

January 27, 2020

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority  
From: Vic Isley  
Subject: President & CEO's Report of December 2020 Activities

Overall overnight stays and the value the visitors bring to the entire Asheville community continue to suffer during the pandemic, December being no exception. Hotel occupancy for the month of December was 54.8 percent, down 20 percent year over year. The calendar year of 2020 is one of the most challenging on record, ending the year at just under 50 percent occupancy, compared to 73 percent in 2019.

|                    | <b>Hotel Occupancy</b> | <b>Percentage Change YOY</b> |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| December 2020      | 54.8%                  | (20%)                        |
| Calendar Year 2020 | 49.9%                  | (32%)                        |

Source: STR Report

A bright spot in overnight stays is with the short-term vacation rental market, which is good news for local residents participating in the vacation rental market who are earning more and benefitting from the return of visitors to our community. December vacation rental occupancy was up 16 percent reaching nearly 66 percent. Vacation rentals for the full calendar year reached 64 percent, compared to 59 percent in 2019.

|                    | <b>Vacation Rental Occupancy</b> | <b>Percentage Change YOY</b> |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| December 2020      | 65.7%                            | +16%                         |
| Calendar Year 2020 | 64%                              | +8%                          |

Source: AirDNA

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 advertising in the immediate future. We continue to coordinate public relations efforts with various media to promote community partners, especially around holiday gift ideas. Search engine marketing ads direct web inquiries to our COVID-19 landing page for the most current information.

Explore Asheville continues to work on 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.

## **DECEMBER BY THE NUMBERS**

- During December, the sales team posted 734 personal contacts (down 26%). December sales activities generated 19 sales leads (down 73%) and 30 convention bookings (down 44%), representing 1,886 rooms (down 79%). Six months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 44 percent and room nights represented are down 51 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 6 group events in December (down 75%), with corresponding revenue of \$53,960 (down 75%). The services team assisted 9 groups (down 31%).
- The PR team landed 37 significant placements in December (up 54%), with 64 media touchpoints (up 60%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$76,207 with reach of nearly 471 thousand. Online placements added \$1,863,214 in value and reach of over 991 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 450,200 visits (down 3%), including 337,170 to the mobile site (down 3%). Our Facebook fan base total is 299,322 (up 1%) and video views totaled 32,752 (down 24%).
- In December 2020, there were 857 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 1,606 the previous year.
- Paid search generated 56k site visits with average time on site of 2:10 and an average of 2.53 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 8.9 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 39 room nights (down 47%) with total room revenue of \$4,268 (down 63%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 6,688 visitors (down 55%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 1,304 visitors (down 24%).

## **LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS**

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$36,314,827 in November (down 14%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 59.9 percent during November (down 20%). The average daily room rate was \$160.11 (down 12%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$95.92 (down 30%). Room demand decreased 16 percent with 155,404 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 69.8 percent (up 23%), ADR of \$108.24 (up 6%), and RevPAR of \$75.60 (up 36%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 13 percent to total 133,762 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 51 percent to total 68,229 in November.

## **PRESIDENT AND CEO**

- Participated in the county's semi-weekly COVID conference calls and worked with representatives of the county to identify continued improvements in communication of safety mandates to visitors and residents.
- Met with representatives of 360i to review destination advertising plans for winter and spring.

- Worked on plans for additional promotional support of local businesses during the winter months, including marketing for Asheville Independent Restaurants and sponsorship of the Asheville Chamber's Restaurant Week.
- Worked with the Asheville Regional Airport on air service development activities.
- Met with representatives of KemperLesnik, the operators of the Maui Invitational event.

## **MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **Project Updates:**

- The Holiday Gift Guide, a small campaign to support local businesses, was shared through paid social and SEM. Full campaign generated 107K web sessions and 83K referrals to partner pages.
  - Promoted local products through Instagram Story weekly gift guide campaign.
  - Launched customizable gift of travel certificate and promoted through social and December e-newsletter.
- Planning for the 2H FY21 paid media continued, including:
  - Re-evaluation of audience and further refinement.
  - Target market analysis.
  - Finalization of the creative brief which will inform new creative development for launch in early spring.
- Supported itinerary and interview facilitation for Titus & Tate college basketball influencer partnership as part of Explore Asheville's Maui Invitational sponsorship package.
- "Give the Gift of Travel" version of the Let's Go There video ran on connected TV through Dec. 23 to encourage future travel.
- Logged 65 media touchpoints, initiated 92 targeted pitches, and supported five media on the ground in Asheville in December.
- Provided story support for Forbes, a syndicated Gannett newspaper writer, Just Luxe, sports podcasters and influencers Titus and Tate, and Marriot Bonvoy Traveler's new podcast "About the Journey" featuring Oneika Raymond.
- Attended and sponsored the first Black Travel Alliance WAVELENGTH national networking and marketplace event. Staffed Explore Asheville virtual booth and conducted 16 one-on-one appointments with black content creators and influencers. Team engaged with a total of 41 new media and creator connections.
- Created and sent the PR Team holiday card to 70 journalists and media friends.

### **Future Updates:**

- Work with agency on further development of new creative, audience refinement and media plan for the spring media campaign.
- Finalize 2021 media list and destination news pitch featuring travel news with a focus on the people and histories behind the news.
- Represent Explore Asheville at TravMedia's International Media Virtual Marketplace.
- Launch "Curated Asheville" winter promotion focused on socially distant experiences.
- Place focus on supporting restaurant community with emphasis on Asheville Restaurant Week.

## **GROUP SALES & SERVICES**

### **Project Updates:**

- Attended the Tennessee Society of Association Executives annual tradeshow virtually, meeting one-on-one with 15 planners. First open dates were fall of 2021, with most inquiries noting meeting dates of 2022 and 2023.
- Attended two Visit NC Count on Me trade shows this December. One has a national focus and the second had a targeted regional focus. Staff met with 13 planners and 17 planners, respectively.
- Sponsored a dinner for Society of Incentive Travel Executives (SITE) – SE Annual Education Summit when in town December 6-8. Thirty-five planners were among the 70-total people in attendance. Multiple hotels and venues participated in the hosting of events. Confirmed a booking for Professional Administrative Co-Employers for April/May 2021 with 519 total room nights as a direct result of hosting the meeting.
- Attended the Association Forum of Chicago Holiday Showcase virtually and completed appointments with 15 planners.
- Confirmed results of updated 48-Hour FAM convention report.
- Photographed/videotaped reimagined meeting spaces at several area hotels for use in virtual FAM. Also filmed Tina Kinsey, Asheville Regional Airport, Jeff Greiner, Attractions Roundtable, and staff segments.
- Held a virtual DOS quarterly meeting.
- Sent 465 New Year greeting e-cards to top and potential accounts.
- Staff were certified in the CRM Member/Partner and Sales modules of Brainery, an online training platform supported by Simpleview.
- Initiated work on CVB explainer infographic video which provides visual explanation of how a CVB can provide valuable meeting services to planners.
- Supported CVB Holiday party by videotaping the Sovereign Remedies craft cocktail recipe section.
- Interacted with meeting planners through virtual attendance at Sports EAT Women's Subgroup meeting and Chicago Town Hall Meeting.
- Definite bookings for December include: 2020 Appalachian Athletic Conference Cross Country Championship (80 rooms), 2022 Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange (108 rooms), 2021 Florida Business Society (80 rooms), 2020 EMC Board Meeting (80 rooms), 2021 SDI Meetings and Incentives (50 rooms), 2020 Winthrop University (15 rooms), 2021 AmeriLife Summit (60 rooms) and 10 wedding groups.
- Tentative bookings include: 2022 Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange (108 rooms), 2021 Asheville Lacrosse Classic for Boys and for Girls (600 rooms and 500 rooms respectively), 2021 National Conference of State Legislatures (214 rooms), 2021 Academy of General Dentistry (92 rooms), 2021 NCYSA Kepner Cup (300 rooms), 2021 IBS Class of 1971 (111 rooms), 2023 National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (1285 rooms), six wedding groups and 2021 Sun Tours Ltd. (68 rooms), among others.
- Hosted a site visit for HOG, USA a domestic/international tour company specializing in Japanese travel.
- Deployed a hotel survey to determine interest in participating in a Closer to Home, a self-directed FAM initiative – 18 properties indicated interest in participating.
- Nine wedding guides were downloaded from the website as compared to six last December.
- Prepared two microsites for upcoming inbound sports groups.
- Attended webinars to stay current on trends affecting various markets.
- Attended CVB virtual holiday party, ABRSC Annual Meeting and toured Asheville Art Museum.

- Explore Asheville sponsored a LinkedIn social media contest for SITE Southeast attendees to post the best photo highlighting “safe meeting” practices.
- Received 3885 views for various LinkedIn posts (various) by the sales team during the month of December.
- Responded to an interview request for a writer who will cover Asheville in PREVUE’s January/February issue.
- A e-newsletter was sent to 13,329 planners in the database promoting Mug Moments 3 and the virtual FAM – with an Open Rate of 13.8 percent and Click Rate of 1.32 percent.

**Future Updates:**

- Finalize details for third Mug Moments scheduled for January 21 – 43 registered so far.
- Finalize deliverables for meetings brand refresh project.
- Continued work on Explore Asheville virtual FAM scheduled to air January 28 – 189 registered so far.
- Complete third case study outlining how groups are meeting safely in Asheville.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**Project Updates:**

- In December, 143 partner account updates, 123 calendar events, and 857 individual Visitor Guide requests were processed.
- Ten new partners were added in December: Turn Up on Wheelz, Bear’s Smokehouse, Massage on Wheels, Wehrloom Honey and Meadery, Asheville E-Bikes, Adoratherapy, Blu29, Barn Door Ciderworks, Veranda Café, and Legacy & Legend.
- Six partner accounts were cancelled in December. The Paint Bug, Ole Shakey’s Getaway, and Asheville Beauty Academy are permanently closed due to issues related to COVID-19. Over Easy Café closed its physical location but has plans to conduct pop-ups in the near-term and hopes to open a new location in the future. Villagers and Purl’s Yarn Emporium closed their physical locations and transitioned to online retail only in response to COVID-19.
- In only its second month since being launched, twelve One-on-One Wednesday sessions were held, nine with current partners and three with community members and potential partners.
- The Explore Asheville’s [Virtual] Holiday + Welcoming Party for New President & CEO was held on December 9 with 172 in attendance. The event included a cocktail video by Charlie Hodge with Sovereign Remedies, music by Adame Dembele from LEAF Global Arts Center, and the presentation of CVB Superstar Awards.
- The team continues to support the Marketing department’s efforts to promote tourism partners offering winter outdoor dining and small group experiences for Curated Asheville.
- Pat attended the South Slope Advisory Committee meeting, Metro Economy Outlook, the Sports Commission’s Annual Meeting, AIGA Business Outreach Committee meeting. Nicole attended the African American Business Association’s monthly meeting.
- The Wayfinding kiosk content update project is in progress. Pat also met with business owners on Broadway north of 240 to review new Wayfinding signage request to direct traffic to this developing corridor.

**Future Updates:**

- Partner webinars are in development including two that will be presented by JB Media: ‘Reinvent Your Path to Success – How to Promote New Experiences’ on January 13 and ‘Cost-Effective Ways to Increase Reach and Website Traffic’ on February 10.

- Planning and preparation for the 'Family Forward NC COVID-19 Rapid Response Program' webinar on Jan 25, which will be co-promoted by Explore Asheville, AIR, Asheville Downtown Association, the Chamber, and the Brewers Alliance.

## **PUBLIC INFORMATION**

### **Project Updates:**

- Wrote and published five partner e-newsletters or e-alerts using the new Act-on platform with open rates as high as 45 percent.
- Wrote, published, and updated content on AshevilleCVB.com that included information on latest state and county COVID-related executive orders, as well as federal relief packages.
- Included promotion around this year's CVB Superstars announced at the holiday party on Explore Asheville's social media platforms.
- Responded to several requests for interviews, quotes, or information, including Wall Street Journal and SouthPark Magazine (impacts of the pandemic on tourism), Asheville Citizen Times (economic outlook for 2021), Mountain Xpress (year in review – tourism and pandemic), WLOS-TV (clarification on the increase in occupancy rates in October), and two with the newly launched 24-hour Spectrum TV News in WNC (value of tourism).
- Provided significant support along with other team members in preparing for, publicizing, and producing the holiday party for partners.
- Attended virtual meetings and events that included Blue Ridge Public Radio Advisory Committee (newly appointed member); Mountain BizWorks' year-end spotlight on local entrepreneurs; Economic Development Partnership of NC discussion on the region's economy; Asheville Chamber's Advocacy & Policy Committee; and Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission's annual meeting.

### **Future Updates:**

- Set up introductory meetings between Vic and news media outlets.
- Develop new communication tool that will recap each month's board meeting.
- Continue to make updates and improvements to AshevilleCVB.com.

## **EXECUTIVE OFFICE**

### **Project Updates:**

- Executed the BCTDA's regular monthly board meeting virtually on December 16. Highlights of the meeting included a Maui Invitational update and the FY audit presentation. This was Victoria Isley's first board meeting in her role as President & CEO.
- Onboarded Victoria Isley as a new staff member, transitioning Explore Asheville leadership from Interim Executive Chris Cavanaugh, who served from July through November.
- Scheduled meetings for Vic with staff, board members, elected officials, and community leaders.
- Continued to cover responsibilities during the Director of Finance's three-month leave, which ended December 31, 2020.
- Worked with CliftonLarsonAllen, LLP to finalize FY 20 audit documents.

### **Future Updates:**

- Continue onboarding and supporting Victoria Isley, including coordinating internal and external meetings as she continues to meet with staff and community leaders.
- Develop the FY 22 budget process and timeline.
- Prepare for the BCTDA's Annual Planning Retreat, scheduled March 25-26, 2021.

- Prepare for and execute the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled on January 27, 2021.
- Worked toward finalizing the policies and procedures for Team Members returning to the workplace.