

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONE

Foothills



**DISCOVERY
REPORT
2023**

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Front cover:
Elevated Escapes, Bragg Creek

Eau Claire Distillery, Diamond Valley

PREFACE

To achieve its full potential, the Foothills Tourism Development Zone (TDZ) requires an unprecedented commitment to prioritize tourism. Public and private partners must commit to taking a regenerative approach to tourism that ensures a positive influence on the economy, enhances the quality of life for residents, preserves agricultural and ranching heritage, and protects the ecology of the natural environment.

The purpose of this Foothills TDZ Discovery Report is to:

- Highlight tourism assets most likely to attract a diverse array of high-value visitors
- Identify the specific challenges facing the area
- Outline strategies for making the most of this TDZ
- Build a strong business case that immediate investment in the Foothills zone will increase profitability from tourism, improve destination livability, and protect and sustain the area's tourism assets for generations to come

It is important to note that this Discovery Report is a living document and will continue to evolve to reflect ongoing work, including Indigenous engagement that is currently underway.

This Discovery Report informs and identifies specific actions Travel Alberta, the Government of Alberta and communities within the Foothills TDZ should take to support the design of a comprehensive Destination Development Plan. This report aligns the tourism development ambitions of local stakeholders with the province's goal to double tourism revenue by 2035.



03 INTRODUCTION



Bar U Ranch National Historic Site, Longview

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity, and truth, we honour and acknowledge the traditional territories of the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Alberta. We value these sacred gathering places and aim to inspire others to appreciate and embrace stewardship of the land as they explore our great province.

The Foothills TDZ lies at the intersection of a number of historical and present-day lands that Indigenous Peoples have cared for and lived on for generations. We honour the traditional lands of the Treaty 7 signatories, including the Blackfoot Confederacy, Tsuut'ina and Stoney Nakoda homelands. We also acknowledge members of the Foothills Métis District and Rocky View Métis District within the homeland of Métis and the Otipemisiwak Métis Government, as well as Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas throughout the Foothills. We appreciate that modern borders do not align with traditional land use, and we honour the neighbouring Indigenous communities who have travelled and inhabited this land throughout history.



Treaty 7

APPRECIATION

Travel Alberta would like to thank all those who participated in the creation of this Discovery Report.

Please note, Indigenous engagement is currently underway.

- **Cheryl Greisinger** - Owner, Forage and Farm; Foothills Tourism Association (FTA) Board Member
- **David Farran** - President, Eau Claire Distillery
- **David Kalinchuk** - Economic Development Officer, Rocky View County
- **James Carmichael** - General Manager, Granary Road Farmer's Market; FTA Board Chair
- **Jason Glynn** - General Manager and CFO, Azure Ridge Estate Hotel; FTA Board Member
- **Khalid Mohammed** - Manager of Planning, Town of High River
- **Lorie Watson** - Economic Development Specialist, Town of Okotoks
- **Monique Leblanc** - Economic Development, Diamond Valley (Towns of Turner Valley and Black Diamond)
- **Mac Makenny** - Owner, Homeplace Ranch; FTA Board Member
- **Neil Maclaine** - Moose Mountain Horseback Adventures
- **Neil Smith** - Chief Administration Officer, Town of Nanton
- **Veronica Kloiber** - Executive Director, FTA
- **Ursula Sherwood** - Executive Director, Community Futures Highwood (CFH)

COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY & REGENERATIVE TOURISM

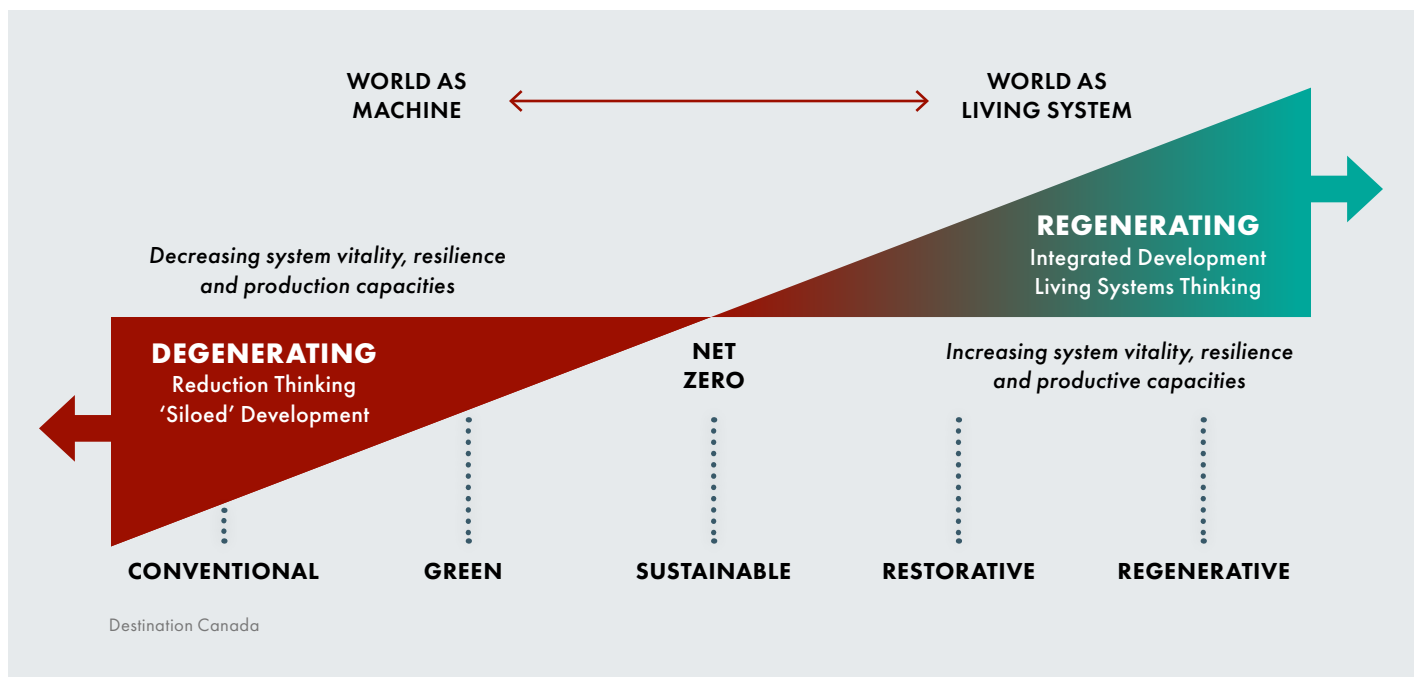
Tourism is a key economic sector in Alberta with strong potential to diversify the economy, create jobs, grow Indigenous tourism businesses, bring the “taste of place” to our guests’ tables and build vibrant communities. It also allows us to preserve and share culture and history, maintain or enhance the environment and foster innovation.

However, as outlined in Destination Canada’s report titled, “A Regenerative Approach to Tourism In Canada”, more and more communities are rejecting uncontrolled tourism development. The rising sentiment is that current approaches:

- Are too often extractive and degenerative
- Reduce quality of life for residents
- Damage ecosystem health
- Diminish local culture and community in the interest of efficiency and scale

An alternative approach is gradually emerging — and in many ways re-emerging. It recognizes the world not as a machine but as a living ecosystem, with humans playing an integral part. And it is from this worldview that the concept of regeneration arises.

Spectrum of Worldviews & Strategies



TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONES

Collaborating with Communities

Pre-pandemic, nearly 60 per cent of visitation and 75 per cent of tourism expenditures occurred in the mature tourism destinations of Banff, Lake Louise, Canmore, Jasper, Calgary and Edmonton. By developing additional “emerging” destinations, we expand opportunities for Albertans to explore their own backyard, creating more space for international visitation in legacy destinations while reducing Alberta’s traveller deficit.

To support tourism development in these emerging destinations, Travel Alberta identified 10 Tourism Development Zones (TDZs) across the province with a high potential for tourism growth over the next 10 years. With successful and sustainable development, these destinations will have the ability to make a meaningful contribution to Alberta’s visitor economy.

In partnership with communities and stakeholders, Travel Alberta has co-developed a series of TDZ Discovery Reports. These Discovery Reports will inform and guide our future Destination Development Plans that include medium- and long-term strategies to contribute to the growth of Alberta’s visitor economy across many high-potential regions of the province.

Together with industry, Indigenous Peoples, government and residents across each TDZ, we strive to:

- Grow & diversify the economy
- Support jobs
- Preserve cultures
- Foster innovation
- Conserve the environment
- Improve resident quality of life



DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN

A Destination Development Plan (DDP) is a 10-year strategic roadmap to optimize and future-proof the potential of a zone's visitor economy. The realized benefits of a comprehensive DDP include: increased revenues coming into communities from visitors; support for the growth of small-to-medium size businesses; the alignment of public, private and community sectors; more opportunities for employment; and enhanced pride of place and quality of life for Albertans.

In this first phase, we took a data-driven and community-led approach to better understand the state of the local visitor economy in each TDZ and begin to identify the inter-related elements of a comprehensive DDP. We assessed resident sentiment and the commitment of stakeholders and municipal governments to determine whether or not local leadership was present and committed to diversifying their zone's economy through tourism. In many TDZs, it was evident that multiple initiatives (and even past studies) have assessed the tourism potential across counties and communities. We speculate

that these previous assessments have not resulted in optimized local tourism sectors because — as reflected in the DDP framework — comprehensive optimization requires attention, consideration and investment of resources across more elements than most organizations have the capacity or resources to coordinate.

As this report demonstrates, we have identified both opportunities and barriers across many of these elements. Going forward, there is much work to be shared amongst stakeholders in each TDZ, using the DDP as a framework. Travel Alberta is committed to collaborating with local and provincial partners to help drive the development and execution of a DDP in those communities that are equally committed to building up Alberta's visitor economy.

Now that this Discovery Report has been released, it is key that Travel Alberta, the Government of Alberta and the many stakeholders within the Foothills TDZ work together to address the following relevant inter-related elements:



(Adapted from Failte Ireland)

METHODOLOGY

Working with Travel Alberta, the consulting firm FLOOR13 partnered with the IBI Group, Jennifer Nichol Consulting, EDG Planning & Design and Grant Thornton in preparing their observations that are captured in this report.

A two-part methodology allowed Travel Alberta and the consulting team to become acquainted with regional stakeholders and communities, determine their vision for the future growth of the local visitor economy and identify key action steps to support a path forward in the design of a destination development plan for the Foothills TDZ.

In the “**discovery and destination profiling**” phase, Travel Alberta worked with the consulting team to access research material, build a steering committee (including local operators and government representatives), and establish a framework for engagement.

In the “**exploration, imagining and visioning**” phase, the consulting team met with the steering committee to determine opportunities, challenges and goals; facilitated a Foothills Tourism Association planning session; and conducted in-depth community assessments within the Foothills TDZ. These assessments included visits to six key communities (Bragg Creek, Diamond Valley, Okotoks, High River, Nanton, and Longview), visits to proposed investment sites, meetings with over 200 industry partners and members of local government, interviews with business operators and community members, and interviews with over 40 stakeholders.



Handle Bar Cafe, Bragg Creek

04 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



227

Stakeholders

76

Businesses

6

Communities

WHAT WE HEARD

Integral to understanding the Foothills TDZ was hearing from its communities. The following were key items and opportunities that came out of engagement:

- Municipal and provincial policies and processes (including access to land, land use bylaws and development permits) need to evolve and become better aligned with each other to develop the visitor economy.
- Agri-tourism is an important part of this TDZ, though it is not well reflected in the municipality and county planning.
- There is a need for the local destination management organization, the Foothills Tourism Association, to obtain sustainable funding, enabling it with resources to be more effective.
- The tourism product and experience offerings need to increase and be diversified across the TDZ.
- Operators need improved access to capital from multiple sources — including all orders of government, financial institutions, and the private sector.
- Visitor length of stay needs to be extended beyond day trips from Calgary and one-night stays.
- Businesses need to generate more stable revenues and develop more consistent visitation throughout the year (not just at peak season in the summer).
- Operating season must be extended for parks with the greatest potential (for example, Sheep River Provincial Park), and the infrastructure within parks, trails and campgrounds requires improvement to accommodate year-round activity.
- Significant developments should be concentrated in key tourism clusters and locations.

The Foothill TDZ stakeholders were very clear in their enthusiasm to develop tourism visitation in the zone but were adamant that this would require the support of multiple orders of government. Many stakeholders pointed to the fact that they are small business owners and lack the resources to maneuver through the system.

Comprehensive Indigenous community engagement is currently underway and will provide further insights and observations.

05 INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT



Warrior Women, Jasper National Park

Across generations, Indigenous Peoples have warmly embraced their neighbors on ancestral lands, fostering deep, mutually enriching bonds through the customs and protocols of treaty-making and visitation. This enduring approach is steeped in the ancient traditions of hospitality and attentive listening.

In active relationship with Indigenous Tourism Alberta, Travel Alberta has enlisted our teams to engage and share space with First Nations, Councils, Settlements, Coops, Confederacies, and community leaders and community members to nurture mutual understanding, trust, and respect. Our engagement protocols and approaches are deeply anchored in the wisdom of our ancestors and knowledge shared by and from the communities we work with and for. Throughout our outreach efforts, we have and will continue to invite in and convene Indigenous leaders and community members with *kisêwâtisiwin* — kindness.

We look forward to weaving the insight we gain into this Discovery Report upon completion.

We hold the belief that Travel Alberta is dedicated to continuous engagement, active listening, and taking effective measures to nurture and grow these relationships, fully comprehend shared aspirations, and further strengthen trust. Together with Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta, we acknowledge and extend our gratitude to the Elders, Knowledge Carriers, Youth, and leadership of these communities and to all our participants and relatives in this transformative work.

kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanitik — All my relations.

Ali Tapaquon
principle and founder
Tatâga Inc.

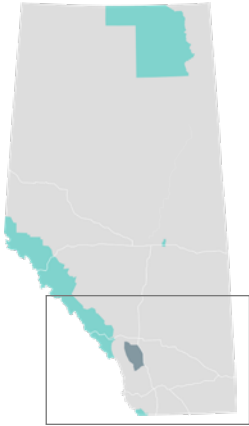
Suzanne Denbak
principle and founder
Cadence Strategies

05 DISCOVERING THE DESTINATION



Anchor D Guiding & Outfitting, Diamond Valley

THE FOOTHILLS



The Foothills TDZ is a picture-perfect area depicting visitors' expectations of western Canada. According to perception research conducted by Travel Alberta, the Foothills is one of the best-known tourism development zones and ranks high on lists of places Albertans intend to visit, whether for a day trip or an overnight excursion.

Majestic mountains views, rolling hills, and an agricultural setting of farms, ranches, and farmers' markets provide a stunning backdrop for communities where Indigenous, cowboy, Hutterite, and ranching culture are intertwined.

The Foothills is internationally known for scenic vistas, the quintessential picture of Alberta beauty.

Beneath the mountains, farms and ranches populate most of the zone and allow visitors to see life as it once was. The area is gaining a reputation for unforgettable and immersive culinary experiences, including farm-to-table, specialty products and craft beverages.

The Foothills has always been a soft adventure playground for Albertans and, more specifically, for the Calgary market. The zone offers long and scenic roads for cycling and motorbike riding, cross-country skiing, trekking, horseback riding and backcountry snowmobiling.

Multiple high-profile movies and television series (including *Heartland* and *The Last of Us*) have been filmed in the Foothills zone, making it a sought-after destination in the entertainment industry.

These established tourist draws provide an opportunity to consolidate emerging tourism clusters with new products and services appealing to both regional and international markets, thus making the Foothills a viable overnight destination offering an authentic "western" experience.



DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION

Like the rest of Alberta, the Foothills area has a relatively young population that indicates a fairly strong labour pool and local consumer base. It benefits from proximity to Calgary, which helps ensure labour availability.

52,067

POPULATION

2,385

INDIGENOUS POPULATION

10%

POPULATION GROWTH
OVER PAST 10 YEARS
(PRIMARILY IN OKOTOKS)

41

AVERAGE AGE

9.34%

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

\$117,215

MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME

(Alberta Regional Dashboard, 2023)

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Communities within this zone depend upon transportation, light manufacturing, warehousing and distribution, natural resource development, agriculture and value-added processing, tourism, film, and retail. Small and home-based businesses are also prevalent throughout the Foothills and are considered significant contributors to the local economy.

1,987

BUSINESSES

96.9%

SMALL BUSINESSES

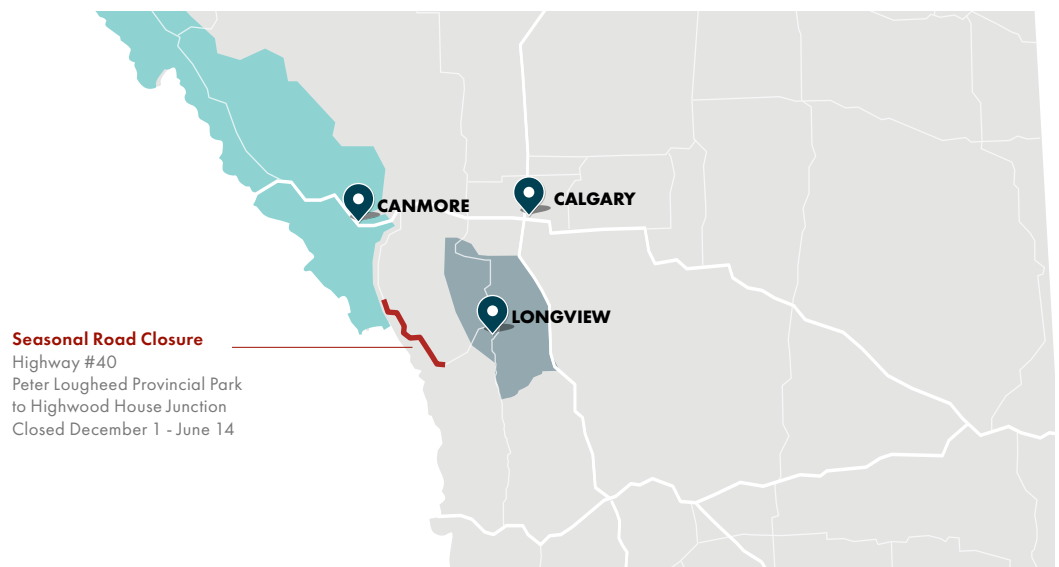
\$82.4M

MAJOR PROJECTS

(Source: Alberta Regional Dashboard, 2023)

ACCESS

The Foothills TDZ lies on the outskirts of Calgary, benefitting from ease of access to the Calgary International Airport and well-maintained highways connecting communities from north to south. Highway 22, also known as “the Cowboy Trail” is the articulating north-south axis of the zone. During the spring and summer, the Foothills benefits greatly from proximity to Kananaskis Village by way of Highway 40/541. The highway closures in the winter, impact all-season potential for add-on itineraries from the Rockies. Highways 549, 546 and 541 provide easy access to the Canadian Rockies to the west. Highways 548, 7, 543, and 540 link the zone to Highway 2 to the east.



POLICY AND PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

A number of policy and planning documents were analyzed to better understand the regulatory environment of the Foothills TDZ as it relates to tourism development. Key findings include:

- The Foothills TDZ lies mainly within Foothills County, a municipal district adjacent to south Calgary. It is part of the Calgary Metropolitan Region Board and has its own municipal development plan and land-use bylaws.
- High River is currently finishing a new municipal development plan that will see a community-driven triple bottom line approach to growth and will encompass destination development.
- The towns of Black Diamond and Turner Valley were incorporated into a single town, Diamond Valley, on January 1, 2023. Prior to this, the two formerly separate regions developed the Intermunicipal Economic Development Strategy, which recognizes the value of tourism as an economic opportunity.
- The Calgary Metropolitan Region Growth Plan (2022) reflects growth aspirations for this region and identifies tourism, particularly agri-tourism, as an industry that will play a key role in the region in the next six to 10 years.
- The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan provides guidance to provincial and local decision-makers regarding land-use management for the region. It identifies tourism as a key sector for advancing economic development in the South Saskatchewan Region.

DESTINATION ECOSYSTEM

Destination Marketing/Management Organizations (DMOs)

In 2019, the Foothills Tourism Association (FTA) was created as a not-for-profit DMO responsible for marketing and promoting the region and its many products and experiences. Funded through membership fees and Travel Alberta grants, as of June 2023, the FTA does not currently have any staff members and has limited financial resources. The Bragg Creek Chamber of Commerce also maintains a tourism promotional website, which promotes a soft adventure lifestyle image. The Town of Okotoks promotes the community under the banner of Destination Okotoks and the Town of High River provides tourism-related information on their website.

Economic Development Organizations

There are a number of economic development organizations in the TDZ, including the Town of Okotoks economic development office, the Nanton Chamber of Commerce, Community Futures Highwood, and Economic Development Diamond Valley. Though each have varying areas of focus, all communities and organizations support economic development initiatives including business retention and expansion, investment attraction and provide supports to start-ups.

VISITATION

According to Travel Alberta's anonymized mobile data, in 2019, 96.8 per cent of visitors to this zone were from within Canada and just under three per cent were from the United States. While most visitation to the zone comes from nearby Calgary, the area does see some visitors from other parts of Canada. British Columbia accounted for just over three per cent of visitors in 2019, followed by Ontario and Saskatchewan.

AB

VISITOR ORIGIN

Visitation to the Foothills, like the whole of Alberta, is highly domestic, with the majority of visitors coming to the area from nearby Calgary (65.8%), Okotoks (11.1%), High River (5.9%), Lethbridge (3.4%) and Edmonton (3.1%).

50%

REPEAT VISITORS

50 per cent of visitors to the Foothills visit two or more times per year.

45 hours

AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY

On average, visitors spend approximately 45 hours, or two days and one night in this zone. International visitors to the zone spend just under an average of 35 hours in this zone. Generally, a longer stay, including at least one overnight, will result in visitors spending more.

Note: Percentages represent the devices detected in the destination for the identified period. They do not represent total visitation and may be impacted by differing traveller technology or a lack of cell coverage.

(Source: Near Mobile Data, 2019)

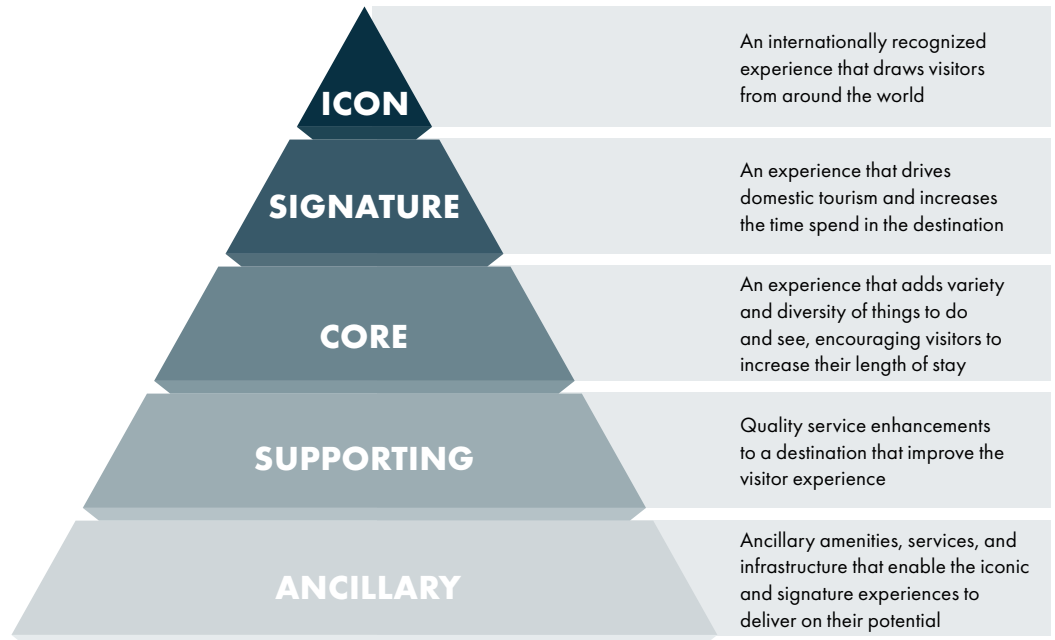
05 DESTINATION ANALYSIS



McLean Creek, Bragg Creek
Caitlyn Giorgio @caitlynicoledesigns

SUPPLY AND DEMAND ANALYSIS

In order to fulfill the tourism potential of this area, it is imperative to understand its tourism product, experience and accommodation mix, and the role each play within the development zone. Moving forward, this understanding will guide targeted investment toward the right products and places.



(Adapted from Fáilte Ireland)

While the majority of the products in the Foothills TDZ are considered core products, there is a need for additional supporting and ancillary products, such as accommodations and restaurants, to aid future growth and facilitate access to the signature products that exist in the zone. Filling this gap in product types will be a priority within the zone moving forward.



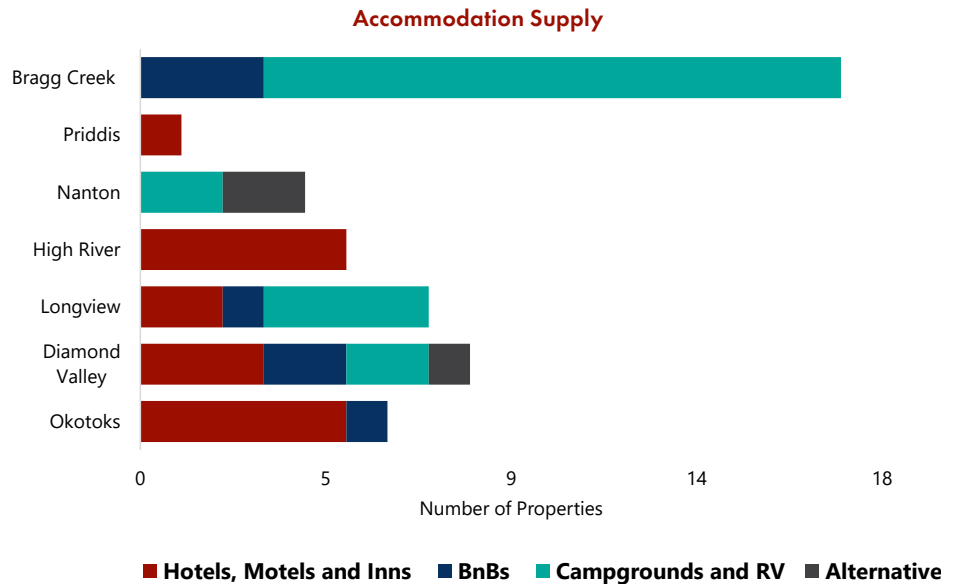
Trails of Bragg Creek

Supply: Accommodation Mix

The concentration of accommodations in this TDZ is in the communities of Okotoks and High River.

Existing Foothills accommodations are primarily economy-branded hotels, except for Azuridge (13 rooms), and a limited number of campgrounds that are only open six months a year.

Moving forward, the need to prioritize “glamping” options and hotel development in the upper-upscale category is critical to meet the expectations of our target visitor. Some of the new accommodation developments in the pipeline that can meet these expectations include: The Laskin - Bragg Creek, Gateway Village - Bragg Creek, River Retreat Kananaskis, Longview and the Eau Claire Boutique Hotel - Diamond Valley.



(Source: STR, 2022; Floor13, IBI Group, 2023; Alberta Parks, 2023)

Supply: Products and Experiences

An analysis conducted within the zone identified just under 300 tourism-related products and experiences. While most of the tourism products and experiences in this TDZ appeal to a regional visitor, they need improvements to meet the expectations of an international visitor. The quantity of experiences needs to increase to ensure there is enough product available to develop itineraries.

Local operators, include:

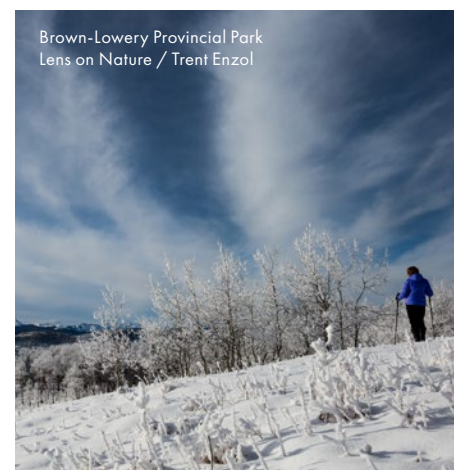
- Eau Claire Distillery
- Spirit Hills Winery
- Granary Road Farmers Market
- Hard Knox Brewery
- Bomber Command Museum of Canada
- Homeplace Ranch
- Elevated Escapes Glamping
- Museum of the Highwood
- Forage and Farm
- High River Brewery

Based on Travel Alberta's anonymized mobile data (2019), top visited tourism products or experiences in the Foothills, include:

- Eau Claire Distillery
- Fahr Brewery
- Turner Valley Golf Club
- Azure Ridge Hotel
- Longview Steakhouse
- Hard Knox Brewery

Key Provincial and National Parks and Historic Sites, include:

- Bragg Creek Provincial Park
- Bluerock Wildland Park
- Sheep Creek Natural Area
- Brown-Lowery Provincial Park
- Bluerock Wildland Provincial Park
- OH Ranch Heritage Rangeland
- Chain Lakes Provincial Park
- Bar U Ranch National Historic Site
- Okotoks Erratic

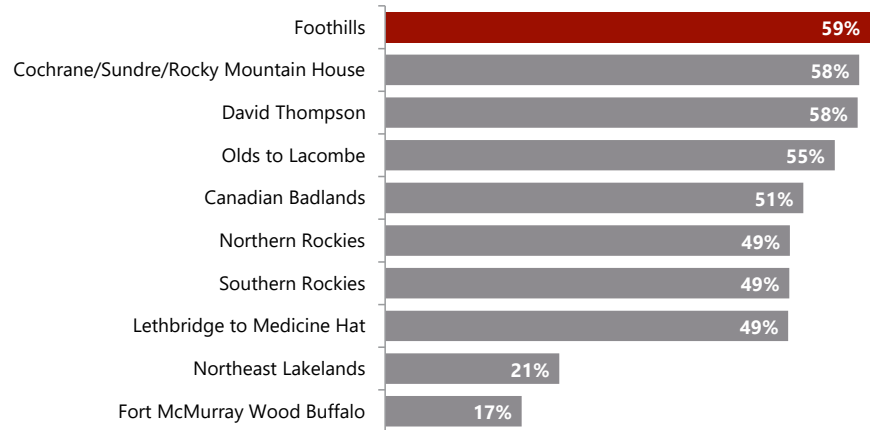


Demand: Amongst Albertans

Perception research conducted by Travel Alberta in November 2022 was undertaken to better understand the awareness, perception, and travel interest to each of the 10 TDZs. Over 1,000 Albertans were surveyed. Key findings from this research indicated:

- Six out of 10 Albertans are familiar with the Foothills as a vacation destination
- Respondents already have a positive impression of the area and more than half will likely travel to the TDZ for a leisure trip in the next 12 months
- Hiking, staying in cabins and enjoying farmer's markets were the top choices experiences in this TDZ

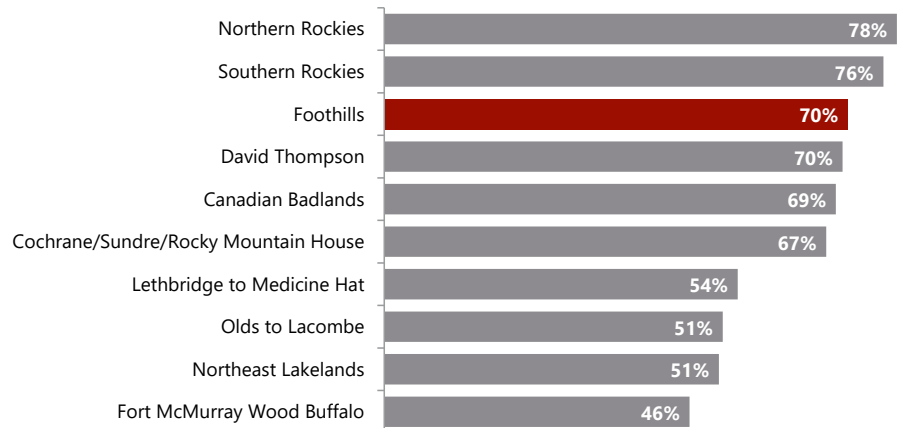
Familiarity with Destination (Per cent familiar with each TDZ)



Almost three in five Albertans feel familiar with Foothills and 70% have a positive impression.



Overall Impression of Destination (Per cent with positive overall impression of each TDZ)



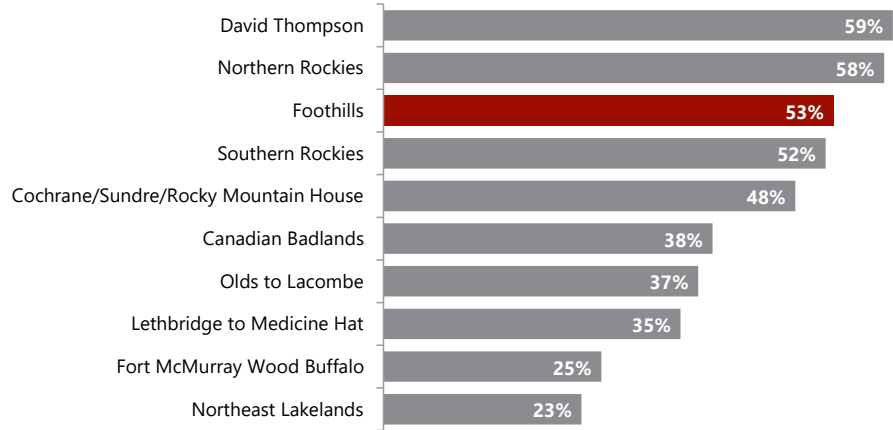
Likelihood to Visit Destination (Per cent likely to travel to each TDZ)

34%

MOST LIKELY TO VISIT
OUTSIDE OF PEAK SEASON

50%

LIKELY TO ONLY STAY
BETWEEN ONE AND TWO NIGHTS



Activities Albertans are most likely to enjoy in the Foothills TDZ

Hiking, cabins and farmers markets are most popular potential activities in Foothills



Demand: International Travellers

Top trip anchors, which are those activities a visitor would centre their trips around, and supporting activities identified by Global Tourism Watch research align well with both existing and potential products and experiences in the Foothills TDZ.

Trip anchors in this zone include:

- Distilleries, breweries and wineries
- Parks
- Self-guided driving tours
- Local culinary experiences

The experiences that resonate with travellers from within Alberta, US, and across Canada are well-aligned with current tourism offerings in the Foothills.

Guest ranch and farm stays as an accommodation choice among US travellers have seen significant growth over the past several years.

Key points of interest amongst visitors from international source markets include:

- Natural attractions
- Hiking
- Camping
- Historical/archaeological/world heritage sites
- Parks

(Source: Global Tourism Watch, 2021)

Year-round connectivity to the Bow Valley will be important for this zone as it offers the potential for building on programming of interest to international visitors.

Demand: Alberta's Target Travellers

Travel Alberta has identified "Curious Adventurers" and "Hotspot Hunters" as the high-value travellers likely to spend more per visit, yield the highest return on investment, and contribute the most to the province's economic growth. Tourism businesses, communities, and associations can attract these valuable visitors by tailoring products and experiences to their unique travel styles.



Priddis

For Curious Adventurers, travel is about getting a different perspective on the world. In the Foothills, these travellers can immerse themselves in the landscape — leaving time for the unplanned encounters and activities that allow them to genuinely get know a destination, such as:

- Exploring the Rocky Mountains on a three-day guided hiking tour
- Immersing themselves in cowboy culture on a horseback ride followed by an authentic steak lunch around a campfire
- Enjoying an evening art gallery showing with wine and the opportunity to meet local artists



Eau Claire Speakeasy, Diamond Valley

For Hotspot Hunters, travel is about achievement and accomplishments. They want to visit the top attractions, participate in unique experiences, and connect with local experts. Examples of a Hotspot Hunter's preferred experiences in the Foothills include:

- Staying at a boutique hotel and sampling award winning whiskey
- Enjoying a walking culinary tour that showcases the top five places to eat in the community and includes an opportunity to meet with chefs and farmers
- Taking the whole family on a wild foraging adventure and learning to prepare and cook local plants

Trends impacting tourism

As destination organizations at all levels and businesses look to adapt and thrive, it will be important they stay attuned to emerging trends that are driving the industry moving forward. These trends and descriptions, identified by Twenty31 in their 2022 Tourism Trends report, will impact supply and demand and shape the future of tourism over the short and long-term.

TREND:

Inspiration from social media and streaming

DESCRIPTION:

Tik Tok and Instagram influencers pushing inspirational travel content is no longer niche, while streaming services like Netflix and HBO provide endless opportunities to create destination awareness — think *Game of Thrones* for Dubrovnik in the 2010s and *The White Lotus* for Sicily in 2022.

KEY TAKEAWAY FOR TDZ

The Foothills is a choice location for many film and TV productions including *Heartland*, *The Last of Us*, *Black Summer*, and *Unforgiven*. This success has prompted the development of new assets, including *Heartland* lead Amber Marshall's recently opened country store in Diamond Valley.

Regenerative travel

The complexity of arranging a trip will result in travellers booking fewer trips but increasing the length of their stay in a single country. "Travel less, travel better" will determine booking behaviour this year.

Within this zone, there is a strong orientation toward sustainable agriculture, which fuels the local culinary and farm-to-table scene. The majority of businesses within the Foothills are locally owned, providing visitors an opportunity to support residents and contribute to the local visitor economy.

Exotic destinations attract young travellers

Regenerative travel will help make tourism a pillar for sustainable economic development for destinations. Eighty-three per cent of global travellers will make sustainable travel a priority in the future, while 66 per cent want their travel spending to directly benefit local communities.

The Foothills zone offers immersive travel, adventure, and western culture experiences to suit this market. Its close proximity to Calgary and the Rockies makes it an easy destination for visitors to have off-the-beaten-path adventures. There are existing tour companies, including Disney Travel Adventures, operating within this zone.

Single destination, longer stays

The complexity of arranging a trip will result in travellers booking fewer trips but increasing the length of their stay in a single country. "Travel less, travel better" will determine booking behaviour this year.

Travellers choosing Calgary or the Rockies will benefit from an Alberta-made add-on itinerary focused on experiencing the Foothills. Previously, many trips to the Rockies would have been limited to three to five days, travellers are now interested in extending this stay and experiencing surrounding destinations.

(Source: Twenty31, 2022)

RESIDENT SENTIMENT

The success of developing tourism across Alberta's TDZs hinges on tourism's impact on the quality of life for local residents. Quite simply, if it's not good for residents, it's not good for visitors. Travel Alberta has been tracking resident sentiment across the province for the past year, and as part of this initiative, we assessed resident sentiment at a TDZ level, as highlighted below.

In the Foothills TDZ, residents are interested in seeing more visitors in their community, which indicates they are open to seeing growth in the tourism sector. However, development must take place in a manageable way.

Resident engagement and education can help residents understand that their zone's amenities are tourism assets. It is important that residents see the connection between tourism and their everyday lives.

In the Foothills TDZ, over half of the residents surveyed identified the importance of farms tours, ranch stays, horseback riding, breweries, wineries, distilleries, and farmers markets to tourism in their communities.

Highlights: Resident Sentiment

QUESTIONS	TOTAL ALBERTA RESIDENTS	FOOTHILLS RESIDENTS
Tourism is important to my community.	70%	75%
I would welcome more visitors to my community.	62%	70%
A strong tourism industry improved my quality of life.	61%	60%
The attractions, events and things to do here are an important part of making my community a vibrant place.	83%	88%
This is a vibrant community and area. There is always lots to see and do.	70%	77%
My community offers experiences I want to tell others about.	65%	84%
I can see the direct impact of tourism on my day-to-day life.	40%	35%

(Source: Stone Olafson, 2023)

SWOT ANALYSIS

Using findings from primary and secondary research and extensive stakeholder engagement, a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted to evaluate the TDZ. The analysis takes into consideration both the current and potential future drivers that will influence tourism within the zone.

Strengths

- Significant market catchment: 1.27 million people within a 2.5 hour drive
- Close proximity to Calgary International Airport
- Seasonally connected to Kananaskis Country
- High disposable income and a young, active population in Calgary and Okotoks
- Landscape, scenery and western culture is of interest to international travellers
- Variety of outdoor, year-round recreation and outdoor trail systems
- Mostly strong broadband internet
- Well-maintained highways and main roads, with the new ring road making it easier to attract employees from Calgary
- Positive resident sentiment and awareness of the destination
- Okotoks is fast growing
- Strong awareness and perception of the zone as a tourism destination among Albertans

S

W

Weaknesses

- Key highway 40 (Highwood Pass), connecting Foothills to Bow Valley closed six months of the year
- Very limited export-ready accommodation suitable for leisure travellers
- Area considered a day trip with visitors residing in Calgary or staying in accommodations in South Calgary
- Long travel distances between existing tourism assets, few clustered assets
- Current policies may create barriers for growth of agri-tourism products and experiences
- Broadband west of Diamond Valley is poor
- The local DMO is currently operating with limited funding and no employees, which may put its longevity at risk
- The DMO focuses primarily on destination promotion and less so on destination management
- Zone lacks a coordinated strategy related to tourism infrastructure and transportation
- Poor wayfinding and signage make it difficult for visitors to navigate
- Lack of staff housing in some of the smaller, more rural communities

Opportunities

- International visitors are interested in the culture and scenery of the area
- Strong domestic population to support regional growth
- Proximity to Calgary International Airport strengthens business case for investment attraction
- Potential for connectivity with Bow Valley offers significant opportunity to create linkage with travel trade, develop itineraries, and support a more diversified visitor mix
- Interest in collaboration among communities
- Businesses can access labour from Calgary and growing communities to support tourism growth

O

T

Threats

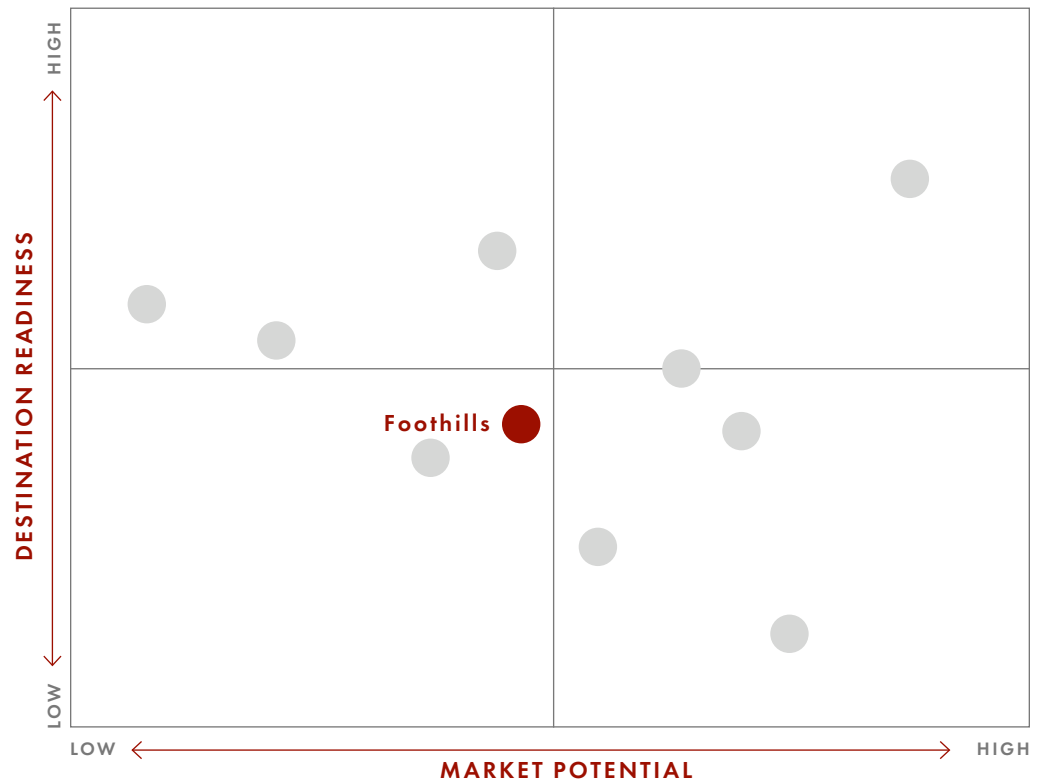
- Hesitancy from some local community members about certain impacts of tourism development (i.e. increased traffic, inflation of housing costs, loss of community connection)
- Continued tourism development in B.C.-bordering communities attracting Albertans away from the province
- Further policies and regulatory environment may limit tourism growth in key opportunity areas
- Tourism is not currently a high priority for community decision makers and therefore may not be given the same consideration as other sectors in planning
- Lack of investment in municipal and provincial assets such as parks, roads, etc.

DESTINATION MATURITY AND READINESS

The Foothills TDZ has significant potential (as shown in red on the matrix) to become an enabling environment for tourism with an improved mix of tourism products and experiences. Based upon all that was observed in this discovery phase, Travel Alberta assessed each TDZ on two primary criteria, i) market potential and ii) destination readiness to help inform the stages of future resource allocation for TDZs. To broaden our internal assessment, Travel Alberta will garner further input from stakeholders involved in the project to weigh into our initial assessment as indicated in table.

Key issues pertaining to this zone, include:

- Sustainability and capacity of DMO
- Lack of access within the zone reduces the ability to market itineraries to international visitors
- Restrictive policies may limit product development that align with market potential, such as agri-tourism



The grey dots represent the position of the Foothills TDZ relative to the ten other TDZs across the province.

05 VISION FOR THE FUTURE



Stone Wood & Steel, Millarville

“Our collaborative tourism region will build on its natural beauty and western heritage to become a year-round visitor destination offering authentic visitor experiences and creating economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits for all its communities.”

– Foothills TDZ Steering Committee

DESTINATION 2035

To balance tourism growth within the zone and ensure a community-first approach in achieving the TDZ vision, a cluster-based method was proposed by the consultants. It is recommended that over the next 10 years, the following five clusters identified in the Foothills TDZ should be built out in a way that allows for manageable growth in visitor revenue:

- **Bragg Creek**
Hiking, cross-country skiing, natural sites, overall soft adventure, accommodations
- **Okotoks**
Agri-tourism, film tourism, services centre, recreational, culinary, accommodations
- **High River**
Agri-tourism, film tourism, recreational, culinary, accommodations, art and culture
- **Diamond Valley/Longview**
Recreational, agri-tourism, culinary, historical discovery, natural sites, back country horseback riding, and upper-scale accommodations

- **Nanton**
Historical discovery, agri-tourism, recreational, and accommodations

These clusters will not only attract a high-value visitor, but will meet the expectations of Albertans and Canadians, and be attractive to international visitors and receptive tour operators.

By 2035, the connectivity of the Foothills will be year-round to the Rockies, providing for more sustainable and financially stable businesses to offer tourism products, experiences, and accommodations that are in demand by our target visitors from Alberta, Canada, and around the world.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

A community-first approach, preserving authenticity and ensuring manageable growth

In support of tourism development within the Foothills TDZ, multiple strategic initiatives were identified by local stakeholders and communities. This included:

01. Advance tourism leadership at a local level.
02. Support the creation of an enabling environment for tourism entrepreneurs.
03. Increase the overall accommodations offering, with a focus on upscale boutique hotels, guest ranches and other glamping accommodations.
04. Increase the overall product offering.
05. Address challenges around DMO governance and sustainability.
06. Improve inter-regional transportation connectivity.
07. Maintain and grow resident sentiment in support of tourism and its positive impact on quality of life for residents and economic diversification.
08. Position tourism as a driver of economic development with high-value tourism-related investments.

OUTCOMES

Successful implementation of these strategic initiatives will enable the development of products, accommodations, and robust multi-day itineraries that increase the length of time visitors stay and how much they spend throughout the Foothills TDZ. Specifically, the desired outcomes of these initiatives include:

Improved seasonality of visitation

Businesses will operate predictably, visitors will have positive experiences, and community members will appreciate the value visitors bring to their communities.

Public and private sector investment

The identification of specific gaps in products, experiences and infrastructure will have created awareness of community needs and market demand, spurring private and public sector investment.

Capacity and capability

Tourism companies, entrepreneurs and destination organizations across the province will be well-equipped to expand, establish, and support their businesses, creating jobs and more vibrant communities.

Awareness and understanding of benefits

Tourism growth will result in a more diversified economy, reduce dependency on other sectors, improve quality of life for residents, and legitimize the benefits of tourism in this TDZ.

Reconciliation and cultural awareness

If the results of the ongoing Indigenous engagement in the region show that local Indigenous communities are in favour of tourism development, Travel Alberta will collaborate with Indigenous Tourism Alberta and Indigenous tourism operators to foster growth in the sector. Community-led tourism will offer opportunities for economic development, the sharing of cultures, and the development of infrastructure that will benefit residents.

Cooperation among communities

Communities will bring their unique perspectives and assets to the table to develop strong tourism products and experiences that attract visitors to the zone and encourage them to stay longer.



Roam Creative

06 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

As highlighted within this report, the majority of Albertans are already aware of the Foothills region, think of it favourably, and are likely to travel there. Communities within the Foothills TDZ are open to the development of their tourism assets, provided this development is done in a community-centric and sustainable way. The local stakeholders, DMOs, and all levels of government must prioritize investment in sustainable and regenerative tourism products and accommodations that will attract more visitors (particularly international visitors) to the Foothills TDZ. This will then encourage all visitors to stay beyond the current average — an overnight or day-trip excursion.

Successfully implementing the strategic initiatives outlined in this report will unlock the zone's existing potential and create new regional growth and prosperity opportunities. The findings in this report will be used to establish the foundations for a sustainable, attractive, and economically viable destination.



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