

April 29, 2020

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority
From: Stephanie Pace Brown
Subject: President's Report of March 2020 Activities

The Explore Asheville team started working from home on Tuesday, March 17 in advance of Governor Cooper's emergency declaration. Staff were well prepared to work remotely and maintain continuity of operations.

March 2020 marks the unprecedented unraveling of our local, national, and world economies. The month started with record-breaking attendance at the Southern Conference Basketball Tournament. Within days, nearly every hospitality business was shuttered, with the ripple into other industry sectors not far behind. An estimated 10,000 tourism-related jobs were lost within a week.

Explore Asheville suspended advertising on March 12, canceling more than \$6.5 million in advertising and successfully negotiated the waiving of more than \$1 million in cancellation fees. Events for journalists and meeting planners arriving from around the country were cancelled.

The team coordinated hundreds of tourism partner website updates in the early days of the crisis laying the groundwork for a new website to support tourism partners offering online shopping, take out dining, and virtual experiences while maintaining connections with future visitors. Thirteen content pieces were written to pivot from our spring campaign to crisis support. These efforts were promoted to journalists, earning national coverage for our community's response to the crisis.

A new resources website was also developed to aid tourism partners, and 20 partner e-alerts were distributed. Stephanie and Kathi participated in daily calls with Buncombe County and other business leaders to represent the tourism partner community and to share content back to the industry. We responded to numerous media and public information requests.

The sales team worked with clients on re-bookings and cancellations and shifted communications and outreach strategies.

MARCH BY THE NUMBERS

- During March, the sales team posted 783 personal contacts (down 25%). March sales activities generated 52 sales leads (down 42%) and 35 convention bookings (down 47%), representing 6,148 rooms (down 14%). Nine months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 19 percent and room nights represented are down seven percent.

- CVB sales leads generated 17 group events in March (down 11%), with revenue of \$722,286 (down 39%). The services team assisted 20 groups (down 49%).
- The PR team landed 28 significant placements in March (up 4%), with 72 media touchpoints (up 41%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$72,459 with reach of over 207 thousand. Online placements added \$1,109,518 in value and reach of over 590 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 277,359 visits (down 18%), including 183,221 to the mobile site (down 20%). Our Facebook fan base total is 297,029 (up 5%) and video views totaled 37,944 (down 43%).
- Online hotel reservations totaled 18 room nights (down 76%) with total room revenue of \$3,588 (down 70%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 6,128 visitors (down 56%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed after the winter.

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$26,075,484 in February (up 24%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 55.9 percent during February (down 4%). The average daily room rate was \$134.31 (up 14%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$75.08 (up 10%). Room demand increased 1 percent with 128,492 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 52.9 percent (up 45.4%), ADR of \$84.82 (down 6.8%), RevPAR of \$44.89 (up 35.5%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 124 percent to total 100,876 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport increased 22 percent to total 105,336 in February.

IN THE COMMUNITY

- Staff members volunteered at or attended Southern Conference basketball games during the March 5-9 event.
- Stephanie attended the North Carolina Travel & Tourism board meeting in Asheboro, NC.
- Stephanie provided a tourism update to the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area meeting, which was hosted in the Explore Asheville Board Room.
- PGAV was in town on March 12 and Stephanie, Marla, Pat and Kathi participated in TMIP meetings with them and the Steering Committee.
- Stephanie attended the Greater Asheville Regional Airport Authority monthly board meeting.
- Stephanie attended an Ideas to Action (I2A) planning meeting to discuss further development of the I2A Leadership Forum.
- Stephanie called into a NC Travel & Tourism board meeting.
- Stephanie attended AIR executive committee and board meetings.
- Stephanie attended an online NCRLA Asheville Area Chapter meeting.
- Beginning Friday, March 20, Stephanie and Kathi began participating in daily COVID Response – Business Community calls with Buncombe County
- Stephanie participated in a discussion regarding food trucks with the City of Asheville.
- Stephanie attended the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce's virtual Town Hall meetings.
- Stephanie and other members of the team attended COVID-19-related webinars.

- Stephanie attended the Land of Sky Regional COVID-19 Response virtual meeting.
- Glenn hosted and attended the monthly American Craft Week planning meeting.
- The PR team held a call with Biltmore's PR team to align communications planning and proactive PR strategies moving through the COVID-19 crisis.
- Dodie worked in support of Chow Chow via board of directors, marketing, and program committee meetings, including landscape assessment, marketing guidance and planning to determine festival direction and opportunities to support local culinary and maker communities during this time.
- Dodie participated in Chow Chow board call to share local efforts to meet community crisis needs as well as subsequent support of "Give A Share CSA" program linking farms to community kitchens. Plans to pull program into Explore Asheville content and PR efforts.
- Marla attended an online Asheville Downtown Association meeting.
- Sales staff attended a site visit of Asheville Event Centre/Blue Ridge Mountain Opry.
- Dianna attended Civic Center Commission and ABRSC monthly meetings.
- Pat attended the Parking & Transportation Committee meeting.
- Pat was invited to join the Center for Craft's Spring Craft Event Planning Committee and attended a virtual meeting in March. The event has been postponed until 2021.
- Pat attended an online meeting of the Local Living Economy committee, as a member of this subcommittee of the Downtown Commission, that includes representatives from the City of Asheville staff and council, Asheville Downtown Association, Asheville Grown Business Alliance, Asheville Independent Restaurant Association and the Downtown Commission.
- Pat was invited to join the MLK Association's subcommittee for COPE (Community Outreach Providing Empowerment) program. The subcommittee is led by Michael Dempsey, dean of Lenoir-Rhyne University and MLK Association board member. The group is planning to host a multi-day event featuring Dr. Joy DeGruy, who was the keynote of the MLK Prayer Breakfast earlier this year. Dr. DeGruy provides education and training for service industry staff on working with people from different backgrounds and cultures. The event, which was planned for Summer 2020, has been postponed until 2021.
- Kathi attended a panel discussion about the occupancy tax hosted by CIBO – Council of Independent Business Owners.
- Several Explore Asheville staff members attended the Elected Officials VIP reception of the SoCon Basketball Championships to welcome the new SoCon commissioner.
- Kathi represented Explore Asheville and was recognized as a former member of The Collider's leadership team at the organization's 4th anniversary event.
- Kathi represented Explore Asheville at a business leaders breakfast hosted by United Way.
- Kathi supported Stephanie and attended a panel discussion for Leadership Asheville's Economic Development Day, at which Stephanie was a panelist alongside BCTDA board member Himanshu Karvir.
- On behalf of Explore Asheville, Kathi met with the new executive director of Land of Sky Regional Council Nathan Ramsey and provided information about the BCTDA.
- Several CVB staff members volunteered with MANNA Food Bank as a part of their COVID-19 Response Team focusing on building emergency food boxes, packaging bulk product and other necessary projects.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

COVID-19 Activities: The marketing team and agency have worked together in response to COVID-19, cancelling advertising buys and working together on development of a microsite that serves as a portal for business modifications, dining opportunities, virtual experience and business resources. The marketing and public affairs departments worked closely together on partner outreach and updates with members of the marketing & PR team aiding with partner communications and supporting data entry and research related to partner updates for the

Asheville Cares website. Development of the virtual vacation content provided an opportunity for outreach to journalists and resulted in media coverage. Details are woven through each section of the marketing team report and have been provided in previous updates to the board.

Advertising: Due to COVID-19, the nonstop flight support campaign was put on hold the week of March 2, followed by a suspension of the total spring media campaign which was paused on March 12. The 360i media team worked directly with media vendors to recoup the entire investment of dollars in the market at that time despite cancellation contracts that were in place. Paid search continued to run for several more days until it became apparent that in the first phases of shutdown that search would not be relevant for a few weeks. It was suspended through the remainder of March. The marketing and agency teams quickly pivoted to developing a strategy for the short term, long term (recovery) and intermediate needs. The plan includes marketing strategies and tactical elements that are currently being deployed. The agency developed a messaging umbrella, *Together in Spirit*, which will roll out through our owned and operated channels while pulled back from advertising. Messaging includes tone and tenor for communications and samples for incorporating the theme into social.

Paid Search: Due to COVID-19, paid search was paused as of March 18. Before the pause paid search drove 35k sessions to ExploreAsheville.com in March, a decrease of 52 percent year-over-year.

General Media Relations: The PR Team logged 72 media touchpoints, initiated 242 targeted pitches and hosted four media on the ground in Asheville in March. Pitch numbers were high due to do a virtual vacation round-up sent to media. Supported site visits included media representing *Wine Enthusiast*, *The Washington Post*, *AAA Crossroads* and *Nashville Lifestyles*. Story support included *StyleBlueprint*, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Luxe Lifestyle*, *ConventionSouth* and *Readers Digest*. Asheville imagery and assistance were also provided to *TripSavvy.com*, *Livability.com* and *JustLuxe*, among others.

Visit NC 365 (Prior to COVID-19): The PR Team put together a robust media FAM itinerary for the visiting VIP media for the Visit NC 365 Conference that looped in over 20 partners, including a Rooftop Bar Tour, Craft City Tour and a rooftop experience at Biltmore. When the conference was canceled due to COVID-19, the team had to cancel all activities.

Response to COVID-19 Virtual Travel: In the wake of COVID-19 and nation-wide stay home ordinances, the PR Team worked to cancel existing media site visit and blogger requests. The team then shifted gears to analyze the travel media landscape. A round-up of Asheville area virtual travel experiences to uplift homebound souls was developed. The team worked with the content team to flesh out support web material. A soft pitch was drafted and sent to 240 members of the media. The team received many positive responses and Asheville's virtual content was included in outlets such as *The Daily Beast*, *AAA Go Carolinas* online, *StyleBlueprint*, *Smarter Travel*, *Today's Parent* and *Vitruvi*.

Community Spirit: In addition to the virtual vacation information gathering, the PR Team also analyzed the sharing of community good news (how other DMOs were sharing it and what media outlets were covering it). The team compiled a list of community news and hospitality philanthropy and supported the development of a subsection of the Asheville Cares website with several content pieces that collect and share this info moving forward.

Significant Placements:

1. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* | “Welcome to Wellville”
2. *Bon Appetit* | “Collards and Cumin”
3. *Business North Carolina* | “North Carolina offers unique and upscale experiences”
4. *Daily Meal* | “The Best Chicken Sandwiches in America”
5. *Garden & Gun* | “Due South”
6. *Luxury Travel Magazine* | “5 Best U.S. Cities for Music Lovers”
7. *Smithsonian Magazine* | “Six Castles You can visit in the United States”
8. *Southern Living* | “Reasons to Visit Black Mountain, North Carolina, a Picturesque Small Town
9. *Southern Living* | “Where to Eat in Asheville, North Carolina Right Now”
10. *Travel Channel* | “Family Mountain Vacations”
11. *USA Today* | “These 35 Breweries are among the best spots to have a beer in the U.S.”

Content Development Projects: During the month of March, with the exception of content early in the month supporting Mel Chin’s Wake, the Content Team focused much of its effort toward collaborating with Web and PR teams to create COVID-19 updates and resources pages. Those evolved from simple lists of affected businesses to an Asheville Cares microsite with business updates, restaurant takeout listings, and lists of businesses operating with modified online offerings. These resources went through many iterations, improving to provide more value to both people external to Asheville who wanted to know travel status here and community partners seeking information.

Into April, the teams continue work in this direction, creating a series of pages that focus on a range of ways future visitors can experience Asheville virtually, under the banner of “Together in Spirit.” A series of pages was also created to highlight the Community Spirit that is alive and well in Asheville, made manifest through good works and charity.

On the Visit Asheville social media channels, we made a strategic decision in mid-March to decrease the volume of posts and relegate posts to only hopeful “moment of zen” imagery and posts providing links to our update and resources pages, alongside support for community initiatives like #AshevilleStrong. This throttling is reflected in some of the month’s metrics. Moving into April we are back to posting at a more regular volume and we are seeing that there are sometime overwhelming positive responses to posts that ask followers to share what they miss about visiting Asheville. One such post received nearly 150 comments on Facebook and 1,300 likes and 100 comments on Instagram.

ExploreAsheville.com Editorial Content:

- During the month of March and into April, there were 13 content pieces added to ExploreAsheville.com – There were two Weekend Things to Do posts and Stories supporting Mel Chin’s Wake and the Connect Beyond Festival at the beginning of the month, with the balance of content being update and resource pages created to support “Asheville Cares” and “Together in Spirit”.
- The most popular blog and story content this month was 50 Things to Do in Asheville, which received 15,691 pageviews, followed by Biltmore in 360 with 7,147 pageviews and which featured in our Virtual Vacation content.

Social Media Stats:

Facebook:

Visit Asheville page

- March saw 639 daily new likes to Facebook for a total of 296,946.
- There were 21 new Facebook posts added to the Visit Asheville page in the month of March.
- The most popular unpaid Facebook post during the month was a post on Mel Chin's Wake. The post reached 26,062 people organically, generating 1,709 engagements and 26 comments.

Video:

- There were 11,071 new, organic YouTube views in March. The most popular video by organic views this month "Asheville, N.C. – Unsurprisingly Surprising," which received 1,808 non-paid views. The video "Experience Black Mountain: 'America's Prettiest Small Town'" came in second with 1,704 views.
- Across all our video platforms, there were 37,944 non-advertising views, with the majority coming from Facebook. There have been 470,623 views of Explore Asheville video content YTD (since July 1, 2019).

Pinterest:

- The total audience in March was 742,040 (down from 1.53 million in February). Impressions were down to 938,060 (from 2 million in February) with 30,510 engagements.
- The total audience in April through April 12 was 32,000. Impressions are 42,570 with 1,570 engagements.

Instagram:

- Through March: Our VisitAsheville account has 73,485 followers
 - There were 13 new posts in March. The most popular photo post was a picture of a basset hound at New Belgium Brewing. It received 1,927 engagements (likes and comments).
- Through April 14: Our VisitAsheville account has 73,710 followers
 - There have been five new posts in April so far. The most popular photo post has been an image of mountain ridges at sunset. It received 1,919 engagements (likes and comments).

Twitter:

- March: Across all our accounts we have a total of 16,958 followers as of March 31. *Please note this number is significantly lower than it was prior October 2019 because our Foodtopia account was hacked and our follower count (and tweets) were erased.
 - The most popular account is Visit Asheville, which has 8,407 followers as of March 31.
 - We continue to provide a mix of proactive response to travel inquiries and pushes of website and Instagram content.
- April: Overall Twitter followers through April 14 is 16,986. Visit Asheville followers through April 14 is 8,432.

Asheville Traveler E-newsletter:

- Subscribers: We have 127,728 active subscribers.
- Opens/Click-throughs:

- In March, our monthly Asheville Traveler e-newsletter went out to 128,277 subscribers. It had an overall open rate of 18.5 percent and a click-through rate of 2.6 percent.

ExploreAsheville.com: Website user sessions in March decreased 18.6 percent compared to last year. Organic traffic was down 37 percent year-over-year in March. Paid search traffic was down 52 percent compared with last year. Referral traffic was down 48 percent year-over-year, while traffic from eNewsletter clicks was down 7 percent year-over-year in March. Social media traffic, excluding paid social, was even compared with last year. Traffic from advertising campaigns, including paid social, was up one percent in March compared to last year. Sessions to the booking engine decreased 59 percent year over year in March and booking engine searches decreased 27 percent.

Website Improvements – SEO, QA & Accessibility: In March, website development was largely focused on tools to support COVID-19 response, such as developing lists of restaurants offering takeout food, an Asheville Cares microsite, and site-wide notification banners. Explore Asheville content and web teams worked with a product called SiteImprove to assist with search engine optimization, quality assurance and accessibility efforts. Atlas Branding in Asheville is working with the team on a design refresh to modernize the site. The design and other structural improvements, including new navigation and a new events module will be fully implemented in May.

April 1-15: Website user sessions decreased 84 percent. Organic traffic is down 73 percent. Paid search traffic is down 100 percent. Referral traffic is down 70 percent. Social media traffic, excluding paid social, is down 89 percent. Traffic from advertising campaigns, including paid social is down 100 percent. Sessions to the booking engine decreased 67 percent and booking engine searches decreased. In April the development work to support businesses operating in online and delivery capacity continues, with new iterations of existing tools and an improved set of “virtual visit” content pages.

Online Reservations: There were 12 orders for 18 room nights in March with a total of \$3,588 in booking revenue and \$203.26 in commission.

Visitor Guide: There were 1,422 requests of the *Official Asheville Visitor Guide* in March. Fiscal year-to-date, there have been 22,998 visitor guide requests.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES

Group sales reported 35 definite group bookings in March, down 48 percent from the prior year (21 meetings/conventions, 13 weddings and one group tour). The combined total definite room nights were 6,148 room nights, down 15 percent from the previous year. Fifty-two leads (39 for meeting/conventions, 10 for weddings and 3 for motorcoach) representing 13,396 room nights, were distributed to Buncombe County accommodations in March. Leads distributed were down 42 percent and rooms represented were down 27 percent over the prior year.

Estimated revenue for leads issued was \$1,039,441 (down 38 percent). Actualized revenue was \$722,286 (down 42 percent). Person-to-person outreach totaled 783 contacts, down 25 percent. CRM Indirect outreach totaled 26,435, up 100 percent. No indirect outreach through the internal system was conducted in March last year whereas this year included three e-blasts: two sent to all meeting planner clients and one sent to all group tour clients.

The national sales manager position was frozen, and all tentative and definite accounts were reassigned to sales managers.

Sales Calls/Missions/FAMS:

- Connie Holliday attended an online MPI Georgia gathering along with 52 other people during COVID-19 crisis.
- Staff attended numerous webinars specific to COVID-19 to understand best practices in sales and communications moving forward.
- Beth attended Travel South Domestic Trade Show meeting with 30 tour operators. Partnering with us was Biltmore and Asheville Outlets.
- Explore Asheville co-sponsored a CMP credit webinar held by Meetings Today. Approximately 600 planners attended. The attendees heard video messaging about Asheville as a meetings destination. Deliverables included the contact list of attendees.

Site Visits/Leads: The team hosted/assisted with one site visit in March including: 2021 Kinder Morgan – 165 rooms.

A sample of March bookings includes (but is not limited to):

- 2021 NC Bar Association Annual NC/SC law Program – 250 rooms
- 2021 NC Recreational Therapy Association – 101 rooms
- 2020 Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals – 122 rooms – Canceled/Rescheduled
- 2020 ASSA ABLOY Senior Management Meeting – 36 rooms
- 2020 The Upledger Institute – 40 rooms
- 2020 Thermo Fisher Scientific – 50 rooms
- 2020 Southern Research Society – 497 rooms
- 2020 Uniglobe – 20 rooms
- 2021 CU Business Group – 252 rooms (*48-Hour FAM Attendee*)
- 2020 Grand Fondo National Championship – 125 rooms
- 2020 USA Softball National Qualified – 120 rooms
- 2020 Perfect Game Baseball (2) – 225 rooms each
- 2020 Great Clips, Inc. – 51 rooms
- 2020 Asheville Ultimate Ho Down Show Down – 100 rooms
- 2020 Boys & Girls Riverside Summer Shootout (2) – 2,800 rooms total
- 2021 SAE International – 128 rooms
- 2020 Young Living Beauty School – 40 rooms

COVID-19 Related Explore Asheville Event Cancellations:

- The 48-Hour Meeting Planner Experience planned for March 17-20
- VisitNC 365 Conference planned for March 22-24
- AAA Explore Asheville Destination Training scheduled for March 16.
- Meeting Professionals International Georgia Chapter's Tech Summit sponsorship scheduled for March 17
- Site visit scheduled for March 13 for a regional car event, for car event
- Absolutely Asheville motorcoach FAM planned for April

Southern Conference Men's Basketball Tournaments: In addition to placing overnight rooms, the Explore Asheville staff played a significant supportive role throughout the tournament. Explore Asheville provided welcome gifts for SoCon Staff, Chief Executive Officers, Faculty Athletics Representatives, Athletic Directors, Senior Woman Administrators and Men's and Women's Coaches. Staff helped coordinate a welcoming atmosphere for both teams and fans at SoCon host properties and at Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville. Banners, balloons, and a table featuring Asheville visitor guides, attraction value cards, and Welcome to AVL

collateral helped create an exciting and memorable atmosphere for the championships. In addition, Explore Asheville worked closely with Eblen Charities in producing the Hoops Against Hunger Challenge. Explore Asheville staff also volunteered on-site throughout the championships, staffing the Hospitality & Media Lounges, volunteer registration assistance and a welcome table. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, signage was created in-house and then placed on the SoCon tables at host hotels and at Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville in attempts to prevent the spread of the virus during the tournament.

There were 32,619 people in attendance at this year's tournament, as opposed to last year's 31,628. It was the first year for Southern Conference Commissioner Jim Schaus.

Group Sales Communications: A status call with Miles Partnership was held. Items discussed included the meetings brand tagline development and a brief report on the audit of content on the Meetings section of ExploreAsheville.com. Next steps include:

- Miles will send website content suggestions for staff to make updates. Specifically, Meta Descriptions, existing published article updates
- Creative samples to be submitted for staff review
- Tag line refinement: with wording to include Elevate / Meetings Elevated

Media

- After staff provided information, Asheville was featured in NTA's *Courier* in a story titled, "Asheville: Adventure meets art".

Mass Communications

- An email to all meeting planner clients addressing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was sent to 12,388 clients. Open rate: 21 percent Clicks: 610
- An email offering meeting planners "Asheville moments of Zen" was sent to 12,536 clients. Open rate: 17 percent Clicks: 771
- The same email of support was sent to all 1,798 Tour & Travel clients in the data base. Open rate: 20 percent Clicks: 70
- LinkedIn post viewing for week ending 3/20 – 3,800 views
- LinkedIn post viewing for week ending 3/27 – 1,965 views
- LinkedIn post viewing for week ending 3/31 – 660 views

Convention Service Highlights: Microsites were prepared for Biltmore-Kiwanis 15K/5K Classic, USA Softball National Qualifier, Hexpo, 2020 Marriage Conference and 24th Annual Ho Down Show Down.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Tourism Product Development Efforts:

The Asheville Art Museum requested a contract amendment to change the requirements for releasing the final grant disbursement of \$500,000. The project completed and opened to the public in November 2019. The BCTDA approved the amendment allowing for funds to be disbursed upon public opening date versus receipt of Certificate of Occupancy.

The YMI Cultural Center requested a contract amendment to update the scope to include repair of the roof and elevator shaft as the first step in upgrading the building's roofing system, not to exceed \$10,000, and to add a full building assessment and financial feasibility analysis, not to exceed \$40,000. The YMI has partnered with the Self-Help Real Estate Development Team

who will assist in conducting a detailed study of the building and to advance plans for upgrading the building to increase event rental capacity and ensure long-term financial sustainability. The BCTDA approved the amendment with funds for each of these items to be disbursed upon receipt of invoice. The balance of the grant would be disbursed in thirds throughout the construction process as is standard TPDF contractual terms.

PGAV is in the final phase of the Tourism Management & Investment Plan (TMIP). The team continues to collect additional project details to inform a common set of priorities and final report framework.

Partner Engagement and Events:

A new workflow was developed requiring additional support from members of the marketing, sales and executive teams to process and respond to the influx of information received from tourism industry partners as a result of the COVID crisis. The needs of tourism partners are evolving, and new tags and categories are being created to help support new sections of ExploreAsheville.com to connect customers with businesses that are still in operation and/or modifying their offerings and hours.

Partner Database Engagement Stats: As a result of COVID, Joe updated 421 business listing records in March to generate content for the Asheville Cares microsite on ExploreAsheville.com. 146 attractions/retail businesses and 175 food & drink businesses were updated and continue to be monitored. Charlie approved 359 events for the month of March. Before the crisis, Joe continued regular outreach to music venue partners to ensure they are submitting their events to the Live Music Calendar. Since the 'Stay Home Stay Safe' order was issued, live events in the community have been cancelled or postponed; however, Charlie has conducted significant outreach and research on virtual events to help populate the new virtual experience section of the website.

Additionally, the team is working closely with Asheville Independent Restaurant Association to maintain accurate business information for our Food & Beverage partners on the website. The team is also coordinating with Buncombe County staff to provide a feed of constantly changing business operation updates to populate their Food Resource community resource website.

Partner Communications: In addition to the partner news alert emails, all staff are involved in an outreach effort to check in with all tourism industry partner businesses throughout the county via phone call, communicating on CVB updates and business support resources.

A survey is being developed to better understand the needs of tourism partners at this time and understand the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the industry.

Explore Asheville CVB 101 Orientation: The public affairs team hosted an orientation on March 11, which included seven attendees representing Adventures Accessed, Bunn House, Food Experience Inc., LEAF Global Arts, Making it Creative, and Ramada Southeast Asheville.

New Partners: There were 24 new partners in March: AVL Party Pros, Black Mountain Yarn Shop, Black Mountain Escape, Carolina Love Events, Cultura, Donna M. Gray Massage and Bodywork, Eco Depot Marketplace, Food Experience Inc, Fresh Wood Fired Pizza and Pasta, H&F Burger, hey hey cupcake!, Jeff Pittman Art, La Guinguette Crêperie, Merry Wine Market, Mountain Me, Open Oven Brunch and Bakery, Regenerative Massage and Bodywork, Studio James Daniel, Take A Hike Mountain Outfitters, The Cake Studio, The Chop Shop Butchery, The Golden Pineapple, The Old Depot Gallery, Wicked Weed West.

March 18 – Hospitality Outlook: This event was cancelled due to the COVID crisis. The luncheon was scheduled to take place at the Holiday Inn – Biltmore West with Chris Cavanaugh of Magellan Strategy Group presenting an economic outlook and Explore Asheville President & CEO Stephanie Brown reporting on destination and lodging performance.

Planning was underway for the following events, all of which have been cancelled or postponed due to the COVID crisis:

March 25 – Asheville Bed & Breakfast Association Summit (assisting ABBA with agenda)

March 26 – “What’s New in 2020?” Partner Forum

April 30 & May 1 – Creative Sector Summit (assisting Asheville Area Arts Council with agenda)

May 5 – National Tourism Week Summit – While the half day conference planned to take place at the Asheville Renaissance Hotel was cancelled, staff is exploring alternative options for recognizing National Tourism Week.

April 14 – Explore Asheville Virtual Partner Forum: “COVID-19 & Beyond”: 124 attendees joined Explore Asheville via GoToWebinar, for an update on current partner support activities during the COVID-19 crisis, intermediate strategies, and long-term plans for reactivating Asheville’s customer base as soon as it is safe to travel. The meeting started with an update from Buncombe County officials on the current status of COVID-19 and social distancing orders in place, and was followed by presentations from Stephanie Brown, Kathi Petersen, Pat Kappes, Marla Tambellini, and Dianna Pierce. The webinar video and presentations can be found on AshevilleCVB.com.

We received the following feedback from partners:

“Nice work on the partner forum by the way - it’s very heartening to hear that folks are already dreaming and planning their next visits to Asheville!”

“I listened to today’s presentation and was so impressed by the thoughtful planning, forward-thinking strategies and the amount of shared knowledge among your entire organization. Each presentation and presenter was exceptional in their own right. Please thank everyone for their hard work, dedication and sincere caring for our community.”

“GREAT job presenting today!!! The meeting was very informative and helpful.”

“It was nice to see you at the partner meeting yesterday. I found everyone's presentation to be very helpful.”

Projects:

African American Heritage Project: Pat has focused on building and expanding relationships with community members and organizations to increase awareness of the project and build a supportive network interested in collaboration. As part of the Community Engagement phase, the project team conducted four in-person Listening Session Workshops on January 9, 10, and 11. Sessions were attended by approximately 80 community members and took place at the Friendship Center in Shiloh, at the Stephens-Lee Recreation Center and in the Explore Asheville boardroom. A final report summarizing feedback, themes, and a recommended plan for next phases will be available in coming weeks.

CRM Audit: The public affairs team continues to work on the auditing process for Explore Asheville’s customer relationship management (CRM) database and is coordinating efforts with Marketing team goals for ExploreAsheville.com following a website usability study.

Arts Portal: The following plans for dissolving the arts portal, AshevilleArtsAlive.com, are on hold pending coordination with the Asheville Area Arts Council. The website featuring arts-only related content from ExploreAsheville.com was created in partnership with and in support of the Asheville Area Arts Council. The website helped increase partner engagement with area artists and arts organizations. Given the change in the arts council's strategic organizational priorities and the low usage rates, the arts portal website will go dark and individuals listed on the arts portal will be invited to request a listing on ExploreAsheville.com if they meet the listing criteria. Plans also include providing a feed of arts-only related events to the arts council for display on their website.

Wayfinding signage for RAD: Pat continues to work with MERJE to refine the plans for the signage system package with a goal to fabricate and install later this year in coordination with completion of RADTIP construction by the City of Asheville.

PUBLIC INFORMATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Local Media / Public Information: In addition to responding to numerous media requests regarding COVID-19 (see below), we also assisted local journalists who requested help connecting with the lodging community (to include Asheville Bed & Breakfast Association, Asheville Homestay Network, and Asheville Buncombe Hotel Association), and with AIR – Asheville Independent Restaurants Association. Several requests for public information were processed and responded to questions related to the occupancy tax. With other team members, she helped develop and disseminate a press release and partner communication related to the announcement that Stephanie Brown is not renewing her contract, and subsequently responded to numerous media requests related to that announcement.

Kathi also continued updating the packet of information that she originally developed for candidates and created a BCTDA fact booklet she has been distributing to groups and individuals across the county, to include: 50 to the Visitors Center, 50 to Leadership Asheville, 60 to the Council of Independent Business Owners (CIBO), 20 to the local hotel directors of sales, 25 to AIR, 12 to Land of Sky Regional Council. In addition, she continued work on strengthening content on the CVB website as a tool for better communicating to the public.

Coronavirus: Kathi developed new pages on the AshevilleCVB.com website related to COVID-19 and then researched, wrote, and posted several pages of content, which requires continuous updating; wrote and organized content for nearly 20 partner e-alerts; responded to numerous media requests regarding coronavirus, wrote press releases and statements, and set up interviews; set up video conference calls with the lodging community (first one attended by nearly 90 people; second attended by more than 100), plus a separate call with the Asheville Homestay Network; created a Stay Home, Stay Safe compliance toolkit for the lodging community in collaboration with Buncombe County public health officials.

She also attended various webinars and participated in daily calls with the Buncombe County Emergency Operations Center, plus Buncombe County and Governor Cooper press briefings; consulted with partners who sought PR assistance related to coronavirus; helped to create a handout /signage on proper handwashing that was used at the SoCon basketball championships, in collaboration with other Explore Asheville team members; posted COVID-19 related content on social media; and with other team members presented information to partners in a virtual forum. She also wrote and disseminated a press release on the BCTDA contribution to the One Buncombe fund and pitched/set up a radio interview with the One Buncombe Committee chair. In addition, she pitched a story idea to several local media outlets about the "virtual Asheville" section of ExploreAsheville.com.

EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Staff/Administrative Updates:

Human Resources: On March 16, Explore Asheville held its final staff meeting before announcing all staff would begin working from home. This was in advance of the stay-home declaration made by Buncombe County and Governor Roy Cooper. Glenn began focusing his attention on the state and local declarations related to COVID-19 to best understand what impacts they will have on team members. He also investigated the SBA and other new programs that might be useful to our 1,300+ small business, tourism partners.

Personnel: Hannah Dosa and Jenn Kass-Green each became eligible to participate in the BCTDA's 401K Plan and were onboarded accordingly. It was decided, at this time, to not fill the recently vacated position of Sales Manager, Atlanta, D.C. and Chicago. Elizabeth White resigned as Director of Web and Analytics, effective March 13. Filling the position is placed on hold for now.

Building: The building was placed on total lockdown the week of March 24.

Destination Marketing Accreditation Program: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic requiring staff to focus on other high-priority tasks, work on the Destination Marketing Accreditation Program reaccreditation application has stalled for the time being. Staff will resume work on the application when available.

Tourism Management & Investment Plan: The Explore Asheville team continued working on the TMIP process in March. PGAV was in town on March 12 and Stephanie, Marla, Pat and Kathi participated in TMIP meetings, along with the steering committee and Chris Cavanaugh.

BCTDA Budget: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Explore Asheville team reassessed cashflow for the rest of FY 20 and worked through reducing proposed costs in the FY 21 budget, which will be presented to the board at the April 29 meeting. Staff also worked with vendors to reduce expenditures related to ongoing services and contracts wherever possible.

Ideas to Action (I2A) Leadership Forum: In early March, Stephanie continued participating in planning group meetings to help develop the I2A Leadership Forum, a new initiative for Asheville and Buncombe County to engage in constructive dialogue across lines of difference. The goal is to enable meaningful engagement among a distinguished, diverse, multi-perspective group of local leaders who will learn about key issues and engage in frank and productive conversation. Ultimately, the forum will lead to new solutions and an action agenda on critical community issues.

Remote Operations: Once the Explore Asheville team began working remotely from home to comply with Buncombe County's Stay Home/Stay Safe order, Jonna researched, selected and implemented technology options for virtual staff and board meetings. This included establishing Zoom accounts and selecting GoToWebinar as the platform to use for BCTDA meetings. Jonna also coordinated and communicated all logistics related to hosting the upcoming BCTDA meeting online.