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December 1, 2025

City of Independence
331 1st Street East
Independence, Iowa 50644

Honorable Mayor Bleichner and City Council Members and City Manager Schmitz,

Funding Request for Buchanan County Tourism – FY 2027

Buchanan County Tourism is requesting \$10,000 in Hotel Motel Tax funding for fiscal year 2027 to support key initiatives aimed at enhancing the area's growing tourism sector. As Independence and greater Buchanan County continues to develop as a prime destination, this funding is essential to strengthening our tourism infrastructure, increasing visitation, and ensuring sustainable growth within our local economy. These efforts will help position Independence as a sought-after destination, benefiting both our residents and local businesses.

The requested funding will be allocated toward three primary areas. First, it will support marketing, advertising, and promotional activities. The First Impressions Community Assessment made it clear that marketing is the major missing piece for Independence. Our community has the infrastructure, dining, attractions, and lodging needed to support tourism, but lacks the visibility to match. This is where Buchanan County Tourism, as the county's destination marketing organization, steps in.

Second, this funding will support our continued membership in Iowa Tourism Industry Partners (ITIP), a network that broadens our statewide connections, provides industry training, and strengthens our advocacy efforts. Through ITIP, we stay plugged into legislative priorities, statewide programs, and emerging travel markets like group and sports tourism, ensuring Buchanan County remains competitive and informed.

Finally, a portion of the funding will support ongoing tourism education, ensuring we stay current with industry trends, tools, and best practices to effectively promote Buchanan County.

The requested funding will play a critical role in boosting Buchanan County Tourism's efforts. By supporting these initiatives, we can strengthen our city's position as a tourism destination,

benefiting both visitors and the local economy. We respectfully request your support in this endeavor.

Value of Tourism in Buchanan County:

Tourism continues to deliver strong economic returns for Buchanan County and Independence and remains a reliable revenue generator for local government. In 2024, Iowa recorded \$7.5 billion in visitor spending according to Tourism Economics and the Iowa Economic Development Authority.

Buchanan County held steady at \$17.6 million in visitor spending in 2024, a year when many surrounding counties declined. Dubuque, Delaware, Fayette, and Black Hawk counties all saw decreases. Where the region lost ground, Buchanan County held its market share, demonstrating the strength and resilience of our local tourism economy.

Tourism has also seen tremendous growth in Independence since 2021, when Buchanan County Tourism hired a full-time tourism director. Strategic marketing, expanded partnerships, and stronger community engagement have all contributed to increased visibility and economic impact.

Visitor data collected through Tourism Economics and Iowa Economic Development Authority defines visitors as individuals who stayed in overnight accommodations or who traveled more than 50 miles from home and deviated from their normal routine. Primary feeder markets for Buchanan County include Cedar Rapids and Waterloo, along with regional markets such as Rochester, Madison, and La Crosse.

Tourism is directly strengthening Buchanan County's tax base. In 2024, state and local taxes generated by visitor spending increased 2.6 percent, totaling \$3.7 million. These dollars reduce the tax burden on residents and support essential community services and infrastructure.

Overall economic activity tied to tourism is trending upward. In 2024, total business sales increased 0.1%, reaching \$26.7 million. Since 2021, when Buchanan County Tourism hired a full-time tourism employee, visitor activity has consistently contributed to growth in key economic indicators: total visitor spending up 35.8%, business sales up 28.8%, employment up 2%, labor income up 7.4%, and state and local taxes paid by visitors up 14%, supporting long-term economic development and strengthening the county's fiscal base.

Looking ahead, ARPA funding for Buchanan County Tourism ends in 2026. To sustain the momentum and continue producing measurable economic benefits, the organization is seeking additional support. Continued investment through Hotel/Motel Tax funding will ensure that the progress made since 2021 not only continues but accelerates.

In short, tourism remains a stable and productive economic engine in Independence and Buchanan County. Continued investment through Hotel/Motel Tax funding ensures that we not only maintain this momentum but position the county for expanded visitation, stronger brand recognition, and greater economic impact in the years ahead.

Buchanan County Tourism's Mission:

Buchanan County Tourism Bureau exists to promote area attractions and amenities through public education, research and development of tourism.

BCTB exists to:

- 1) Educate the public on cultural, historical and natural resources of Buchanan County
- 2) Market attractions and events throughout Buchanan County.
- 3) Promote economic growth for businesses and organizations in Buchanan County.

Your support enabled Buchanan County Tourism to accomplish the following in 2025:

- Awarded a \$25,000 mural grant from the Iowa Economic Development Authority to create a downtown Independence mural, scheduled for completion in June 2026.
- Accepted into the First Impressions Program for the City of Independence through Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, with a focus on evaluating and improving Independence's tourism-related businesses and attractions.
- Produced and printed an independent visitor guide for distribution across the region.
- Secured a \$10,500 Iowa Tourism Grant to implement new branding, marketing initiatives, and a new website.
- Participated in four local parades and provided support to ten community celebrations across Buchanan County.
- Expanded TikTok marketing, consistently averaging over 5,000 views per video and targeting Independence's ideal audience of young couples and families.
- Maintained an active presence on Facebook and Instagram, reaching an average of 6,000 people each week.
- Updated the Travel Buchanan website and strengthened the overall social media presence.
- Continued partnership efforts with iTIP.

- Distributed approximately 7,000 Amish Country maps, supporting local agritourism and visitor navigation.
- Collaborated with Celebrate Indee and the Independence Area Chamber of Commerce to begin planning for America's 250th anniversary in 2026.
- Launched LEAD Buchanan in partnership with Buchanan County Economic Development, ISU Extension and Outreach, Hawkeye Community College, and the Independence Area Chamber of Commerce. This leadership program encourages civic engagement, community involvement, and volunteerism.
- Received the Elevate Iowa Award in recognition of countywide tourism and economic development efforts, providing the opportunity to attend Tourism Academy to advance knowledge in content strategy, SEO, performance marketing, and innovative partnership models.
- Continued professional development through the Iowa Tourism Conference, Iowa Downtown Conference, and Iowa Leadership Bootcamp.
- Organized two countywide scavenger hunts called Go Wild that encouraged residents and visitors to explore tourism, historical, and agritourism sites.
- Supported RAGBRAI, welcoming more than 25,000 visitors to Buchanan County.

Statement of Intended Use of Funds for FY 2025

Buchanan County Tourism intends to accomplish the following objectives:

- Create an Independence Shopping and Dining Guide for visitors.
- Celebrate America's 250th Birthday in Independence, planning additional events, activities, and marketing to garner community and visitor engagement.
- Continue Go Wild, highlighting tourism hot spots throughout Independence and Buchanan County.
- Fill the third weekend in August with an event that celebrates the people of Buchanan County as there is a major hole with Independence's Brew-B-Q ending.
- Plan a Farm to Table dinner to showcase our downtown and bring people together.
- Continue working with our local First Impressions team and key attractions, including Downtown Independence, the Amish community, and Cedar Rock, to strengthen marketing efforts, expand cross-promotion, and increase Independence's overall reach.
- Produce new and updated print materials, including a redesigned Amish Map (expected printing of 15,000 for 2026) and a 2026 calendar of events.
- Develop 2026 itineraries including architecture and museums, highlighting our local history.

- Promote and expand website, social media and promotional efforts.
- Continue growing our social media. By regularly and systematically updating our social media we have seen more engagement and brand recognition.
- Expand exposure in the area by participating in fairs, events, & parades, seek additional and increased funding opportunities, market ads for the Buchanan County Visitor Guide and brochures, merchandise, etc.
- Continue group memberships and partnerships; ITIP, Historic Highway 20, etc.
- Target businesses integral to tourists and build relationships to encourage membership and positive working relationships.
- Develop a volunteer program for Tourism: Assess needs, recruit potential individuals, train and educate, maintain an active volunteer calendar, and recognize volunteers yearly for sharing time and talents.
- Attend the Iowa Tourism Conference, and additional conferences that are beneficial to the position.
- Continue presence at neighboring fairs with brochures, event information, and promotional materials.
- Continue serving Independence through marketing, public education, research, and the development of tourism which helps boost our local economy and population.

Thank you in advance for believing in and supporting Buchanan County Tourism Bureau; it is a pleasure to highlight the attractions and amenities that make Independence and Buchanan County the best place to live, work, and play! For any questions, please contact BCTB Director, Isabel Thurn at director@travelbuchanan.com or 319-334-3439.

Sincerely,

Isabel Thurn, BCTB - Director
Kriss McGraw, BCTB - President