

# **A Request for Proposal to Redesign and Manage a Website To Support Marketing of Tourism in Custer County**

## **Overview**

The Custer County Tourism Board oversees and invests Accommodations Tax revenues collected on lodging within the county. We recognize the need to update and improve our brand presentation, especially our website as a hub for promoting all Custer County offers to visitors. We seek a proposal to provide such a site, as well as ongoing marketing advice and support, over the course of 18 months.

As a rural county, not widely recognized within our state, we believe this represents a unique opportunity to build a hub to support a fresh brand. We are prepared to invest \$27,000 in these efforts through 2018.

We seek by May1, 2017, a proposal that addresses the issues described below. The successful bidder will offer maximum value for this fixed-price contract.

## **Background**

Custer County, Colo., with a population of about 5,000 people between the Wet Mountains and Sangre de Cristo Range in the state's southeast, is poorly known compared with other mountainous regions. But its natural beauty matches or exceeds any other part of Colorado, offering expansive views of active ranches and hayfields in front of snowcapped peaks in the Wet Mountain Valley, thousands of acres of wilderness, dozens of peaks exceeding 12,000 feet and hundreds of miles of trails on BLM, National Forest and Wilderness lands. Each year, visitors have more than 300 sunny days with clear, dark nights to take in the sights and discover the Milky Way.

Outdoor recreation is a key attraction, with hiking, cycling, fishing, hunting, camping, horseback riding and off-road motor sports topping the list of activities. Photographers, birders and rock climbers find plenty to keep them busy. Snowshoeing, cross-country and backcountry skiing, ice fishing in DeWeese Reservoir and San Isabel Lake, and snowmobiling are winter activities – along with the arts – that show potential for growth.

Wildlife watchers have much to see year-round, with rich migratory and nesting bird seasons; common sightings of mule deer, elk, antelope, foxes, bears, hawks, grouse and more; as well as Mission Wolf, a renowned refuge for captive-bred wolves, which welcomes visitors to its ranch in the Wet Mountains.

Key towns include Silver Cliff and Westcliffe, which abut each other in the Wet Mountain Valley, overlooking the spectacular Sangres. In the county's east, you find the sleepier town of Wetmore, mostly summer cabins at Lake Isabel and the quirky

but popular Bishop's Castle. The Cliffs towns feature gift shops, art galleries, crafts vendors, a raft of small-town businesses, a couple of franchise businesses, some limited supplies for outdoor activities and an old-fashioned sense of community. Dining opportunities range from a relatively new Subway in Westcliffe to unique, small eateries and summer lodges serving local and gourmet fare. There are 150 to 200 official beds in the county, ranging from simple motels to mountain lodges and boutique bed-and-breakfast inns. At least as many beds exist in short-term rentals offered by homeowners.

The Cliffs towns are also the only International Dark Sky Association-certified Dark Sky community in Colorado, one of only 14 in the world, an honor that has drawn international media attention. The county has no stoplights or four-lane roads. Quiet and panoramic views abound. Most midweek days, even at summer's peak, wanderers can have trails and campgrounds largely to themselves.

The county has a rich mining and ranching heritage, which it celebrates each September with the Wet Mountain Western Pilgrimage, and year-round at the Silver Cliff Museum, All Aboard Westcliffe and the Custer County Library. Summer months fill with special events and festivals, starting with a beer and wine festival in May, followed by a popular trail run in early June, ramping up with the established High Mountain Hay Fever Bluegrass Festival, Westcliffe Stampede Rodeo and National Cutting Horse Show in July, followed by the Custer County Cowboy Gathering in August, and continuing into early October with Arts Hullabaloo and the Art for the Sangres fundraiser. There are few, if any, visitor-focused events from mid-October through April.

In addition, Custer County accommodations can serve as a base for exploring attractions and wild areas in nearby counties, such as: Great Sand Dunes National Park, Brown's Canyon National Recreation Area, Royal Gorge, rafting and fishing on the Arkansas River, and skiing at Monarch Mountain and other resorts.

### **The Custer County Tourism Board ...**

... Administers Accommodations Tax funds collected on lodging within the county. It spends these funds on marketing the county – and its accommodations – to potential visitors from outside Custer County. In addition to marketing efforts, those expenditures include several small grants each year to support local events.

The board comprises five voting members, including one of our three county commissioners, as well as one nonvoting member, all appointed by the Board of County Commissioners.

In the past, the Tourism Board has also invested in printed collateral materials, (distributed mostly on pads to welcome centers across southeast Colorado) a mural at Colorado Springs airport, a variety of print advertising, the creation of several short videos and its current website.

The Tourism Board has a collection of previously designed and printed collateral materials that it will update to support internet marketing efforts, along with likely radio and print advertising.

For the coming year, we plan to continue using the existing Custer County Tourism Board logo. We would expect over the coming months to test different tag lines, emphasizing our scenery, wide-open spaces, Western heritage, outdoor opportunities and creative community. Some possible taglines mentioned include:

- 740 Square Miles of Wow! (previous campaign)
- The Road Less Traveled
- More of Less
- It's All About What's Not Here
- Dark Nights, Sunny Days
- Colorado's Best-Kept Secret
- The Colorado You Used to Know
- Scenic Views and Wide-Open Spaces
- Where the West Is Still Wild
- Where the West Meets the Wild
- Where the West Gets Wild
- You Can See Better in the Dark
- Vacations, Elevated
- (Go) Big Mountains, Big Skies, Big Dreams
- Colorado's Last Undiscovered ...
- Once You Find Us, You Won't Forget Us

### **Current Web Presence**

Despite years of promotion in a variety of media, awareness of Custer County is not widespread in Colorado, let alone in the world. Additionally, our online messaging to visitors has varied considerably, with different brand emphases, uneven verbal and visual presentations, and sometimes, conflicting event information.

Several groups offer websites to attract and inform visitors. Among them:

- The current Custer County Tourism site: <http://visitcustercounty.com>
- Custer County Chamber of Commerce: <http://custercountyco.com>
- The Cliffs Action Revitalization Team: <http://thecliffscolorado.com>
- Custer County Economic Development: <http://www.custercountyedc.com>
- Discover the Cliffs guide: <http://cliffhangersguide.com>
- The Cliffs Calendar: <http://www.thecliffscalendar.com>

Most are considering significant upgrades or redesigns for their sites. But most depend heavily on volunteers for web updates and social media, making efforts and updates uneven. The Tourism Board, CART and Chamber sites all use the WordPress CMS. Economic Development is on a new Wix-based site.

The County Tourism website is particularly in need of updating in almost every way. It has an old, nonresponsive design, old blog postings and other information that could bear some editing. Its calendar and others in the community differ in format, functionality and content, sometimes offering conflicting and outdated information.

For many potential visitors, our message has been muddled. We have lacked an obvious hub to our wheel of efforts. And our efforts often have fallen short.

This ambiguous and inconsistent message does not encourage participation in collecting Accommodations Taxes (destined to fund such promotions) by nontraditional local hosts, such as homeowners advertising rentals on AirBnB, VRBO and HomeAway sites.

### **New Website Functionality and Features**

Custer County Tourism needs a freshly designed, responsive, attractive website to showcase an evolving brand for the county. We hope to build an appealing and reliable online destination to: support messaging to potential visitors through other media, give visitors the information and links they need for vacation planning, encourage them to share their information so we can stay in touch, and help us gather and share data that reflect our appeal to various demographic groups.

We have met with representatives of the organizations with websites listed above and agreed this new website should be our collective destination for tourism information and for a community calendar. Hence, we seek a solution that would enable robust sharing (iframe and/or similar presentations) of both visitor-oriented information and a multi-category calendar, allowing different sites to display different default categories, both in brief and in detail.

This new site should incorporate much of the current website's area information, a list with descriptions of and links to lodging facilities that pay Accommodations Tax to Custer County, the calendar described above, social media and other links, and detailed analytics.

The new site should be built on a straightforward and powerful CMS, such as WordPress (our current platform), allowing minimally trained staff, contractors and/or volunteers to update information, with different levels of administrative access and provisions for editing information before it goes live.

The chosen vendor for this new site should support local social media efforts to highlight and drive traffic to the website. The vendor should identify existing visual and verbal information on the current site that can be repurposed for the new [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com). The vendor should – from this existing content and from freshly contracted articles, pictures, and possibly, video – create six to eight top-level pages for the site, identify and outline second-tier pages for local creation, and

establish style and other criteria for submissions from additional contractors and/or volunteers.

The site should include or be paired with a system (such as a database or spreadsheet) for defining and tracking licensing rights to creative works submitted by others.

We also will look to our chosen vendor for best advice on collateral materials, outside advertising and building a brand for Custer County – incorporating such qualities as scenery, nature, outdoor activities, Dark Skies at night, sunny days, Western heritage, history, a vibrant arts community and a small-town gestalt. However, full branding or rebranding might reach beyond the envisioned contract, possibly involving a college marketing program.

In addition to the vendor chosen for this website, the Tourism Board expects in the coming year to contract with a local calendar manager, a local social media specialist, Front Range radio stations, and graphic arts providers for collateral materials and advertising. The board plans to seek grants to further support these efforts and will turn to the vendor for advice on this front, as well.

We do not envision a need for e-commerce built into the new [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com). However, we will require a set of forms enabling visitors to: order printed brochures and other collateral materials, download PDFs and other files, register for mailing lists, and leave comments.

### **Audience**

Our primary audience for the new [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com) will be potential visitors from outside Custer County, although we expect the site – particularly its calendar – to serve as an information hub for visitors and residents alike.

While Custer County attracts many out-of-state visitors, particularly from within the Mid- and Southwest regions, we see great opportunities to attract visitors from Colorado's densely populated and rapidly growing Front Range. We have millions of urban and suburban residents within 150 miles of our sparsely populated county. Many aren't aware Custer County exists, let alone that it offers such beauty and access to nature and culture.

Previous studies and anecdotal evidence suggest the county has strong appeal to the Baby Boom and older demographic groups, seeking scenic views and outdoor experiences. However, the county's growing arts community and adventurous landscape should appeal also to younger audiences seeking authentic venues for vacationing and short escapes, including the county's busy summer season of public events.

As the website and local visitor facilities – particularly off-road trails – develop, we hope our marketing will help draw shoulder season and winter visitors to experience the authentic and scenic West outside developed and tightly managed winter resorts. We also hope it will encourage those passing through the county – which is a well-traveled and scenic route to eastern New Mexico and western Texas from Colorado’s mountain heartland – to stay for a night or two.

As the site proves itself an effective resource for visitors, we expect this to build confidence in lodging providers – particularly homeowners – encouraging them to collect and remit more Accommodations Taxes in order to be listed as legal innkeepers (and comply with the law).

### **Budget Details**

The Tourism Board has agreed to invest in this project a significant portion of its revenues accruing during the next two years, totaling \$27,000. We are prepared to pay \$2,100 per month (\$12,600 total through Dec. 31) to launch and establish the website through the final six months of 2017. And then, based on the successful bidder’s continued interest, proven performance and value, continue the relationship in 2018 at a rate of \$1,200 per month, or \$14,400 for the additional year of support and development, aimed at: further improving the site, helping to build our brand and partnering to market tourism in Custer County.

NOTE: The bid we seek is technically for \$12,600 for the remainder of 2017. State law limits the county to annual contracts.

### **Proposal Requirements**

The Custer County Tourism Board seeks a proposal that comprises at least:

1. A detailed plan for designing and engineering a new [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com) website, including:
  - a. Six to eight carefully designed and edited top-level pages of area information, modeled on and incorporating existing content.
  - b. A responsive design, readable and useful on all devices.
  - c. Fresh and edited content to make these top-level pages stronger.
  - d. An easy and straightforward content-management system – WordPress preferred – to allow updating by minimally trained contractors and volunteers.
  - e. Identifying and proposing useful second-tier pages and tools.
  - f. Editing of outside content contributions.
  - g. Forms for visitor feedback and registration to download or receive by mail brochures and other information.
  - h. A multi-category calendar that other local sites can share to display different default categories, both in brief and in detail.

- i. Robust content sharing tools to allow other local sites to display consistent tourism information and branding from the Custer County Tourism Board.
  - j. Search-engine optimization, along with guidance, and possibly tools, to assist local authors and social media actors in maintaining high search rankings for the site.
  - k. Detailed and complete listings, with links, of all properties that pay Accommodations Tax in Custer County.
  - l. Expandable lists, with links where appropriate, of tourism attractions, dining and other visitor opportunities in Custer County.
  - m. A robust list of links to further information of interest to visitors.
  - n. Detailed analytics that link to statewide tourism data collection sites, tracking site visitor counts, behaviors and demographics.
2. A plan for ongoing support and advice, concerning not only [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com) but also other efforts to promote tourism in and to brand Custer County. This might include recommendations for additional spending, although we seek as much marketing value as the vendor can supply. Such value might include additional deliverables vendor can afford to provide within our budget and based on our background and goals stated above. It might include identifying grants and other opportunities to support Custer County's brand and grow visitors.
3. A workflow and/or tools for enabling the display of tourism-related content – and possibly design and/or design elements – from [visitcustercounty.com](http://visitcustercounty.com) on other local websites. This refers particularly to the shared calendar noted above, but also to key tourism information and branding.

### **Proposed Timeline**

- May 1, 2017: Deadline for response to RFP.
- By May 31: Awarding of contract by Board of County Commissioners.
- July 31: Deadline for operational, public website.
- Aug. 1 to Dec. 31, 2017: Refining of website and marketing coordination.
- Jan. 1, 2018, through Dec. 31, 2018: Under a fresh contract, we will seek continued updating, editing and design adjustment of site, along with support and advice for additional tourism marketing efforts.

### **Please direct questions through and bids to:**

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