

*Visit*  
**ITHACA**

2021 ANNUAL REPORT



## letter from leadership

For many in our industry January 2021 felt like the 13th month of 2020. But hope was on the horizon, with vaccines becoming available in the spring, travel restrictions lifting, and students returning to classes on all three campuses. The reputation of the community mindfulness of our residents positioned Tompkins County as a place where visitors felt safe to travel.

New platforms to create touchless visitor engagement also provided the CVB with greater tracking data. Making data-driven decisions resulted in true and intentional visitation, as evidenced by website feeder market engagement materializing in the visitor centers. By transitioning to a digital format, we were able to engage more meaningfully with prospective students and families when they could not yet travel in person.

Your CVB advocated for local, state and federal issues, from health and safety to the designation of the Finger Lakes Region as a National Heritage Area. We attended both hybrid and in-person trade shows, we welcomed record-breaking visitation at the Overlook at Taughannock and the return of international visitors ahead of forecast. We remain hopeful, as our industry continues to recover. Thank you for your partnership as we work to bring the economic engine of tourism back to full strength together.

Safe travels,

Peggy Coleman,  
VP, Tourism/CVB Director

### MISSION

To foster sustainable economic growth through service to our members, strategic advocacy, workforce development, destination marketing, and quality of life investments.

### VISION

We are an inclusive community, where people thrive, businesses start and grow, nonprofits effectively serve, and visitors experience our "gorges" place.

### VALUES

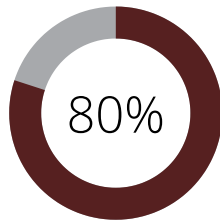
- Participation & Collaboration
- Free Enterprise & Commerce
- Entrepreneurial Spirit
- Involved Leadership
- Integrity & Accountability
- Environmental Stewardship
- Diversity & Inclusion
- Commitment to Community



# VisitIthaca.com Overview

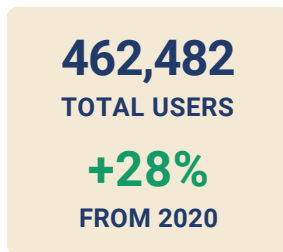
Total website traffic increased by 27% year over year and traffic from organic search increased by 23%. Additional goals tracked include referrals to our partners' websites and travel guide requests through the website form (2,490).

**Organic search brought 80% of the website's overall traffic.**

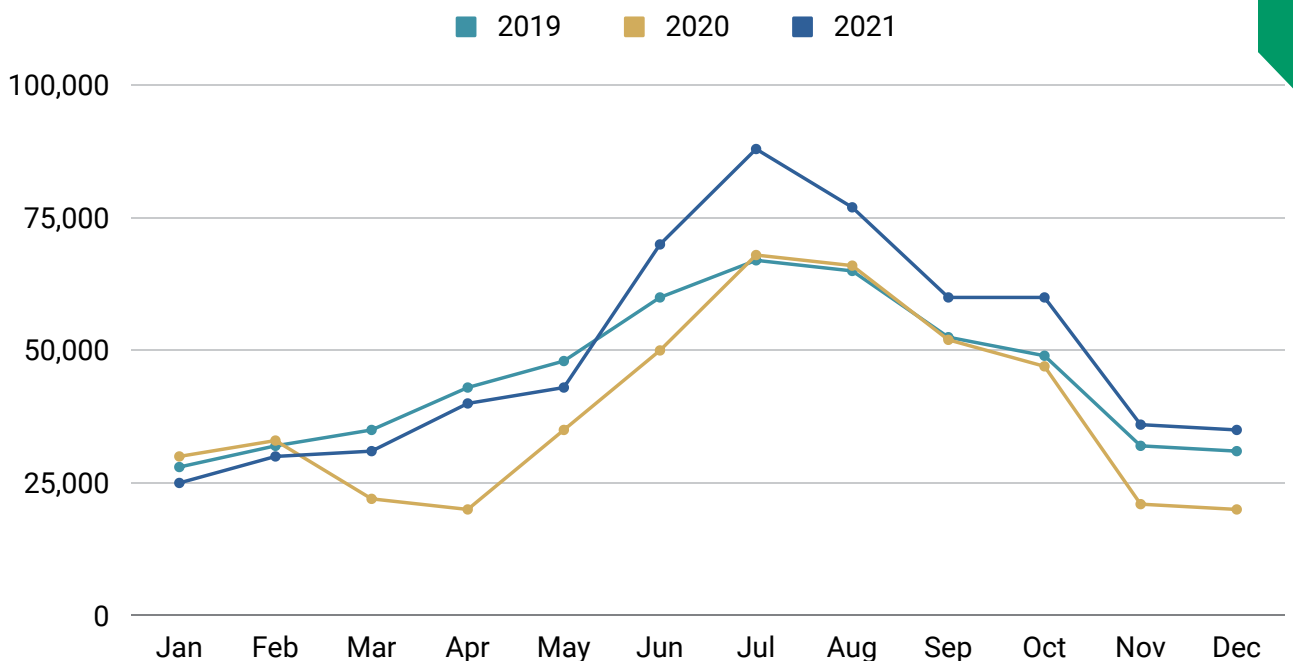


## The return of events!

In 2021, IthacaEvents.com promoted 647 events, generating 53,000 unique pageviews. The top event of 2021 was the 29th Annual Ithaca Artists Market; this event was a paid promotion.



Website Sessions



## Connecting Content with Visitor Questions

Using website analytics, working with a dedicated SEO agency, and receiving input from our Visitor Experience team, we created content relevant to people at different stages of their travel planning journey. Blog post sessions originating from organic search increased 58% year over year.

### TOP 5 BLOG POSTS BY SESSIONS:

- 48 hours and 10 Ithaca Waterfalls 4,800
- Waterfalls to Visit in Winter 4,780
- Things to Do in Winter 4,570
- Pet-friendly Guide 3,745
- Waterfalls Downtown 2,300

## REFERRALS TO PARTNERS

### direct click-throughs

33,339

Total outbound clicks

3,062

Lodging book online button

1,210

Attractions book online button







From outstanding street art to unique shops to amazing natural beauty, every corner I rounded in Ithaca provided me new and exciting discoveries.

-Troy Petenbrink @thegaytraveler  
26.9K followers on Instagram



## Website Traffic by Geographic Area

More than half of 2021 website sessions came from people in New York State, this includes significant growth in traffic from New York City and Buffalo. Other major Designated Market Areas (DMA) trending positively included Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, D.C. The increase of sessions from these markets correlates to traffic at our visitor centers for the year.

**333K** NEW YORK STATE SESSIONS

**221.5K** OUTSIDE OF NY

**40K** PENNSYLVANIA

## Visitor Center Walk-in Traffic

The Visitor Experience team helped visitors from all 50 states and Washington, D.C. in 2021. Top feeder markets were New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Boston, Harrisburg, and Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. The top regional markets were Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, and Binghamton. Additionally, we saw international visitors from 56 countries in 2021.

**109,500 NEW YORK CITY DMA WEBSITE SESSIONS**



Photo Credit: South Hill Cider





Photo Credit:  
@carolinaperezdesigns

**Visit Ithaca is committed to showcasing the vibrancy of our inclusive community. One way Visit Ithaca worked toward supporting this story is through the intentional inclusion of vendors representing the wide array of businesses in our county. We contracted with a MWBE (minority- and women-owned business enterprise) agency to provide marketing and social media support for our agricultural and cider assets, sought out media with diverse backgrounds, contracted with a local photographer to increase assets showing LGBTQ families, and collaborated with the Community Arts Partnership to help promote a wide range of local artists.**

# Growing Social Engagement

In 2021 we introduced weekly pairings as a series, shared Instagram Stories with more frequency, and introduced Instagram Reels and Instagram Guides to our social media strategy.

*#VisitIthaca*  
mentions across  
social channels

1,400+



**15,700**  
FOLLOWERS  
+22%

**700,000**  
POST REACH



**42,015**  
FOLLOWERS  
+1%

**800,000**  
POST REACH



**1,700**  
NEW EMAIL  
SUBSCRIBERS

**26%**  
AVG. OPEN RATE



## Weekly Pairings

- 30 Pairings
- 60 Partners featured
- 269K Total reach (Facebook + Instagram)
- 21K Highest reach Cayuga Nature Center + Trimmers Ice Cream
- Average reach 9K



## Instagram Reels

- 9 Reels
- 53K Plays
- With 695 likes, A walk to Ithaca Falls was the most popular video
- Short videos featured tourism attractions, accommodations, visitor centers, waterfalls, and events



## Stories and Guides

- 14 Guides
- 210 Stories
- 365 Link clicks
- Top 20 Stories included food, cider, holidays, college events, and GMA at Taughannock Falls



*Instagram Story example, welcoming back students for the Fall 2021 semester.*



# Visit Ithaca Waterfalls Challenge

The Visit Ithaca Waterfalls Challenge is a digital pass, where visitors use their mobile device to check-in at more than 20 of Ithaca's natural areas, encouraging them to return to complete the challenge. When visitors check-in at enough places, they can win an aluminum water bottle and a knit beanie made with recycled materials.

*Waterfalls Challenge sticker (free), water bottle (10 locations), beanie (18 + locations)*



## #WATERFALLSCHALLENGE

### PASS STATISTICS launched in October

892 sign-ups;  
683 outside of Ithaca

838 location check-ins

#### Benchmarks

10-location check-ins: 33  
people

18 or more locations:  
18 people







Photo Credit: Fausel Imagery

“

***First person to complete Waterfalls Challenge:***  
We've found that Ithaca is a good base camp, providing plenty to do - and we try to stay a week each year. The challenge pass is something new for us, as it expanded our hiking options and introduced us to new areas, like the bike/hike trails and Sapsucker Woods.

***- Debbie T. from Ohio***

”



# Campaigns and Advertising

Ithaca and Tomkins County's position as a destination with abundant public outdoor space continued to serve us well in 2021. Our spring campaign led with "Waterfalls and Wide Open Spaces," and then we carried the messaging into winter with "A Wonderland of Waterfalls."

We know our spring and late fall/early winter campaign resulted in at least 173 room bookings based on tracking through Sojern during non-peak leisure travel time. Paid partnerships have become a strong strategy in destination marketing. Visit Ithaca specifically worked with video content creators with established audiences to continue to build brand awareness. Another example is underwriting for Buffalo-area public media and podcasts through Heritage Radio Network – both outlets describe their listeners as lifelong learners and matched Tompkins County's previous visitor demographics.



## Buffalo-area public media

Spring and late fall campaigns included frequent radio spots and linked banners in their membership emails.



## Flock Finger Lakes

YouTube channel 54.3K subscribers, Instagram followers 9.7K

### 3 sponsored episodes

- Foraging Wild Apples - 10K views / 61 comments
- Malloryville Bog walk – 12K views / 106 comments
- Winter Garden walk at Cornell Botanic Gardens had 21K views / 52 comments



## Sojern

Programmatic digital campaigns targeting people with an intention to travel, as well as retargeting.

Digital display ran March through June; Connected TV (CTV), digital display and video ran November through December, 5.9K referral sessions tracked back to our landing pages

7,000+

Referrals from paid campaigns back to VisitIthaca.com

## Life in the Finger Lakes (print and digital)

22K subscribers/direct mail per issue

Ran 3 full-page ads inside front cover + linked banner in LIFL weekly emails

## Heritage Radio Network

Podcasts with a food and beverage focus

## New York's Best Experiences

In-person travel guide distribution at lifestyle shows including the NJ Balloon Show and Hudson Valley Food & Wine Festival

## Cider – Building a Brand

Our work focused on leveraging the remainder of the Market New York grant for cider marketing:

- 3,667 unique pageviews (+15% YoY) to craft cider landing page on VisitIthaca.com
- Hosted two writers based in NYC during Cider Week New York in October
- Capstone media familiarization tour in November, hosted five writers to showcase craft cider as well as Ithaca's outdoor assets
- FLXCDR seal was established to promote the area's cider style

## Video partnerships

New cider-related YouTube content included: New York Sherpa (Spending a day visiting cideries in Ithaca); Flock Finger Lakes (foraging wild apples with Steve Selin of South Hill Cider); and Kae Lani Palmisano (cider and food pairing with Chef Felicia Barrett of Monks on the Commons)

## Travel + Leisure

### "Why the Finger Lakes Is Becoming the Capital of Cider"

Print and digital, Sept/Oct 2021

"In New York's Finger Lakes region, producers are taking a modern approach to one of the country's oldest beverages – apple cider."



Photo Credit: South Hill Cider





Ithaca is the kind of place that caters to any kind of trip you're in the mood for. It has the energetic vibes of a city with the charm of a small town... a great place to relax after a day in nature. Ithaca's proximity to local farms means access to a bounty of foods as well as incredible wines. And let's not forget the cider! The region's plentiful orchards lend itself to myriad of apple varieties which cider makers are leveraging to their full potential. Ithaca is currently leading an exciting cider movement that the food industry will be buzzing about in years to come.

- Kae Lani Palmisano, Philadelphia @kaelanisays



## 2021 Media Hits

By leveraging the power of relationships, PR outreach resulted in significant exposure for the Visit Ithaca brand and the Tompkins County region to inspire travel.

**Conde Nast Traveler (Apr)**  
*8 Stunning U.S. Swimming Holes to Cool off in This Summer*

**Outside Online (Aug)**  
*The Ultimate Road-Trip Guide to New York's Finger Lakes*

**Better Homes & Gardens (Oct)**  
*10 Destination-Worthy Cheap Motels*

**Good Housekeeping (Nov)**  
*The Enduring Magic of Children's Gardens*

**Syracuse.com (Dec)**  
*Go ahead and chase them: New waterfall challenge in Ithaca includes popular spots, hidden gems*

**52K ESTIMATED VIEWS**  
**Forbes.com (May)**

"If you live in the New York City area, there's no need to board a plane for a vacation. A destination like Ithaca in upstate New York can be the best place to travel. It's the cultural and wellness hub of the Finger Lakes region, with plenty of well-appointed spas, outdoor summer theatre, public mural walking tours, and engaging small museums."

## ITHACA IN THE MEDIA

### MEDIA OUTREACH

57 responses to media requests

10 I LOVE NY blog post features

20 additional mentions in web & print





## ITHACA LOVES TEACHERS

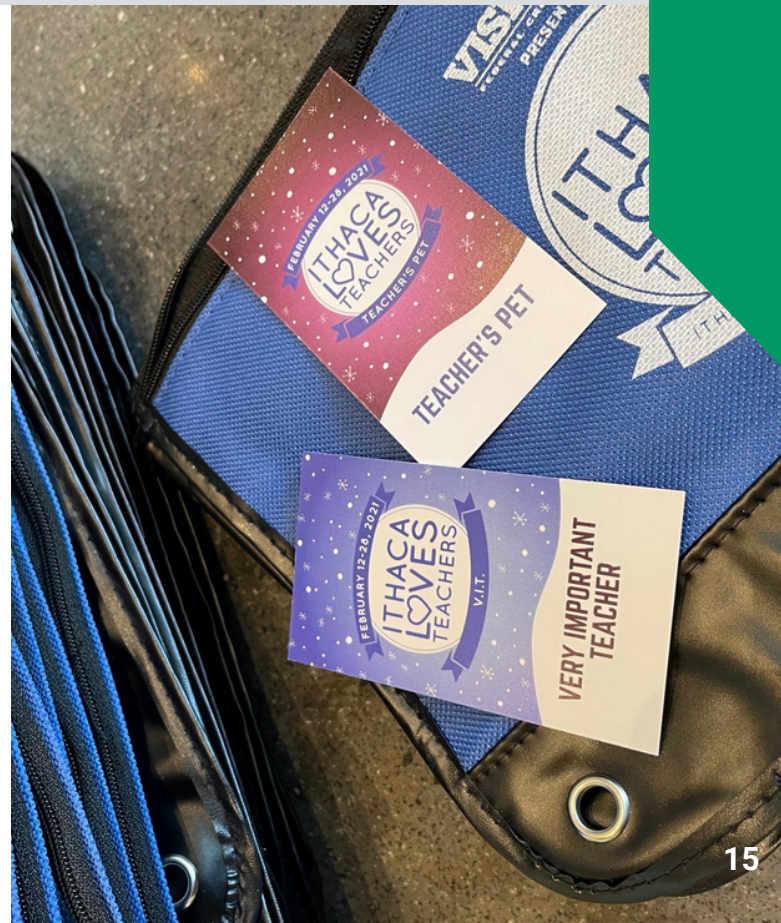
Visit Ithaca successfully transitioned the Ithaca Loves Teachers celebration program booklet to a digital pass in 2021, resulting in more than 1,400 sign-ups. During the event, participants redeemed almost 2,000 deals at 140 local businesses.

## A Record Setting Year

The 2021 season at the Overlook at Taughannock Visitor Center shattered the record set in 2019 for visitor foot traffic with over 47,000 visitors, increasing by 35% over the last pre-pandemic year. May and July totals were nearly twice what they were in 2019. Additionally, visitor phone calls, Downtown Visitor Center walk-ins and off-site events all increased from 2020 levels.

## Helping Visitors

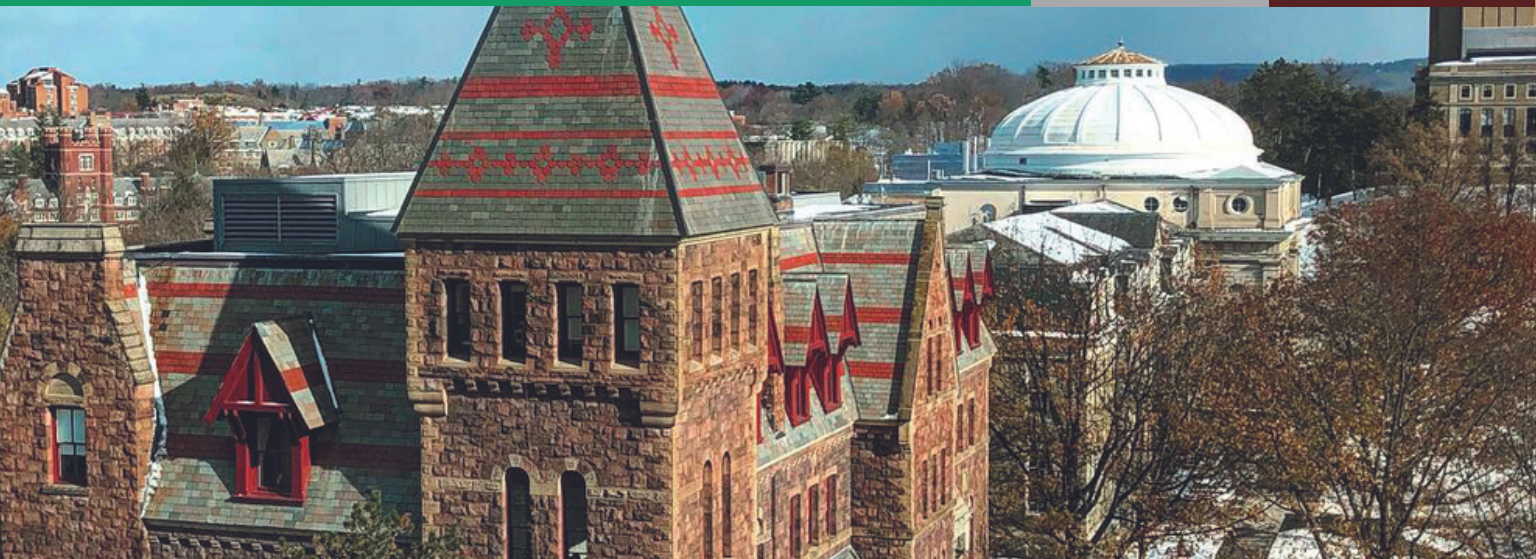
In addition to connecting with visitors in person, Visit Ithaca's website chat service allows our team to offer information with a personal touch to those considering a visit to Tompkins County. The chat continues to be a popular feature, with 1,828 chat requests in 2021. Among the top areas of interest are waterfalls, lodging, events, outdoor recreation and Ithaca Loves Teachers.







“ Thank you. This was a great session, especially with the local tourism people here to describe a place that we can't visit, and provide another insight versus the standard online pictures and virtual visits.  
—Prospective Ithaca College Parent ”



“ Thank you! It was an excellent presentation and so much of the information would be great for future recruitment!  
— Kim W., Cornell University's New Students & Transition Programs ”



## Higher Education Connections

The Visitor Experience team led 21 virtual "Ithaca 101" programs with 1,575 attendees. A late-2021 demonstration for 25 graduate student department members from Cornell University led to six sessions booked for 2022, with more dates expected to be scheduled. The team also took part in five on-campus higher education-connect events with a total of 3,205 attendees in 2021.

## Accessibility Survey

I LOVE NY launched an accessibility audit survey to aid in identifying tourism businesses across the state that are accessible. Team members worked with partners to complete surveys that will identify experiences for visitors who are blind or have low vision and those with autism and different abilities. The information will be updated in the Visit Ithaca database and, if it meets certain parameters, will be included in the searchable accessibility page on [iloveny.com](http://iloveny.com).

## CONNECTING AND INFORMING PARTNERS

When the Taughannock Visitor Center opened for the season, the Visitor Experience team hosted two Tourism Town Halls to allow partners to exchange information on how they planned to operate for the season, related to the pandemic, and inform each other in a way to cross-promote each other.





## Conference Center

Weekly meetings throughout 2021 have advanced this important economic development project forward. The anticipated opening is Q4 2023.

Your CVB and Chamber team have helped lead this project and contributed their leadership, expertise, time and advocacy work to benefit the community.

### THE CONFERENCE CENTER WILL HAVE:

- 50,000+ SF of rental function space, including 12,000 SF ballroom
- Up to 7 breakout rooms
- Pre-function space on two levels
- Attached parking garage

### WORK COMPLETED:

- Local Development Corporation Board of Directors expanded
- All multi-party agreements in place
- Bond funding secured
- Grants from NYS to project solidified
- Demolition of Green Street Garage
- Key Branding Developed
- Groundbreaking Ceremony completed

## GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY





# Sales

The Sales team continued to build and strengthen relationships with clients to keep Ithaca top of mind for groups in 2021 and beyond. The team also participated in regular planning meetings and the development of online marketing tools to support the Ithaca Downtown Conference Center's progress toward opening next year.

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## 2021 Accomplishments

- ✔ Completed 90 appointments from virtual and in-person trade shows, including 55 from the international market and 35 domestic and Canadian coach groups, and assisted seven domestic operators with future group itineraries to the area.
- ✔ Participated in a Brand USA Canadian Tour Operator virtual event as part of the Wine, Water & Wonders cooperative, resulting in Ithaca and Tompkins County being featured in Brand USA's "Insider Guides" themed around Northeast wineries.
- ✔ Attended a meeting planner client lunch in collaboration with the NYS Destination Marketing Organizations. A total of 35 planners in attendance received the first official "Coming September 2023" message about the Ithaca Downtown Community Conference Center, resulting in a meeting request for a proposal from a planner looking to book the conference center.
- ✔ Represented Ithaca and Tompkins County at the Empire State Society of Association Executives (ESSAE) Annual tradeshow for Capital District meeting planners.
- ✔ Increased international awareness with buyer appointments at IPW from the Wine Water, & Wonders team.
- ✔ Ithaca was included in Travelhouse's (Sweden) current itinerary as a result of the I Love NY Virtual Marketplace.



## Advocacy

Be it future development or an immediate critical need, the CVB and Chamber engaged our elected officials to support all tourism businesses locally, on the state level and nationally. Key focus areas included:

- PPP for 501c6 organizations
- National Heritage Area Designation for the Finger Lakes Region of New York State
- Vaccine information/distribution, especially getting frontline hospitality workers approved early
- State Liquor Authority licensing
- Short Term Rental legislation statewide policy
- Short Term Rental support for lakefront rentals in Town of Ithaca
- NYS Tourism Matching Grants
- Ithaca International Airport funding/project support for Multimodal Connectivity
- Workforce Development funding locally and state level
- Metropolitan Statistical Area Advocacy, which kept eligibility to Federal funding for communities like Ithaca and Elmira
- Tompkins Together Campaign to support local tourism industry workers







**Jennifer Tavares, CEcD**  
President & CEO

**Peggy Coleman**  
VP of Tourism & CVB Director

**Jodi LaPierre, PDM**  
Director of Visitor Experience

**Erin Rafalowski**  
Director of Marketing

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Visitor Centers Site Supervisor

**Jordan Herson**  
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**Lisa Conarton**  
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**Sarah Imes, CTIS**  
Tour & Travel Manager

**Maia Consolo**  
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Business & Workforce Development Specialist

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**Rob Montana**  
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**Ryan Shehu**  
Site Supervisor

**Diane Hemly**  
Office Manager & Bookkeeper

OUR TEAM

