

STEP 3: Three team members answered the High Springs questions (Steps 1 & 2 are outlined on pp 5–10)

Would you go to High Springs?

If NO, why not?

If YES, what would you do? How long would you stay?

Tyler—No

“It looks like there are a couple of cool bed and breakfasts but that’s not up my alley. I couldn’t find anything else interesting besides several state parks that didn’t seem to have anything different than I can get closer to home.”

Denise—Overnight

“I would stay overnight at the Grady House Bed and Breakfast and then canoe or kayak the Santa Fe River or go cave diving in Ginnie Springs.”

Carol—Day trip

“I could spend a few hours exploring downtown for architecture and history. Some shopping and maybe a drive through O’Leno State Park.”

Search Terms Used

Things to do High Springs Florida
Shopping High Springs Florida
Places to stay High Springs Florida
High Springs, FL wiki
B & B High Springs FL

Websites Visited

www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g34287-High_Springs_Florida-Vacations.html
www.highsprings.com/welcome
www.visitflorida.com/en-us/cities/high-springs.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Springs_Florida
<http://highsprings.us/>
www.highsprings.com/welcome
www.facebook.com/HighSpringsChamberOfCommerce
www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g34287-Activities-High_Springs_Florida.html



Onsite Assessment

A team of six conducted the on-site assessment of Alachua County on October 4–13, 2014 and November 8–12, 2014. The purpose of this phase was to experience the community the same way a visitor might. No one knew who we were (not even the *Visit Gainesville* staff).

Team members visited High Springs multiple times to understand what visitors experience. These visits took place on various days and at different times of day. We took pictures, explored, visited attractions, made purchases, ate in restaurants and talked to business owners, residents and other visitors.

Finding High Springs

Finding their destination is the first task for most visitors and finding the city of High Springs is easy. Finding downtown can be difficult, even dangerous, if you're westbound on US 441.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



This is an odd traffic situation. The lack of a traditional T-intersection makes it difficult for westbound visitors to know what to do. Adding the second arrow doesn't resolve the problem. Think about another sign about 250 feet before the turn and indicate that it's a fork, not a turn. This will help people know what to look for.

Adding another sign 200 feet before the light at Main Street would give people another opportunity to make the turn and reinforces that there is a downtown for them to explore.

Gateways are your welcome mat. They show community pride and encourage people to stop and explore. They should be simple, easy to read and supportive of a community's identity.

Next time you drive by, see if you can determine what the drawing is or what the words other than "High Springs" are. There are so many fonts and small details, it's difficult to absorb all the information.

When it's time to update or replace the gateway signs, consider simplifying them and maybe use the name only with the ornate shape.



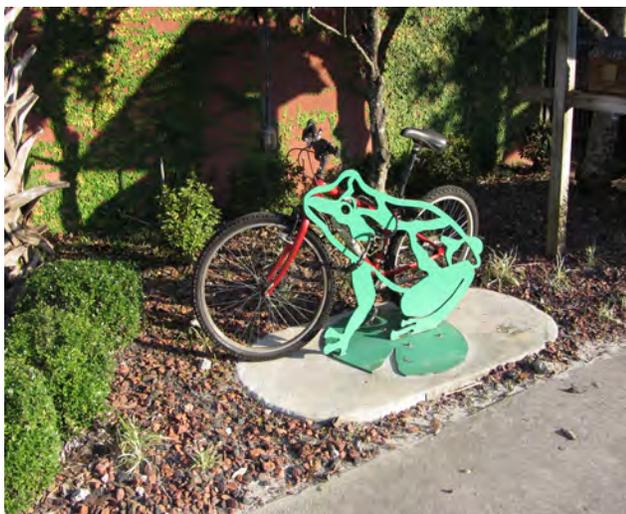
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Public art, including murals and decorative street furniture, add vitality to any streetscape. This is especially true when there are large expanses of blank walls. The fact that High Springs continues to maintain the existing murals reflects its pride as a community

Bike racks are prevalent and encourage those riding through to stop and linger. They also add to establishing a friendly, welcoming environment. Nice job!

Banners help establish sense of place and support a community's identity, but banners can be tricky. The banner shown below provides additional color and evidence of community pride.

When it's time to order new banners consider using a simpler font, colors with more contrast and a less detailed graphic element. Think about the key message to be conveyed. This will make the banners more legible and effective.



WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION?

Making information available to visitors when and where they need it is a tough job. Digital marketing has made it easier in some respects, but not everyone is looking online.

We found maps at the visitor center, the museum and in various shops. Most of the ads and businesses on the maps were more appropriate for local residents than for visitors, but having the map in hand when people were giving us directions was helpful.

Besides the map, the rest of the materials at the visitor center were geared to residents—local organizations and services. We didn't even see information about the museum.

We did find brochures in other places and most of these were well done. The brochure rack at the Museum (bottom right) was far more helpful than the one at the Chamber office. We encourage more collaboration as a way to better serve your visitors.

Having the chamber office/visitor center in downtown and adjacent to the Farmers Market site is great, now you just need additional information.

It also makes sense to have maps, the museum brochure and any current event information available at restaurants, coffee shops and the outfitters. It's simply another opportunity to encourage visitors to stay longer and explore.

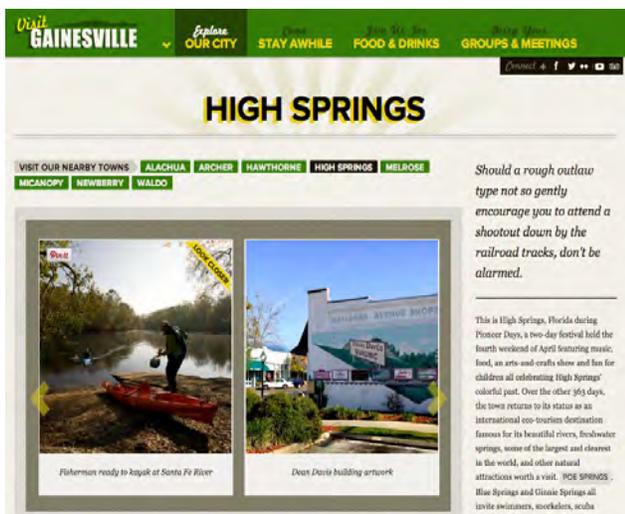
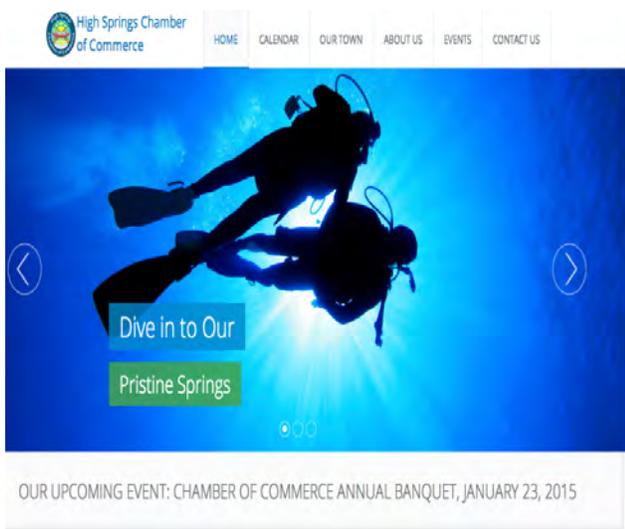
[These materials were gathered at various locations throughout the Alachua County area]



WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION?

The Chamber of Commerce website highlights photos of things to do in and around High Springs but we couldn't find specific information about the activities—descriptions, costs, directions or hours.

On the *Visit Gainesville* site, High Springs has very detailed listings for businesses, lodging, restaurants and activities. Be sure business owners keep their content current and that someone is designated to submit event information at least 3 months in advance.



Should a rough outlaw type not so gently encourage you to attend a shootout down by the railroad tracks, don't be alarmed.

This is High Springs, Florida during Pioneer Days, a two-day festival held the fourth weekend of April featuring music, food, an arts-and-crafts show and fun for children all celebrating High Springs' colorful past. Over the other 363 days, the town returns to its status as an international eco-tourism destination famous for its beautiful rivers, freshwater springs, some of the largest and clearest in the world, and other natural attractions worth a visit. POE SPRINGS, Blue Springs and Ginnie Springs all invite swimmers, snorkelers, scuba divers and sightseers. And there are plenty of rivers to float and outfitters to get you there and back.

WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

Remember, to draw visitors, you must offer something worth the trip. Even if it's only a 15 or 20 minute drive away it has to be something people can't get closer to home.

High Springs is bookended with antique and gift stores with an antique mall on the south end of Main Street and a block of shops on the north end. It offers a different experience than that found in Micanopy with a busier ambiance and more options for nearby activities.

Scattered along Main Street is a thriving downtown for residents with hardware stores, salons, services and only a few vacant spaces. This was definitely the most vibrant downtown we encountered throughout the county.



WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

There is also a good core of restaurants on Main Street with The Great Outdoors anchoring downtown as a destination eatery.

The Wi-Fi at High Springs Coffee and The Talented Cookie is a great option for those recreating in the area. With so many other places open on Sunday, both of them might want to consider being open as well. We also suggest businesses check their websites to be sure their hours and locations are listed and prominent to avoid disappointing potential customers.

The reuse of historic buildings by The Great Outdoors and True Blue Cafe sets an excellent example and their visibility to passers-by encourages people to stop and explore.

We heard about 60 North Main, but from across the street it looked like it had closed. The signage is tucked in the corner of a window and is often blocked by parked cars (as are the signboards on the sidewalk). This often happens with a variety of businesses. Owners need to take the time to look at the impression they make from a variety of directions at different times of the day. Make it easy for customers to find you!



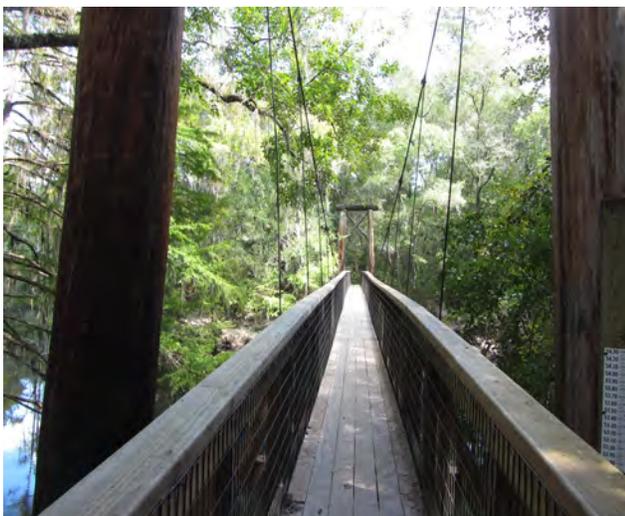
WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

Outdoor recreation is a primary draw to the High Springs area. You are blessed with a variety of quality natural resources and opportunities along with a solid core of outfitters and equipment suppliers.

Building upon this might include additional gear shops and targeted services. You're already the hub—own it and promote it!

Cross-promotion at the various springs and state parks lets people know what else is available in the area. Partnering with lodging throughout the area to provide bike rentals would encourage daytrips and possibly keep visitors in the area an extra day.

The adaptive sports program provided for Veterans by IrishWaterdogs is impressive and, if capacity allows, additional promotion on appropriate websites could expand the experience to more individuals. The community can support this effort by ensuring easy accessibility wherever possible.



WHAT IS THERE FOR ME TO DO?

We nearly missed the historic Priest Theatre. This is an excellent place for some interpretation. Tell the Theatre's story as part of the community's history that extends beyond the railroad.



Housed in the refurbished elementary school, the High Springs Museum is crammed with interesting memorabilia and a charming railroad layout. What makes the museum shine is the volunteers. They're the ones with the stories and they bring the inanimate collection to life. Someone should be collecting the stories and interpretation for the days when your current volunteers retire and new ones take the helm.



Community theater productions are a nice complement to the area attractions. This is another opportunity for cross-promotion and partnering with lodging, restaurants and outfitters that can encourage people to stay longer.



HOW WERE WE TREATED?

In nearly every situation—asking for directions, eating in restaurants, walking down the street, visiting shops and attractions—we were treated with kindness, respect and sincere friendliness. We felt safe and welcome. Well done!

High Springs was also the only community where residents and business owners refrained from sharing too much. No one complained to us. No one criticized their neighboring business owners, the city administration or any organization.

This was quite different from what we experienced elsewhere. We're sure there are frustrations and politics among the business owners in High Springs, but as visitors, it was nice not to be drawn into them.

WAS OUR #1 NEED MET?

Clean, accessible restrooms are the #1 need for visitors. Some businesses were accommodating even if we were not paying customers, while others apologized and said they had no public facilities. Very few gave us directions to the restrooms at the visitor center.

When visitors need to use a restroom and can't find one they're likely to get in their car and drive to a gas station or other facility. Once they've left, they're unlikely to return.

Instead of posting signs like the one below, encourage shops to direct visitors to where they CAN find a restroom.



HIGH SPRINGS AS A VISITOR DESTINATION TODAY

Strengths & Opportunities

- Visitor center in downtown
- Nearby outdoor recreation
- Outfitters
- Antique and gift shops
- Museum
- Charming, clean, safe downtown
- Friendly people

Challenges & Threats

- Lack of cohesive identity
- Shops/some restaurants not open on Sunday
- Maintaining buildings, especially empty ones
- Marketing and promotion

THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. *Visitors are on vacation.*

They want things to be easy, they want to enjoy themselves. They're looking for experiences and opportunities that they can't get closer to home.

2. *Not everyone uses a smartphone.*

Even if your visitors have smartphones, they're not necessarily using them for anything other than phone calls, texting, taking pictures and checking email. Don't assume they'll be looking online for information, be sure to provide alternatives that are available beyond business hours on weekdays.

3. *You love your town but visitors don't know your town like you do.*

It can be difficult to see your community through fresh eyes. Can visitors navigate easily? Do they feel welcome? Are your "hidden gems" too well hidden?

Shop and restaurant owners should stand across the street from their businesses at least once a week and look at the impression their business makes. Are the windows clean? Are displays (including menus) fresh, attractive and inviting? Can people tell you're open?

4. *Your visitors have interesting places and cool shops and restaurants in their towns too.*

People travel—whether for the afternoon or the week—to see and experience something different. Every community has its own sense of place, its own personality. Help visitors experience and appreciate what makes your community different, what makes it worth their time and money. Don't try to be everything to everyone and don't create experiential expectations that you can't meet. Not every town will appeal to everyone and that's okay.

5. *A number of your visitors may have disabilities related to vision, hearing or mobility.*

There are little things you can do to provide accessibility. Making sure the videos are closed-captioned and that written materials can be accessed in auditory format goes a long way toward providing a rich experience.

Historic buildings and communities often have uneven surfaces and awkward transitions. Do what you can to mitigate these or provide alternatives.



NEXT STEPS

RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED WITHIN THE REPORT

- Consider simplifying gateway signs
- Add Historic Downtown signage on US 441
- Consider simplifying the banners
- Distribute marketing materials
- Add visitor info to Chamber website
- Keep Visit Gainesville page updated
- Make sure hours are posted on websites
- Recruit complementary retail and services
- Add bike rentals
- Promote IrishWaterdogs Warriors program
- Review accessibility for mobility-impaired
- Add interpretation at Priest Theatre
- Document stories told by museum volunteers
- Cross-promote activities and create packages
- Replace “No Restrooms” signs with ones that direct visitors to the public restrooms

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital Presence

STEP 1—Update the Chamber of Commerce website with visitor information. This could be as simple as linking the page to the *Visit Gainesville* page for High Springs.

STEP 2—Helping small businesses and restaurants create websites, claim local listings, verify their accounts on review sites and determine which, if any, social media platforms make sense for their business is a critical first step.

Small, hands-on sessions aren't expensive, but providing the tools and basic knowledge will be extremely valuable. Owners don't need more sessions about why they need to be on-line, they need help with HOW to be on-line.

Monthly workshops, email tips, and technical follow up can be used to create a stronger overall presence. Collectively hiring a consultant to provide the training and assistance would reduce the overall cost.

For example, you provide monthly workshops where owners walk through:

- Website basics
- Setting up/updating the website
- Claiming local and review site listings
- Creating a dedicated email address
- Email marketing basics

A second level could include social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) and newsletters. There could be follow up support for questions and the option to have the consultant “do it all” for an additional fee.

This model helps small businesses who don't know where to start while helping them to pace themselves so they don't get overwhelmed.



NEXT STEPS

Identify Who You Are

This process will be the foundation for everything as you move forward. This isn't about a logo or a tagline. It's stepping back and thinking about who the community is, at its core.

Currently, you are a community serving outdoor recreationists and antique shoppers. How do you combine the two in way that works?

Your goal is to define an identity that clarifies:

- Why it's an appealing place to live
- Why anyone want to visit
- Why a business should locate here
- What needs to be preserved

Once the community has a defined identity everything else should be positioned to support and enhance that identity.

