Public Policy Goals
117th Congress

One of the pillars of the Southeast Tourism Society is to serve as a unified voice on matters of legislation, public policy and the future of the tourism sector. Through the leadership of the Board of Directors’ Advocacy Pillar Committee, the aim of STS’s public policy agenda is to advance travel and tourism as a driving force for economic growth and job creation, a vital partner for preserving the culture and history of the Southeast, and showcasing the exceptional travel experiences of the region.

In order to ensure the tourism sector remains an engine of growth, STS advances these policy priorities in the 117th Congress:

**Recognize Domestic Tourism as a Key Economic Generator and Jobs Creator**

The travel and tourism sector is an engine of economic growth. In 2019, direct travel spending in the U.S by domestic visitors was $972 billion, a 4.4% increase over the previous year and comprises 85% of the U.S. travel and tourism market. At present, the federal government is focused on international tourism with the International Trade Administration’s National Travel & Tourism Office, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Travel and Tourism Advisory Board; and the Tourism Policy Council comprised of the federal agencies with dedicated tourism programs; and the national public/private destination marketing organization, Brand USA.

The COVID-19 pandemic has vividly demonstrated that tourism is an essential component of state and local communities and a focused effort to develop a roadmap for domestic tourism is need to reach its full economic impact. Specifically, STS recommends:

- Move the National Travel & Tourism Office from the International Trade Administration to a free-standing agency within the Department of Commerce that addresses both domestic and international tourism policies and programs.
- Direct the Federal Tourism Policy Council under the leadership of the Department of Commerce to develop a strategy to sustain and grow domestic tourism by December 31, 2021. The strategy should include annual and long-term goals for domestic travel for the next decade as well as benchmarks for ensuring increased visitation and economic growth to local communities.
- Direct responsible agencies to cooperate on the establishment of a domestic tourism dashboard. Reliable metrics are the key to measuring the success of any economic growth strategy. There is no shortage of relevant data to be compiled; state and local tourism agencies measure domestic tourism economics and the private sector relies heavily on Department of Commerce data for their reports. The dashboard could be built primarily on established data sources and reports and would provide essential information to states and local communities looking to grow their tourism market.

**STS is committed to working with federal policymakers to ensure the economic benefits of travel and tourism are fully leveraged and shared broadly by the states, communities, small business, and tourism workers.**

**Strong Investments in the Nation’s Transportation Infrastructure**

America’s economic vitality, ability to compete in the global economy, and a thriving tourism sector are dependent on dynamic and efficient transportation systems. While the current transportation infrastructure has served the nation and the tourism sector well, the challenges to our transportation system are numerous. Our vital transportation infrastructure shows signs of aging. Increased congestion on our highways, railways, airports and seaports reduces our nation’s economic productivity. With the rise in transportation security programs has come a need to train the frontline workers in customer service skills. Perhaps most troubling, the programs the tourism sector are directly dependent upon, such as enhancements, scenic byways, recreational trails and Federal land roads are consistently under-funded. America has built one of the greatest transportation infrastructures in the world, but much work remains to ensure that our national transportation policy connects communities, tourism, and the economy.

**STS supports federal transportation priorities that allow travelers to better navigate communities, prioritizes investments in important transportation corridors, and ensures that tourism continues to make travel an enjoyable experience.**

**Preserve and Promote America’s Cultural, Historic and Natural Resources**

Each year more than two billion visits are made to the public lands that comprise the nation’s natural, cultural, historical, and wildlife resources. Some of the Southeastern states’ greatest tourism resources are its cultural and natural sites. One of the challenges in preserving and promoting these sites is that the management of these shared resources is the responsibility of an array of state and federal land agencies, including the National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, United States Forest Service, and United States Army Corps of Engineers. STS has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with key federal agencies to provide a forum for better collaboration and understanding of the travel and tourism sector. Sound national investment strategies are needed to preserve, protect, and improve all of these public resources.
• Provide sufficient appropriations for federal public lands agencies to ensure public access to the national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, battlefields, monuments, historic sites, and other public lands, enhance visitor facilities and services, and fulfill the mission to conserve critical natural, historic, and cultural resources.

• Implement consistent and user-friendly electronic systems for applying and paying entrance, recreation, and permit fees, as well as purchasing entrance passes. In addition, these systems must streamline permitting and allow for the processing of single and multiple permits. Effective utilization of technology is a challenge for organizations of all size and scope but investing in technology solutions for the federal land agencies will produce immediate dividends of accountability, efficiency, and convenience, as well as facilitating visitor access to public lands venues.

• Improve coordination and cooperation with Gateway Communities. Hundreds of communities throughout the nation serve as gateways for the millions of visitors to our national parks, forests, and other federal public lands. STS supports efforts to strengthen collaborations with Gateway Communities by revitalizing the Preserve America grants program and directing the National Park Service to partner with Gateway Communities on promotional and educational programs.

• Modernize management of the National Heritage Areas Program and secure stable funding. For two decades, NPS has administered a national heritage areas program under its mission to preserve nationally significant natural and historic resources. Successful national heritage areas embody locally driven partnerships that emphasize local control of land use, and blend education, cultural conservation, resource preservation, and recreation and community revitalization. Stable and consistent funding would allow local communities to better leverage this vital program for community and economic development.

STS supports federal investments and programs to ensure our public lands are preserved and protected for future generations and that the health and growth of gateway communities is a priority.

Lay a Strong Foundation for America’s 250th Birthday Celebration That Ensures Every Community Will Have the Opportunity to Participate and Leverage the Benefits of Tourism

In 2026, America will celebrate its 250th birthday and the public will be encouraged to connect with the nation’s special places and experience its unique stories. STS calls for making needed Investments in policies and programs to ensure that all communities large and small are able to engage in the national celebration and the economic benefits of tourism are fully leveraged and shared broadly.
Reinforce the Connection Between Food, Culture, and Tourism

Food is an essential element in telling the story of a community. Drawing on history, culture, and local agriculture, chefs, restaurateurs, craft brewers, distillers, vintners, farmers markets, and culinary shops are illuminating the rich traditions and agricultural resources of their communities and the Southeast. By connecting with tourism, these small businesses and creative professionals are expanding their audience while helping to deliver extraordinary travel experiences. **STS supports federal policies to help these dynamic businesses grow, foster collaboration, and promote their products and communities.**

Strengthen the Federal Voice on Tourism Issues

STS is committed to educating Members of Congress on the economic importance of travel and tourism to local communities, states, and the nation, and ensuring the interests of tourism are heard and considered in major policy debates. Additionally, STS will be working to connect interested Members of Congress with the Federal Tourism Interagency Partners to build collaborations and ensure the development of strong federal tourism policies and programs. **STS encouraged all members of the Southeast congressional delegation to join the Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus as an excellent resource for information and collaboration on the key issues impact the tourism sector.**