

Building a Rural Wine Trail, Building a Rural Destination

Lessons from Wine Trails and Rural Tourism Communities Across America

Illinois Valley Wine Trail Benchmark & Destination Development Report

Fall 2026 | Working Research Report

Executive Summary

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail began with a relatively straightforward idea: connect four wineries, encourage visitors to experience them collectively, and use collaborative marketing, events and a passport program to strengthen wine tourism in Oregon's Illinois Valley.

The research undertaken during the Trail's first year has raised a much larger question:

Are we building an Illinois Valley Wine Trail organization that also partners with tourism businesses, or are we ultimately building a broader Illinois Valley tourism and destination-stewardship organization whose flagship destination program is the Illinois Valley Wine Trail?

That question emerged through interviews and correspondence with wine-trail leaders, research into small and mature wine-tourism organizations, comparisons with rural destination organizations, and the practical experience of building the Illinois Valley Wine Trail itself.

The research does not reveal a single organizational model that the Illinois Valley should copy. Instead, successful wine trails have evolved structures appropriate to their geography, winery base, tourism economy, leadership capacity and available resources.

Several patterns appear consistently.

Strong wine trails distinguish **governance from management**. Winery owners may govern an organization while paid professionals perform its daily work. That professional capacity may take the form of an Executive Director, independent contractor, Chamber of Commerce, destination organization or outside marketing agency.

Small winery counts do not necessarily preclude professional management. Keuka Lake operates with a small winery membership while receiving contracted administration and marketing support from the Yates County Chamber of Commerce. Other small wine organizations use contractors or paid leadership.

Funding also extends far beyond traditional membership dues. The organizations examined use combinations of dues, winery assessments, event tickets, passports, advertising partnerships, grants, lodging-tax or tourism funding, sponsorships and in-kind winery contributions.

Events are not simply promotional expenses. In some mature trails, they have become substantial earned-revenue engines that help finance the organization itself.

Tourism businesses can participate without necessarily having the same governance rights as wineries. Several organizations distinguish between winery members and tourism partners, advertisers or associate members.

And perhaps most importantly for the Illinois Valley, a wine trail can function as more than a mechanism for selling wine. It can help connect visitors to lodging, food, recreation, shopping, agriculture, arts, downtowns and natural attractions.

That creates an opportunity, and a responsibility.

The Illinois Valley is not beginning with a blank map. It has Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve, public lands, trails, rivers, wineries, agriculture, arts and cultural assets, Dark Sky opportunities, small businesses, existing lodging and a history of tourism. What it currently lacks is the depth and coordination of visitor infrastructure found in mature wine destinations such as Hermann, Missouri or Dundee, Oregon.

The strategic question may therefore be less:

How do we build a successful four-winery trail?

and increasingly:

Can a small rural wine trail become a catalyst for rebuilding and expanding a visitor economy while stewarding the natural, cultural and community assets upon which that economy depends?

This report represents a checkpoint in that investigation, not its conclusion.

1. Why This Research Began

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail launched in 2026 with four participating wineries:

- Augustino Estate & Vineyard
- Bridgeview Vineyards
- Deer Creek Vineyards
- Foris Vineyards

The Trail was incubated through A Magical Canvas Experiences with a planned three-year development period through 2028 before determining its permanent organizational structure.

From the beginning, the Trail was conceived as more than a list of wineries.

Its working philosophy is summarized by its tagline:

Wine is the invitation. The Illinois Valley is the experience.

The Trail's passport, events, storytelling and tourism partnerships were intended to encourage visitors not merely to enter a tasting room, but to move through the Illinois Valley, return multiple times, discover additional businesses and potentially extend their stay.

That approach immediately raised organizational questions.

Who should ultimately govern the Trail?

Who should perform its daily work?

Should participating wineries pay dues, contribute wine and food, support events, or some combination?

Can four wineries generate enough revenue to support professional management?

What role should lodging, restaurants, recreation businesses, retailers, arts organizations and attractions have?

What relationship should exist between the Trail, the Illinois Valley Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Cave Junction, Visit Grants Pass, Travel Southern Oregon and other economic-development organizations?

And ultimately:

Is the permanent organization itself a wine trail, or is the Wine Trail one destination program within something broader?

Those questions became the basis of this research.

2. Research Approach

The research combined several forms of information.

Primary research

Direct interviews, telephone conversations and email correspondence were conducted with representatives of wine trails and wine-tourism organizations, including organizations such as:

- Applegate Valley
- Hermann Wine Trail
- Keuka Lake Wine Trail
- Bucks County Wine Trail
- Seneca Lake Wine Trail

These conversations were especially valuable because organizational practices such as management contracts, winery contributions, event economics and internal decision-making are not always visible on public websites.

Secondary research

Public sources included:

- Wine-trail websites
- Membership information
- IRS nonprofit filings

- Chamber and destination-organization materials
- Tourism-agency documents
- Government sources
- Event and passport materials
- Economic-development and rural-tourism resources

Supplemental destination research

As the project expanded, research also began examining communities and organizations outside the wine-trail model, including rural destinations, Main Street programs, Chambers of Commerce and tourism organizations.

These comparisons are included where they illuminate the larger destination-development question.

A note on certainty

Throughout this report, information is treated in three ways:

Confirmed: supported by public documentation or direct information from the organization.

Participant perspective: information shared during interviews or correspondence.

Observation or implication: an interpretation relevant to the Illinois Valley, rather than a claim about the benchmark organization.

Where information could not be confirmed, the report identifies it as unknown rather than filling gaps with assumptions.

3. The Illinois Valley Starting Point

Four wineries create both a constraint and an opportunity

The Illinois Valley currently has four wineries.

That means the Trail cannot build its long-term growth strategy around continually increasing winery membership.

Seneca Lake can have dozens of winery members. The Illinois Valley may never have more than a small handful.

That changes the growth equation.

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail's future growth is more likely to come through:

- increased visitation
- repeat visitation
- overnight stays
- visitor spending
- passports
- events
- tourism partnerships
- earned revenue
- sponsorship
- regional marketing
- lodging development
- destination products
- stronger connections among existing visitor assets

A small winery count therefore does not necessarily mean a small destination opportunity.

4. An Unusual Startup Advantage: Founder Capacity

One important difference between the Illinois Valley Wine Trail and several organizations examined in this research is the amount of operational capacity available during startup.

The Trail did not need to begin by hiring a website company, event producer, marketing agency, ecommerce consultant and administrator separately.

During incubation, its founder already possessed substantial professional capacity in:

- website development
- ecommerce and payment systems
- event design and production
- ticketing

- marketing
- communications
- social-media content
- graphic production
- partnership development
- organizational planning
- program administration

This allowed the Illinois Valley Wine Trail to bootstrap functions that another startup organization might have needed a Chamber, DMO, agency or multiple contractors to provide.

That likely contributed to the speed of development.

But this advantage also reveals a long-term organizational risk.

Founder capacity can accelerate incubation. Permanent organizational capacity cannot depend upon the founder.

The long-term organization must identify these functions independently of the person currently performing them, determine their actual value and cost, and create sufficient revenue to sustain them.

The question should therefore not be:

How much can four wineries afford to pay one person?

It should be:

What professional functions does this destination organization require, what do those functions actually cost, and how should those services be provided and funded?

5. Small-Trail Case Studies

Benchmark Snapshot

Organization	Approx. Winery Scale	Structure / Governance	Management Model	Revenue / Contribution Model	Particularly Relevant Lesson
Illinois Valley Wine Trail	4	Founder-led incubation	Founder provides broad professional capacity	Passport, events, partners, developing model	Small trail attempting destination development
Applegate	Small regional trail/association	Winery association	Professional management after earlier volunteer model	Winery support + events + grants	Volunteer capacity eventually becomes limiting
Hermann Wine Trail	6	Winery-governed business association	Paid professional management	2% voluntary assessment + events	Earned revenue and assessments can replace conventional dues
Keuka Lake Wine Trail	Small, currently 5 listed wineries	501(c)(6)	Chamber contracted for administration and marketing	Membership + visitor products + tourism advertising	Governance and operations can live in separate organizations
Bucks County Wine Trail	8 members	Incorporated nonprofit	Professional/contract support	Membership + programs + outside support	Small member organization can maintain professional capacity

Upper Rogue Wine Trail	6	Public structure not confirmed	Not confirmed	Ticketed Trail events	Excellent same-region scale comparator
Placer Wine Trail	Larger than IVWT, still instructive	501(c)(6) winery association	Professional Executive Director	Assessments + in-kind wine + events + associate members	Clearly defines winery obligations and tourism-business participation
Seneca Lake Wine Trail	28 members	501(c)(6) association	Professional Executive Director/staff	Events + programs + member support + advertising	Mature professional association
Finger Lakes Wine Country	Multi-county destination	Regional destination organization	Transitioning to agency-led marketing model	Regional destination funding	Governance can contract execution to an agency

6. Applegate: A Nearby Oregon Lesson in Capacity

The Applegate comparison is valuable because it operates in Southern Oregon and within a rural wine-tourism environment familiar to Illinois Valley wineries.

Direct research found that Applegate's organization began with significant self-management by participating wineries before professional administrative capacity became increasingly important.

The organization uses major collaborative events, particularly its Uncorked experiences, as both marketing and revenue-producing activities.

Participating wineries contribute substantially to the visitor experience through wine, food, staffing and participation rather than expecting the central organization to purchase every component.

Direct interview information indicated that the association invests roughly \$2,000 in marketing for an event while wineries bear much of the individual hospitality cost. Attendance has historically ranged into the hundreds, with stronger performance during some seasonal events than others.

An especially useful lesson from Applegate is that event participation itself can be a membership obligation.

The organization also demonstrated that events can finance broader marketing rather than merely consume marketing dollars.

Illinois Valley implication

IVWT should consider winery participation as more than a cash dues question.

Future winery agreements might reasonably define expectations around:

- event participation
- wine contributions
- food or pairing contributions
- content-production access
- media tastings
- committee participation
- collaborative promotion

The exact requirements should be developed with the wineries, but Applegate demonstrates that formal in-kind obligations are not inherently unusual.

7. Hermann Wine Trail: Building an Economy Around Trail Events

Hermann emerged as one of the most informative direct interviews in this research.

The Hermann Wine Trail currently presents six family-owned winery stops and operates six major wine-and-food events throughout the year. Its public event model is remarkably consistent: visitors purchase a central ticket, begin at any participating

winery, travel the Trail independently, and receive a featured wine-and-food pairing at each stop. Current tickets are generally \$35 and include a souvenir glass.

The events intentionally operate across the calendar, including February, spring, summer, November and December.

What the interview added

Direct conversation with Hermann leadership provided information not readily visible from its public visitor materials.

The Vintners Association preceded the modern Trail structure. The organization evolved into a 501(c)(6) model and is governed by winery participants.

Rather than relying solely on conventional fixed dues, Hermann developed a **voluntary 2% winery sales surcharge/assessment model** to support collective activity.

Its event program became an important revenue source.

Management also evolved. Work that had once been performed with substantial unpaid effort eventually became professional compensated work.

Hermann's event attendance can reach hundreds to more than a thousand participants depending upon the event, demonstrating that a wine trail can create substantial demand around particular weekends rather than simply waiting for ordinary tasting-room traffic.

What Hermann already had

There is, however, a critical difference between Hermann and Illinois Valley.

Hermann was already a tourism destination with substantial lodging capacity and an established visitor economy.

The Wine Trail could therefore create events that gave people additional reasons to travel to and stay in a place already equipped to host them.

Illinois Valley implication

Hermann's model cannot simply be copied.

Its more transferable lessons are:

Events can manufacture demand during otherwise weaker periods.

A trail can create significant earned revenue.

Winery financial contributions can be tied to business activity rather than only flat dues.

Professional management can emerge as the organization matures.

Lodging capacity changes the economic value of a wine-trail event.

For Illinois Valley, the question becomes not simply how to produce an event that attracts visitors, but whether sufficient lodging, dining and other infrastructure exists to retain their spending once they arrive.

8. Keuka Lake: Governance and Management Do Not Have to Live Together

Keuka Lake is among the strongest structural comparisons for IVWT.

The Keuka Lake Wine Trail identifies itself as a **501(c)(6) nonprofit membership organization** whose primary purpose is promoting member wineries and visitation to the Keuka Lake area. It celebrated 40 years in 2025.

The Trail has a longstanding relationship with the Yates County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center.

The Chamber describes the arrangement even more clearly: it has a **longstanding contract with the Keuka Lake Wine Trail as its administrative and marketing team**. The Chamber is also the designated Tourism Promotion Agency for Yates County.

This provides one of the clearest examples uncovered in the research of an independent wine-trail organization separating governance from execution.

Structure

Wine Trail organization: mission, membership and organizational identity.

Contracted Chamber/DMO: administration and marketing.

Keuka also sells advertising opportunities to transportation providers, restaurants, attractions, retail and other tourism businesses rather than necessarily treating all of them as winery members. Its tourism-partner marketing includes website placement, social exposure and email marketing.

Illinois Valley implication

IVWT does not necessarily need to employ every person who performs its work.

A future 501(c)(6) could theoretically contract:

- A Magical Canvas Experiences
- the Illinois Valley Chamber
- another agency
- an independent Executive Director
- another qualified provider

The provider can change.

The governing organization and mission can remain.

That distinction is central to succession planning.

9. Bucks County: Small Scale With Organizational Longevity

The Bucks County Wine Trail incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 2004 and currently describes itself as an eight-member organization focused on promoting and educating visitors about Bucks County wines and wineries.

Its public messaging explicitly connects winery visitation to day trips, weekend getaways and broader vacations.

Bucks also demonstrates that ordinary tasting-room activity and Trail programming do not need to become one system.

Individual wineries can maintain their own businesses and tasting structures while the Trail creates centralized collaborative experiences.

Illinois Valley implication

A strong wine trail does not require the wineries to surrender their individual identities, pricing systems or operating policies.

The Trail's job is to create **additional value between the wineries.**

That distinction is especially important in Illinois Valley, where each of the four wineries has a notably different personality and visitor experience.

10. Upper Rogue: A Six-Winery Neighbor Inside the Same Larger Wine Region

The Upper Rogue Wine Trail provides an unusually useful geographic comparison because it operates within Southern Oregon and the broader Rogue Valley wine identity.

Its 2026 Roam the Rogue event involved six participating wineries. A \$49 ticket included two wines and two paired appetizers at each winery plus a commemorative Riedel glass. A \$15 designated-driver ticket included appetizers and nonalcoholic beverages.

The Trail also promoted transportation providers and a lodging discount associated with the event, explicitly encouraging visitors to turn the experience into a weekend or multi-day stay.

Illinois Valley implication

Upper Rogue demonstrates something strategically important:

Distinct subregional wine identities can coexist within the larger Rogue Valley wine region.

Illinois Valley does not need to disappear into a broader Rogue Valley identity in order to collaborate with it.

The relationship can be layered rather than competitive.

11. Placer: Defining What Membership Actually Requires

The Placer County Vintners Association is a 501(c)(6) trade association established in 2010 to promote the commercial wine industry in Placer County. It governs the Placer Wine Trail through a winery-member board and lists a professional Executive Director.

Its membership requirements are particularly instructive.

Commercial winery members agree to support the organization's purpose and policies, participate in events, serve on at least one committee or subcommittee, remain subject to approved assessments and **donate at least two cases of wine annually.**

This is one of the clearest examples found of explicitly defining in-kind participation as part of membership.

Placer also operates an associate membership program.

Eligible participants include tourism and hospitality businesses, restaurants, hotels, resorts, transportation providers, tour operators, specialty-food producers, media, Chambers, cities and economic-development organizations.

Published associate levels range from \$300 to \$2,500.

Illinois Valley implication

This model offers a useful answer to a recurring IVWT question.

Including tourism businesses does not require treating wineries and tourism businesses identically.

An organization can distinguish between:

core industry members

and

associate tourism/business partners.

This remains one possible model even if IVWT ultimately becomes part of a broader Tourism Alliance.

12. Seneca Lake: What Professionalization Looks Like at Scale

Seneca Lake is intentionally included even though it is much larger than IVWT.

It demonstrates what a mature wine-trail association can eventually become.

The organization is led by Executive Director Brittany Gibson, who joined the Trail in 2018 and leads strategic marketing, member engagement and regional tourism initiatives.

Its tourism ecosystem includes separate lodging, dining and attraction advertisers rather than folding every tourism business into winery membership.

Public IRS-derived financial information provides a rare look at professional management economics.

For 2024, the organization reported:

2024 Seneca Lake Winery Association	Amount
Revenue	\$502,435
Expenses	\$629,628
Net assets	\$453,429
Program-service revenue	\$132,211
Net fundraising revenue	\$347,046
Executive Director direct compensation	\$88,280
Other ED compensation	\$2,657
Other salaries/wages	\$61,535

Winery officers listed in the filing received no compensation, while professional staff were paid.

The organization also reported six promotional events selling 4,430 tickets during the 2024 reporting period.

Illinois Valley implication

Seneca reinforces a principle visible across multiple benchmarks:

Volunteer member governance does not imply volunteer professional management.

The board can represent and govern the industry while professional staff are compensated to execute the work.

13. Finger Lakes Wine Country: Think in Layers

Finger Lakes Wine Country provides the larger destination-system comparison.

The organization represents **five counties, three wine trails and approximately 3,065 square miles**. Its visitor messaging extends well beyond wine to communities, outdoor recreation, lakes, food, culture and other experiences.

This produces an important organizational hierarchy:

individual business

↓

wine trail

↓

regional wine/destination organization

↓

larger tourism system

The existence of the larger destination organization does not eliminate Keuka or Seneca.

The smaller identities remain valuable.

A particularly important 2026 development

In February 2026, Finger Lakes Wine Country issued an RFP announcing a deliberate transition toward an **agency-led operational model**.

The organization sought a full-service marketing agency to function as its outsourced marketing department and long-term brand partner, working with its Board of Directors on destination strategy, brand stewardship and integrated marketing.

This is highly relevant to IVWT.

It demonstrates that even a mature destination organization may decide:

governance belongs with the organization

while

professional execution can be contracted to an agency.

This does not establish that IVWT should contract A Magical Canvas Experiences.

It establishes that an agency-led model is a legitimate organizational option worthy of consideration.

14. What the Wine-Trail Benchmarks Reveal

Finding 1: Governance and management are different jobs

Across the research, governing bodies commonly represent members and establish mission, budgets and policy.

Daily execution is often professionalized separately.

Possible models include:

- paid Executive Director
- contracted administrator
- marketing/management agency
- Chamber/DMO contract
- hybrid staffing

The central question is therefore not whether IVWT should have a board **or** professional management.

It may need both.

Finding 2: Small does not necessarily mean volunteer-run

Keuka demonstrates that a small winery membership can maintain professional administrative and marketing support.

Placer demonstrates formal professional leadership alongside winery governance.

Applegate's experience illustrates the limitations that can arise when organizations depend heavily upon volunteer capacity.

Size affects the budget.

It does not eliminate the need for the work.

Finding 3: Dues are only one tool

The organizations studied use combinations of:

- fixed dues
- assessments
- percentage-based contributions
- ticket revenue
- passports
- sponsorship
- advertising
- grants
- tourism funding
- lodging-tax support
- merchandise
- in-kind contributions

Hermann's percentage-based model is especially noteworthy because it links member contributions more directly to economic activity.

Finding 4: Events can be revenue engines

Wine-trail events are often treated as destination products in their own right.

The central organization markets and tickets the experience.

Participating wineries provide hospitality, wine, food and staffing.

Visitors move through the region.

That creates revenue for both the Trail and individual wineries while also supporting restaurants, lodging and other businesses.

The implication for IVWT is significant:

Events should not automatically be viewed as marketing expenses.

Well-designed events can become part of the organization's operating model.

Finding 5: The Trail itself should be the product

The strongest distributed events give visitors a reason to complete multiple stops.

The individual wineries remain distinctive, but the event creates a coherent experience connecting them.

This principle can inform future development of Savor the Season, Passport Pours and other IVWT programs.

Finding 6: Passports are more than discount books

Passports can function as:

- visitor-acquisition tools
- repeat-visitation incentives
- itinerary builders
- completion challenges

- data-collection mechanisms
- email-list builders
- seasonal products
- revenue generators
- cross-business referral tools

IVWT's Founders Edition Passport therefore has strategic value beyond the dollar value of its included benefits.

Finding 7: In-kind participation has economic value

Winery participation does not need to consist entirely of cash.

Placer formally requires donated wine.

Applegate wineries provide wine, food and event resources.

Other trail events similarly depend upon winery-supplied hospitality.

IVWT should therefore consider tracking the value of in-kind contributions including:

- event wine
- food
- tasting experiences
- media visits
- content-production access
- complimentary tastings used for Trail marketing
- staff time
- venue use

A winery providing resources is investing in the Trail even when no check changes hands.

Likewise, Trail operating costs do not become zero merely because the founder personally absorbs them.

15. Who Does the Work?

The research suggests at least four management models.

Model	Advantage	Vulnerability
Founder/volunteer	Low cash requirement; speed; entrepreneurial flexibility	Burnout, succession risk, hidden true cost
Staff Executive Director	Accountability and dedicated capacity	Requires dependable operating revenue
Independent contractor/agency	Flexible access to multiple professional skills	Requires clear scope, oversight and conflict policies
Chamber/DMO contract	Existing infrastructure and tourism relationships	Trail may become vulnerable to another organization's staffing or priorities

No model is inherently correct.

The durable principle is:

The organization should know what work must be done, who is accountable for doing it, how performance is measured, and how the work will be funded.

For IVWT, a future 501(c)(6) could contract professional management rather than directly employing staff.

If A Magical Canvas Experiences were considered for that work, appropriate governance safeguards would be essential, including documented scope, reasonable market-based compensation, board approval, conflict-of-interest procedures and recusal from decisions involving the contract.

This structure should be designed to survive regardless of who owns or manages A Magical Canvas Experiences in the future.

16. Why 501(c)(6) Is Emerging as the Working Direction

This research examined both 501(c)(5) agricultural organizations and 501(c)(6) business-league models.

Organizations such as Berks County demonstrate that a wine organization can operate under an agricultural structure.

However, IVWT's developing mission extends beyond agricultural producers.

Its intended ecosystem includes:

- wineries
- lodging
- restaurants and food businesses
- recreation
- attractions
- retail
- arts and culture
- transportation
- tourism services

For that reason, the 501(c)(6) business-league model currently appears more aligned with the direction being developed.

This report treats **501(c)(6) as the working organizational direction**, while recognizing that final formation, tax and governance decisions should be reviewed by qualified legal and tax professionals.

17. From Wine Trail to Rural Destination

The benchmarking eventually exposed a more fundamental difference between Illinois Valley and some mature wine destinations.

Hermann already possessed extensive visitor infrastructure.

Dundee, Oregon evolved over decades into a recognizable wine and agritourism destination.

Illinois Valley has significant attractions but less coordinated visitor infrastructure.

This means IVWT may not simply be organizing wine tourism **inside an existing destination economy**.

It may be helping strengthen the destination economy itself.

18. Dundee: What Happens When Wine Becomes Part of the Place

A community perspective gathered from a longtime Dundee-area resident described a transformation from a small town that happened to have wine into a community strongly associated with agritourism.

The observations included:

- growing winery and restaurant cooperation
- shuttle and transportation businesses
- wine events and passport-style experiences
- expansion of vacation rentals and other lodging
- increased visitor activity
- resident benefits including maintained parks and trails
- some friction around traffic and visitor behavior
- continued concerns about downtown walkability and community design

These are participant observations rather than a formal economic-impact study, but they are useful because they demonstrate that tourism development creates both opportunities and community-management questions.

Dundee's official destination marketing now explicitly packages wine with restaurants, shopping, lodging and outdoor experiences, including boutique hotel, B&B and vacation-rental accommodations.

Illinois Valley implication

Tourism development should not be measured solely by visitor counts.

The better question is:

What kind of destination are we creating for visitors and residents simultaneously?

19. Lodging Is a Destination-Development Question

One of the clearest differences between Illinois Valley and mature wine destinations is lodging capacity.

Before drawing conclusions, Illinois Valley needs an actual lodging inventory.

That inventory should include:

- hotels and motels
- bed-and-breakfasts
- vacation rentals
- cabins
- farm stays
- guesthouses
- RV parks
- campgrounds
- unconventional lodging
- winery-associated lodging
- other legal short-term accommodations

The question should not simply be:

How do we attract a hotel?

It should be:

How do we increase appropriate overnight visitor capacity?

In a rural community, additional capacity may emerge incrementally through existing property owners, small businesses, agricultural properties and unconventional lodging rather than through one large hotel development.

Future research should examine zoning, permitting, infrastructure, insurance, financing, lodging taxes, market demand and available public or economic-development assistance before recommending specific programs.

A future tourism organization could also potentially provide technical information for residents or entrepreneurs interested in entering the visitor-accommodation market.

The objective would not be indiscriminate short-term rental growth.

It would be intentional destination development that balances visitor demand, housing needs and community impacts.

20. Existing Visitors May Be the First Market

Illinois Valley already contains major visitor assets.

Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve is perhaps the most obvious example.

Additional research should verify current annual visitation and examine visitor movement through the Illinois Valley.

The important economic-development question is not merely:

How many people visit Oregon Caves?

It is:

- Where do they sleep?
- Where do they eat?
- Do they visit Cave Junction?
- Do they visit wineries?
- Do they shop?
- Do they know what else exists?
- How long do they stay?
- How much of their spending remains in the Illinois Valley?

If substantial visitor traffic already exists, the first destination-development opportunity may not be attracting entirely new travelers.

It may be **capturing more value from visitors already moving through the region.**

21. Destination Stewardship

As the research expanded beyond wine trails, another concept became increasingly important:

destination stewardship.

Traditional destination marketing asks:

How do we bring people here?

Destination stewardship adds:

How do we care for the place when they come?

For Illinois Valley, that potentially includes:

- trails
- forests
- rivers and waterways
- Oregon Caves
- Dark Sky resources
- agricultural landscapes
- public lands
- cultural resources
- community character
- visitor behavior
- resident quality of life

Tourism depends upon these assets.

Long-term tourism development therefore has an interest in protecting them.

A future Illinois Valley destination organization could potentially combine:

economic development + destination marketing + stewardship.

That possibility deserves further research before determining the organization's final mission or name.

22. The Central Organizational Question

The research ultimately brings IVWT to a fork in the road.

Are we building an Illinois Valley Wine Trail organization that partners with tourism businesses, or are we ultimately building a broader Illinois Valley tourism and destination-stewardship organization whose flagship destination program is the Illinois Valley Wine Trail?

Both models are plausible.

Model A: Illinois Valley Wine Trail as the organization

501(c)(6)

Wineries form the primary governing membership.

Tourism businesses participate through partner, sponsor, advertiser or associate categories.

The organization primarily advances wine tourism while creating broader destination benefits.

Strengths

Clear industry identity.

Simple mission.

Strong winery control.

Easy public understanding.

Questions

How far can a wine organization reasonably move into lodging, recreation, downtown development and destination stewardship before its mission becomes awkwardly broad?

Model B: A broader Illinois Valley Tourism/Destination Alliance

501(c)(6)

The organization represents the broader visitor economy.

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail remains a major consumer-facing brand and flagship destination program.

Other future initiatives might include:

- visitor information
- lodging development
- outdoor-recreation itineraries
- Dark Sky tourism
- agritourism
- arts and culture
- culinary tourism
- destination stewardship
- visitor passports
- collaborative destination campaigns

Strengths

Allows the organization to address the visitor economy directly.

Creates a natural home for multiple business sectors.

Reduces pressure to make every destination initiative somehow fit beneath a wine label.

Questions

How are wineries guaranteed appropriate influence over the Wine Trail?

Who owns and governs the IVWT brand?

How should voting membership be structured?

How does the Alliance avoid duplicating existing organizations?

23. Possible Working Identity: Illinois Valley Tourism Alliance

“Illinois Valley Tourism Alliance” has emerged as a useful working concept rather than a finalized name.

The word **Alliance** is particularly relevant.

It does not imply replacement of:

- Illinois Valley Chamber of Commerce
- Main Street Cave Junction
- IVCDO
- Visit Grants Pass
- Travel Southern Oregon
- wineries
- recreation organizations
- public agencies

Instead, it suggests coordination.

However, the newer emphasis on stewardship raises a naming and mission question worth exploring.

Should the future identity emphasize:

tourism

destination

stewardship

or some combination?

The mission should be determined before the name.

24. Could the Alliance Initially Be Housed in the Chamber?

Keuka demonstrates that a Chamber can provide professional administration and marketing to an independent wine trail.

Other rural models demonstrate even deeper Chamber involvement in tourism.

For example, Wallowa County directs 50% of its net transient-lodging-tax receipts to the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce, with at least half of that allocation required for tourism and business-development promotion.

This makes a Chamber-based or Chamber-incubated model worth discussing in Illinois Valley.

Possible structures could include:

a Chamber tourism council

an Alliance initially incubated by the Chamber

an independent Alliance contracting with the Chamber

an independent Alliance collaborating closely with the Chamber

No option should be selected before determining:

- governance
 - funding
 - staffing capacity
 - brand ownership
 - decision-making authority
 - long-term succession
 - organizational responsibilities
-

25. The Missing Connective Tissue

Illinois Valley already has organizations serving different pieces of community and economic development.

The opportunity is not necessarily to create another organization that duplicates all of them.

The better question is:

What important work currently falls between organizations?

Potential roles include:

Organization / Sector	Primary Role to Explore
Chamber of Commerce	Business support, membership, advocacy, business connections
Main Street Cave Junction	Downtown vitality, placemaking, business district development
IVCDO	Community development
Visit Grants Pass	Destination marketing and regional visitor promotion
Travel Southern Oregon	Regional tourism strategy and marketing
Illinois Valley Wine Trail	Wine-tourism product and visitor activation
Future Alliance	Coordination, destination development, stewardship and visitor-economy strategy

These boundaries require discussion with the organizations themselves.

26. Main Street and the Visitor Economy

Rural destination development does not stop at attraction marketing.

Visitors need a place worth walking through, eating in, shopping in and returning to.

Silver City, New Mexico provides a useful Main Street comparison.

Silver City MainStreet describes its mission as economic development through historic preservation, creative placemaking, downtown events and development of new uses for downtown buildings.

Its downtown guide connects visitors directly to restaurants, shops, galleries and lodging.

Historical economic-impact reporting associated with the program documented business growth, building rehabilitation, public and private investment and job creation.

The point is not that Cave Junction should copy Silver City.

The lesson is that **Main Street organizations can function as active economic-development and destination partners rather than simply event organizations.**

27. A Local Business-Support Question

A personal experience during the opening of a downtown Illinois Valley business in 2024 raised another question relevant to this research.

The new business did not receive coordinated outreach welcoming it downtown, introducing available Chamber/Main Street resources or connecting it with a broader business-support network.

One anecdote does not establish an organization-wide pattern.

But it raises an important question worth investigating:

When a new business opens in the Illinois Valley, who welcomes it, connects it to resources, incorporates it into the business community and helps it become part of the visitor economy?

This becomes especially important if tourism development is expected to stimulate new restaurants, lodging, retail, recreation or visitor services.

Destination development cannot consist solely of generating demand.

The community also needs systems that help local entrepreneurs respond to that demand.

28. Stewardship, Main Street and Tourism Are Connected

The emerging destination model is not:

Get more tourists.

It is a loop.

Protect and improve the place

↓

Support local entrepreneurs

↓

Create strong visitor experiences

↓

Market those experiences

↓

Increase visitor spending

↓

Strengthen local businesses and public resources

↓

Reinvest in the place

A successful destination organization should therefore be interested in both the visitor and the resident.

29. A Possible Development Path for Illinois Valley

The research suggests that IVWT does not need to determine its permanent structure immediately.

Its existing three-year incubation period provides room to build evidence before institutionalizing the organization.

Stage One: Build and Prove | 2026

Develop:

- IVWT brand
- Passport
- events
- visitor relationships
- winery relationships
- tourism partnerships
- digital infrastructure
- content
- baseline data
- operating procedures

Stage Two: Coordinate and Measure | 2027

Develop:

- clearer winery participation standards
- partner/member categories
- destination metrics
- visitor-origin tracking
- event economics
- lodging inventory
- stronger Chamber/DMO relationships

- earned-revenue strategy
- stewardship partnerships
- broader destination programming
- Alliance feasibility

Stage Three: Institutionalize | 2028

Determine:

- permanent 501(c)(6) structure
- organizational mission
- governance
- voting membership
- professional management model
- management compensation
- brand ownership
- conflict-of-interest procedures
- long-term funding
- succession
- formal regional relationships

The organization does not need to know its final form today.

It does need to build deliberately toward one.

30. Questions for the Next Phase

The research has produced more useful questions than easy answers.

Organizational identity

Are we building a Wine Trail organization with tourism partners?

Or a broader tourism/destination-stewardship organization with the Wine Trail as its flagship program?

Governance

Who should ultimately vote?

What decisions should remain specifically under winery control?

Should different membership classes have different governance rights?

Winery participation

What should participating wineries contribute financially?

What should they contribute in-kind?

Should IVWT establish a standard monthly content-production visit with reasonable complimentary tasting access?

What are winery responsibilities during ticketed Trail events?

Professional management

What professional functions does the organization require?

What is their market value?

Should those functions eventually be provided by employees, contractors, a Chamber or an agency?

Funding

What percentage of the organization's budget should eventually come from:

- member contributions
- tourism partners
- passports
- events
- sponsorship
- grants
- public tourism funding
- other earned revenue?

Lodging

What is the Illinois Valley's actual lodging inventory?

What is its occupancy?

Where are the gaps?

Could appropriate vacation rentals, farm stays, cabins, B&Bs, RV accommodations or other rural lodging increase overnight capacity?

What barriers prevent those businesses from developing?

Visitor economics

How many people already travel through Illinois Valley?

How many stop?

How many stay?

Where do they spend?

How much potential spending leaves the Valley?

Business development

Who welcomes a new business?

Who connects entrepreneurs to financing, technical assistance and destination marketing?

What should the Chamber provide?

What should Main Street provide?

What should other organizations provide?

Stewardship

How do we increase visitation without degrading the landscapes and community character that make visitation desirable?

How can tourism contribute financially or organizationally to stewardship?

How should residents participate in destination planning?

Measurement

What would happen if IVWT stopped measuring success only through wine-trail metrics?

Could success eventually include:

- overnight stays
 - local visitor spending
 - partner referrals
 - lodging development
 - business openings
 - repeat visitation
 - Trail completions
 - email growth
 - shoulder-season traffic
 - downtown activity
 - stewardship investment
 - resident sentiment?
-

Conclusion: Wine Is the Invitation

This research began with a small question.

How do you build a successful wine trail with four wineries?

Wine trails across the country provided pieces of the answer.

Applegate demonstrates the power of collaborative events and winery contribution.

Hermann demonstrates that events can become an economic engine and that professional management can emerge from a member-governed organization.

Keuka demonstrates that an independent 501(c)(6) can contract its administration and marketing to another organization.

Placer demonstrates that winery obligations and tourism-business participation can be formally defined without making every participant identical.

Seneca demonstrates the scale and professional capacity a mature wine-trail organization can develop.

Finger Lakes Wine Country demonstrates that individual wine trails can retain their identities within a much larger destination system and that even mature destination organizations can separate governance from agency-led execution.

Dundee demonstrates what can happen when wine, food, lodging and agriculture become part of a community's destination identity.

Silver City demonstrates how downtown revitalization, entrepreneurship, culture, recreation and tourism can reinforce one another.

None of these places is Illinois Valley.

That may be the most important finding of all.

Illinois Valley has four wineries.

It also has Oregon Caves, forests, rivers, trails, Dark Sky potential, agriculture, artists, small businesses, rural landscapes, communities and people capable of creating experiences around them.

The Wine Trail does not need to become all of those things.

It can connect them.

A visitor might arrive because of wine.

Another may arrive because of Oregon Caves.

Another may come for a trail, river, event or dark sky.

The destination succeeds when those visitors discover reasons to stay for dinner, sleep locally, have breakfast, visit a shop, explore another attraction, return in another season and tell someone else that the Illinois Valley is worth more than driving through.

That is a larger proposition than promoting four tasting rooms.

It is destination development.

And if it is pursued intentionally, it also becomes destination stewardship: strengthening the local economy while protecting and improving the place that makes the economy possible.

That brings the research back to the question that now sits at the center of the Illinois Valley Wine Trail's next phase:

Are we building an Illinois Valley Wine Trail organization that partners with tourism businesses, or are we ultimately building a broader Illinois Valley tourism and destination-stewardship organization whose flagship destination program is the Illinois Valley Wine Trail?

The answer should not be rushed.

The Wine Trail is still in its incubation period. The research will continue. Winery partners, tourism businesses, community organizations, the Chamber, Main Street, regional tourism organizations and the Advisory Council all have perspectives that should inform the decision.

But the direction of the work is becoming clearer.

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail began by connecting wineries.

Its larger opportunity may be connecting a destination.

Wine is the invitation. The Illinois Valley is the experience.