

EDA OF JONES COUNTY REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS:
ADVERTISING AGENCY SERVICES
Tourism Industry Recovery, II

Proposals due on or before 5:00 p.m. CDT on MARCH 2, 2023.

ABOUT THE EDA OF JONES COUNTY

The Economic Development Authority of Jones County performs all marketing functions to promote Jones County as a destination using the brand of “Visit Laurel & Jones County.” The EDA is a government entity deemed by the Mississippi Legislature, Jones County Board of Supervisors, Cities of Laurel and Ellisville and the towns of Soso and Sandersville as the official organization responsible for tourism promotions for all of Jones County.

DESTINATION WEBSITE: WWW.VISITJONES.COM

DESTINATION BACKGROUND

Jones County used to be one of the best kept secrets in South Mississippi. However, all that has changed with the popularity of HGTV’s hit television series “Home Town.” Now, millions across the country have seen how Laurel’s historic downtown is undergoing a modern renaissance, and thousands have come in person to see first-hand what’s happening across Jones County. As one of The South’s newest destination towns, Laurel offers visitors eclectic shopping and diverse dining options. Laurel is also home to Mississippi’s first art museum, the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art that will be celebrating its centennial throughout 2023. Jones County boasts an array of outdoor recreational activities, attractions for all ages and a robust calendar of events. With a growing number of vacation rental properties and national hotel brands, there are many ways for visitors to enjoy their stay, whether it is for one night or an extended visit.

Laurel and Jones County are the backdrop for HGTV’s most popular program “Home Town,” now in its sixth season. More than 26 million viewers tuned into season 5, and 20 more episodes are currently being produced for season 7 that will air in 2024. Reruns of the show are available on Discovery+, and the show’s stars Ben & Erin Napier are attached to a number of other traditional and streaming series. HGTV has stated that "Home Town continues to be a hit for so many reasons, but mostly because the Napiers are a beautiful family whose love for their small town lifestyle, neighbors and community - and their belief in the small businesses that support all of that - are truly aspirational."

In the spring of 2020 when the pandemic began, “Home Town” was in production for its fifth season. Season 4 aired in the first half of 2020 and those episodes were consistently in the top five ratings of the key 25-54, upscale female viewership demographic. The interest and opportunities for Laurel and Jones County as a desirable destination were immense at this time, but the momentum for this period of growth was halted immediately with the travel restrictions that began in March 2020. The impact of the trips that were never booked or regretfully cancelled cannot be calculated. However, it can be assumed that there was significant revenue that never made its way to the hotels, attractions, restaurants, etc. of Jones County as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further economic impacts were felt from the high number of cancelled events that would have attracted tens of thousands of visitors to Jones County in 2020. A unique attribute of Jones County’s is its busy and year-round calendar of festivals, special events, sports tournaments and merchant-driven activities. Leading up to the pandemic, Visit Laurel & Jones County had focused a portion of its marketing strategy on highlighting opportune weekends where a variety of events would be held for visitors to take part in across Jones County. There really is always something to look forward in Jones County, and this message resonates with first time and return visitors alike. Event-centric messaging is also the gateway for visitors to explore more attractions, restaurants and shops---all of whom were negatively impacted by closures and the decline in visitors.

Fast forward to the injection of the first round of Tourism Recovery Funds (from the CARES Act) beginning in the fall of 2020. These funds allowed Visit Laurel & Jones County to execute new marketing tactics and enhance existing strategies in an effort to rebuild the interest in not just traveling to Jones County but traveling in general in the midst of the pandemic.

A primary goal of this first recovery campaign (TRF1) was to drive website traffic, and the table below shows how the initial investment of TRF1 funds in late 2020 significantly increased web traffic.

Annual Website Users to www.visitjones.com

2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
10,777	17,105	87,777	89,302	91,682
<i>YOY Growth</i>	59%	413%	1.7%	2.7%

The data shows the impact that was made by increased marketing dollars in 2020, and the near flat growth in users over the past two years since that campaign ended. This flat growth should also be compared to pre-Covid growth where website traffic increased 59% YOY from 2018 to 2019. This reiterates the fact that Jones County was a growing destination pre-Covid, and beyond a short period growth in 2020, the tourism industry continues to struggle to recover to pre-pandemic growth levels.

OBJECTIVE

The full potential of Jones County as a destination for leisure travel has barely been tapped given the national spotlight provided by the success of “Home Town.” The goal of this second round of recovery is to harness the unrealized potential to grow interest (seen through website traffic) and actual visitors (seen through occupancy rate; hotel demand) in Jones County.

This RFP has been issued to seek qualified firms who have a working knowledge of the tourism industry and can demonstrate the necessary experience to create a strategic plan and ad placement strategy, produce messaging and content, and design a dynamic tourism website for our leisure travel market.

The EDA OF JONES COUNTY intends to contract with a qualified agency to support its continued recovery efforts, stemmed from the negative economic impacts of COVID-19. This contract will be funded through federal ARPA dollars for Mississippi Tourism Recovery, II.

This RFP in no way commits the EDA OF JONES COUNTY to award a contract, to pay any costs in preparation of a proposal, or to contract for the goods and/or services offered. Although it is the EDA OF JONES COUNTY’s intent to contract with the person/company that best meets the qualifications to complete the scope of work, the EDA OF JONES COUNTY may terminate the negotiations if they are unsuccessful in reaching an agreement on all matters including the scope of work and cost.

SCOPE OF SERVICES

The EDA OF JONES COUNTY wishes to employ an outside agency to produce an overall creative strategy spanning from April 2023 to September 2025, including destination marketing and messaging; content design/creation, both for use as print and digital; and integrated marketing activities, including digital marketing, social media strategies and others relevant tactics. The agency is also asked to evaluate the current tourism website, make recommendations and then execute the necessary updates or redesign.

The agency should recommend an overall media creation and placement strategy to clearly position the EDA OF JONES COUNTY to visitors as an affordable and attractive open destination for those who enjoy traveling, specifically in its top drive markets. It will be imperative to ensure this scope of services adheres to any changing public health guidelines and is conveyed in an informed manner.

The selected agency's responsibilities will include the below:

1. **Strategic Plan:** The EDA requests an outside firm to develop a strategic marketing plan for the Visit Laurel & Jones County brand to use over the course of the ARPA Tourism Recovery Fund campaign that will run from 2023-2025. This would include assessing the current tourism assets, opportunities and stakeholders, current and future audiences through traveler data, brand identity and messaging, media planning and new tactics to deploy to aid in the recovery of the tourism industry in Jones County.
2. **Website Redesign:** The EDA's tourism site is www.visitjones.com. This site is essential in the operations of the EDA's tourism marketing efforts, and it will play a central role in the tourism recovery campaign as the primary location for tourism resources. The website has had many, small updates throughout the years, but these incremental changes have resulted in an increasingly difficult platform for the multiple marketing partners involved to continue to maintain.

The EDA is seeking recommendations on updates and/or a new design concept, a reimagined homepage, internal page redesign, organized and searchable blog and any new elements that provide better access for information to current and potential visitors. The site's directories are fed through the EDA's CRM database, and this is an element of the redesign that can not be altered. The EDA is open to looking at new platforms to host the site, as long as the integration of the exiting data can be maintained.

3. **Media Plan and Placement:** Based on the strategic plan, the EDA would like the agency to develop a media plan for Visit Laurel & Jones County, with a heavy emphasis on digital tactics. The agency would also negotiate the terms and place all media. Additional tactics are encouraged to be recommended as well if they coincide with the strategic plan.

The strategy should aid in market revitalization during and after the business disruption effects of COVID-19. It will be imperative to ensure this scope of services adheres to any changing public health guidelines.

Digital: The EDA has a separate contract to manage its social media channels and blog publishing. The scope of work for the digital marketing portion of this contract would include, but not limited to: SEO, digital display ads, social media ad campaigns and sponsored content.

4. **Content creation:** The agency will create a portfolio of new marketing assets, including photos, videos, graphics and testimonials, for use in promotional materials and travel campaigns. The EDA may source additional content production as needed that can be used in the agency's media placement strategy.

AVAILABLE FUNDS

BUDGET: The EDA OF JONES COUNTY will fund this contract at a maximum of \$240,000. This budget is based on creative production, strategy development and execution, travel market data, media planning and placement, website updates/redesign, media placement fees, and out-of-pocket expenses. This budget will be implemented in three phases between April 2023 and September 2025 (April 2023-September 2023, October 2023-September 2024, October 2024-September 2025). The EDA OF JONES COUNTY reserves the right to adjust both the budget and related services.

BILLING: THE EDA OF JONES COUNTY limits invoicing to one invoice per month. Each invoice should be on letterhead from the selected agency and include the month(s) for which payment is due as well as detail of work completed at the mutually agreed upon rate(s) or amount in the executed contract.

TIMELINE

This tentative timeline may be altered at any time at the discretion of the EDA OF JONES COUNTY and will be funded through federal ARPA dollars for Mississippi Tourism Recovery, II.

RFP available to agencies.	FEB. 14, 2023
Final day to submit questions regarding this RFP.	FEB. 22, 2023, by 5PM CDT
Questions answered	FEB. 24, 2023 by 5PM CDT
Proposals due by 5:00 p.m. CDT.	MAR. 2, 2023 by 5PM CDT
Proposals evaluated by RFP committee.	MAR. 3-6, 2023
Interviews with final candidates, if necessary.	MAR. 7-9, 2023
Recommendation approved by EDA Board; Contract negotiations begin.	MAR. 21, 2023
Work begins for a limited duration, decided in contract negotiations.	APRIL 1, 2023

SUBMITTAL REQUIREMENTS & DELIVERABLES

Your response to this RFP must be submitted in the following format and labeled accordingly:

1. **Statement of Qualifications** – Provide a written statement of your firm’s qualifications for providing the work as described in the Scope of Work.
2. **Tourism Experience** – Provide a written statement of your involvement in the tourism industry, specifically with DMO clients, industry memberships and resources.
3. **Organization, Ownership and Management**
 - a. Name, address and telephone of the entity that will be contracted with and all trade names to be used.
 - b. Name, address and telephone numbers of the organization’s principal officers and other owners.
4. **Organization’s Structure and Experience**
 - a. Organizational chart of company, including any subcontractors who will work with the EDA OF JONES COUNTY.
 - b. Total number of employees including full time, part time and contract workers.
 - c. Short history of the company, especially as it relates to work in the tourism sector.
 - d. Summary of employees who will work on the account including their name, title, a short summary of their qualifications and their main role in working with the EDA of JONES COUNTY.
 - e. Hours of operation that staff will be available and any satellite offices.
 - f. Experience as it relates to strategic planning, messaging, ad design, website design and placement strategy. No more than **three** relevant case studies should be provided, including project goals with measurable KPIs and results. Creative work should be included for each case study.
5. **Client Information & References**
 - a. Name any travel/tourism clients and their current status.
 - b. Three references that are current accounts with contact names, email and phone numbers.
6. **OFFICIAL CONTACT** - The EDA OF JONES COUNTY requests the proposer designate one person to receive all communications for clarification and verification of information related to this proposal. Please identify this point of contact on the proposal.
7. **Conflict(s) of Interest** - The proposer must declare and provide details of any actual, potential or perceived conflict(s) of interest.
8. **Certification Form** – Certification Form (attachment 1) must be signed and accompany all RFP Response submissions.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

1. Submittals in response to this request and respondents' participation in the process shall be at no cost or obligation to the EDA OF JONES COUNTY. The EDA OF JONES COUNTY reserves the right to, at any time, abandon or terminate its efforts to contract for any or all of said services without any obligation to any respondent.
2. Responses to this request and other materials submitted shall become the property of the EDA OF JONES COUNTY and will not be returned.
3. Respondent shall not contact any EDA OF JONES COUNTY personnel or staff after this request has been advertised, except to ask questions as specified below under "Respondent Questions." Such contact will be considered cause for disqualification.
4. The EDA OF JONES COUNTY may waive any informalities or minor defects or reject any and all submittals.
5. The EDA OF JONES COUNTY reserves the right to reject any submittal if the evidence submitted by, or investigation of, such respondent demonstrates that such respondent or its subcontractors, in the EDA OF JONES COUNTY 's opinion, is not properly qualified to carry out the obligations of the Contract or to complete the Work contemplated therein.
6. All applicable laws, ordinances, and the rules and regulations of all governmental authorities having jurisdiction shall apply to the Contract throughout.
7. This Contract is being funded through a grant provided to the EDA OF JONES COUNTY by the State of Mississippi as part its ARPA State and Local Fiscal Relief Fund (SLFRF) allocation received from the U.S. Treasury Department. The SLFRF program places numerous obligations on recipients and subrecipients, which flow down to successful respondent. Each respondent is cautioned to carefully review the *Supplemental Terms and Conditions (attachment 2)* which are a part of the sample contract and to ensure that all responsibilities and obligations are properly addressed.
8. By executing a signature on the submittal, respondent certifies that:
 - a. Neither the respondent, nor any of its team members, is currently debarred from submitting proposals or entering into contracts issued by any political subdivision or agency of the State of Mississippi or the Federal Government.
 - b. No Federally appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid, by or on behalf of the respondent, to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a member of Congress in connection with the awarding of any Federal contract, the making of any Federal grant, the making of any Federal loan, the entering into of any cooperative agreement, and the extension, continuation, renewal, amendment, or modification of any Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement.
 - c. If any funds other than Federally appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a member of Congress in connection with this Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement, respondent shall complete and submit Standard Form LLL, "Disclosure Form to Report Lobbying," in accordance with its instructions.

EVALUATION & SELECTION

The EDA OF JONES COUNTY will establish a committee to evaluate all proposals. The committee will then make a recommendation of the selected organization to the Board of Directors who will formally vote to accept the recommended proposal and move into contract negotiations.

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 1

Proposals meeting all requirements of the RFP will be evaluated by a review committee who will evaluate the following components:

- Tourism industry experience
- Qualifications to execute the plan of work
- Budget and Timeline
- Ability to illustrate return on investment for suggested strategies
- Overall evaluation of presentation of organization and its ability to integrate with the EDA OF JONES COUNTY team and needs

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 2 (if necessary)

The EDA OF JONES COUNTY reserves the right to hold interviews and/or bring questions to the final candidates before a recommendation is made from the evaluation committee.

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 3

A contract will be awarded to the organization whose proposal is determined to be the most advantageous to the EDA OF JONES COUNTY, taking into consideration the criteria set forth in this RFP. Upon completing the selection process under this RFP, the EDA OF JONES COUNTY will notify the winning proposer and all other proposers who were not selected. The EDA OF JONES COUNTY's evaluations of proposals are confidential and as such, the EDA OF JONES COUNTY is unable to respond to any questions and/or requests for information as to why a company was not selected.

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 4

After awarding the contract, the schedule will include a period of collaboration between the EDA OF JONES COUNTY and the selected agency to better define, elaborate upon, and update the agency's final Scope of Work and general Terms and Conditions. For the selected agency, an employee will be designated as your contact and will coordinate any materials needed or questions answered with all other EDA OF JONES COUNTY employees.

STANDARD CONTRACT

A copy of the EDA of JONES COUNTY'S standard contract template is attached (attachment 3) to be referenced for this proposal. By responding to this request, the respondent is asserting its intent to accept the terms and conditions contained therein unless exceptions to the contract are provided as part of the respondent's submittal.

DELIVERY REQUIREMENTS

Please submit your responses in hard copy and electronic format. All proposals should include a clear, concise narrative. Proposal format is open to presentation style but must include the aforementioned items. It is advised, but not required, to submit five printed proposals (5).

Printed submissions must be marked "RFP: Public Relations Agency Services" and delivered to:

EDA of JONES COUNTY
c/o Amanda Roll
PO Box 527
Laurel, MS 39441

Electronic submissions should be provided in PDF format and sent to amandar@edajones.com with the subject line: "RFP: Advertising and Production Agency Services." Proposals may not be faxed.

Submittals received in any manner not specifically set forth above shall not be accepted or considered. Submittals received after the deadline will not be considered. It is the responsibility of the respondent to ensure that the submittal is received by the specified deadline. The delivery date and time will be recorded upon receipt. The EDA OF JONES COUNTY will not be responsible for late or incomplete responses due to mistakes or delays of the respondent or carrier used by the respondent or weather delays. A postmark will not be considered proof of timely submission.

QUESTIONS

Note that all answers regarding questions and request for clarification for this RFP will be responded to publicly consistent with the schedule below to ensure that all respondents have the same information.

Email Amanda Roll, amandar@edajones.com, with any questions by February 22, at 5:00 p.m. CDT. No calls, please.