



November 18, 2020

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

October visitation to Asheville and Buncombe County was the strongest it has been since the start of the pandemic. While the final STR report for October is not yet available as of this writing, lodging metrics for the month (one indicator of the health of the tourism sector and a measure of visitation) will still be below 2019 levels, but hotel occupancy will likely be down only single digits for the month. Average daily rate (ADR) and revenue per available room (RevPAR) will be down in October by a greater percentage than occupancy, due to some discounting still occurring in lower priced hotel segments. Weekday occupancy still lags weekends, but the spread between the two was likely smaller than at any time since the start of the summer travel season. Hotel occupancy continues to be highest in the Tunnel Road and Biltmore Village submarkets.

Final short-term rental demand figures for October are available from AirDNA. AirDNA reports that entire place short-term rental occupancy for Buncombe County was 82%, the highest it has been observed since AirDNA began reporting figures for both Airbnb and VRBO/HomeAway in summer 2017. Short-term rentals continue to be popular as alternatives to hotels among some travelers in both this destination and nationally.

Explore Asheville continues to monitor trends in coronavirus spread both regionally and locally. The ability to promote the destination through paid advertising has been restricted as we are still following the strategy outlined in late June to the BCTDA board of monitoring Johns Hopkins COVID-19 data to determine where and when to advertise within the drive market region. The recent increased spread of the virus will hinder further any plans for holiday advertising. We are, however, still coordinating public relations efforts with various media to promote our partners, especially around holiday gift ideas. We also continue to run search engine marketing ads to direct web inquiries to our COVID-19 landing page.

We are pleased to partner with the Asheville Buncombe Sports Commission to help bring the Maui Invitational college basketball tournament to Asheville, and the destination will be featured on the ESPN broadcast of the event.

Explore Asheville continues to work on new initiatives to encourage adherence to mandates and safety protocols among both partners and visitors, and is committed to keeping residents, employees, and visitors safe while maintaining commercial activity, jobs, and economic impact for the community.

OCTOBER BY THE NUMBERS

- During October, the sales team posted 918 personal contacts (down 19%). October sales activities generated 37 sales leads (down 62%) and 12 convention bookings (down 68%), representing 2,506 rooms (down 54%). Four months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 48 percent and room nights represented are down 47 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 25 group events in October (down 65%), with corresponding revenue of \$109,817 (down 95%). The services team assisted 47 groups (down 27%).
- The PR team landed 40 significant placements in October (up 14%), with 127 media touchpoints (up 55%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$417,310 with reach of nearly 5.7 million. Online placements added \$1,029,825 in value and reach of nearly 548 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 647,644 visits (flat), including 454,791 to the mobile site (down 3%). Our Facebook fan base total is 298,735 (up 2%) and video views totaled 51,508 (down 20%).
- In October 2020 there were 1,890 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 2,530 the previous year.
- Paid search generated 78k site visits with average time on site of 2:52 and an average of 3.08 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 10.8 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 78 room nights (up 5%) with total room revenue of \$12,373 (down 8%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 15,648 visitors (down 40%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 4,204 visitors (up 34%).

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$36,462,935 in September (down 8%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 59.6 percent during September (down 24%). The average daily room rate was \$142.81 (down 12%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$85.11 (down 33%). Room demand decreased 18 percent with 154,601 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 68.6 percent (up 20%), ADR of \$105.09 (up 7%), and RevPAR of \$72.07 (up 28%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 10 percent to total 124,267 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 63 percent to total 50,320 in September.

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.
- Presented an outlook on the tourism sector at the quarterly directors of sales call with local hotels and the group sales team.

- Collaborated on details of the advertising program for the Maui Invitational.
- Worked with Buncombe County finance and tax departments on plans to address late and non-payment occupancy tax penalty waivers.
- Participated in regional destination marketing organization calls with VisitNC and other mountain DMOs.
- Provided an update to the Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission.
- Met with representatives of 360i to review destination advertising plans for pausing and restarting advertising in drive markets.
- Organized team strategy session for discussion of holiday marketing initiatives.
- Participated on the VisitNC committee reviewing CARES Act applications for funding.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS – Marla Tambellini & Team

Project Updates:

- While the paid media plan remained paused through October, VisitNC rolled out its marketing promotions funded by the CARES act which includes assets from counties throughout NC. Several video assets from the Asheville area are included in the eMarketing effort. The program will continue through November.
- Worked with 360i team in finalizing holiday creative and messaging should the opportunity to resume paid media arise.
- Launched safety messages and mask-wearing reminders using geo-fencing to target people in high traffic areas.
- Began preparation for production of assets for ESPN for use during the Maui Invitational Tournament.
- Secured two grants through VisitNC for development and production of safety assets.
- Developed an integrated project to build and promote an online Holiday Gift Guide. The project was born out of a media round-up pitching gift ideas and maker stories. The release was sent to 106 writers and media outlets and included the URL for the online guide with the intent to create additional support for local businesses.
- Shot fall foliage video for use in paid and earned media assets, including fall outreach to media outlets.
- Managed transition of video and image assets to a new digital asset management platform.
- Logged 127 media touchpoints, initiated 891 targeted pitches, and supported seven media on the ground in Asheville in October. PR outreach included four proactive media efforts including a new holiday gift guide round-up (106 pitches), a winter travel release (287 pitches), a holiday events release (281 pitches) and distribution of 2020 fall color b-roll footage (203 pitches) to national and regional media. The winter and holiday were also distributed nationally via PR Newswire.
- Provided story support for *Conde Nast Travel*, *O Magazine*, *Forbes*, *Real Simple*, *AAA Go Magazine*, *FoodNetwork.com*, *The Weather Channel* and *Business NC Magazine*.
- Participated in Visit NC's October Virtual Media Panel that was attended by nine national journalists. Artist Jenny Pickens was nominated for the panel by Explore Asheville PR Team and selected as one of five female entrepreneurs to represent North Carolina.
- Attended Media Marketplace for the Society of American Travel Writers logging 12 deskside visits with media contributors/editors for AARP, Outside Magazine, AAA publications, USA TODAY, Nat Geo and Tasting Table.

Future Updates:

- Onboard new Content Director Whitney Smith, formerly the marketing and PR manager with the NC Arboretum.
- Shoot and edit new assets that include mask-wearing in the destination.

- Organizing a seasonal greeting for Explore Asheville journalists and media friends.
- Update video assets for Let's Go There partnership through U.S. Travel.
- Finalize media strategy and planning FY 21 Q3 and Q4.
- Introduce images into Google search efforts.
- Finalize social media editorial calendar for second half of FY21.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES – Dianna Pierce & Team

Project Updates:

- Co-hosted a group tour Virtual Vacation with World Best Adventures, highlighting group activities and featuring Biltmore, LaZoom, Adventure Center of Asheville, NC Arboretum, and the WNC Farmer's Market. Eighteen tour operators attended the web with an additional 20 tuning in via Facebook live.
- Downloaded 11 wedding guides from the website, equal to last year.
- Met with 27 incentive meeting planners virtually during IMEX, a top incentive show held annually in the US.
- Attended virtual TEAMS Sport Conference and conducted nine one-on-one appointments.
- Participated in Meeting Professional International's virtual trade show and conducted eight one-to-one appointments
- Hosted the inaugural Mug Moments, a 20-minute conversation held between an Asheville hotelier and the CVB regarding how groups are meeting safely in our community. Sixty meeting planners attended
- Reached out to wedding/event venues and meeting hotels about Governor Cooper's Phase 3 requirements
- Held AAA webinar highlighting what's new in Asheville for Fall 2020. Thirty-six attendees were representing AAA Auto Club Group, AAA Allied Group, AAA Mid-Atlantic, and AAA Carolinas. Content included industry partner updates and COVID-19 safety initiatives
- Definite bookings for October include: 2020 Maui Invitational (1454 rooms), 2019 Bob Louis Park (2 events, 125 rooms each), 2021 Tri-State Dance Contest (100 rooms), 2022 North Carolina Lawyers Assistance Program (206 rooms), 2021 North Carolina 811 (40 rooms), and 2020 Acadia Healthcare (34 rooms).
- Tentative bookings for October include: 2021 National Centers for Environmental Information (100 rooms), 2022 Real Property Section Annual Meeting (195 rooms), 2021 Purpose Financial (120 rooms), 2021 Virbac National Sales (101 rooms), 2021 Virtual Service Operations (231 rooms), 2021 Performance Trust Employees Getaway (370 rooms), 2021 Riverside Spring Shootout - Boys (200 rooms), 2021 Riverside Spring Shootout - Girls (250 rooms), 2023 Borzoi Club of America (510 room), among others.
- Presented at the BCTDA Annual Meeting and follow-up Marketing, Sales and Community Engagement update.
- Attended numerous webinars specific to meetings to stay current on trends affecting the various markets.
- Attended a site tour of Hilton Garden Inn, Ode to Buskers sculpture unveiling and dedication, and meetings with local hotel partners.
- Hosted a fall contest on LinkedIn encouraging meeting planners to tag a colleague to win. Thirteen planners responded and new contacts were generated.
- Responded to a call for CVB news from Bonnie Walsh who will be presenting a webinar in late November entitled "Leveraging Your CVB Relationship with CVBs/DMOs".
- Sent an email invitation to view episode one of the Mug Moments conversation with the AC Hotel's Marie Dalis Brown generating nearly 100 registrations.

Future Updates:

- Continue planning towards hosting the Southeast Chapter of SITE coming in December. A total of 40 planners are expected.
- Schedule/host second Mug Moments about how meetings are happening safely at Asheville's hotels.
- Finalize elements contained in the brand refresh project.
- Continue work on next iteration of destination virtual tour to launch in January 2021.
- Attend virtual trade shows as assigned.

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

Project Updates:

- In October, 66 partner records were updated – 26 attractions & retail, 12 lodging, 21 food & drink, and 3 venue/wedding services. There were 145 events for the calendar, and 1,890 Individual Visitor Guide requests processed. Charlie pushed Visitor Guide bulk distribution and sent guides to 386 AAA offices.
- Eight new partners were added in October: We Rock The Spectrum, Rabbit Rabbit, Horse + Hero, AVL Tacos and Taps, Asheville Pizza and Brewing Company - South Asheville, Level 256 Classic Arcade Bar, Mac's Burgers & Cheesesteaks, and SunFroot.
- Four partner accounts were cancelled in October. Well Played Board Game Café, Leap Frog Tours, and Tasty Beverage Company are permanently closed due to issues related to Covid. Koresma is a musician who relocated to LA.
- Two partner webinars were hosted in October including the BCTDA Annual Meeting on October 7 for 217 registrants, and a follow up Sales, Marketing & Community Engagement Update on October 20 for 123 registrants.
- 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.
- TPDF disbursement requests for the YMI Cultural Center and for the NC Arboretum are in review.
- The new Wayfinding inter-district signage system designed for the River Arts District was installed and punch list items are in progress.
- Pat continues to seek support in the research phase of the African American Heritage Trail project including reviewing options for partnering with UNC Asheville.
- In support of Buncombe County's effort to encourage the use of masks and the 3 W's, staff coordinated the commission of a custom graphic by a local artist to be used in public spaces including window clings, sidewalk decals, pole banners, and other signage. We worked with the Asheville Area Arts Council and the Asheville Art Museum to help us identify a local artist and select a design. The collateral has been produced and the community engagement team has been distributing the materials around town and to individual partners.
- Robert Stevenson of Homeward Bound, the City's liaison contracted to connect people in the community with resources, met with CVB staff to share insights on his work. Pat is working with Robert to convene tourism partner organizations to learn more about current homelessness-related issues in the community and provide Mr. Stevenson with direct feedback from businesses.
- A partner survey has been created and distributed to partners to collect insights on tourism business winter plans.
- Pat attended the virtual 7th African Americans in Western North Carolina and Southern Appalachia Conference/Symposium.

Future Updates:

- Partner virtual events and webinars are in development including the Explore Asheville's Virtual Holiday + Welcoming Party for New President & CEO on December 9, and three webinars presented by JB Media including 'People First – Website Usability Best Practices' on November 5, 'Reinvent Your Path to Success – How to Promote New Experiences' on January 13, 2021 and 'Cost-Effective Ways to Increase Reach and Website Traffic' on February 10, 2021.
- Pat and the members of the Community Engagement team are pursuing professional development in equity, diversity, and inclusion, and have enrolled in coursework at the Lenoir-Rhyne Equity & Diversity Institute.
- Nicole is preparing a series of Extranet Tips & Tricks "how-to" training videos that will be posted on AshevilleCVB.com to improve accessibility for partners.
- Nicole and Pat are preparing to launch One-on-One Wednesdays, a program where partners can sign up for 30-minute appointments to get personalized assistance. This is an alternative solution to the monthly orientations that have been suspended due to COVID.

PUBLIC INFORMATION – Kathi Petersen

Project Updates:

- Assisted BCTDA chair and vice chair with various aspects announcing the appointment of Vic Isley, including writing/disseminating press release; responding to public records and other media requests; publicizing announcement via Explore Asheville communication channels (newsletter, social media, AshevilleCVB.com).
- Worked with Jonna, Chris, and Buncombe County staff to communicate the waiver of the occupancy tax penalty to commercial lodging and accommodation partners, including short term rentals, B&Bs, hotels/motels, etc.
- Oversaw Pre- and post-publicity of Parts 1 & 2 of the BCTDA Annual Meeting, to include media advisories, recaps of meetings on AshevilleCVB.com and in industry/community newsletters; plus responding to media needs.
- Completed the managing of all aspects of the 20-page FY 2019-20 BCTDA Annual Report, which included planning, developing/ writing/ editing content, working with the designer on layout, copyfitting, proofs, final publication, and publicizing/promoting via industry communication channels.
- Wrote/disseminated a press release announcing the William A.V. Cecil Award presented to AIR at the Annual Meeting; made personal media pitches and publicized the award via social media; and created a new Cecil Award page on AshevilleCVB.com.
- Developed content and published first industry/community e-newsletter using Explore Asheville's new platform, Act-On.
- Wrote copy for other newsletters and e-alerts – in total, eight were sent out in October.
- Developed content and updates for AshevilleCVB.com.
- responded to requests for interviews on fall tourism, for participation in the Business NC Tourism Roundtable, and on the outlook/benefits of tourism in WNC.

Future Updates:

- Continue to manage all aspects of content and production/publication of e-newsletters as we further refine the use of the new Act-On platform.

EXECUTIVE OFFICE – Glenn Cox and Jonna Sampson

Project Updates:

- Executed two board meetings to include a special board meeting on October 15 to hire Victoria Isley as Explore Asheville’s President & CEO, and the regular monthly meeting on October 28.
- The Director of Finance’s three-month leave began on October 1, 2020, and staff are covering her job responsibilities related to payroll, supplier maintenance, and invoice processing.
- Assisted the Community Engagement department with technical and logistical assistance related to executing the BCTDA’s Virtual Annual Meeting on October 7, and the Marketing, Sales and Community Engagement Update virtual event on October 20.
- Provided documentation to the Buncombe County Tax Office related to the BCTDA’s action to automatically waive all COVID-related penalty waivers, which will be presented to the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners for further and final consideration on November 5.
- Staff members attended the “Ode to Buskers” Sculpture Unveiling and Dedication at the Kimpton Hotel Arras.
- Chris Cavanaugh and department heads provided a BCTDA board member orientation for Kathleen Mosher and Brenda Durden via Zoom.
- Onboarded Nicole Will into Explore Asheville’s medical and health benefits.
- In collaboration with Ms. Tambellini, concluded the application process to hire a new Director of Content and worked with the successful candidate to understand the costs related to benefits.

Future Updates:

- Prepare for the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled on November 18, 2020.
- Gather materials and prepare to onboard new President & CEO Victoria Isley, who starts in her position on December 1.
- Onboard the newly hired Director of Content.
- Continue covering for the Director of Finance, who is on leave the months of October through December.