



STRATEGY & CREATIVITY MATTER

Focus Group Summary

1. Core Identity: “Uncrowded, Authentic, Rural.”

Across all of the discussions, there is a clear and consistent alignment around what makes Plumas County truly distinct. At its core, the county is defined by its rural, small-town character, a place where the absence of crowds is not a limitation, but a defining strength, especially when contrasted with destinations like Truckee or Lake Tahoe.

But what sets Plumas County apart goes beyond its physical environment. There is an authenticity here that is difficult to replicate, a “funky,” slightly off-the-beaten-path personality that feels discovered rather than manufactured. It is a place where experiences are not curated to perfection but instead unfold naturally through the character of the community itself.

Equally important is the deep sense of connection that exists within the county. Visitors don’t just pass through; they engage with people. There is friendliness, openness, and a personal quality to interactions that transform a visit into something more meaningful. In Plumas County, it is not the list of activities that defines the experience; it is the people who bring those experiences to life.

Taken together, these elements represent a strategic asset, one that is widely recognized by the community and, importantly, one that there is a strong desire to protect as the county considers its future.

2. Growth Tension: Preserve Character vs. Increase Visitation

Running through each conversation is a clear and consistent tension, one that sits at the heart of Plumas County’s future. There is a shared recognition that tourism has a role to play in the local economy, and with it, a desire to grow visitation in thoughtful ways, particularly during shoulder seasons when additional activity could support local businesses.

At the same time, there is an equally strong and deeply felt resistance to becoming something the community is not. The comparison to Lake Tahoe comes up frequently, not as an aspiration but as a cautionary tale. Overcrowding represents a path that residents are intent on avoiding.

This concern manifests in very tangible ways. There is unease about chain development displacing locally owned businesses, about infrastructure being pushed beyond its limits, whether through inadequate parking, strained public facilities, or safety concerns, and about the broader loss of affordability and lifestyle that often accompanies unmanaged growth. Beneath it all is a deeper question: how to benefit from tourism without sacrificing the very qualities that make the place worth visiting.

Out of this tension, a direction begins to take shape. It is not about pursuing more visitors at any cost, but about pursuing the right kind of growth, growth that aligns with the community's values, respects its capacity, and reinforces rather than diminishes its identity. In this emerging view, success is not defined by volume, but by balance: a model of tourism that is intentional, measured, and grounded in what Plumas County chooses to be.

3. Experience Shift: From Activities → Meaning & Connection

There is a noticeable shift in how tourism is being understood, one that moves beyond the traditional focus on activities and toward something far more meaningful. While hiking, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits remain important, there is a growing recognition that they are not, in themselves, what sets Plumas County apart. Many destinations can offer similar activities. What they cannot easily replicate is how those experiences are felt.

The true value of a visit to Plumas County lies in the human and emotional dimensions of experience. It is found in the personal connections visitors make with locals, in moments that shift perspective or create a sense of discovery, and in the deeper cultural engagement that comes from interacting with a real, lived-in place. These are the elements that linger long after the trip is over.

Visitors, as stakeholders describe them, are simply not looking for things to do. They are seeking peace, connection, and authenticity, which contrast with the pace and complexity of their everyday lives. Many return, not just because of the landscape, but because of the relationships they've formed and the sense of belonging they begin to feel over time.

This evolution in thinking points toward a fundamental strategic shift. It suggests that Plumas County's opportunity is not to market a list of activities, but to cultivate and communicate experiences that resonate on a deeper level, moving from an activity-based approach to one that is truly experience-centered.

4. Culture & Storytelling as Competitive Advantage

A particularly important insight emerged in the third meeting, where the conversation shifted more directly toward the role of arts, culture, and history in shaping Plumas County's tourism future. What became clear is that these elements, while present and deeply embedded in the community, remain underutilized as drivers of differentiation. Yet they may represent some of the county's most powerful and defensible assets.

The richness is already there. It lives in homegrown events, festivals, parades, and races that are not manufactured for visitors but created by and for the community. And it shows up in the county's "funky," grassroots creative identity, an unpolished, authentic expression of place that feels organic rather than curated.

What begins to emerge from this is a shift in perspective. The focus moves away from simply identifying "what there is to do" and toward understanding "what this place means." It is a move from inventory to interpretation, from listing assets to revealing their significance. In this context, the role of tourism is not just to promote activities, but to help visitors connect with the deeper narrative of the place.

This reframing elevates storytelling to a central role. Not as a marketing tactic, but as the mechanism through which meaning is conveyed. In doing so, it transforms how Plumas County can present

itself—less as a destination defined by offerings, and more as a place defined by its character, its people, and the stories that bring it to life.

5. Infrastructure Gaps Impacting Experience

Alongside the larger strategic conversations, a set of very practical, recurring challenges surfaced in every discussion, issues that, while operational on the surface, have a direct and often disproportionate impact on the visitor experience.

Participants consistently pointed to shortcomings in signage and wayfinding. Visitors struggle to navigate the area, locate trailheads, or even discover otherwise compelling places. This is compounded by limited infrastructure, insufficient parking in key areas, a lack of accessible restrooms, and gaps in trail access and navigation that can make exploration feel uncertain or frustrating rather than inviting.

Equally challenging is the fragmentation of information, particularly around events. Without a centralized, reliable calendar, visitors often miss opportunities to engage with the very experiences that make the county unique. Events that could create memorable, differentiating moments instead go unnoticed, simply because they are difficult to find.

Individually, these issues may appear minor. Collectively, they shape how a place is experienced and remembered. They interrupt the flow, create friction, and diminish the sense of ease and discovery that Plumas County is otherwise well-positioned to deliver. In this sense, they are not just operational gaps; they are experience-breakers. Addressing them is not about convenience alone, but about ensuring that the promise of the destination can actually be realized by those who visit.

6. Fragmentation → Need for Coordination

A clear organizational theme emerged across the discussions, one that speaks less about what Plumas County offers and more about how those offerings are brought together. There is a shared recognition that, while the individual pieces are strong, they are not yet working in concert. The absence of a unified voice, the lack of coordinated marketing, and limited collaboration across businesses all contribute to a fragmented market presence. What exists is not a lack of assets, but a lack of alignment.

At the same time, participants highlighted meaningful opportunities to shift this dynamic. The idea of packaging experiences, bringing together lodging, activities, and local expertise into cohesive offerings, surfaced as a way to enhance both the visitor experience and economic impact. Cross-promotion among operators, rather than competition in isolation, was seen as a way to extend reach and reinforce a sense of shared purpose. And at a broader level, there is a clear need for county-wide alignment, where messaging, priorities, and efforts reflect a common direction.

Out of this, the role of Plumas County Tourism becomes clearer. It is not simply to market the destination, but to connect it—to serve as the organizing force that brings together disparate efforts into a cohesive whole. In this model, the DMO becomes less of a promoter and more of an orchestrator, aligning stakeholders, facilitating collaboration, and ensuring that the county's collective strength is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

7. Brand Clarity & Positioning Needed

There is growing recognition among stakeholders that, while Plumas County possesses a strong sense of place, it lacks a clearly defined, differentiated brand in the marketplace. The identity exists in practice, in the landscape, in the people, in the culture, but it has not yet been fully articulated in a way that is consistent, compelling, and understood both internally and externally. As a result, messaging tends to be fragmented, varying by organization, business, or individual perspective, without a unifying thread that ties it all together.

This lack of cohesion creates a challenge. Without a clear and shared identity, it becomes difficult to communicate what truly sets the destination apart, and even more difficult to build momentum around a common direction. What is needed is not simply better marketing, but greater clarity, an intentional effort to define who Plumas County is, what it stands for, and how it wishes to be experienced.

From that clarity comes alignment. Stakeholders, across tourism, business, and the broader community, must see themselves reflected in the identity and feel a sense of ownership in bringing it to life. And with alignment comes focus: the ability to attract not just more visitors, but the right visitors, those whose values, expectations, and behaviors are in harmony with the place itself.

In this way, brand definition is not a superficial exercise. It is foundational. It provides the anchor for strategy, the lens for decision-making, and the basis for all future efforts, marketing, development, and experience design—to be built with intention and consistency.

8. Target Visitor: Values-Based Alignment

Throughout the discussions, participants returned repeatedly to the idea that not all visitors are the same, and that success for Plumas County depends on attracting those who are truly aligned with the place. The “right” visitor was not defined by age, income, or traditional demographic categories, but by values and behaviors. These are individuals who respect the community and its environment, who are drawn to authentic, slower-paced, and meaningful experiences, and who choose to engage with and support local businesses.

They are often families looking to reconnect with return visitors who have developed relationships with the area, or explorers intentionally seeking uncrowded destinations where discovery still feels possible. What unites them is not who they are on paper, but how they experience a place, and how they choose to participate in it.

This perspective signals an important strategic shift. Rather than targeting broad demographic segments, Plumas County has the opportunity to define and attract visitors who share its values. In doing so, it can create a stronger alignment between the destination and its guests—one that enhances the visitor experience while reinforcing and protecting the community's character.

9. Inclusion & Perception Challenges

An important theme began to surface over the course of the discussion, which may not yet be fully formed but carries significant implications for the future. Participants raised thoughtful concerns about whether all visitors truly feel welcome in Plumas County. These concerns addressed racial diversity, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and the broader political perception of the region, factors that are increasingly shaping how destinations are viewed and chosen.

There is a growing awareness that perception matters. For many travelers, the decision to visit a place is influenced not only by what it offers, but by how it feels—whether they will be accepted, comfortable, and able to fully be themselves. In this context, marketing cannot simply showcase scenery or activities; it must also signal openness, inclusivity, and a genuine sense of welcome.

At the same time, participants recognized that this is not solely a marketing challenge. It is both a brand and a community issue. The messages a destination communicates must be grounded in real-world experiences. Creating a welcoming environment requires alignment between how the place is presented and how it is lived. As such, this theme points to a broader opportunity and responsibility to ensure that Plumas County is not only perceived as inclusive but experienced that way by all who visit.

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10. Organizational Role & Capability

Implicit across all of the meetings is a broader realization about the role of Plumas County Tourism itself. The organization is being called to evolve, moving beyond a traditional focus on promotion and into a more strategic leadership position. It is not simply about marketing the destination, but about helping define its direction, shaping how it competes, and ensuring that efforts across the county are aligned and intentional.

This shift brings with it new responsibilities. There is a need to coordinate stakeholders more effectively, bringing together businesses, community members, and partners around a shared vision. It also requires building stronger data and measurement capabilities, so decisions are informed not just by instinct, but by insight, allowing the organization to track progress, understand impact, and adapt over time.

Perhaps most importantly, it calls for alignment between strategy and structure. As the direction becomes clearer, the organization itself must be designed to support it, through its roles, processes, partnerships, and priorities. In this sense, the next step is not simply to define the strategy, but to ensure that the organization is equipped to deliver on it. Structure must follow strategy, reinforcing it at every level and enabling it to move from concept to reality.

Bottom Line Synthesis

Taken together, the meetings point to a clear strategic direction:

Plumas County's opportunity is not to compete on activities or scale, but to compete on meaning, culture, and connection, while carefully managing growth to preserve the very character that makes it valuable.