



2026 Planning Retreat Summary

Overview:

The City of Forsyth Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) met on Friday, January 30, 2026, to undertake planning efforts for the upcoming year. After a brief business meeting, the CVB Authority members discussed their goals for their annual retreat. The group sought to maintain focused and efficient discussions that would allow them to obtain consensus on a well-developed priority list with specific goals from the meeting.

Authority Members and Staff in attendance:

Paige Bryson – Chair
Sam Patel – Vice-Chair
Denise Buff – Secretary / Treasurer
Lois Allen – City Council Liaison
Sunny Patel, CVB Member
Greg Tapley, CVB Member
Helen Walker, Immediate past chair
Leslie Waters, CVB Member
Gilda Stanbery, CVB Executive Director/CEO
Nicole Newsom, CVB Director of Marketing
Chelsea Kerr, CVB Administrative Assistant
Natalie Sundeen, CVB Attorney
Dean Nelson, City of Forsyth Community Development Director
Rachel Floyd, City of Forsyth Communications Coordinator
Diane Glidewell, Monroe County Reporter
Harry Patel, La Quinta General Manager
Greg Boike, Facilitator, MGRC

Review of 2025 Activities:

The CVB Authority members began by reviewing 2025 activities to discuss some of the achievements from the past year. Six of the eight priorities from 2025 were largely accomplished. These priorities included:

- **Continue Maintaining Partnerships**
 - The Forsyth CVB continued to keep its existing partnerships strong and especially focused on building and growing its tourism relationship with the Georgia Public Safety Training Center (GPSTC). The CVB will continue maintaining these relationships.
- **2025 Year of Celebrations**
 - Key celebrations from the year 2025 happened smoothly with support from the CVB. The 60th anniversary of High Falls State Park will happen in 2026.

- **Start a Forsyth CVB Newsletter**
 - The CVB newsletter launched in February 2025 and has gained organically more than 2000 followers within its first year. The CVB newsletter maintains an open rate of approximately 50 percent, which is above industry averages. The CVB will look to commemorate one-year anniversary of the newsletter's launch. The CVB will continue to maintain its online presence on social media as well.
- **Public Arts Webpage and Tour**
 - The CVB's work on the webpage and public arts tour is still ongoing.
- **Permanent home for the CVB Office and Welcome Center**
 - The CVB office is in the same location that it moved into at the beginning of 2025. It does not possess the necessary space or infrastructure for all of the current needs. However, the Welcome Center did experience an increase in visitors from 2024 (1,514 visitors, up from 874 visitors).
- **Access the ATL Market**
 - The CVB continued to market to the Atlanta market including presence in statewide publications as well as in sports programs. The sports programs did not meet the hoped return on investment, but this will continue to be an area of focus, especially given the FIFA activities of 2026.
- **Fish. Beer. Repeat.**
 - The CVB successfully launched this campaign in 2025. This will continue into 2026.
 - The CVB also capitalized on positive momentum from local restaurants and launched a Roots to Table campaign that will also continue in 2026. Key featured establishments include the Whistle Stop Café in Juliette, Grits Café in Forsyth, and Her Majesty Kitchen in Forsyth, as featured on Food Network's "Chopped."
- **Distribute Local Swag**
 - The CVB also purchased and distributed swag from local businesses in 2025. Monroe County took gift bags with local swag brought many of these materials to their presentation at the NACo's Building Resilient Economies in Coal Communities (BRECC) conference in January 2025.

Challenges:

Several challenges related to continued tourism sustainability and viability, and the general operations of the CVB were also discussed. These included:

- **Decline in Print Marketing:**
 - Print leads continue to decline, but the CVB has made up for this from digital and in-person marketing leads, helping to mitigate a negative impact.
- **Interstate Lighting and Signage**

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- Forsyth would still benefit from improved lighting, but this is beyond the scope of control for the CVB. It is an initiative for City of Forsyth.
- **Lack of Community Meeting Space**
 - The La Quinta (capacity of 80) remains the largest space outside of the Monroe County Conference Center (MCCC).
 - The MCCC remains too expensive to rent for most small and medium sized groups that would look to Forsyth for their conference/meeting needs.
- **CVB Office and Welcome Center Needs**
 - The CVB Office moved again in January 2025. A permanent location is still needed.
 - Ideally, the CVB Office and Welcome Center should be in a visible location that could help to drive business into the surrounding community and bridge the need for meeting space with meeting rooms.
- **Water Infrastructure Problems**
 - Water quality has increasingly become an issue for the hotels and businesses in the City of Forsyth. This was the largest new challenge discussed by CVB members.
 - Hotel guests encounter brown/rust-colored water, leaving them unable to use showers and sinks within their rooms. This has been happening around once a week for some hotels (including the La Quinta) as of late.
 - Hotels often have to compensate guests with hotel points, discounts, or refunds.
 - This has led to negative reviews for hotels in the city, like the Motel 6 example.
 - Hoteliers understand that this is a process that takes some time to fully fix. However, communication about these issues is a pressing need in the meantime.
 - Suggestions discussed include the CVB as a conduit for information, having businesses download the city's app for communications, and examining possibilities for filters in hotels (ideally in a public-private partnership or with grant funds).

CVB Goals for 2026:

Throughout the day, the group continued to discuss priorities for 2026, including both those identified by the Executive Director and members of the CVB Authority. A list of goals can be seen below in priority order. This list comes with refreshed priorities for the CVB, following the completion of many items in the last 12 months. Again, these goals and priorities refer to new initiatives or changes in scope. Much of what the CVB has continued to do effectively over the years will remain in place.

- **Continue Maintaining and Expanding Partnerships**
 - The CVB prioritizes the continued maintenance of its key partnerships within the community while also building new relationships.
 - Among the major partnerships to build and/or expand include the Meadows Gun Range, Buc-ees, Oglethorpe Power, Electric Cities of Georgia, and Google (new data tenant on Rumble Road).

- **Permanent home for the CVB Office and Welcome Center**
 - While the current space is adequate, it does not possess the necessary space or infrastructure for all of the current needs. The CVB continues to be interested in securing a permanent home with sufficient space and a good, visible location for visitors; plus meeting space for groups.
- **Complete Public Arts Webpage and Tour**
 - The CVB is actively working on a public arts webpage that will provide tourism information for those seeking to experience public art in Forsyth. This work is expected to be complete within the first half of 2026.
- **Tourism Impact Awards**
 - In January 2026, the CVB approved new awards recognizing businesses and individuals who go above and beyond to contribute to the growth, appeal, and impact of tourism and hospitality within the community. These awards will launch later in 2026.
- **Americana Summer Campaign**
 - With 2026 being the 250th birthday of the United States of America and with Atlanta serving as a host venue for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, there is a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on Forsyth as an authentic experience of the American south. Forsyth is positioned to be a perfect day trip or over-night for those visiting the Atlanta area while wanting to experience the United States outside of the big city. This is a significant marketing opportunity for Forsyth.
- **“Hello, Neighbor” Business Packet**
 - In the same way that new residents are welcomed into the community, the CVB has demand for welcome materials to new businesses, commercial work crews, etc. that benefit from the CVB’s services. The CVB will create a “Hello Neighbor” packet for that market.
- **Downtown Walking Tour & Living History Program**
 - The CVB will create a new interactive walking tour of the downtown area. Living History experiences and a haunted tour were discussed.
- **New Campaigns and Messaging Strategies**
 - The CVB is interested in deploying several new campaigns and messaging strategies. These include, “With Love from Juliette” (focused on romance) and Paddle. Golf. Repeat. (a sequel to Fish. Beer. Repeat.). The CVB also wants to expand it’s “Meet in the Middle” messaging and branding theme.
 - Other initiatives include Forsyth as a basecamp for scenic drives; a kid-friendly destination; Hidden Fox on the website; enhancing existing website pages; new video content; new Explore Georgia pages; and
 - Finally, the CVB hopes to direct these messages to event planners and professionals in an updated digital packet.