development through grant projects and in diverse communities.
Provide industry leadership and maximize partner collaboration *Grow stakeholder participation in our programs, increase private and in-kind contributions and prioritize opportunistic marketing.*	• Ensure alignment with stakeholders and partners • Increase awareness of Explore Minnesota's programs and the benefits of our work • Expand tools and resources for stakeholders	• Strengthen stakeholder resources to support industry partner success. • Create a more consistent visitor experience through training and streamlined traveler support. • Broaden stakeholder engagement through deeper collaboration to shape Minnesota's tourism future. • Expand outreach to better integrate all communities in tourism development.
Foster state stewardship *Build partnerships to identify areas of growth and sustainability. Create educational opportunities related to maintaining the cultural, environmental and economic integrity of Minnesota's top destinations.*	• Establish Minnesota as a leader in sustainability and stewardship • Drive year-round visitation to strengthen communities and regional economies	• Increase campaigns and organic content that highlight local experiences, cultural and outdoor assets, and heritage sites. • Engage residents and communities to foster and sustain positive sentiment for Minnesota.
Ensure organizational excellence *Prioritize employee growth through educational opportunities and improve employee engagement and satisfaction.*	• Strengthen employee satisfaction and workplace culture • Deepen employee engagement in key organizational priorities	• Enhance staff effectiveness and organizational agility. • Increase cross-functional communication and collaboration. • Increase participation in the agency's Employee Engagement Committee.

key themes:

Increased awareness of Minnesota

Increased community & stakeholder engagement

Improved cross-departmental collaboration

Improved efficiency

a look at FY2028 – 2029

Explore Minnesota is poised to continue making significant contributions to Minnesota's economy over the next decade. As we look to the FY2028-2029 biennium, we recognize that there will be challenges, but we also know we will be better positioned to lead the nation in tourism, outdoor recreation, film, and livability promotion and development.

We have identified three key initiatives that are critical to our continued success. These are intended to guide our team and stakeholders, while leaving room for new opportunities. To accomplish these initiatives, we will need stakeholder support.

Over the remainder of the FY2026-2027 biennium, we will engage our industries to collect feedback and develop a collaborative approach to move these initiatives forward.

future-focused initiatives, FY2028 - 2029

Seek a more sustainable funding solution Explore Minnesota's budget.

To support our mission and vision, Explore Minnesota requires more sustainable funding. In FY2026-2027, we will research ways to utilize existing general funding sources to sustain and grow our work, generating new revenue for the state.

We will also research funding mechanisms for major events, destination development support, and other initiatives that will put Minnesota on the map. Tourism, events, films, new residents, and businesses keep our state's economy strong.

With support from the Administration and stakeholders, we aim to bring a proposal forward in FY2028.

Support the development of new experiences for in more parts of Minnesota.

Minnesota boasts major attractions, beautiful natural landmarks, and significant sites that make it a dream destination.

To continue enticing visitors, we must collaborate with communities to develop and promote new "must-stop" destinations and attractions as well as regional experiences.

Development may be more than physical infrastructure. We'll seek new ways to foster collaboration among communities, deepen our storytelling and become more accessible and welcoming to all visitors and future residents.

Deepen message alignment across state partners to increase brand awareness.

To ensure Minnesota's awareness grows, we will grow our partnerships with public and private organizations.

The Star of the North strategy and brand will support statewide initiatives to attract visitors, films, outdoor recreation enthusiasts, residents, and new businesses. Brand distribution will increase awareness of Minnesota throughout the country and world.

Ideally, by FY2029, the Star of the North brand will serve as the statewide rallying cry, and partners will utilize the messaging and branding to more effectively promote the benefits of visiting, living and working in Minnesota.