



September 30, 2020

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority  
From: Chris Cavanaugh  
Subject: Interim Executive's Report of August 2020 Activities

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Asheville and Buncombe County's tourism sector continues to suffer from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. As just one indicator of the health of the sector, hotel occupancy in August was 56%, down from 78% during the same month one year ago. Weekday occupancy continues to be particularly lackluster, as hotels are still not able to host meetings and conventions that would fill up many of those rooms, and business travel is still very limited.

Buncombe County hotel occupancy in August was higher than in several peer markets, including Savannah and Charleston, SC (both at 46% for the month), Greenville, SC (48%), Myrtle Beach (51%), and Chattanooga (52%). However, these figures reflect only traditional lodging properties (and in Savannah and Charleston do not include nearby beach communities like Tybee Island and Kiawah Island) and do not show the significant impact of short-term rentals, particularly in beach destinations. While short-term rental market data for Buncombe County for August was not available at the time of this report, it likely will show the continued strength of the entire-place rental market in the area.

Hotel occupancy continues to be strongest in the Tunnel Road and Biltmore Village submarkets and weakest along Interstate 26 south of Interstate 40. Rooms along Tunnel Road are seeing the heaviest discounting relative to last August's average daily rates while other hoteliers try to maintain rate.

As Explore Asheville continues to respond to the needs of the sector in September, a few organizational changes have been made to better utilize the human resource talent at the CVB. The Public Affairs department has been renamed Community Engagement, and Hannah Dosa (formerly Hospitality Coordinator) has moved from the executive office into the department to provide additional resources. Additionally, Nicole Will has been hired to fill a vacancy in the department. These changes greatly enhance the department's effectiveness.

Explore Asheville is also developing new initiatives to encourage adherence to mandates and safety protocols among both partners and visitors, recognizing that as colder weather arrives the need for responsible behavior will likely be greater than ever.

## **AUGUST BY THE NUMBERS**

- During August, the sales team posted 646 personal contacts (down 44%). August sales activities generated 20 sales leads (down 77%) and 26 convention bookings (down 10%), representing 5,492 rooms (up 69%). Two months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are up 26 percent and room nights represented are up 11 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 6 group events in August (down 83%), with corresponding revenue of \$43,512 (down 98%). The services team assisted 11 groups (down 69%).
- The PR team landed 48 significant placements in August (up 92%), with 48 media touchpoints (down 34%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$49,694 with reach of over 120 thousand. Online placements added \$2,035,067 in value and reach of over 1 billion.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 402,073 visits (down 10%), including 272,347 to the mobile site (down 15%). Our Facebook fan base total is 297,940 (up 2%) and video views totaled 57,348 (up 33%).
- Online hotel reservations totaled 65 room nights (down 30%) with total room revenue of \$9,376 (down 39%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 4,376 visitors (down 79%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 2,476 visitors (down 16%).

## **LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS**

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$32,185,505 in July (down 28%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 54.6 percent during July (down 35%). The average daily room rate was \$136.12 (down 18%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$74.33 (down 46%). Room demand decreased 32 percent with 140,619 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 78.5 percent (up 22%), ADR of \$102.18 (up 6%), and RevPAR of \$80.22 (up 29%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 14 percent to total 150,209 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 67 percent to total 53,309 in July.

## **Interim Executive – Chris Cavanaugh**

### **Project Updates:**

- Participated in the county's semi-weekly COVID conference calls and worked with representatives of the county to identify improvements in communication of safety mandates to visitors and residents.
- Met with the city's consultant representatives working on the Tunnel Road corridor study.
- Presented a tourism update to the Downtown Commission.
- Met with representatives of the county and the town of Woodfin to discuss the Woodfin greenway and blueway project funded in part by BCTDA.
- Worked with staff to develop new partner programming.
- Met with representatives of 360i to review destination advertising plans for pausing and restarting advertising in drive markets, and to discuss the agency's contract.

- Assisted the Asheville Art Museum with gaining state approval for the reopening of museums across North Carolina.
- Met with representatives of the Asheville Tourists to discuss planned improvements to McCormick Field.
- Spoke briefly to the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners to introduce an update on the Tourism Jobs Recovery Act.
- Worked with the Asheville Buncombe Sports Commission on plans for “bubble” types of college basketball events.

## **MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS – Marla Tambellini & Team**

### **Project Updates:**

- Paid media (outside of paid search) remained suspended due to COVID market exclusion data. However, data is pointing to an ability to restart in late September.
- Agency finalized revised media plan based on \$1.5 million in net media versus original allocated \$3 million. Additional media buys will be added based on metrics and current situation.
- Began developing fall creative inclusive of safety/serenity messaging approach; launch timing is flexible and will be informed by COVID market exclusion data.
- Paid search generated 72k site visits with average time on site more than three minutes and an average of 3.6 pageviews per visit; clickthrough rate (CTR) was 11.7%.
- Began analyzing media opportunities within the North Carolina Tourism marketing credit program.
- Prepared for participation in the US Travel Association Let's Go There campaign to inspire future travel with a “Book Now, Travel Later” message.
- The PR team logged 48 media touchpoints, initiated 308 targeted pitches, and hosted four media on the ground in Asheville in August. The pitch total includes 296 individual media pitches of the Fall “Linger Longer Outside” press release.
- The PR team put together their outreach calendar of planned media outreach and associated deadlines for the 2020-2021 fiscal year.
- ExploreAsheville.com logged 402,073 user session in August 2020 versus 495,426 the previous year, a decrease of 18.84 percent.
- Integrated new marketing automation system that will be critical in developing a more robust email promotional effort.

### **Future Updates:**

- Based on updated data, advertising is expected to be relaunched in advance of October.
- Finalize production of assets for use with campaigns spearheaded by US Travel and Visit NC.
- Launch refresh of ExploreAsheville.com in late December.
- Continued distribution and pitching of fall destination news and calls for partner news for winter, holiday and 2021.
- PR team provided story support for *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Southern Living*, *Trip Savvy*, *NC Weekend*, *Travel + Leisure*, *AAA Magazine*, *American Way*, *Reader's Digest*, *Forbes*, and *Style Blueprint*.
- As part of VisitNC's PR efforts around the centennial of women's suffrage (and for an upcoming virtual media event featuring female entrepreneurs, leaders, artists, business owners, etc., that relate to the travel experience), the PR team created a new women-focused press sheet and pitched several Asheville women for the national media event.

## **GROUP SALES & SERVICES – Dianna Pierce & Team**

### **Project Updates:**

- In August, the sales team began using the Destinations International Event Impact Calculator (EIC) to start calculating the total economic impact of all booked and actualized events. Previously, this tool was used to calculate the impact of signature and/or select groups only.
- Explore Asheville was a sponsor of MPI Sunshine Summit with approximately 300 planners attending. Deliverables included keynote speaker introduction, video viewing, content included in pre- and post-attendee emails (including link to the destination video), featured banner on event app, etc.
- Final 3D Matterport virtual tours and aerial drone footage project was completed with links sent to area meeting properties for independent sales use. Daniel held a series of trainings demonstrating best practices to each recipient property. A tutorial video was also completed for the upcoming gated web page, final element of the project.
- Sixteen wedding guides were downloaded from the website, as compared to 13 last year
- Staff hosted three site visits for future meetings/events: One site represented three different groups: 2023 Professional Administrative Co-Employers – 276 room nights; Corporate Client – Future Interest and Shamrock Innovations – Future Interest; Bob Mann Tours – Future Interest; 2021 DZS Luxury Meetings and Events – 140 room nights.
- Connie Holliday received the Certified Meeting Professional “CMP” designation, a widely recognized and highly regarded professional designation.
- Staff participated in virtual education/networking events with Cvent Connect, Association Executives of NC (annual and Young Professionals) and American Society of Association Executives.
- Staff conducted one-on-one sales appointments during the virtual trade shows hosted by *Meetings Today* (10 appointments).
- Beth helped moderate the second Wedding Town Hall meeting for industry partners.
- Staff launched the EIC program and completed Cvent updates.
- Partnered with Crowne Plaza Tennis & Golf Hotel on an affinity blast to 77 organizers, receiving two RFPs as a result.
- Multiple leads were sent this month originating from planners viewing our virtual assets.
- Definite bookings for August include: Wedding – 14 groups; Group Tours - 10 arrivals; 2023-2025 NC Local government Information Systems - 1965 rooms; 2021 360 Adventure Collective – 24 rooms; 2021 American Bar Association – 180 rooms and more.
- Explore Asheville’s inclusion in PCMA Convene’s Virtual Experiences — the Next Best Thing in Destination Marketing resulted from a pitch by staff.
- The Aug/Sept digital version of Group Tour included an Asheville Itinerary after staff supplied the writer with information.
- An email was sent to 796 contacts from past ASAE annual meetings had a 32 percent Open Rate and generated more than 70 new LinkedIn followers.
- A campaign, in partnership with Crowne Plaza Resort, targeting dog competition and national specialty planners had an Open Rate of 29 percent and generated two RFPs.
- A promotion for National Lemonade Day asked Meeting Planners and Group Tour Operators share how they are making lemonade out of lemons generated a positive response and use of #PlannersMakeLemonade on LinkedIn.
- LinkedIn views related to various posts exceeded 5800 views.

### **Future Updates:**

- Continue review/edit of deliverables for meeting brand refresh by Miles Media.
- Formalize SOPs for CRM, further defining of market segments in CRM.
- Continue work on Asheville Cares Stay Safe Pledge for the meetings segment of the industry.
- Construct gated 3D virtual tour page on meetings pages.
- Craft next iteration of destination virtual tour to launch in November (replacing FAM)
- Attend virtual trade shows as assigned.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (FORMERLY PUBLIC AFFAIRS) – Pat Kappes & Team**

### **Project Updates:**

- In August, 53 partner records were updated – 6 Accommodation, 22 Attraction/Retail, 6 Venue, 17 Food & Beverage businesses, and 2 Wedding Services.
- Four new partners were added: South Slope Cheese Company, Noir Collective, GRIND Coffee Bar Co-Working and Event Space, and Appalachian Vintner. Five partner accounts were cancelled, three due to closures (Sensibilities Day Spa – Downtown, Calypso – St Lucian Caribbean Cuisine, and Bonefish Grill) and two partner accounts were cancelled for businesses that plan to re-open in the future (Table and Imperial Life).
- A Partner Forum webinar “Our Changed World – Things Your Tourism Business Can Do to Pivot & Adapt” by Yelp’s Senior Field Marketing Manager and Small Business Expert was hosted on August 20 with 30 in attendance.
- A Wedding Industry Town Hall ‘Update on Conducting Weddings Safely & in Compliance’ was hosted on August 31.
- A Community Update on Wayfinding Signage in the River Arts District was hosted for partners in RAD on August 10 with eight in attendance.
- Pat is managing a process for updating the content on all kiosks throughout the county which have not been refreshed since original installation 10+ years ago. The first two kiosks to be focused on are in RAD.
- Pat assisted City’s consultants to coordinate participation by lodging partners in the Tunnel Road Corridor Study Focus Group designed to solicit feedback about how guests use the corridor, changes expected along the corridor, and how Tunnel Road can support future hotel industry growth.
- TPDF disbursement requests from the NC Arboretum, the City of Asheville, and the Asheville Art Museum are in review.

### **Future Updates:**

- In support of Buncombe County’s effort to encourage the use of masks and the 3 W’s, staff is coordinating the commission of a custom graphic by a local artists to be used in public spaces such as window decals, sidewalk clings, and other signage. The Asheville Area Arts Council is managing the artist selection process, and the Asheville Art Museum, City of Asheville, Buncombe County and CVB staff are providing input.
- The new Wayfinding signage in RAD is on track for installation in late September/early October.
- Partner virtual events and webinars are in development and include “5-Step Action Plan for How to Handle Anti-Mask Guests” presented by NCRLA’s legal partner on September 2, “Maximizing Your Digital Brand on Google” presented by 360i on September 23, and the BCTDA Annual Meeting on October 7.

## **PUBLIC INFORMATION – Kathi Petersen**

### **Project Updates:**

- Coordinated with the Buncombe County Manager and Mountain BizWorks a presentation and update for Buncombe County Commissioners regarding the Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund. This included identifying and reaching out to Fund recipients to share their personal stories during the presentation.
- Coordinated, publicized, and moderated with Beth a second Wedding Industry Town Hall that included panelists from Buncombe County Public and Environmental Health.
- Widely publicized and helped coordinate a partner webinar on handling anti-mask customers.
- Responded to numerous local media requests, to include participating in or setting up interviews, providing background information, conducting research, and more (topics included: the CVB's marketing and advertising plans, unemployment rates in the tourism industry due to the pandemic, the Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund, downtown protests and unrest).
- Wrote and disseminated a press release on the aforementioned webinar, "How to Handle Anti-Mask Guests," and responded to interest and inquiries from the media.
- Conducted with Chris and Marla a 'BCTDA 101' session with an Asheville Citizen Times reporter new to reporting on the industry.
- Continued training on and development of plans for the partner/community e-newsletter using a new platform, Act-On, which will be launched in September.
- Made numerous updates and developed new content for AshevilleCVB.com.
- Spent considerable time planning and developing the content for the FY 2019-20 BCTDA Annual Report, which included identifying and working with a designer, developing the production plan, and writing/editing copy.
- Responded to numerous questions, comments, and requests from the public related to downtown protests, mask mandates, the CVB's advertising plans, etc.

### **Future Updates:**

- Continue to work on the FY 2019-20 BCTDA annual report throughout the month of September which will be published in October.
- Manage all aspects of content and production/publication for the new Act-On platform for partner/community e-newsletters which will be fully implemented by the end of September.

## **EXECUTIVE OFFICE – Glenn Cox, Jennifer Kass-Green and Jonna Sampson**

### **Project Updates:**

- At the August 26 meeting of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, Interim Executive Chris Cavanaugh thanked outgoing board member Chip Craig for his service. Condolences and compliments were extended for Tom Ruff, who retired from Biltmore after 25 years and had served on the BCTDA, as he recently passed away.
- Completed the 2019 Workers' Comp Audit for The Hartford.
- Assisted the CEO Search Committee with public meeting notices and virtual meeting assistance.
- Completed the recruitment process for the Community Engagement Specialist opening.
- Transitioned invoice processing to a fully electronic approval system within Workday.
- Started preparing for the Director of Finance's upcoming October-December leave of absence.

**Future Updates:**

- Prepare for the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled September 30, 2020, via Zoom.
- Work with Buncombe County Finance on the annual audit.
- Further assist the CEO Search Committee with meeting logistics as appropriate.
- Complete the onboarding process for the new Community Engagement Specialist.