

VISIT *South Haven*

**Travel & Tourism Industry
Report**

May 2026



About Visit South Haven

The Work Behind the Visitor Economy

Visit South Haven is the official destination marketing organization for South Haven and Van Buren County – an independent, not-for-profit, lodging membership-based organization guided by a local Board of Directors. Our work is focused in three key areas: marketing the destination, investing in destination development, and using data to guide strategy.

Through **year-round marketing**, we inspire travel, support local businesses, and showcase the beaches, harbor, trails, events, shops, restaurants, lodging, and small-town experiences that make this region special.

Through **destination development**, we invest in physical amenities and community projects that enhance the visitor experience while also improving quality of life for residents.

Through **research and data**, we track visitation, spending, market trends, lodging capacity, and visitor behavior to help our partners and communities understand the visitor economy.

Tourism supports local jobs, generates tax revenue, strengthens businesses, and contributes to long-term community vitality – and Visit South Haven helps connect visitors, businesses, and the community in ways that create lasting value.



KENDRA KINGSBURY
Guest Relations &
Community Liaison

JEN SISTRUNK
Executive Director

TRENTON BULAT
Digital Media
Manager

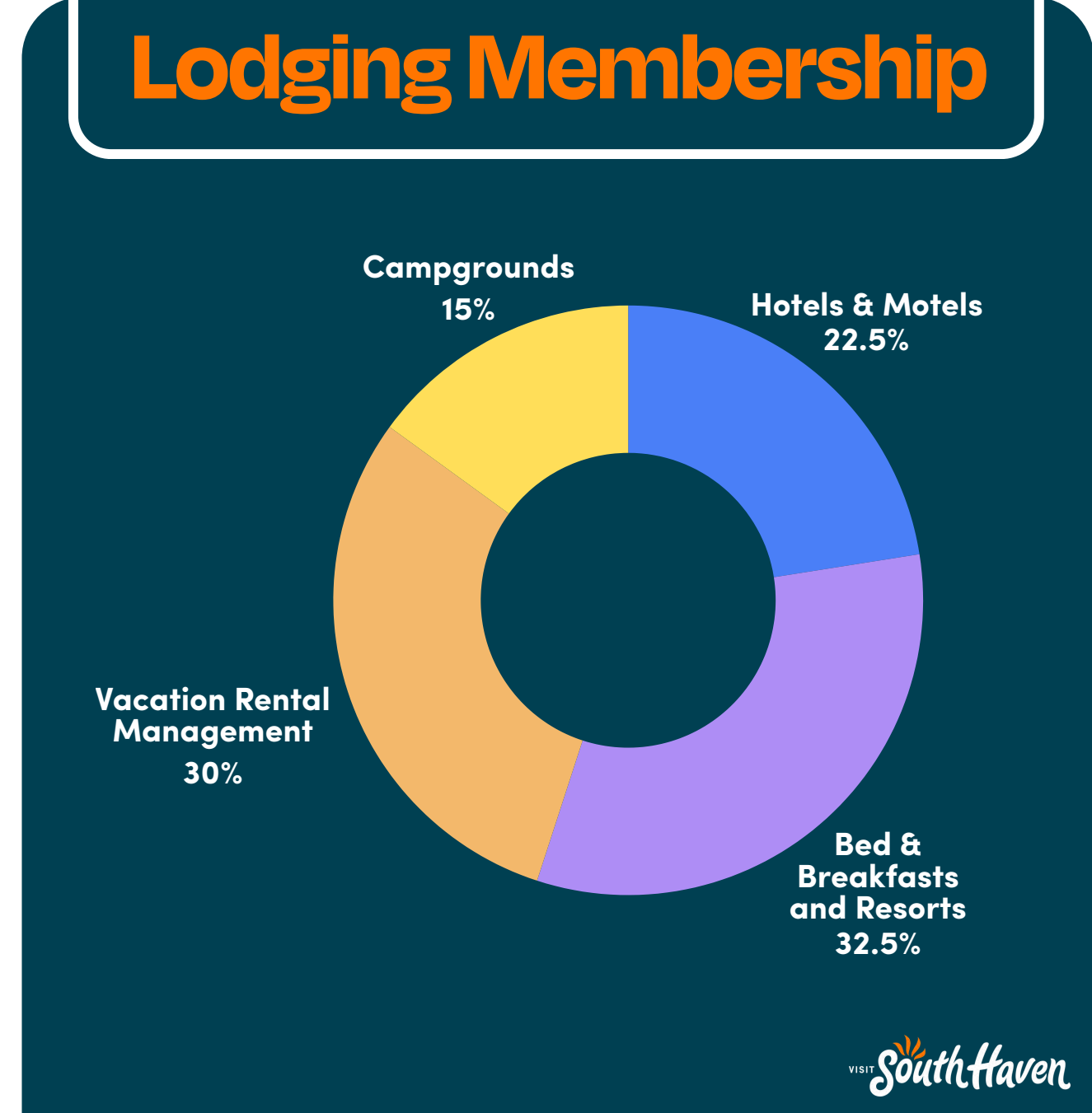
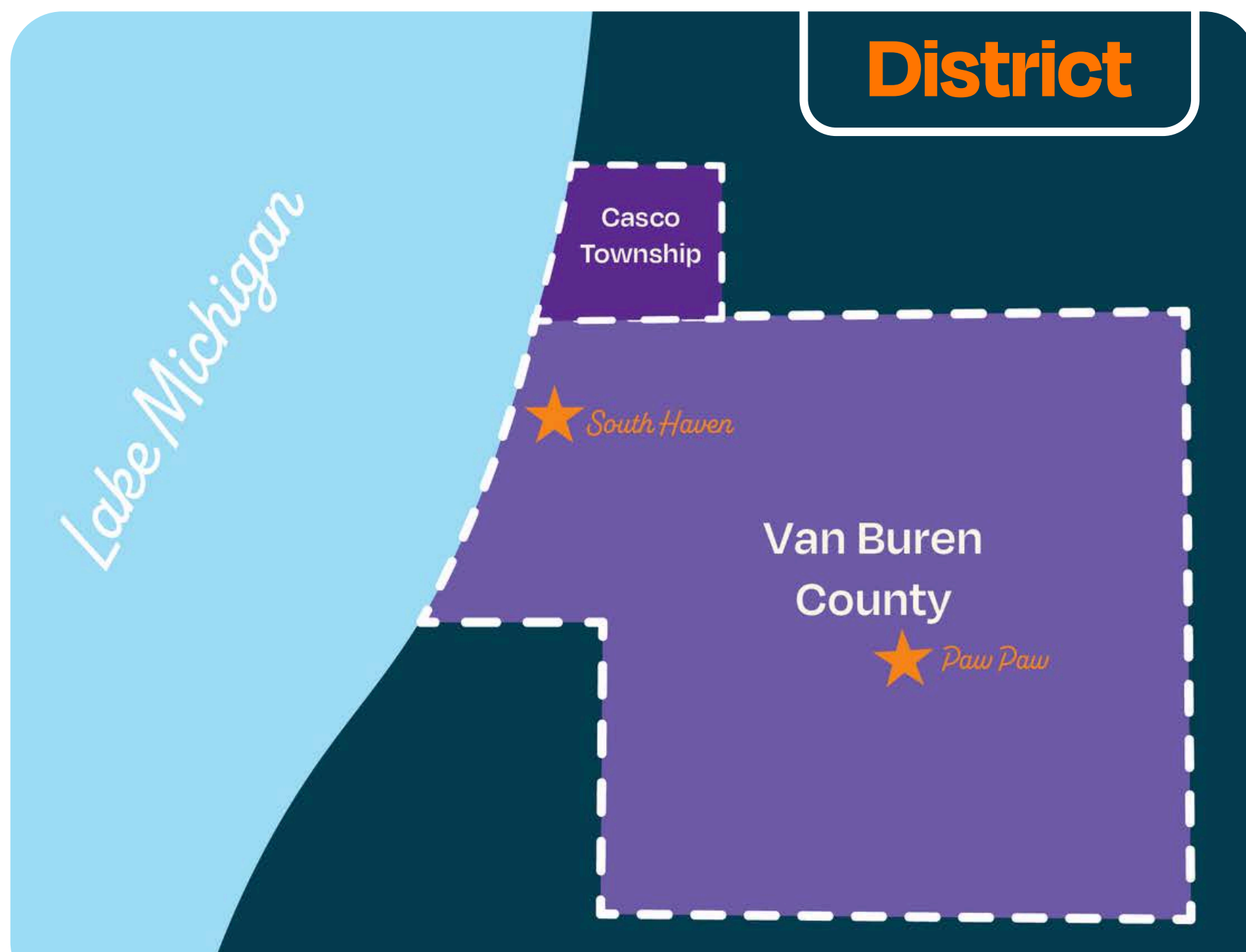
JANICE CHITTLE
Destination
Experience
Manager



Where We Serve & How We're Funded

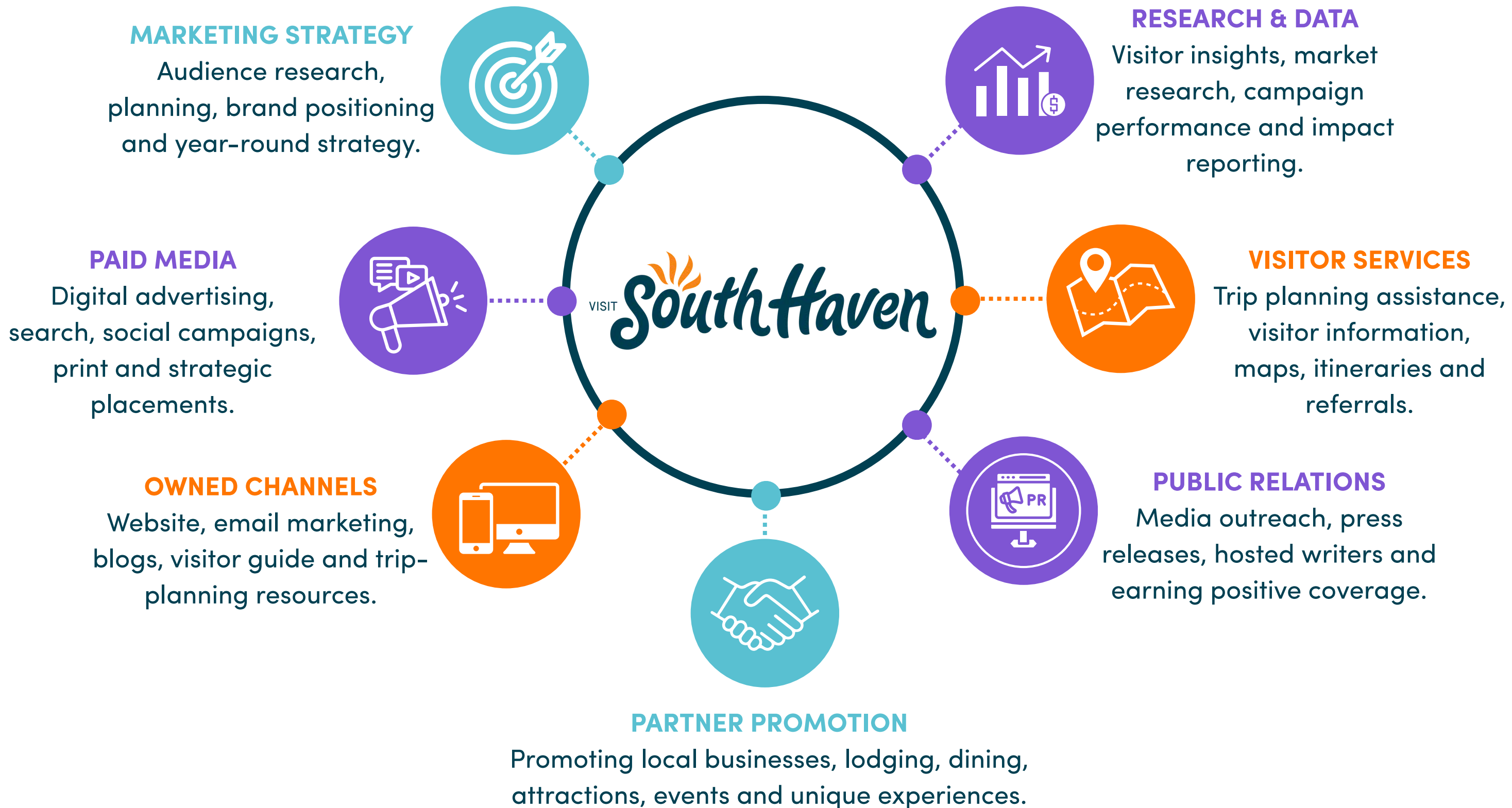
Visit South Haven serves Van Buren County and Casco Township. We are **100% funded by visitors** through a 5% lodging assessment collected from lodging properties and vacation rental managers with 10 or more transient facilities.

No local tax dollars fund our work. Visitor-generated dollars are reinvested into marketing, visitor services, destination development, and partnerships that support our communities.



Full Service Destination Marketing

How Visit South Haven promotes our destination year-round





Building a Place People Want to Visit — and a Place People Want to Live

through visitor-funded destination development

\$1.9M

invested in destination development amenities throughout South Haven and Van Buren County since 2019.

Wayfinding & Signage

Helping visitors navigate communities, trails, downtowns, and attractions with ease.

Trails & Outdoor Recreation

Supporting physical improvements that connect people to nature, movement, and year-round exploration.

Public Spaces

Investing in places where people can gather, pause, explore, and experience the character of the community.

Accessibility Improvements

Helping make destination experiences more usable, inclusive, and welcoming for all.

Grant Matching

Leveraging visitor-funded dollars to support local projects and bring additional investment into the region.

Placemaking Projects

Creating memorable physical spaces that reflect the identity, charm, and character of our communities.

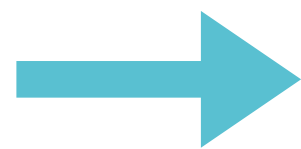
It all starts with a visit.

The Work of a Destination Organization & Its Community Impact

In recent decades, the regional economy has become far more diverse, but the visitor economy remains a key net export that brings significant spending and also serves as the introduction to our area.

Tourism is the “**front door**” of economic development, attracting visitors and helping influence their positive perceptions about the region as a place to live and invest. Destination marketing is often a crucial step in showcasing a community to future residents and stakeholders. The “Halo Effect” study by Longwoods International showcases the importance of consistent promotion as a tool to drive local prosperity.

Visit



If you built a place where people want to **visit**, then you have built a place where people want to live.



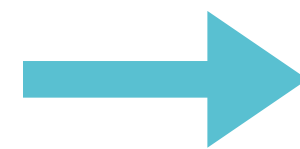
Live



And if you built a place where people want to **live**, then you have built a place where people want to work.



Work



And if you built a place where people want to **work**, then you have built a place where business and residents want to invest.



Invest

And if you built a place where business and residents will **invest**, then you have built a place where people will want to visit.



Travel & Tourism in South Haven

Snapshot & Outlook

Tourism remains a key driver of South Haven's economy and community identity. In 2025, the destination welcomed approximately **1.6 million unique visitors**, generating an estimated **4.8 million total visits**, including repeat travel. The visitor economy also generated more than **\$191 million in visitor spending** and supported more than **2,400 jobs**. Together, these measures reflect South Haven's strength as a regional destination and the broader trends shaping West Michigan's beach communities.

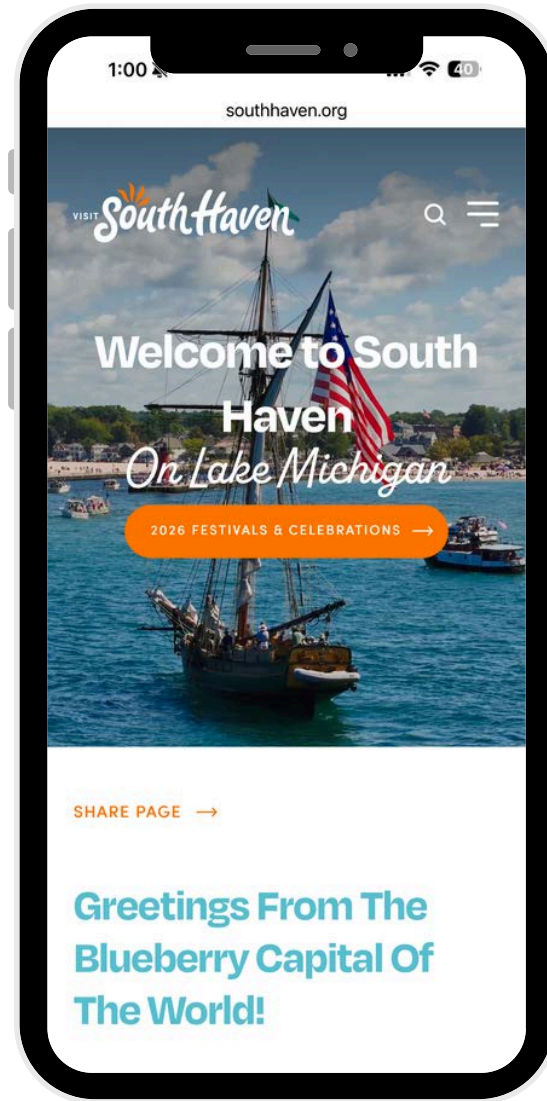
This report provides a snapshot of the current state of the South Haven tourism industry—who our visitors are, how they engage, and how South Haven compares within the competitive set. It also highlights key trends and outlines how Visit South Haven is positioning the destination for a sustainable and competitive future.





Placer.ai

Placer.ai is a location intelligence platform that uses machine learning and data science to analyze anonymized, aggregated data from mobile apps to provide businesses and civic stakeholders with insights into foot traffic patterns and consumer behavior.



What Placer.ai Does

Location Intelligence: Placer.ai focuses on understanding and analyzing where people are going, when, and why, providing insights into foot traffic patterns, consumer behavior, and trends.

Data Source: The platform gathers anonymized and aggregated data from mobile apps, which helps them analyze visitation patterns and understand consumer behavior.

How Placer.ai Works

Data Collection: Placer.ai partners with mobile app companies to obtain anonymized data, which is then aggregated and analyzed.

Data Analysis: The platform uses machine learning and data science techniques to analyze the data and generate insights into foot traffic patterns and consumer behavior.

Data Presentation: Placer.ai provides these insights through an interactive dashboard, robust API, and various feed products, allowing users to visualize and analyze the data.

Privacy: Placer.ai emphasizes data privacy, ensuring that no data tied to specific individuals is shared with customers.

K-anonymity: Placer.ai uses K-anonymity of 50, meaning that every dot on the map may be an approximate location and does not indicate a detailed location of any one particular device.

Who is the South Haven Traveler?



Median Age

55



Average Household Size

2.5



Median Household Income

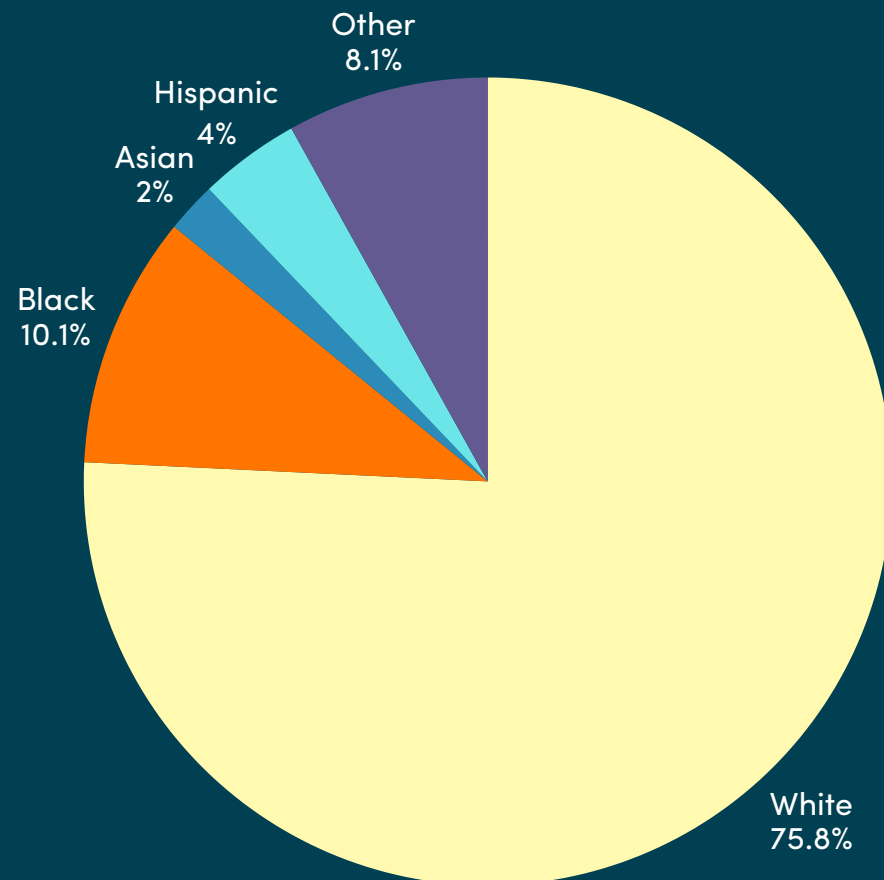
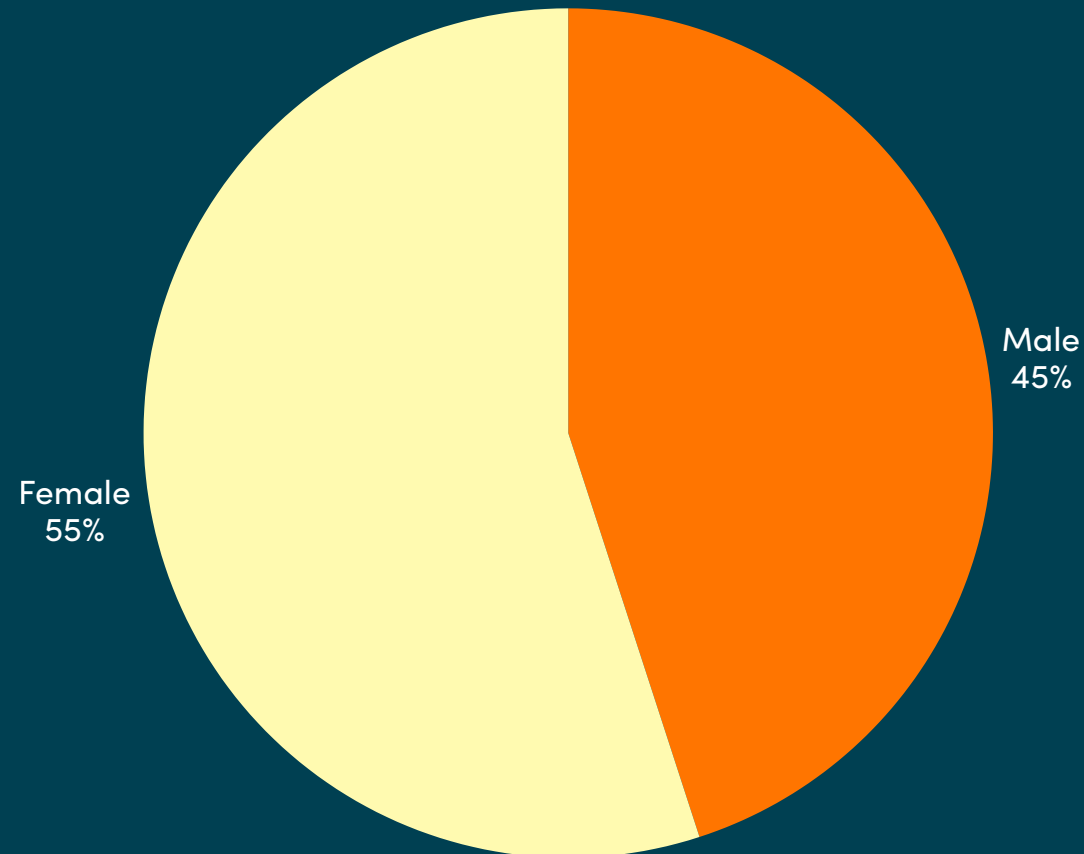
\$104K



Education

Bachelor Degree or Higher

● Male ● Female



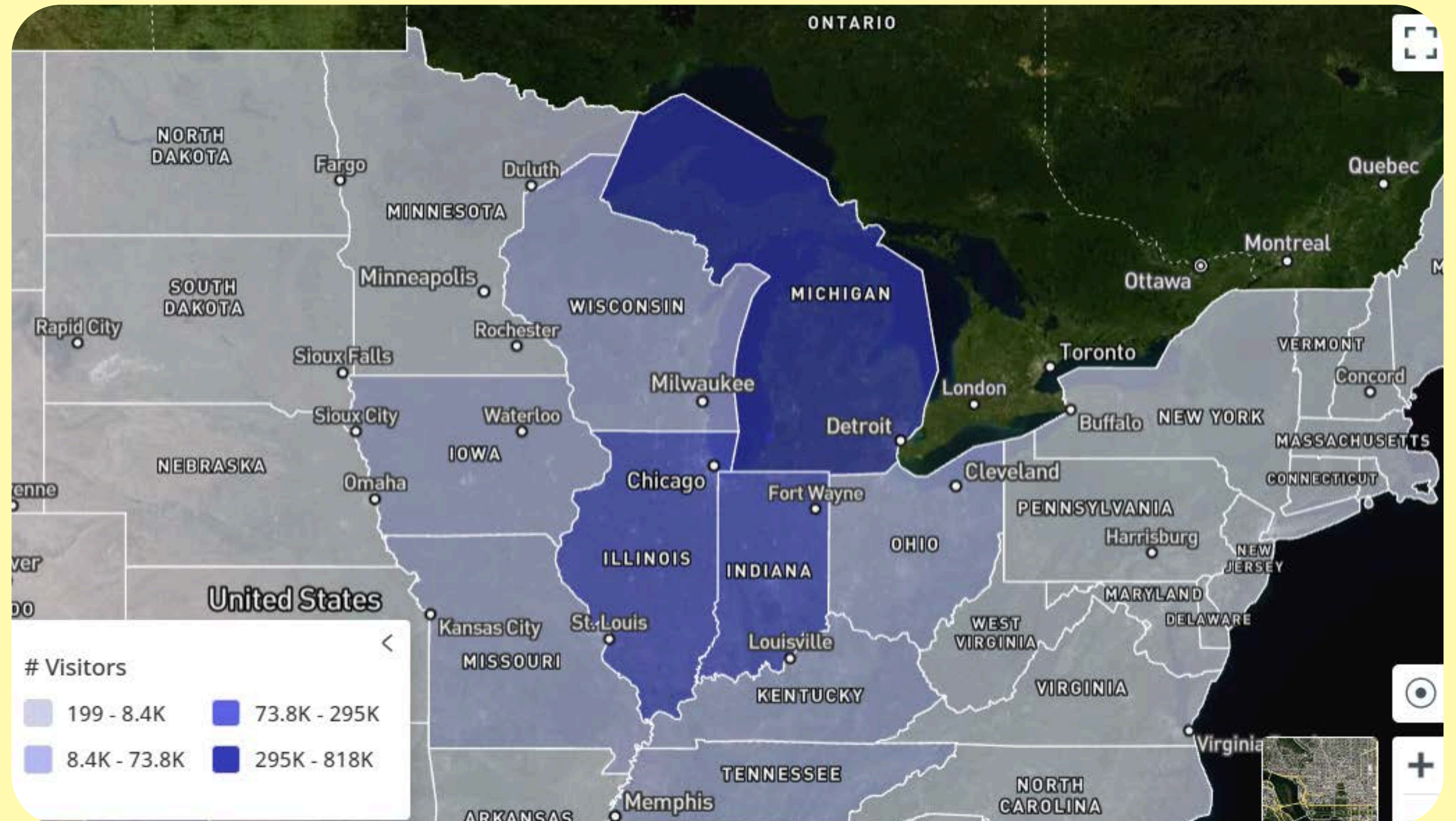
Regional Drive Markets Lead Visitation

South Haven's visitor base is strongly regional, with more than half of visitors coming from within **Michigan**. **Illinois** and **Indiana** remain key out-of-state markets, reinforcing South Haven's position as an easy-drive Lake Michigan getaway for Midwest travelers.

Top 10 Markets by State

| | |
|-----------|-------|
| Michigan | 51.9% |
| Illinois | 18.3% |
| Indiana | 13.2% |
| Ohio | 3.1% |
| Missouri | 1.6% |
| Wisconsin | 1.4% |
| Florida | 1% |
| Kentucky | 1% |
| Texas | .9% |
| Iowa | .7% |

Market Landscape



Nearby Metros Drive Demand

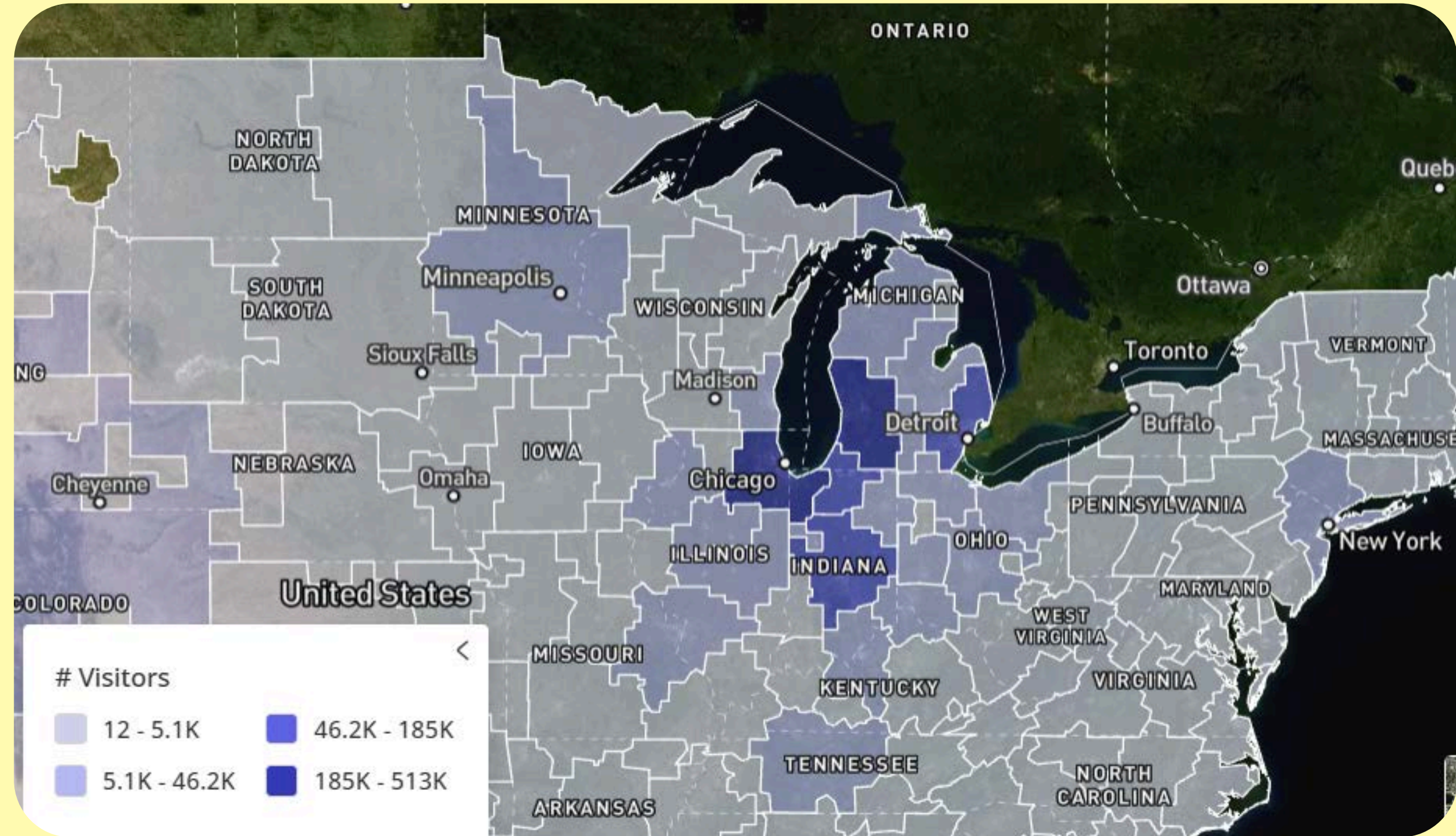
South Haven's strongest visitor markets are concentrated in nearby Midwest metro areas, led by **Grand Rapids/Kalamazoo/Battle Creek, Chicago, and South Bend/Elkhart.**

These drive-market audiences remain central to our marketing strategy because they are close enough for weekend getaways, repeat trips, and seasonal travel.

Top 10 DMAs

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Grand Rapids/Kzoo/B.Creek----- | 32.5% |
| Chicago----- | 18.3% |
| South Bend/Elkhart----- | 9.9% |
| Detroit----- | 6.7% |
| Indianapolis----- | 5.2% |
| Lansing----- | 2.7% |
| Traverse City/Cadillac----- | 1.6% |
| St.Louis----- | 1.5% |
| Ft Wayne----- | 1.4% |
| Flint/Saginaw/Bay City----- | 1.2% |

Market Landscape



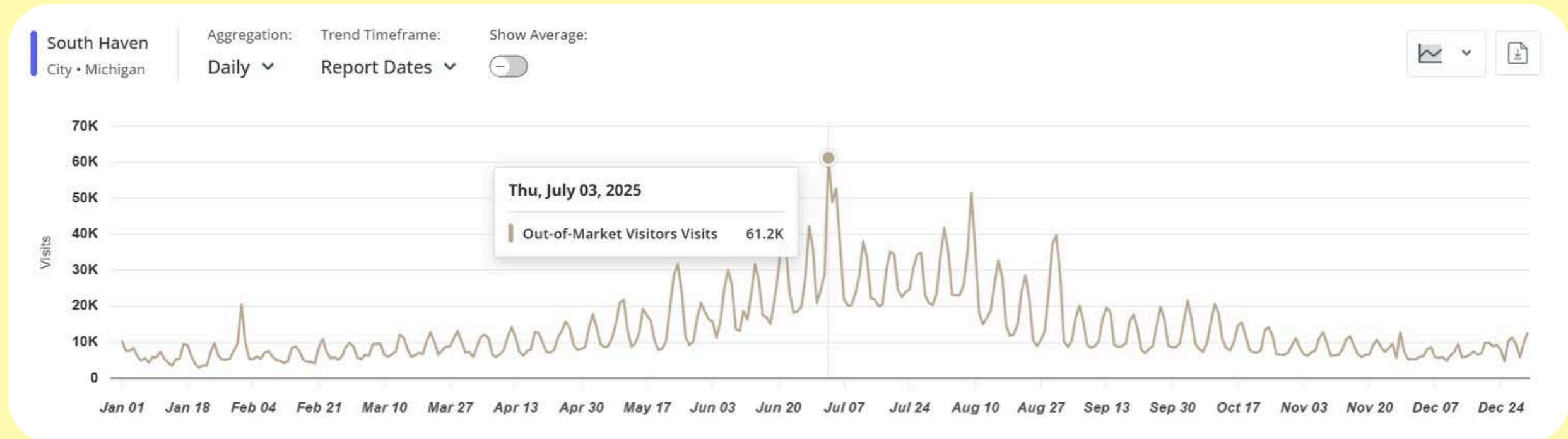
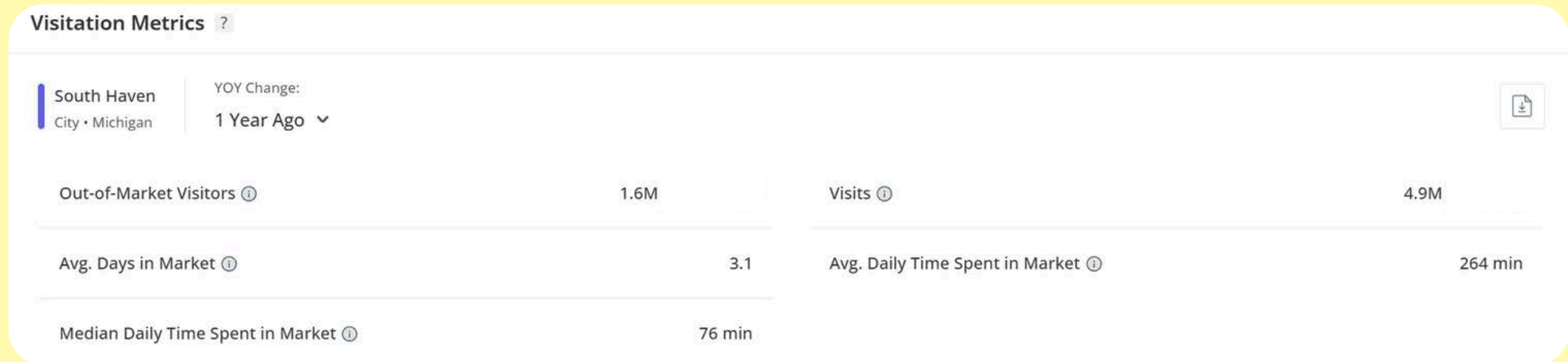
Signature Events Drive Visitor Peaks

South Haven's visitation follows a clear seasonal pattern, with the highest activity concentrated around major summer events and holiday weekends. Peak visitation days align with **Light Up the Lake**, the **Fourth of July**, **Blueberry Festival Saturday**, and **Labor Day Saturday**, showing the continued importance of signature events in driving visitor demand.

The chart also shows a notable winter lift around **Ice Breaker Festival** in January/February – a meaningful spike during one of the slowest times of year and a strong example of how events can help build shoulder-season and off-season visitation.



Annual Market Summary



Overnight Market

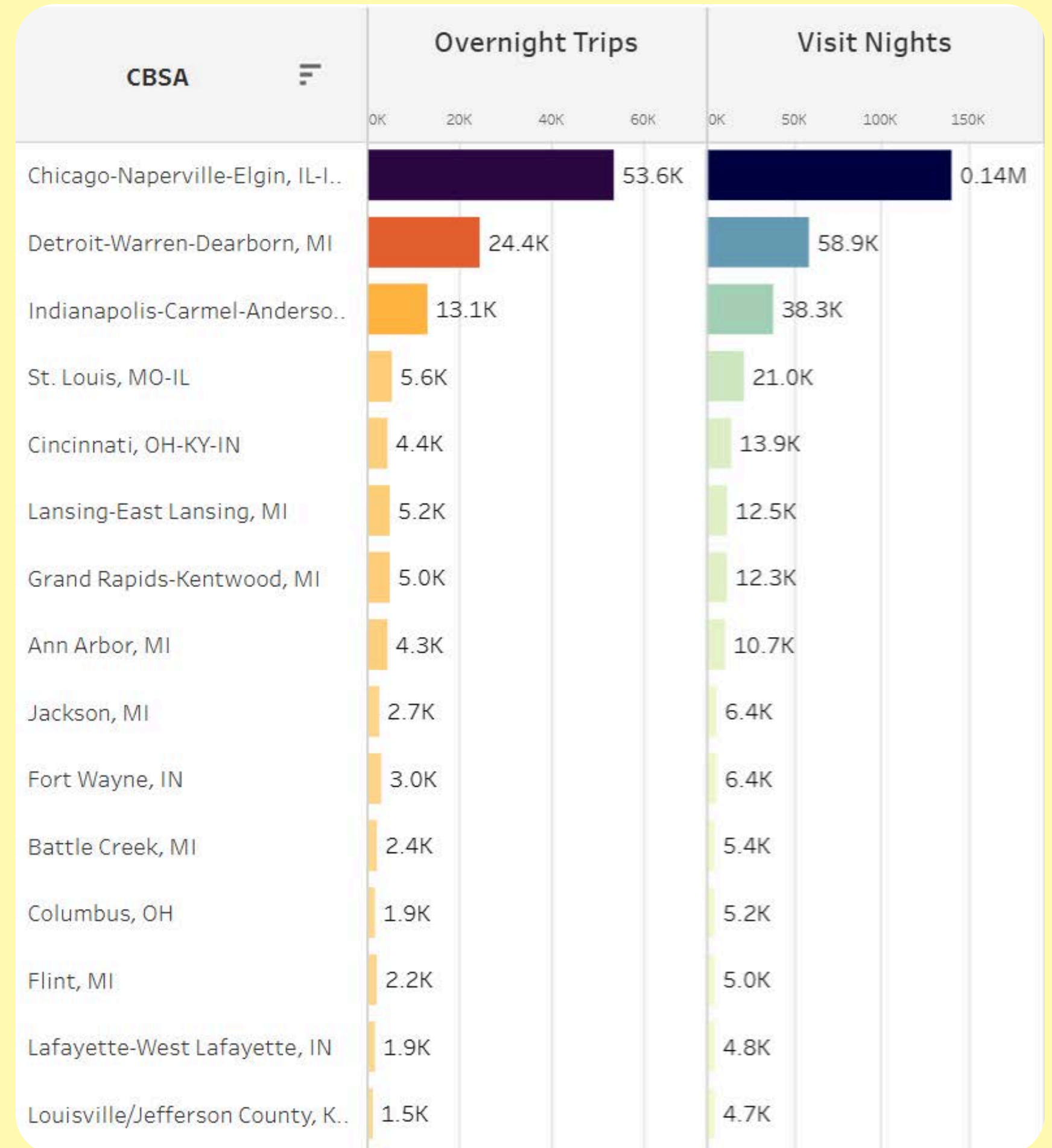


Overnight Markets Are Shifting

Chicago remains South Haven’s leading overnight market, but the broader story is how other Midwest markets are moving. The **Detroit** metro area has shown continued growth in recent years, while **St. Louis**

Louis is also climbing in the rankings as an emerging overnight market.

While Chicago is still a major driver, overnight travel from that market has softened slightly – making it important to watch growth opportunities across Detroit, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and other regional drive markets.





Modeling Overnight Capacity

This scenario is based on an estimated 50% occupancy rate across South Haven's hotel and short-term rental supply. It shows how changes in short-term rental availability could affect total overnight lodging capacity over time.

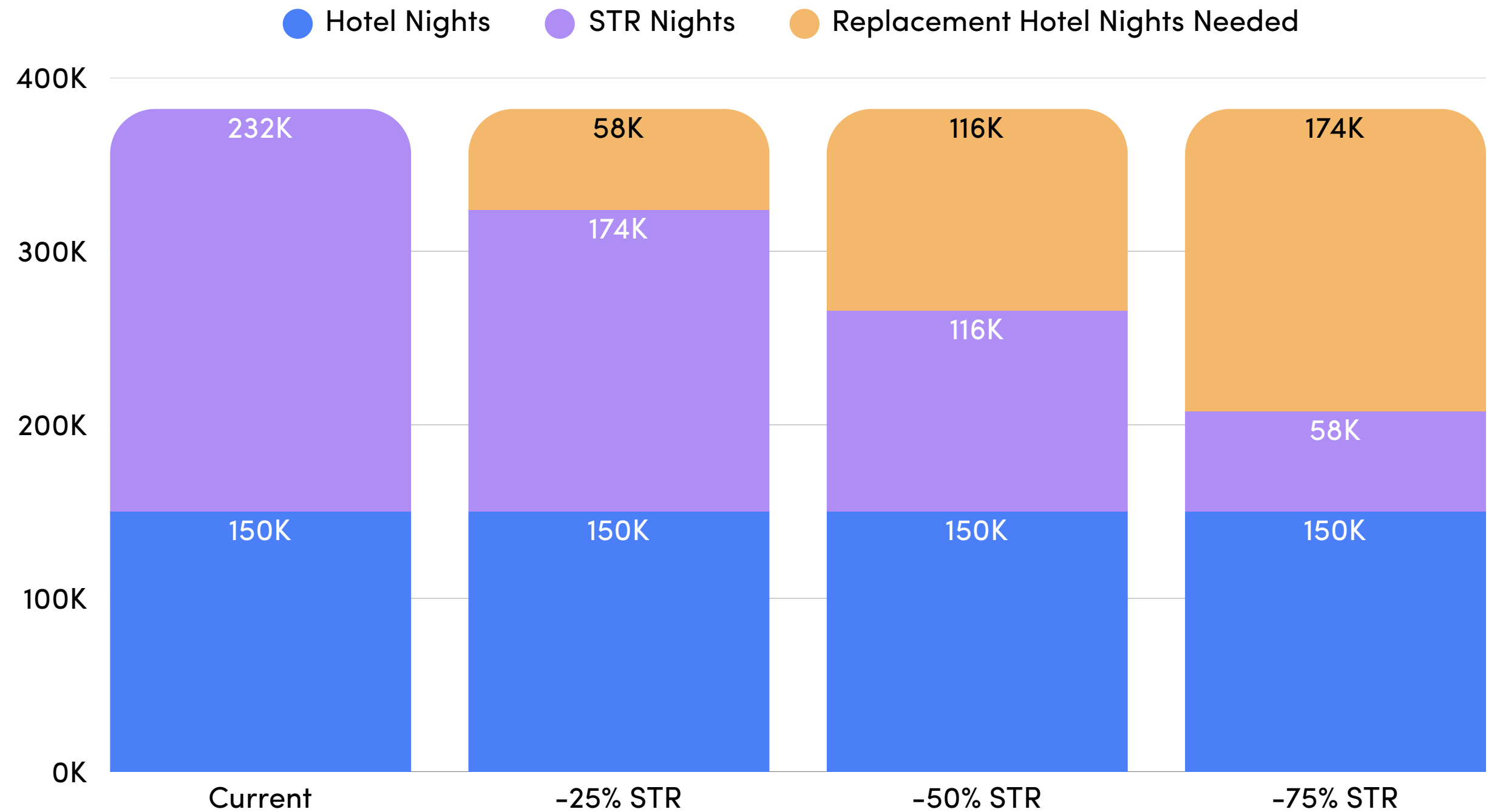
The chart models potential reductions in short-term rental room nights and shows the amount of replacement hotel room nights that would be needed to maintain the same overall overnight capacity.

At 50% occupancy, every 14,000 room nights is roughly equal to one 78-room select-service hotel – similar to a Holiday Inn Express.

Scenario Note:

This is not a forecast. It is a capacity model showing how different levels of short-term rental reduction could affect the lodging mix if overall overnight capacity shifts.

A Scenario View of Overnight Lodging Capacity



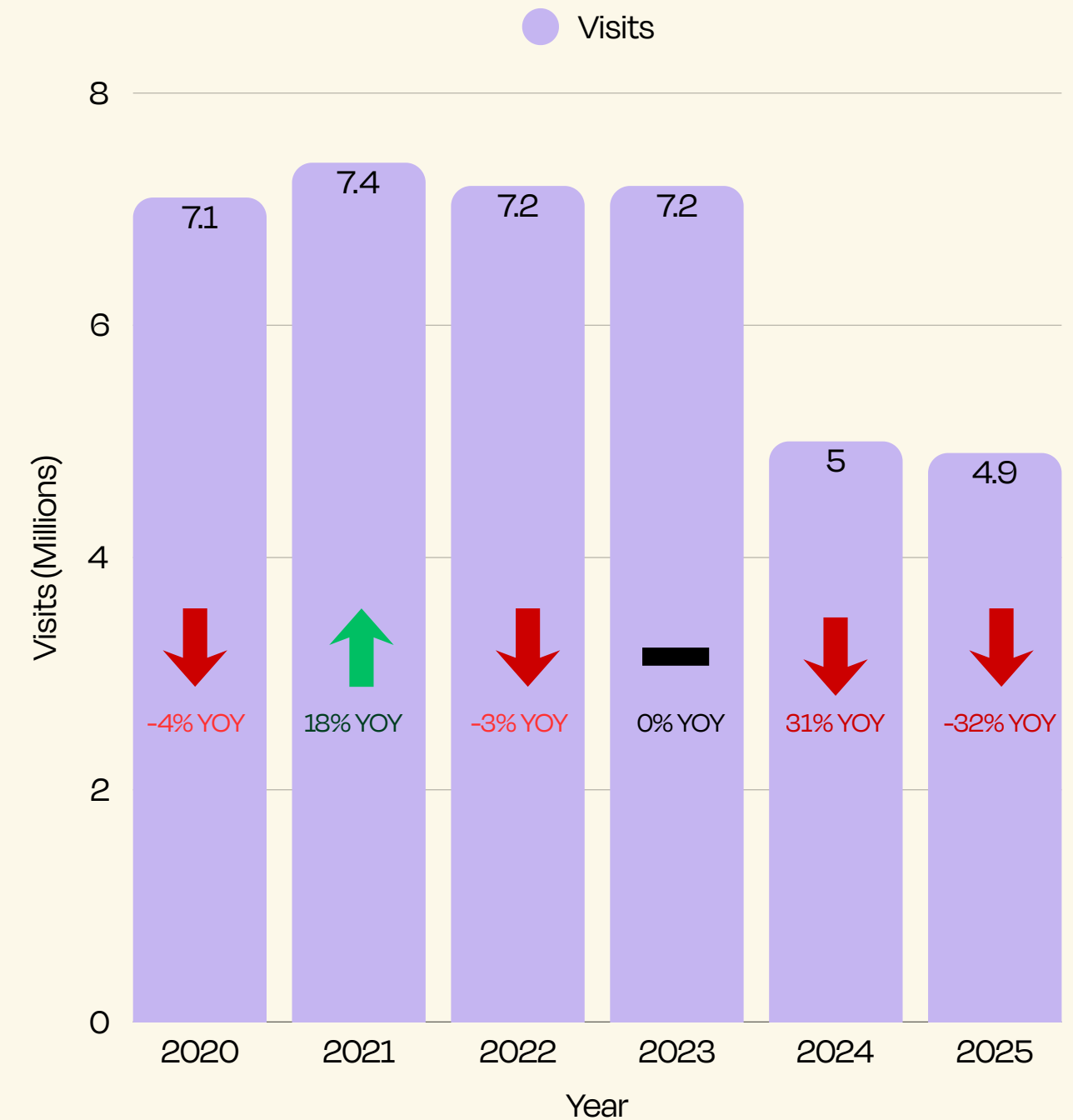
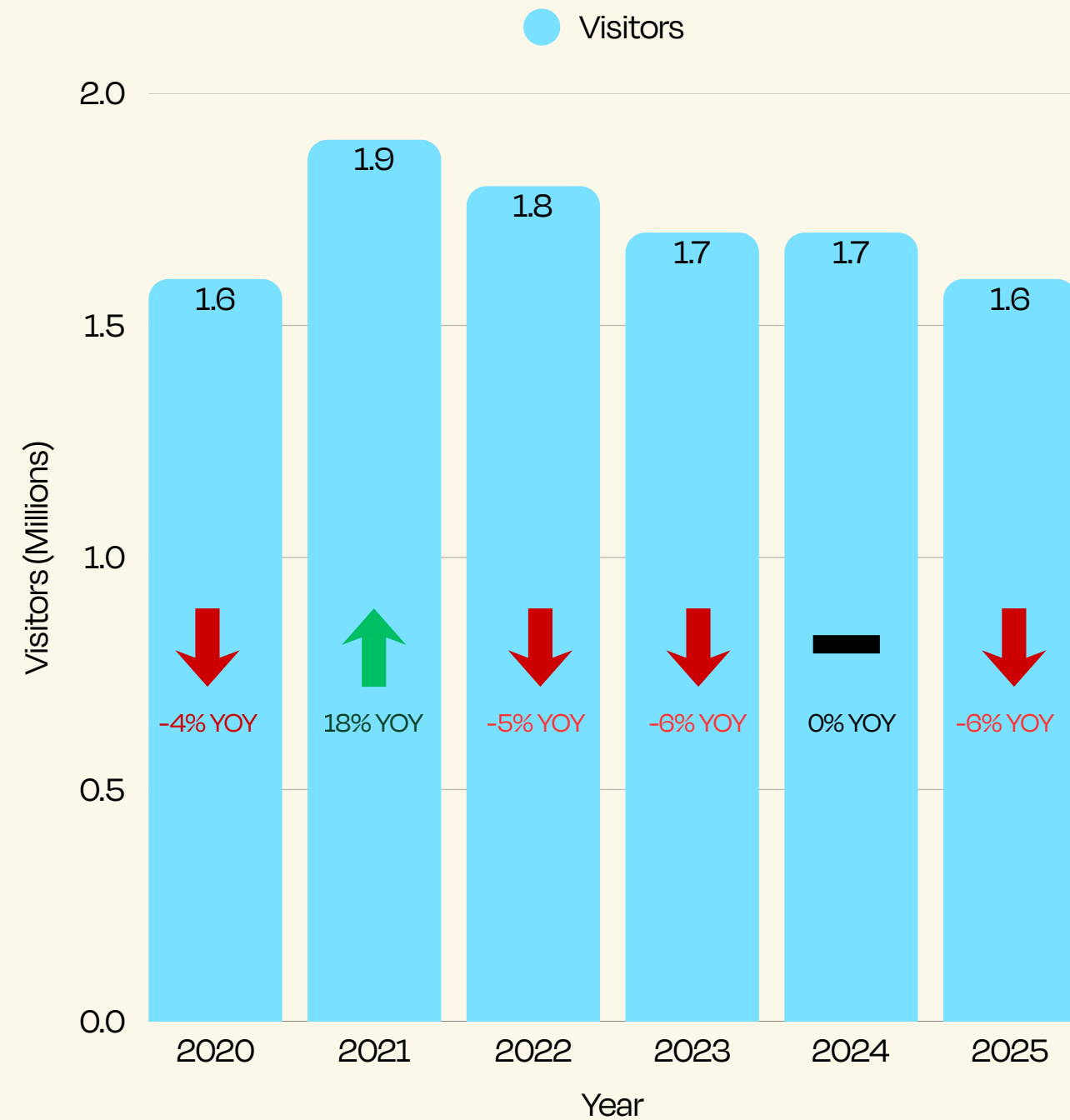


Understanding Visitor Volume vs. Visit Frequency

This chart compares unique visitors and total visits to the City of South Haven from 2020–2025. Unique visitors show how many individual people came to the destination, while total visits show how often those visitors came.

The data suggests South Haven continues to attract a strong visitor base, but overall visit frequency has softened in recent years.

Annual Visitation & Frequency





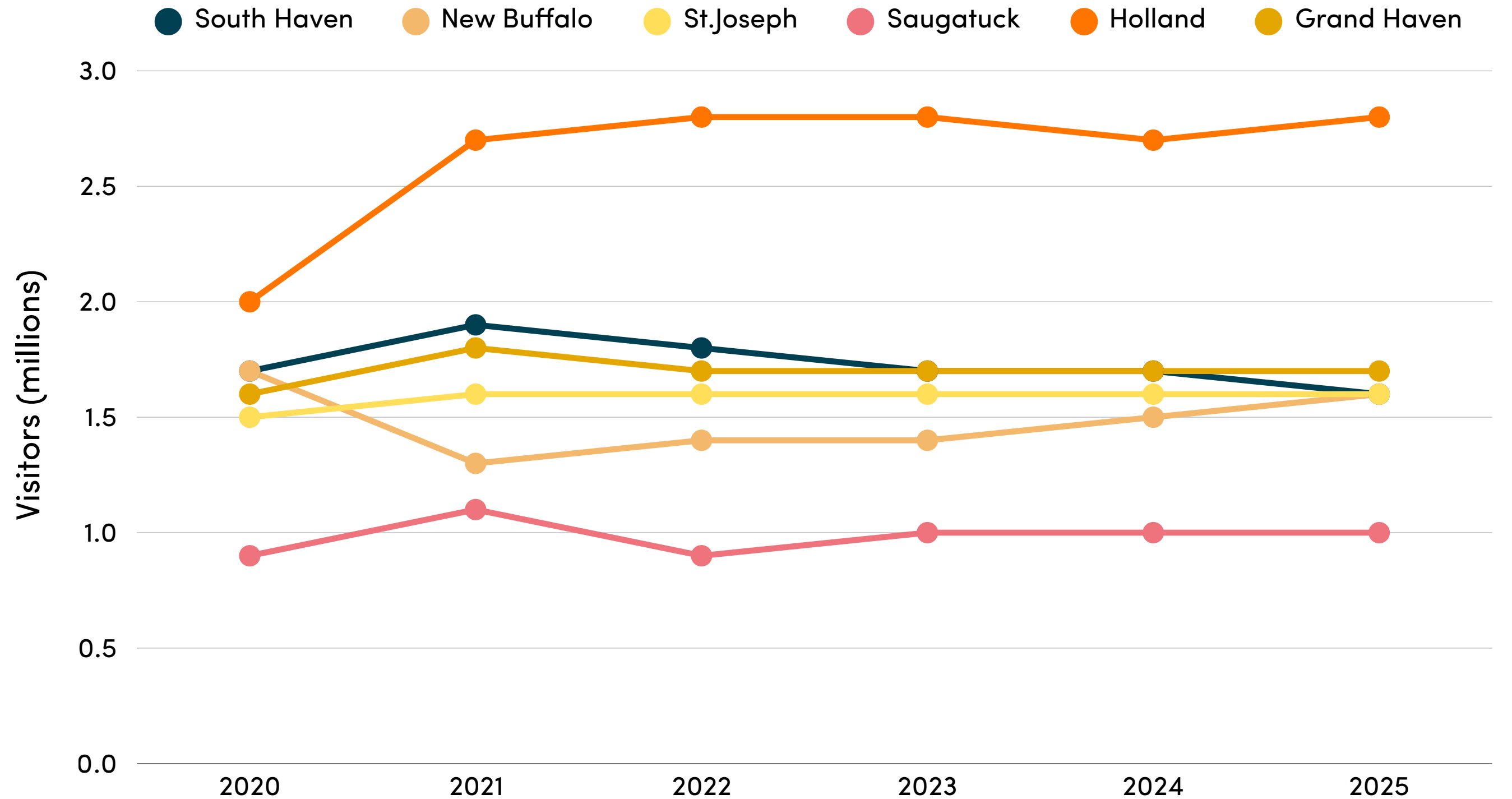
Reading the Trendline

South Haven remains part of a strong and competitive Lake Michigan beach town set. While each destination is different, this trendline helps show how South Haven is performing relative to nearby markets and reinforces the importance of continued promotion, destination development, and fresh reasons to visit.

Context Note

Market totals are directional. Each destination has different geographic boundaries, lodging supply, lakefront access, attractions, and visitor amenities, so this chart is best used to compare trends over time rather than rank communities directly.

Visitors: Comp Market Comparison



Visitation Trends & Scenarios

Scenario Planning Based on Current Trends

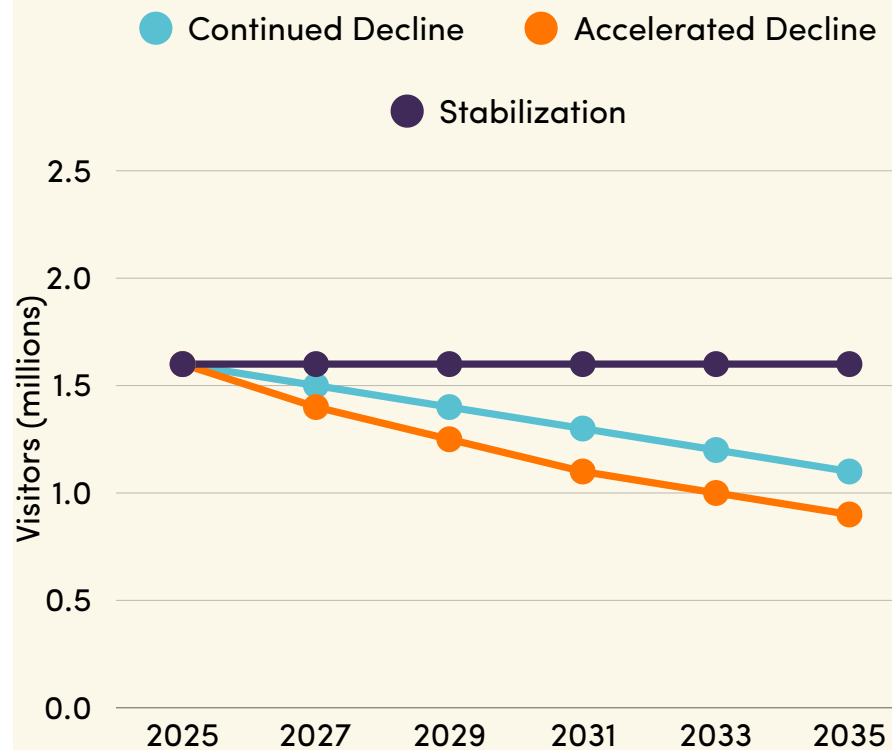
These scenarios are not forecasts — they show what could happen over time if current visitation trends continue. South Haven, New Buffalo, and Grand Haven represent similar Lake Michigan markets, but each is moving differently: South Haven has softened from its peak, New Buffalo is showing growth, and Grand Haven has remained relatively stable. This helps us understand the range of possible outcomes and why continued marketing, destination development, and repeat visitation matter.

Scenario Note:

Trendlines are directional and based on current patterns. They are intended to show possible future paths, not predict exact visitation levels.

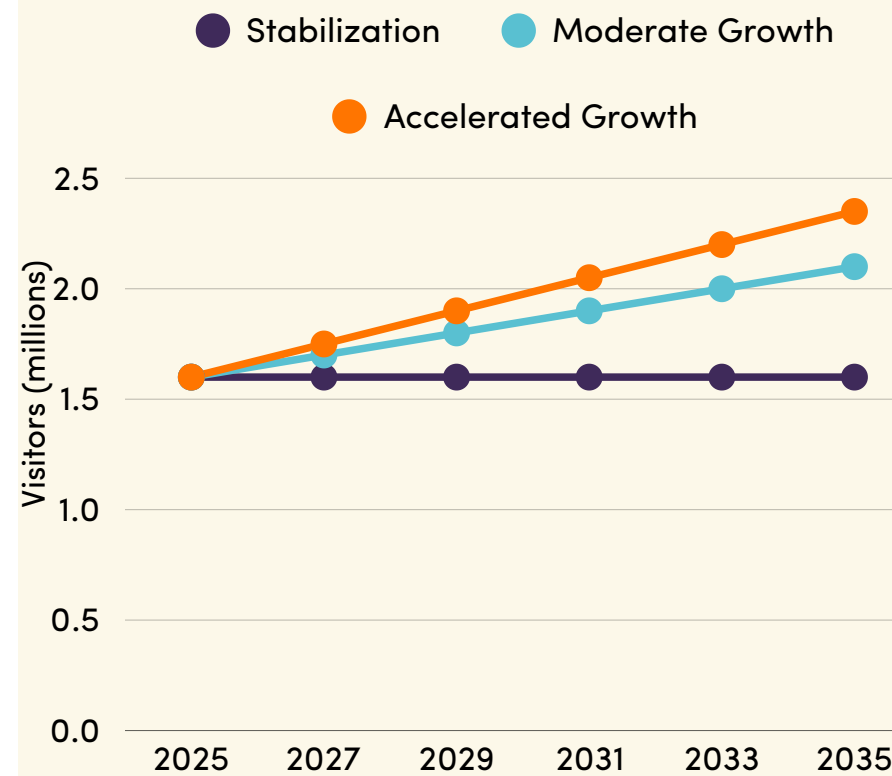
South Haven

Visitation has **declined** from its peak, indicating a gradual softening in demand.



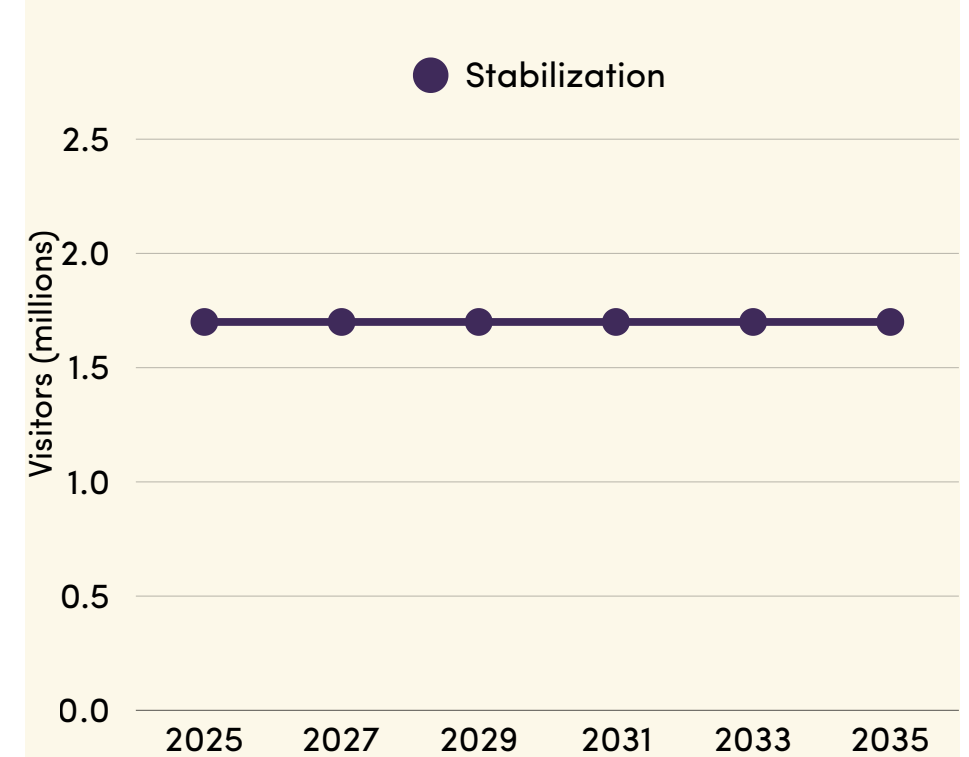
New Buffalo

Visitation has **increased** in recent years, reflecting steady growth and momentum.

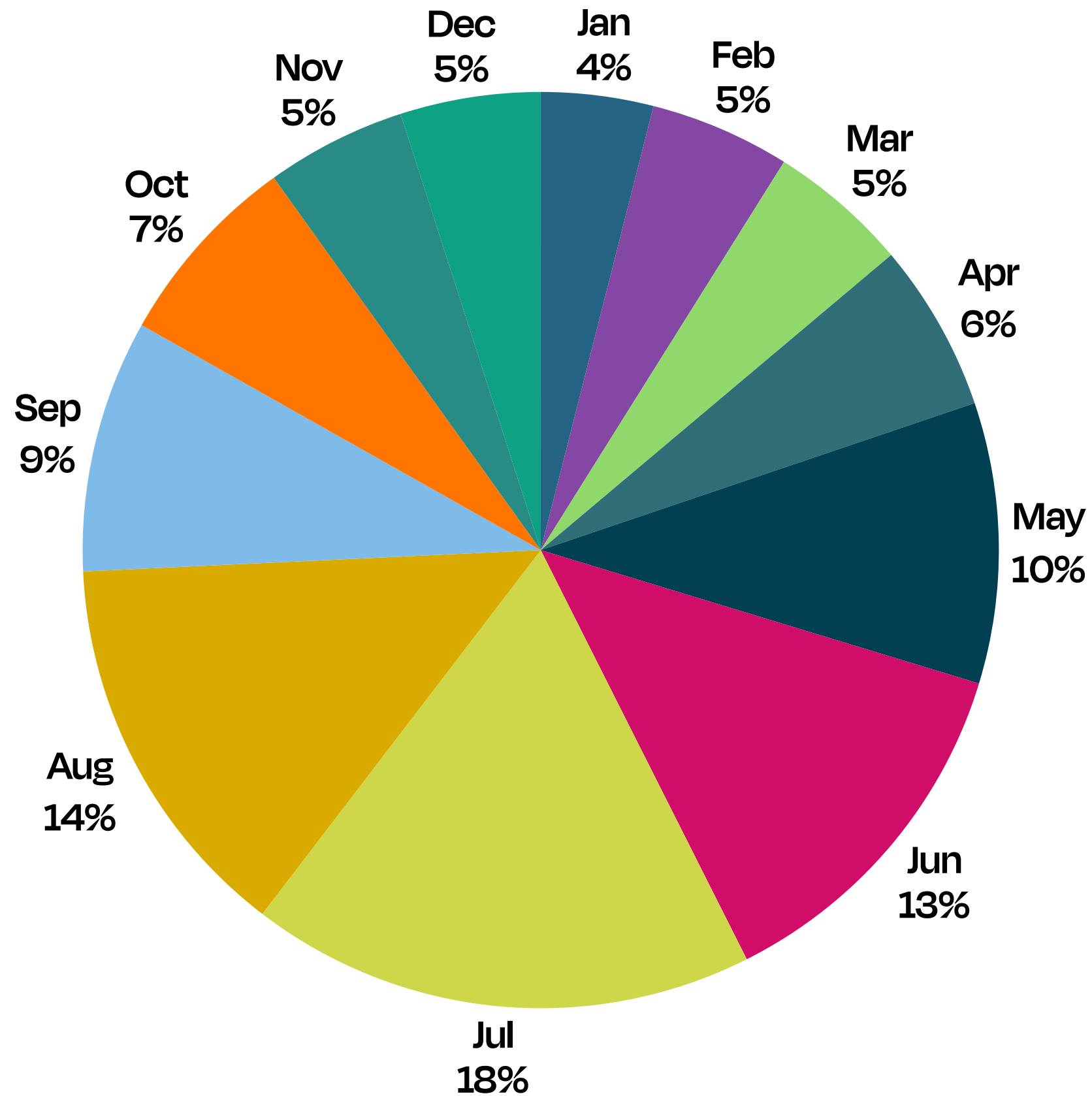


Grand Haven

Visitation has remained **consistent**, demonstrating long-term stability.



Visitation by Month



Seasonal Visitation Patterns

South Haven's visitation remains highly seasonal, with **45%** of annual visitors arriving in **June, July, and August**.

Visit South Haven's work is focused on expanding the shoulder seasons — starting summer earlier in the spring and extending visitor activity deeper into the fall. We've seen progress in recent years with stronger fall visitation, and the next opportunity is building more early-season demand in March, April, and May.

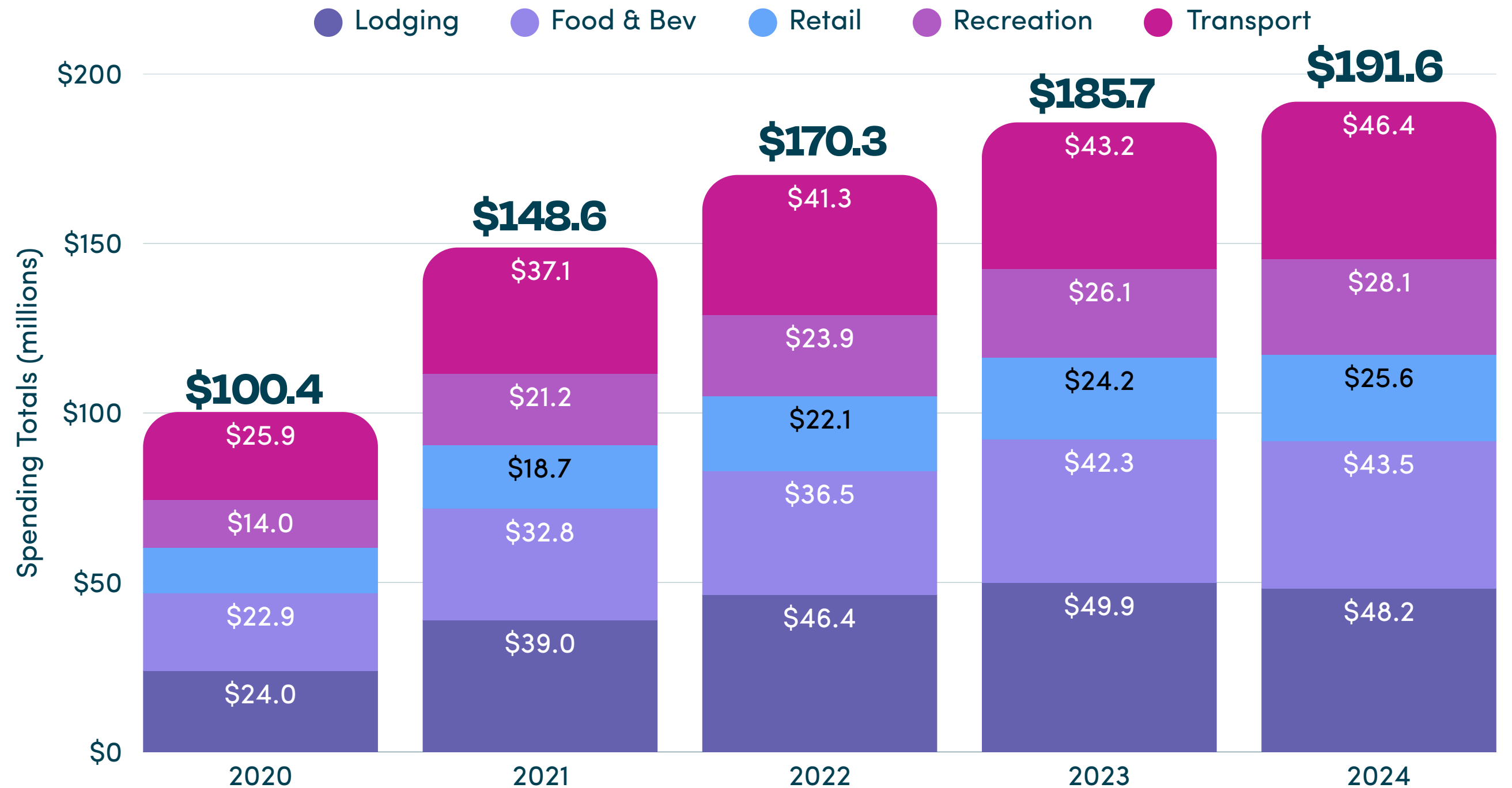


Visitor Spending & Category Shifts

Data from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation shows South Haven visitor spending continuing to grow, rising from \$100.4 million in 2020 to \$191.6 million in 2024. Spending has increased across lodging, food and beverage, retail, recreation, and transportation, showing how visitor dollars move through the broader local economy.

Before 2021, food and beverage spending was slightly higher than lodging. Beginning in 2021, lodging began to outpace food and beverage and has remained the top spending category each year since. This shift highlights the growing importance of overnight stays in South Haven's visitor economy.

Annual Visitor Spending

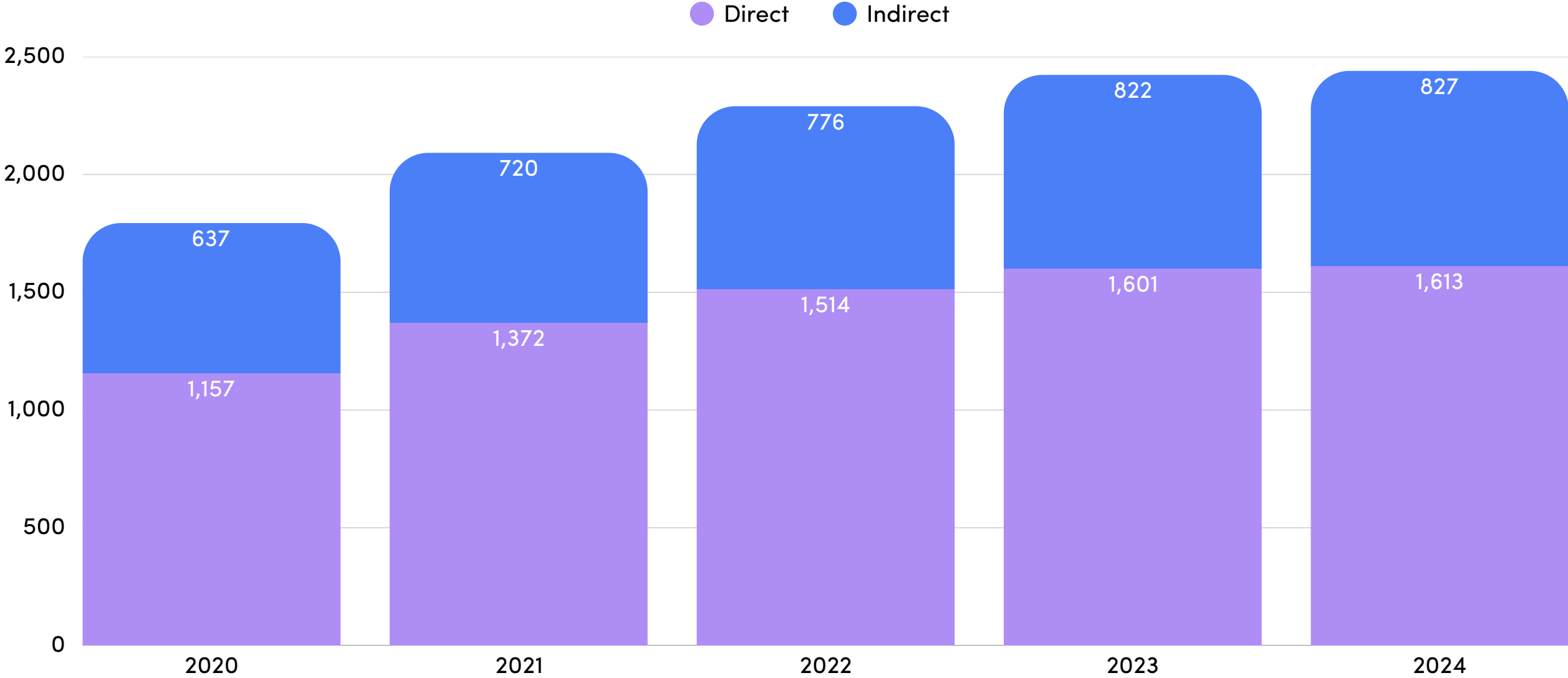




Tourism Supported Employment

Data from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation shows tourism supports jobs across South Haven’s local economy, both directly within visitor-facing businesses and indirectly through the industries that support them. Employment tied to tourism has grown steadily since 2020, reaching **1,613 direct jobs** and 827 indirect jobs in 2024.

Visitor spending does more than support businesses — it supports people, paychecks, and year-round economic activity throughout the community.





What We're Watching



Demand & Repeat Travel Are Shifting

Repeat visitation softened last year – a reminder that loyalty must be nurtured, not assumed.



Shoulder Seasons Matter

Spring, fall, and winter offer room for thoughtful growth.



Lodging Supply Is Critical

Overnight stays drive spending – and visitors need places to stay.



Competition Is Growing

Lake Michigan destinations are all working to stay top-of-mind.



Visitors Want Local

Travelers are seeking authentic food, shops, trails, events, and experiences.



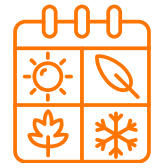
Tourism Supports Quality of Life

Smart destination development benefits visitors and residents.

These trends guide how Visit South Haven markets, partners, and plans for the future.

Turning Trends Into Action

Where Visit South Haven's Work Is Focused



1. Growing a Year-Round Destination

We're working to build demand beyond peak summer by promoting spring, fall, and winter experiences — from events and outdoor recreation to shopping, dining, wellness, and cozy lakeshore getaways.



2. Supporting Balanced Lodging Supply

We're watching how lodging availability impacts overnight stays, visitor spending, and local businesses, while supporting a healthy mix of accommodations that meets demand and respects community needs.



3. Highlighting Unique Visitor Experiences

We're showcasing the niche, local, and memorable experiences that inspire travel — farms, trails, makers, food, history, events, hidden gems, and the small moments that make this place feel like nowhere else.



4. Strengthening Community Hospitality

We're focused on helping South Haven feel welcoming, respectful, and easy to enjoy for visitors and residents alike — because hospitality is part of the destination experience.



5. Building Repeat Visitation & Loyalty

As repeat travel softens, we're creating fresh reasons for visitors to return through seasonal storytelling, email, social media, content, campaigns, and experiences that keep South Haven top-of-mind.



6. Using Data to Guide Our Work

We're using visitation, lodging, spending, and market data to track shifts in demand, understand visitor behavior, measure impact, and make smarter decisions for the destination.





Our Doors are Always Open

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