

Comprehensive Brand Audit

SUPPLEMENT TO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



Summary

PURPOSE & METHOD

This audit reviews how the City of Isle of Palms presents itself today – in words and creative, across its channels, through the people and processes that produce its materials – across four areas: messaging, visual identity, channels, and the systems and governance behind them. It responds to the problem the City named when it began this project: the existing logo and design elements are used inconsistently, and that inconsistency weakens the City’s identity and can create doubt around official documents and City representatives.

We reviewed the City’s brand assets and civic materials, website, newsletter, social channels, public-facing content of partner organizations, the City’s adopted plans; owned analytics and the interdepartmental staff survey.

THE BIGGEST TAKEAWAY

Isle of Palms has a strong, widely shared identity – and no system to carry it.

Across the City’s own channels, its adopted plans and its partners, the island is described the same way in substance: *a natural, family-centered barrier island close to Charleston*. What differs is how each expresses it. Without shared verbal or visual standards, every channel, department and partner has built its own version, and together they read as several organizations rather than one city. The gap is not in what the City has to say – rather how consistently it is said and shown.

The findings at a glance:

AREA	WHAT WE FOUND
MESSAGING & VISUAL	Five independently governed voices describe the island with no shared reference point. The City’s own visual output spans 22 color values and more than 25 fonts, with no single typeface carried <i>across</i> channels.
CHANNELS	Each channel does its job, but the job is mostly <i>utility</i>. Beach, parking and rules pages draw the traffic; the page built to express the island’s identity (Experience IOP) draws almost none. Most destination storytelling lives in partner channels the City does not control.
SYSTEM & GOVERNANCE	Staff isn’t breaking a system, there isn’t one to follow. Most City staff (75%) falls back on a workaround when the right approach is unclear.

What We Audited

The audit covered every place the City’s brand is created, applied or described — including places the City does not control but that shape how the island is perceived.

AREA	WHAT WAS REVIEWED
BRAND ASSETS	City seal, website wordmark and its colorways, department marks for Police, Fire & Rescue and Recreation, the mark for Sunnie, the City’s AI assistant.
CIVIC MATERIALS	Business cards, letterhead and memos, presentations, brochures, civic signage, City plan documents as published.
OWNED CHANNELS	isleofpalms.gov (formerly iop.net), newsletter (Constant Contact), social channels for the City and its subbrands (Facebook, Instagram), and Sunnie.
PARTNER VOICES	IOP Chamber of Commerce (visitiop.com), Explore Charleston, Wild Dunes Resort, Charleston County Parks (Isle of Palms County Park).
CITY PLANS	Comprehensive Plan (2015), Strategic Plan 2022–2027, IOPThrives! Community Enrichment Plan, the City’s FY26 budget, Explore Charleston’s FY25-26 Isle of Palms marketing plan.
DATA	Google Analytics (GA4) & Search Console (GSC), Constant Contact, Meta Business Suite (90-day window of May 1-Aug 1); and 12-month window of Aug 1, 2025-Aug 1, 2026 where noted), and tourism search-behavior research completed for this engagement.
STAFF INPUT	Interdepartmental Branding Survey (12 staff), onsite review of civic applications and signage.

Limits on this evidence:

- The staff survey is small and weighted toward one department. Six of 12 responses came from Police, three from Administration, two from Building & Planning and one from Finance. No one from Fire & Rescue or Recreation responded, therefore staff findings are *directional*.
- Search data covers a short window as the City’s Search Console property moved from iop.net to isleofpalms.gov so reliable search figures reflect a limited period.
- Partner content changes often and our read reflects what was live during review as observation, not criticism of any partner.

Messaging Audit

Five independently governed voices shape how Isle of Palms is perceived, and none answers to a shared brand document. Divergence isn't a failure of execution anywhere – it's the structurally expected outcome of having no shared standard to measure against.

THE CITY'S VOICE MATCHES ITS MISSION – ITS ADOPTED STATEMENTS DON'T MATCH EACH OTHER

The City's own civic communications reflect its policy mission. Direct review of the City's copy – Mayor's Message newsletters and event-page copy on isleofpalms.gov – shows language like *"the island slows down just enough to let you truly enjoy it," "protect the place we call home,"* and *"the more subdued, off-season vibe."* It is consistently quiet, resident-centered, and protective – a close match to the Comprehensive Plan and Strategic Plan's residential-first framing.

The City's official documents are less consistent. The Strategic Plan's Mission Statement uses an unqualified superlative – *"to be the most sustainable, family-friendly beach community in South Carolina"* – a promotional, competitive register with no supporting benchmark or methodology. The CEP Executive Summary, written for the same civic audience within roughly the same planning period, uses a more measured, defensible framing: *"a leader in environmental preservation and sustainability."* The two documents use meaningfully different registers to describe the same aspiration, which means the inconsistency isn't only a City-vs.-Chamber or City-vs.-Explore Charleston problem; it exists within the City's own official documentation. Stakeholder interviews consistently describe IOP as *"relaxed," "quiet,"* and *"small-town"* – a register closer to the CEP's language than the Mission Statement's. The CEP's "leader in" framing is the more brand-safe and more accurate template going forward.

The City's newsletter has also borrowed language that isn't its own. A February 2025 Mayor's Message approvingly quotes a Charleston Magazine profile describing IOP as *"like Mayberry by the sea"* – an exact phrase that is documented elsewhere as Folly Beach's original historic nickname, not IOP's. The City's own newsletter is reinforcing language that belongs to a direct competitor's heritage brand.

FIVE VOICES, NO SHARED STANDARD

Five distinct sources of public-facing content shape perception of IOP, each with different ownership and no shared governing document: the City of Isle of Palms (isleofpalms.gov), the Isle of Palms Chamber of Commerce (visitiop.com; privately governed and not a designated DMO), Explore Charleston being the state-designated DMO, Wild Dunes as the private resort operator, and the Charleston County Parks and Recreation Commission as the the county government entity operating the main public beach park (IOP County Park), entirely outside City control.

Where the voices agree:

The beach as the central asset. Every voice, without exception, leads with the natural beach and coastline as IOP's core draw.

Family framing. “Family-friendly” or equivalent language appears in City-adjacent copy (CEP), the CVB page, the Chamber’s homepage, real estate content, and Wild Dunes’ imagery – though it’s used to mean different things by different voices: protecting resident families’ quality of life vs. attracting visiting families.

Proximity to Charleston as a stated fact. All five voices mention closeness to Charleston and downtown as a practical detail. Where they diverge is how much weight that fact carries.

Recreation-forward content. Biking, water sports, and golf show up across the CVB, Chamber, and Wild Dunes content as core activities, regardless of tone.

Where they diverge:

Tone and register. Direct copy review confirms four distinct registers: the City is civic and protective (“protect the place we call home”), the CVB is polished travel-editorial and Wild Dunes-weighted, the Chamber is casual and social-media-native, and Wild Dunes is luxury resort, under Hyatt’s global brand standards.

Residential vs. resort origin. The Comprehensive Plan and City communications assert “*primarily residential*,” while the CVB’s own history section states IOP’s development “*didn’t begin in earnest until the 1970s*” with Wild Dunes, a resort-centered origin story that contradicts the residential-first narrative and erases the pre-1970s pavilion and community history entirely.

“Commercial district” vs. “residential community.” The County Park, a county entity not controlled by the City, explicitly describes its own location as IOP’s “*commercial district*” – a direct wording conflict with the Comprehensive Plan’s core identity claim.

Charleston-adjacency as convenience vs. identity risk. Most voices (CVB, real estate, Wild Dunes) treat “*close to Charleston*” as a selling point with no tension. Wild Dunes’ own tagline – “*Close Enough... But worlds away*” is the one voice that explicitly asserts separateness, though at the resort’s scale relative to the mainland, not IOP’s scale relative to Charleston as a destination brand.

NO MESSAGING REFERENCE POINT EXISTS

Nothing in the Comprehensive Plan, Strategic Plan, or CEP constitutes actual brand guidelines – tone, audience definition, visual system, messaging pillars. The closest existing reference points are the Strategic Plan’s Mission and Vision statements and the CEP’s four focus areas, but these are civic planning language, not messaging architecture. This absence is itself a foundational finding: it explains structurally why five independent voices could diverge without anyone being “wrong.” No document currently requires alignment, and no enforcement mechanism exists to resolve any of the divergences above.

THE MESSAGING IS AMENITY-LED, NOT CHARACTER-LED

Existing third-party content (real estate copy and travel descriptions) communicates primarily an amenity and lifestyle value proposition rather than an identity or character one. It foregrounds what one can do here (beach access, golf, tennis, dining) rather than who this place is for or what kind of life it protects. This matches stakeholder feedback that current positioning feels generic and amenity-led rather than character-led.

Differentiation is weak as a result of this. Third-party descriptions of IOP (“barrier island resort community,” “golf and tennis,” “beachfront”) are largely interchangeable with how Hilton Head, Kiawah, or comparable Lowcountry islands are described. Nothing reviewed *clearly* differentiates IOP in its own language from the regional competitor set (Kiawah, Folly, Seabrook, Wild Dunes) or the audience-adjacent set (Hilton Head, Emerald Isle, Pawleys, Surfside). This validates the need for anti-positioning: defining IOP partly by what it deliberately *is not* relative to its closest comparators rather than only by its own standalone attributes (not resort-scaled like Kiawah, not commercially dense like Folly, not as private as Seabrook). It makes differentiation explicit and defensible against the specific competitive set instead of relying on generic descriptive language that could apply to several islands at once.

When asked to summarize IOP’s identity in a nickname-style phrase, an AI model (Gemini) independently produced “*The Premier Family Beach.*” No source confirms this as an existing tagline or nickname; it does not appear anywhere in owned or third-party copy. Its components, however, trace directly to real, recurring language: “premier” appears verbatim in the Comprehensive Plan’s Vision Statement (“*Isle of Palms has developed into a premier barrier island residential community...*”), and “family[-friendly]” appears consistently across Explore Charleston’s copy, hotel sites, and third-party travel content. The phrase works as a rough composite snapshot of what the sum of current uncontrolled messaging adds up to and it landed on language interchangeable with nearly any family beach destination. Existing content isn’t yet doing differentiation work on its own.

Each channel is functioning under its own sail, resulting in fragmented central messaging that creates general audience confusion. The consistencies across sources are memorable in that they are repeated, but the system as a whole would be strengthened by consistent, strategic messaging and a central identity that can be conveyed across touchpoints – broad enough for multiple audiences, yet unique enough to be owned. Each voice *does* have clear audience targets of its own, which can inform the broader strategy to coalesce them.

HOW MESSAGING LINES UP WITH CITY STAKEHOLDER INPUT

Several messaging patterns run against what City stakeholders described:

- **The Mission Statement’s unqualified superlative** runs against stakeholders’ preference for humble, resident-first, non-promotional framing.
- **Amenity-forward, resort-coded language in real estate marketing**, the County Park description, and general travel content runs directly against stakeholders’ explicit rejection of “resort or party destination” positioning.

- **The County Park’s description of IOP’s location as its “commercial district”** conflicts with the “primarily residential” identity central to both stakeholder input and the Comprehensive Plan.
- **Explore Charleston’s “Isle of Palms History” copy erases the pre-1970s pavilion and amusement-park era** and J.C. Long’s 1944 residential development that established the island’s year-round community. This runs against the deeper, residential-first heritage narrative stakeholders and this project are building, and it comes from the primary regional DMO, not a minor third-party source.

Other City messaging aligns closely. The Strategic Plan’s “*manage population growth pressure*” and “*protect resident’s quality of life from impact of short-term accommodations*” priorities match stakeholder concerns, in some cases nearly verbatim. The CEP’s “balance tourism with quality of life” framing and its “*leader in environmental preservation*” language both align with stakeholder preference for grounded, non-superlative sustainability claims.

Three independent evidence layers converge on the same conclusion, and none was persuaded by the others:

Policy. The Comprehensive Plan, LMO, and Strategic Plan cap commercial zoning at 1.4% of the island, and Land Use Goal 7.2 explicitly protects residential areas from commercial impact.

Data. In the ATAX budget, room inventory, and occupancy/ADR figures, 75% of IOP’s lodging inventory is short-term rentals, not hotel rooms, and occupancy is softening slightly while ADR climbs – a premium, low-volume performance pattern consistent with a protected, non-mass-market destination.

Stakeholders. Independently, interviewees describe the desired identity as “*family-oriented, small-town,*” reject “*resort or party destination*” framing, and explicitly recommend against “*growth*” language in favor of “*protecting character.*”

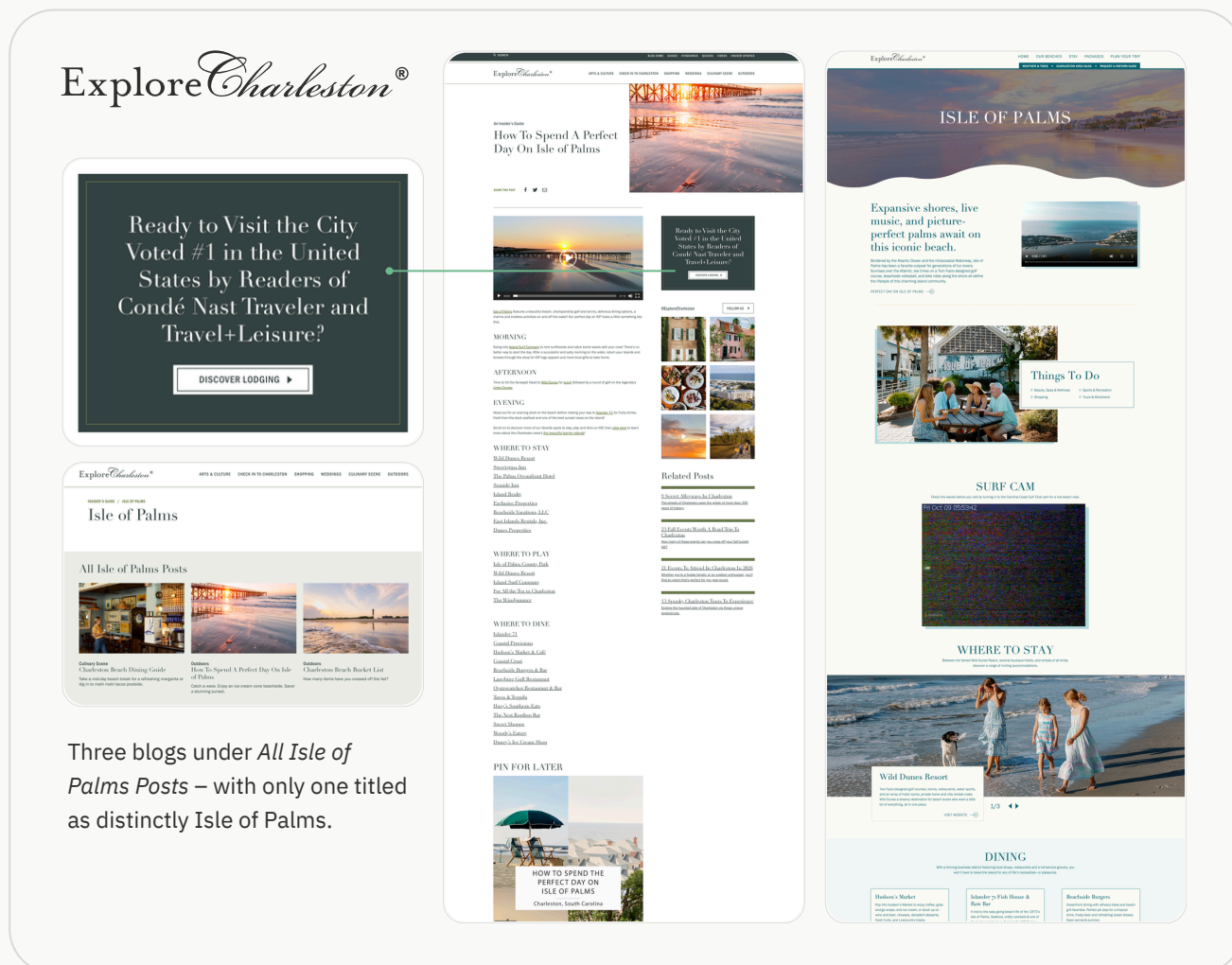
HOW EXPLORE CHARLESTON PROMOTES THE ISLAND

Explore Charleston gives Isle of Palms real investment and reach – particularly with its flagship piece, “*How To Spend A Perfect Day On Isle of Palms*” (charlestoncvb.com/blog/isle-of-palms), runs a genuine 4K drone video alongside the copy – real investment in aspirational, high-quality visual storytelling. The page threads together the static beach landing page, the blog post, the print and digital Visitors Guide, and Sinclair broadcast spots point to a genuinely wide distribution footprint for a single destination. It states the island’s family appeal and its proximity to Charleston *clearly*.

Two features of the flagship post are worth noting as the brand develops:

- **The “Perfect Day” format.** The post is organized as Morning → Afternoon → Evening – a single-day itinerary template, the visitation pattern (single-day, no overnight) stakeholders identified as the least beneficial and most unifying resident concern. A “Week on Isle of Palms” or “Your Long Weekend on IOP” angle would surface different content entirely (farmers market, rec center, multiple distinct dining nights, seasonal activities) and create a natural opening for the offseason and nature angle stakeholders raised.

- **The closing call-to-action.** The post ends with “Ready to Visit the City Voted #1 in the United States by Readers of Condé Nast Traveler and Travel+Leisure?” pointing the reader to Charleston as the destination brand. It is a small, concrete example of how regional content can direct attention to the hub rather than to IOP’s own standalone draw.



HOW THE CHAMBER PROMOTES THE ISLAND

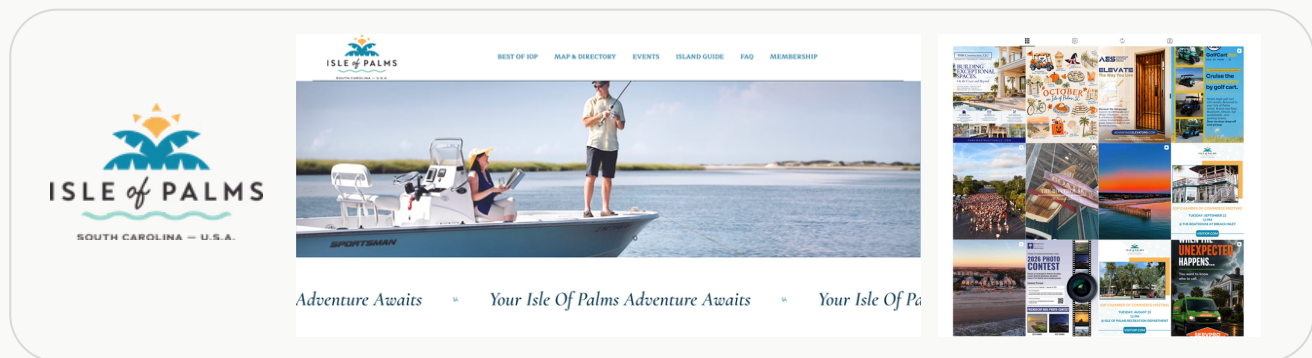
The Chamber’s founding-era language is more commercial than civic. In its founding ATAX presentation and in on-record interviews, the Chamber’s founding president described IOP’s economy as “mostly hospitality driven and an international destination,” and the Chamber’s stated founding mandate is to “*create a professional, vibrant brand that focuses on an experiential approach to marketing overnight visitors*” – a more commercial, growth-oriented register than the Mayor’s “protect the place we call home.”

Its current public presence is genuinely resident-inclusive with the homepage committing to “*support and uplift our neighbors, the true heart and soul of this place.*” The Farmers Market, open Chamber meetings, a firefighter appreciation night, and a charity paddle event appear in the same events feed as visitor-facing con-

tent so the Chamber functions as genuine local infrastructure, not purely a marketing channel. Its SHOP/EAT/PLAY/STAY directory is a real service to local businesses, directly supporting Strategic Plan Priorities (“support local business community”). Its blog topics (pet-friendly spots, wildlife-spotting, seafood, shopping, kids’ activities, live music, Sullivan’s Island history) show real variety, including family- and nature-oriented content that aligns with stakeholder priorities.

Two observations bear on the brand system:

- **The Chamber’s website does a great job leading with *adventure*, but the day-to-day voice lives on Instagram.** Captions, tone, and hashtag usage vary post to post without a visible editorial standard, which is natural for a social-native voice but makes it harder to align with a shared brand than a designed system would be.
- **Room to model longer stays.** As a hybrid community and visitor voice, the Chamber is arguably best positioned to model the “week in IOP, not a day at IOP” behavior stakeholders want to encourage, through content that invites multi-night stays and shoulder-season visits.



ENVIRONMENTAL CLAIMS DEPEND ON ENFORCEMENT

The City has a real, citable body of environmental action: the 2015 single-use plastic bag ban (first in South Carolina), tree and vegetation protection ordinances, sea turtle nesting lighting ordinance, and a Class 7 Community Rating System designation. This is the evidence base behind the CEP’s “a leader in environmental preservation and sustainability” language.

A direct interview with the City’s environmental representative surfaced a gap between that policy record and *its enforcement* – described as wanting stronger enforcement of existing environmental initiatives and specifically named the sea turtle lighting ordinance as a point of active resident pushback – longer-term residents resisting compliance, which makes it harder to credibly position IOP as a sustainability leader.

In speaking with a staff member from the Police Department, we learned that older residents residing alone cite leaving lights on for their own safety (or, comfort levels rather) while others were concerned about the Police having proper visibility at night when responding to service calls regarding coyotes – points to another layer of complexity regarding interdepartmental needs and how and what the island should identify as priority in brand development.

**Email hello@weareblueridge.com
to request access to the full report**