

Illinois Valley Wine Trail Advisory Council

Inaugural Meeting Brief

September 23, 2026 | Illinois Valley Branch Library | Cave Junction, Oregon

Meeting Overview

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail convened its inaugural Advisory Council meeting on September 23, bringing together representatives and community voices from tourism, hospitality, arts and culture, wine, media, business, outdoor recreation, and regional destination development.

The meeting marked the beginning of a broader conversation about how the Illinois Valley can strengthen its visitor economy through greater coordination, shared resources, and practical collaboration.

The Council is **advisory rather than governing**. Its role is to help identify opportunities, connect organizations and resources, surface gaps, and inform the direction of visitor-focused work during IVWT's three-year incubation period.

A central question guided the meeting:

How can we work together to create a stronger, more connected visitor experience throughout the Illinois Valley?

From a Wine Trail to a Visitor-Economy Conversation

IVWT shared lessons emerging from its 2026 wine-trail benchmarking and rural tourism research.

While the research began with a relatively narrow question about how successful small wine trails operate, it has increasingly pointed toward a larger issue: successful trails do not operate in isolation. They function within broader tourism ecosystems

involving chambers, destination organizations, businesses, attractions, local governments, community organizations, and regional partners.

The Illinois Valley already has many of these pieces.

The discussion therefore focused less on creating another organization and more on understanding:

- What work is already being done?
- Where are organizations working toward similar goals?
- Where are there opportunities to share resources?
- What visitor-related work is currently falling between organizations?
- How can organizations identify overlapping efforts before independently building separate solutions?

Recent conversations between IVWT and the Illinois Valley Chamber reinforced this question. Both organizations had independently begun thinking about tourism-focused advisory or coordination efforts.

No organizational structure was determined at this meeting. Instead, participants recognized the value of continuing to explore how existing and emerging efforts can complement one another.

What We Heard

Several themes emerged from the Council discussion.

Coordination Before New Infrastructure

There was strong interest in understanding and connecting existing resources before creating new programs, committees, or organizational structures.

The discussion highlighted opportunities for closer coordination among the Illinois Valley Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Cave Junction, Illinois Valley Community Development Organization, Visit Grants Pass, regional tourism partners, the Illinois Valley Wine Trail, businesses, attractions, and community organizations.

The Council itself will remain flexible as those relationships develop.

Visitor Information Needs to Be Easier to Find

Participants discussed the difficulty visitors can have finding consolidated, current information about what to do throughout the Illinois Valley.

Existing resources are spread among individual organizations, websites, social media pages, event calendars, businesses, and regional tourism organizations.

The opportunity is not necessarily to duplicate those resources, but to make them easier to discover and connect.

Regional Relationships Matter

The Illinois Valley's visitor economy extends beyond the Valley itself.

Discussion identified opportunities to strengthen relationships with Visit Grants Pass, the Grants Pass & Josephine County Chamber of Commerce, Curry County communities and organizations, Travel Oregon, visitor centers, ranger stations, and communities along both the I-5 and Highway 101 travel corridors.

Visit Grants Pass was identified as an especially important regional partner. One framing discussed during the meeting was positioning the Illinois Valley as an additional experience approximately 30 minutes beyond Grants Pass, rather than treating the two destinations as competitors.

Participants also identified the need to clarify what IVWT and Illinois Valley partners need from Visit Grants Pass and what the Valley can provide in return.

Highway 199 Visitor Communication Project

The upcoming Highway 199 construction impacts provide an immediate opportunity to put collaboration into practice.

Potential four-hour closures beginning in 2027 could create a particular challenge during the Illinois Valley's already vulnerable winter visitor season.

Rather than simply communicating a road closure, the project will explore how travelers can be encouraged to **spend their waiting time discovering the Illinois Valley.**

Emerging Direction

Discussion supported a combination of **print and digital visitor information.**

A printed guide could provide durable visitor information while directing travelers through a QR code to a living digital resource containing current information, itineraries, visitor resources, and appropriate links for current highway conditions.

Because printed visitor information can become outdated quickly, participants discussed keeping initial print quantities relatively small.

Potential distribution locations discussed included gas stations, lodging properties, visitor centers, the O'Brien area, Grants Pass, Ashland, Brookings, Crescent City, ranger stations and other locations along likely travel routes.

Additional distribution and promotion possibilities included regional rack-card networks, social media, school/family communication channels, and itinerary-friendly platforms such as Pinterest.

Potential project partners and resources raised during the discussion included Visit Grants Pass, Travel Oregon, local chambers, regional chambers, public lands/ranger stations, local businesses, attractions, local government, and regional tourism organizations.

Questions Still to Be Answered

The project team still needs to determine the guide's final size and length, content categories, initial print quantity, printing costs or partnerships, distribution network, digital structure, and communication strategy.

IVWT will also explore whether Bigfoot Print & Copy may be interested in participating as a community printing partner and investigate the requirements and costs associated with regional visitor-information rack distribution.

October 15 Highway 199 Working Session

The next working session for the Highway 199 Visitor Communication Project is scheduled for:

Thursday, October 15, 2026 | 1:00 PM

This will be a **working meeting rather than another general discussion**.

The session will focus on turning the concept developed by the Advisory Council into a defined project framework, including:

Guide structure and length → content and categories → print/digital relationship → distribution strategy → communication strategy → partner roles → immediate assignments

Additional invitations and working materials will be distributed before the session.

Participation will not be limited to Advisory Council members. Individuals and organizations with relevant knowledge, resources, distribution connections, or an interest in helping develop the project will have opportunities to participate.

Winter & Holiday Visitor Opportunities

The discussion also turned toward a broader question: **How can the Illinois Valley create reasons to visit during the quieter winter season?**

Rather than immediately creating multiple new events, participants discussed beginning with **one focused December effort** and connecting experiences that already exist.

Ideas raised included a community Christmas lights map, Christmas tree farm experiences, a possible Santa component, business specials tied to holiday activities, and promotion of existing holiday markets and events.

Existing activities such as local artisan and Guild holiday sales could become part of a broader visitor-facing collection of **holiday and winter happenings** rather than competing as separate events.

The Illinois Valley Chamber's developing community calendar and Illinois Valley News event listings were identified as existing resources that could help support this work.

IVWT can also use its communication channels to help identify holiday happenings throughout the Valley.

This remains an exploratory opportunity, not a committed new IVWT event.

Following the meeting, Council participant Susan Fischer-Maki began follow-up research into existing Southern Oregon holiday and Christmas-light trail models to identify lessons learned and best practices that may be useful locally.

Photography & Destination Media

Another significant gap identified during the meeting was the availability of **current, high-quality destination photography that organizations have permission to use.**

Some Illinois Valley imagery is already available through regional partners, including materials previously shared by Visit Grants Pass, but participants identified the need for a broader and more current local collection.

Ideas discussed included:

- creating a shared photography asset library;
- identifying existing usable images before commissioning new work;
- exploring photography or imaging equipment available through community partners;
- inviting residents and photographers to contribute images;
- using a submission form or coordinated hashtag campaign;
- potentially developing a photo competition around lesser-known or “secret” Illinois Valley places.

The goal is to begin developing the photography library **before the end of 2026.**

Where that library should ultimately live remains intentionally unresolved. IVWT and the Illinois Valley Chamber have already begun discussing the photography project,

and its long-term home should reflect the larger coordination conversation rather than being predetermined.

Emerging Action Items

The meeting produced several immediate follow-up items:

Action	Initial Lead / Connection	Status
Convene Highway 199 working session on Oct. 15	IVWT / Mercy Bordeaux	Scheduled
Define guide layout, length, content and communication strategy	Highway 199 working group	Oct. 15
Explore community printing partnership with Bigfoot Print & Copy	IVWT	Follow-up
Investigate Travel Oregon/rack distribution options and costs	IVWT / partners	Research
Identify additional regional distribution locations	Working group	In development
Begin photography asset-library development	IVWT + potential partners	Before year-end
Contact Caitlyn regarding Guild imaging resources	IVWT	Follow-up
Explore community photo-submission options	Photography project	Research
Research Southern Oregon holiday/light-trail models	Susan Fischer-Maki	Underway
Explore stronger Curry County tourism connections	IVWT / partners	Future outreach

Clarify opportunities and mutual expectations with Visit Grants Pass	IVWT / regional partners	Ongoing
Continue exploring coordination with existing Illinois Valley organizations	Council / community partners	Ongoing

These items represent a mixture of **confirmed actions and areas for further investigation**. Inclusion in this brief does not necessarily represent a formal commitment by every organization discussed.

Organizational Structure Remains Open

The Illinois Valley Wine Trail is currently operating within its planned three-year incubation period.

Research presented to the Council included a variety of organizational models used by wine trails and rural destination organizations, including nonprofit and membership-based structures, contracted management, chamber partnerships, and collaborative models.

IVWT continues to evaluate its appropriate long-term structure, including the **501(c)(6) model**, while also asking a larger question:

Where should different pieces of Illinois Valley visitor-economy work naturally live?

The goal is not to select an organizational chart first and then force the work into it.

Conversations with the Illinois Valley Chamber have revealed overlapping interest in tourism coordination. That creates an opportunity to explore alignment rather than automatically creating parallel infrastructure.

No decision was made regarding the Council's eventual organizational home or structure.

Ways to Participate

The Advisory Council is intended to create pathways for participation beyond the people sitting at the Council table.

As projects become more clearly defined, IVWT will publish opportunities for businesses, organizations, residents, volunteers, photographers, and regional partners to contribute.

Immediate opportunities will include:

Highway 199 Visitor Communication Project

Participate in the October 15 working session or contribute information, visitor resources, distribution connections, or project expertise.

Illinois Valley Photography Project

Future opportunities are expected for photographers, businesses, organizations, and residents to contribute usable destination imagery.

Holiday & Winter Happenings

Businesses and organizations will be invited to share existing holiday events, activities, experiences, and visitor opportunities as this concept develops.

Additional participation opportunities will be added as specific needs and roles are identified.

Organizations do not need to attend every Advisory Council meeting to participate in the work. Meeting briefs and project materials will be made available following meetings so that invited organizations, community partners, and other stakeholders can review the discussion, provide feedback, contribute resources, and participate in relevant working groups.

What Happens Next

The Advisory Council's first meeting was intentionally the beginning of a process rather than an attempt to solve every visitor-economy question in one afternoon.

The immediate test is practical:

Can we take one shared challenge, Highway 199, connect the people and resources already available, and build something useful together?

The October 15 working session will move that project into its next stage.

A future full Advisory Council meeting is anticipated in **January 2027**, although its format may evolve as conversations continue with existing organizations and partners.

Improving Hybrid Participation

The inaugural meeting also provided useful lessons about virtual participation. Because the free Google Meet session was limited to one hour, remote participants were disconnected before the full meeting concluded. Future Council meetings will use a platform or meeting setup that accommodates the full session and allows remote participants to remain engaged throughout the discussion.

Meeting Resources

The Advisory Council webpage will serve as the continuing home for meeting and project materials, including:

September 23 presentation • Meeting Brief • Highway 199 project materials • working documents • future participation opportunities • follow-up resources

The presentation and supporting materials provide additional background on IVWT's three-year experiment, wine-trail benchmarking, rural tourism research, Illinois Valley tourism ecosystem, and Highway 199 project.

A Closing Thought

The first Advisory Council meeting did not produce a new organization, a finished tourism strategy, or a stack of predetermined answers.

It did something more useful for a first meeting: **it connected people, surfaced overlapping work, identified tangible gaps, and produced a project around which collaboration can actually be tested.**

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