

DESTINATION
NEXT

2025

DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL

**FUTURES STUDY
DEEP DIVE**

**The Advocacy Leadership Imperative:
Why Advocacy Defines the Future of
Destination Organizations**





Executive Summary

A deep dive into findings from the 2025 Destinations International DestinationNext Futures Study, prepared by Cassandra (McAuley) Gilbertson, Managing Director, MMGY NextFactor.

The **2025 Destinations International DestinationNEXT Futures Study** highlights several key imperatives as destination organizations transition to a new era of leadership, however none more important than the fact that advocacy has become a strategic function of destination leadership -- and for good reason.

Funding remains one of the most persistent—and precarious—challenges facing destination organizations today. While the economic impact of the visitor economy is well-established, public funding for destination organizations continues to face growing scrutiny and political vulnerability. In the 2025 Futures Study survey, 42% of destination organizations reported their funding is at risk of being reduced or eliminated in the next three years, an increase from 37% in 2023.

A key part of this shift involves redefining what we measure. Traditional metrics like hotel occupancy and visitor spending offer only a narrow view of success. Leading destinations are developing multidimensional KPIs that also account for resident sentiment, environmental health, cultural vibrancy and long-term economic impact. These indicators not only tell a more complete story but also build the business case for continued investment in regenerative practices.

At its heart, this is about leadership. Destination organizations must be champions of community well-being, trusted stewards of place and bold advocates for the policies, partnerships and investments that secure a resilient future.

At the same time, destination organizations cannot be the only ones setting the bar. Communities, partners and governments must co-own what success looks like and support the resources and policies needed to achieve it.

This shift in roles and success measures has three key implications for the future of the destination organizations, all directly related to advocacy:

1

Organizational models must evolve.

New capabilities require new structures. Whether through team restructuring, upskilling, or cross-functional integration, destination organizations must be designed for agility, complexity, and collaboration.

2

Governance and stakeholder alignment are more critical than ever.

As roles expand, so must clarity. Boards, funders, and community partners need to understand what the organization does—and why. Strong governance models and transparent reporting will help build credibility and trust.

3

The definition of success must be shared.

Destination organizations cannot be the only ones setting the bar. Communities, partners, and governments must co-own what success looks like and support the resources and policies needed to achieve it.

To secure sustainable investment so that destination organizations can continue to lead and support community vitality, destination organizations and their leaders must evolve from passive recipients of funding to assertive advocates for the value they create. This begins with strengthening relationships with government stakeholders and positioning tourism as a community shared value: an industry that delivers returns in jobs, tax revenue, small business growth and community well-being.

The Advocacy Imperative in 2025

In an era of heightened scrutiny and shifting priorities, advocacy has moved from the periphery to the center of destination leadership. The 2025 Destinations International DestinationsNext Futures Study (DNEXT Futures Study) confirms that the ability to advocate effectively—for the industry, the organization and the community—is now as critical as any marketing or visitor program.

Destination organizations are increasingly expected to advocate not only for tourism but also for broader community outcomes such as workforce development, sustainability, housing and quality of life. However, public scrutiny of destination funding is rising and many government allocations or tourism-related levies face increasing political vulnerability.

Expanded Advocacy Mandates

Destination organizations must take a long-term, investing in talent development, creating inclusive workplace cultures and building awareness of tourism as a viable career path. Advocacy now encompasses collaboration on workforce, housing and transport solutions to strengthen local economies and quality of life.

Resident-Centered Mandates

Resident sentiment has emerged as a defining measure of success. Destination leaders must demonstrate how tourism contributes to local well-being, shared amenities and inclusive prosperity to sustain legitimacy and support.

Cross-Sector Responsibilities

Advocacy now extends into broader policy conversations, from small business resilience and infrastructure investment to alignment with community priorities such as housing and workforce development.

Securing Investment Through Advocacy and Impact

The Funding Reality

Financial stability continues to be one of the most persistent challenges facing destination organizations. While the economic contribution of tourism is undeniable, funding models are under growing scrutiny and often politically vulnerable.

Evolving Funding Models

In response, many destinations have diversified their revenue through tourism improvement districts, short-term rental levies and visitor fees. While these mechanisms enhance financial resilience, they also bring trade-offs—some governments, assuming self-sufficiency, have scaled back investment.

The Advocacy Imperative

Destination organizations must evolve from passive recipients of funding to assertive advocates for the value they create. This begins with stronger government relationships and clear communication of tourism's role as a public good— it's an industry that delivers jobs, tax revenue and community vitality.

Beyond Government

Advocacy must also extend to residents and businesses. Demonstrating tangible community benefits—from cultural enrichment to improved amenities—builds long-term trust and helps counter skepticism.

The most successful organizations are moving beyond static funding models and embracing a more entrepreneurial mindset. They are safeguarding existing revenue streams, exploring innovative funding mechanisms and strengthening public-private collaboration. But they're also making the case for continued public investment—showing that while funding diversity increases resilience, it does not replace the foundational role of government support.

Expanding Advocacy Beyond Government

Resident Sentiment as a Success Metric

Residents are no longer passive stakeholders; they are active arbiters of legitimacy. Destination leaders must continuously demonstrate how tourism enhances quality of life and shared prosperity.

Countering Opposition with Community Benefits

Proactive advocacy highlights the tangible value tourism brings to residents—through cultural vitality, enhanced amenities and improved infrastructure—strengthening trust and neutralizing opposition.

Industry, Community and Investor Engagement

Effective advocacy bridges government, business, and community interests. The most successful destinations cultivate entrepreneurial approaches while maintaining stable public support and transparent communication.

Destination advocacy is no longer confined to lobbying policymakers; it now extends directly into the community and across industries. The DNEXT Futures Study emphasizes that funding stability and long-term legitimacy depend on building broad-based support. This means that destination advocacy must speak to residents, businesses and investors alike, demonstrating visible community benefits, fostering trust and reinforcing the destination organization's role as a steward of place.

The Changing Toolkit of Destination Advocates

Measuring for Impact

*Traditional KPIs—like visitor volume, hotel performance, and marketing ROI—remain relevant but no longer sufficient. Leading destinations now track **resident sentiment, community benefit, social impact and event legacy** as indicators of long-term value.*

*These multidimensional measures signal a deeper shift: success is no longer defined solely by economic outcomes but by **shared prosperity and resilience**. Metrics now serve as tools for alignment as much as accountability, ensuring the destination's work reflects community priorities.*

*The rising importance of these KPIs signals a shift in mindset. Success is no longer measured only in volume or visibility, but in **shared prosperity, social cohesion and long-term resilience**. Metrics are becoming tools for alignment—not just accountability—helping organizations navigate complex trade-offs and ensure their work reflects community priorities and values.*

The Case for Advocacy as a Core Competency

*Advocacy has evolved from a communications activity into a **core strategic competency**. Destination leaders must embed advocacy across governance, planning and daily operations—making it as integral as marketing or event strategy.*

*True advocacy readiness requires credibility, consistency and alignment with both public policy and community values. Advocacy is effective only when organizations can tell their story **boldly, credibly and consistently** while demonstrating real value for residents and stakeholders alike.*

Effective advocacy is therefore defined not only by strong government relations, but by sustained community trust and resonance with local priorities.

Future Directions: Advocacy is Leadership

The role of destination organizations now extends well beyond just promotion, to that of community champions. Destination leaders are increasingly called to influence issues such as workforce development, housing and sustainability—areas that shape the overall health of their communities.

*Advocacy will continue to evolve toward **co-creation and shared accountability** with residents and partners. Destinations that embrace this collaborative model will not only weather volatility but lead their communities toward more resilient futures.*

Recommendations for Destination Leaders

1. **Audit Advocacy Capacity:** Evaluate whether your organization has the people, structures and relationships to advocate effectively.
2. **Invest in Government Relations:** Build systematic, ongoing engagement with policymakers to influence supportive policies.
3. **Adopt Community-First Messaging:** Demonstrate how tourism supports residents through quality of life, amenities and opportunity.
4. **Diversify Funding Advocacy:** Balance new revenue approaches with continued advocacy for public investment.
5. **Build Storytelling Platforms:** Develop authentic, human-centered narratives that reinforce your organization's role as a trusted community steward.

Destinations that embrace bold, credible advocacy will be best positioned for long-term success—because they engage in meaningful, mutually beneficial ways with all types of stakeholders, from elected officials and business leaders to residents and community partners. This ability to clearly demonstrate value across government, business and civic audiences enables destination organizations to secure sustainable investment, protect their role as a public good and build resilience amid heightened scrutiny and shifting priorities.

Recommendations for Destination Organization Leaders

To position advocacy as a core competency, destination leaders must take deliberate steps to strengthen the capacity and credibility of themselves, their organizations and their teams.

Audit Advocacy Capacity

Organizations must evaluate whether they have the people, structures and relationships in place to advocate effectively.

Invest in Government Relations

Systematic engagement with policymakers is essential. Destination organizations must lead advocacy initiatives by strengthening government relations to shape supportive policies.

Adopt Community-First Messaging

Advocacy must resonate with residents by making the value of tourism tangible. Resident sentiment is now a defining measure of success. Destination leaders must demonstrate how tourism contributes to local well-being, shared amenities and inclusive prosperity to maintain legitimacy and support.

Diversify Funding Advocacy

Advocacy must balance entrepreneurial approaches with safeguarding public investment. The most successful organizations are moving beyond static funding models and embracing a more entrepreneurial mindset, but they are also making the case for continued public investment—showing that while funding diversity increases resilience, it does not replace the foundational role of government support.

Build Storytelling Platforms

Credibility comes from consistent, human-centered narratives. Destination organizations must tell their story boldly, credibly and consistently while remembering that building resident and business support is critical to long-term funding stability helps neutralize opposition and reinforce the destination organization's role as a trusted steward of place.

ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

**Trends & Strategies from the
2025 Destinations International
DestinationNEXT Futures Study**

Relevant Trends:

- #1** Tourism needs increased advocacy and recognition from government to grow economic impact.
- #2** Industry leaders need multi-dimensional KPIs that go beyond traditional economic metrics to effectively measure and communicate the industry's full economic, social and environmental value.
- #3** Greater industry, community and government alignment is driving destination competitiveness and brand.
- #5** Resident sentiment and community engagement is critical to maintaining destination alignment.
- #9** Geopolitical tensions and nationalism are rapidly altering global travel flows, as travelers seek destinations perceived as safe and welcoming.
- #10** Destinations are prioritizing visitors who deliver greater economic, cultural and environmental value, rather than simply pursuing volume growth.
- #11** Industry must address skilled labor shortages, labor pipelines and generational workplace shifts.
- #12** Communities expect to be more engaged in destination, product and experience development for locals and visitors.
- #13** Destination Organizations are increasingly developing strategic alliances across multiple economic sectors to leverage resources.
- #15** Public scrutiny of destination funding is rising, with government allocations and/or industry-generated taxes and levies increasingly at risk of diversion.
- #19** Destinations are focusing on improving accessibility for travelers of all abilities.
- #22** The housing crisis is straining workforce availability in the tourism industry.
- #24** Destinations are looking at sustainability/regeneration more broadly, encompassing economic, social and environmental impacts.
- #25** Rising social challenges and visible urban issues are harming visitor perceptions and weakening both destination brand integrity and economic growth.

Relevant Strategies:

- #2** Lead destination advocacy by strengthening government relations to shape supportive policies.
- #3** Strengthen local community engagement and sentiment to build sustainable support for the visitor economy.
- #4** Safeguard existing revenue streams while exploring diverse funding sources to maintain and expand financial stability.
- #5** Better align tourism and economic development.
- #7** Establish multi-dimensional data-driven KPIs to measure and enhance both economic and social impacts of a sustainable visitor economy.
- #9** Embrace adaptability by developing strategies with flexible initiatives that can adjust to a range of potential futures and disruptions.
- #11** Expand organizational mandate to align visitor experiences with resident quality of life and community relevance.
- #12** Strengthen organizational talent through increased investment in building and maintaining a skilled, motivated and loyal workforce.
- #14** Lead initiatives that improve accessibility for people of all abilities throughout the destination.
- #16** Lead initiatives to promote tourism as a career path to address industry workforce shortages.
- #22** Support improvement of regulatory compliance including short-term rentals.