

# VisitCOS plans for long haul

By [Erinn Callahan](#) - September 6, 2019



For Pikes Peak-area tourism officials, it's all about the destination, not the journey.

With the region's population already growing rapidly and — by all accounts — likely to continue doing so, it is a pivotal time to ensure visitor needs are also taken into consideration, according to [Visit Colorado Springs'](#) 10-year strategic Destination Master Plan.

The master plan, developed last year, ultimately seeks to boost visitation to the Pikes Peak region — El Paso, Teller and Fremont counties — by 25 percent by 2028, said Chelsy Offutt, director of communications for VisitCOS.

“This is extremely important given the new properties, attractions, and specifically the City for Champions projects coming to fruition, which seek to entice hundreds of thousands of new, out-of-state visitors as our commitment to the Colorado Office of Economic Development,” she said.

Destination promotion “benefits the well-being of every person in our community,” said Doug Price, VisitCOS president and CEO.

“It is a common good,” he said.

As the Olympic City USA brand gains traction, Colorado Springs' future as a travel destination is contingent on various sectors of the community coming together with a unified brand to ensure consistency in messaging and adherence to brand standards — in other words, ensuring the tourism has “a seat at the table,” according to the plan.

“Travel destinations are very competitive and always vying for their share of the traveling public,” said Amy Long, VisitCOS chief innovation officer. “[VisitCOS’] public service to promote the wonders of the Pikes Peak region is an essential investment to remain at the top of the desired destination list.”

## **IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL**

A vital piece of VisitCOS' plan is attracting longer-term visitors who invariably spend more during their stay.

“A key part of our 10-year strategic Destination Master Plan is shifting campaign geo-targets to invite travelers from long-haul markets who spend significantly and stay longer, resulting in less stress on our community assets,” Price said. “Our opportunity is to create unique, year-round experiences, while educating travelers on how to care responsibly for our region’s natural wonders.”

With a focus on visitor spending rather than just volume, Colorado Springs can grow in a sustainable manner that is supported by residents, and increased visitor spending can go toward maintaining and protecting Olympic City USA's natural attractions, parks and open spaces, according to the 27-page plan ([bit.ly/2luzLGp](https://bit.ly/2luzLGp)).

By further developing high-quality products, facilities and services that will in turn boost visitor spending, the region could see more than a 100 percent increase in overall spending, according to the master plan.

“Additional funding would provide opportunities to market in shoulder seasons, reach out to niche audiences and leverage more technology that helps tailor each potential visitor’s interests,” Long said.

“Shoulder season” refers to winter, spring and fall, and leads to another of the plan’s key initiatives — elevate marketing efforts in the off-peak seasons, thereby positioning the Pikes Peak region as a year-round destination.

## **BY THE NUMBERS**

Visitors in 2018 spent an average of 3.2 nights in the Pikes Peak region, up from 2.8 days in 2017, according to research conducted in June by Longwoods International.

About 37 percent of visitors stayed only one night, with 24 percent staying two nights and 20 percent spending three to four nights in the region. Only 10 percent of visitors stayed a week or longer, according to the study.

In 2017, nearly half — 43 percent — of visitors made only overnight trips, the research found.

Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak region attracted 23 million visitors in 2017, with 13 million taking daytrips and 10 million visitors staying at least one night in the region, according to the plan. These visitors spent \$2.3 billion throughout the region, a 3 percent uptick from 2016.

The vast majority — 90 percent — of travelers said they were drawn by the leisure assets and opportunities in the region, with 43 percent stating they took an independent leisure trip and an equal percentage enjoying a leisure trip visiting friends and relatives, according to the master destination plan.

Ten percent of visitors were business travelers, with the remaining 4 percent combining business with leisure travel. Eighty percent of day visitors originated from within Colorado, with notable percentages from California (6 percent), New Mexico (2 percent) and Texas (2 percent) on regional day trips as part of multi-day tour itineraries including Colorado and neighboring states, the plan found.

The destination master plan is targeting 20.9 million visitors and \$3.6 billion in spending by 2028 for Colorado Springs alone, aiming for 29.3 million visitors and \$4.9 billion spent across the Pikes Peak region during that same time frame.

“There is a clear opportunity to further increase yield, with visitor spending in Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak region averaging \$162 per person — well below the U.S. average of \$255 per person,” the master plan states.

## **DESTINATION COS**

Some of Colorado Springs’ main attractions practically market themselves. Pikes Peak and Garden of the Gods are perennial favorites, and the City for Champions suite of projects already is generating buzz. The Weidner stadium, located on a tract of land at Cimarron and Sahwach streets, will seat about 10,000 people for sporting events and could seat up to 20,000 for concerts. Additionally, the \$75 million U.S. Olympic Museum is set to draw 350,000 people annually when it opens its doors in the spring of 2020 — which officials have said will lead to “significant economic activity and positive impacts on the business community and sales tax revenue,” the Business Journal previously reported.

However, a major concern expressed in the master plan is that outsiders regard the Pikes Peak region as only having enough to offer for short trips. Therefore, strategies need to focus on encouraging trade professionals to create longer-stay packages.

One way VisitCOS officials have done this is by creating “hidden gem” itineraries and content through various outlets, Offutt said — including one available online that recommends lesser-known attractions such as the McAlister House Museum and the Iron Springs Chateau Melodrama Theater.

While stakeholders seek more visitation to the region, another common view expressed during consultations for the master plan was that growth in visitor volume must not compromise the sustainability of the area — meaning the amount visitors spend must outpace the growth in numbers of people visiting the area.

“We want to maintain and increase tourism in a sustainable and responsible way,” Offutt said.

VisitCOS partners with the Colorado Tourism Office, one of the few statewide tourism offices to officially partner with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, Offutt said.

Leave No Trace provides research, education and initiatives to help people stay well informed of their impact on the environment, according to its website.

“We work closely with the Colorado Tourism Office, Leave No Trace and many other organizations to stay top-of-mind and help spread visitation across the region,” Long said.