



March 25, 2021

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority  
From: Vic Isley  
Subject: President & CEO's Report of February 2021 Activities

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Overall overnight stays and the value the visitors bring to the entire Asheville community continue to suffer during the pandemic, and February of 2021 continues that trend. Hotel occupancy for the month of February was 44.5 percent, down 20.5 percent year over year.

A bright spot in overnight stays continues to be the short-term vacation rental market, 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. February vacation rental occupancy was up 20.5% percent reaching 54.6% percent.

	<b>Hotel Occupancy</b>	<b>Percentage Change YOY</b>
February 2021	44.5%	(20.5%)

Source: STR Report

	<b>Vacation Rental Occupancy</b>	<b>Percentage Change YOY</b>
February 2021	54.6%	+20.5%

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. With positive cases dropping and the availability of vaccines increasing, plans to reengage with potential travelers through paid promotions will be rolled out in phases throughout the spring.

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 inspiring travelers to choose Asheville for their future travel to support local jobs for residents and create new customers for community businesses and outfitters.

## **FEBRUARY BY THE NUMBERS**

- During February, the sales team posted 996 personal contacts (up 10%). February sales activities generated 55 sales leads (down 49%) and 18 convention bookings (down 18%), representing 1,770 rooms (down 62%). Eight months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 49 percent and room nights represented are down 56 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 3 group events in February (down 83%), with corresponding revenue of \$67,520 (down 87%). The services team assisted 3 groups (down 83%).
- The PR team landed 29 significant placements in February (up 38%), with 77 media touchpoints (up 97%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$1.8 million with reach of 8.4 million. Online placements added \$1.4 million in value and reach of more than 761 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 338,852 visits (down 14%), including 237,568 to the mobile site (down 5%). Our Facebook fan base total is 299,753 (up 1%) and video views totaled 33,048 (down 29%).
- In February 2021, there were 2,247 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 3,073 the previous year.
- Paid search generated 72k site visits in February with average time on site of 1:16 and an average of 1.94 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 17 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 44 room nights (up 13%) with total room revenue of \$6,161 (down 5%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 1,818 visitors (down 78%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 1,308 visitors (up 3%).

## **LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS**

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$24,204,607 in January (down 5%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 41.8 percent during January (down 17%). The average daily room rate was \$114.25 (down 8%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$47.79 (down 24%). Room demand decreased 13 percent with 112,415 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 46 percent (up 24%), ADR of \$101.32 (up 10%), and RevPAR of \$46.61 (up 35%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 16 percent to total 82,019 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 61 percent to total 43,630 in January.

## **MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **Project Updates:**

- Reviewed creative concepts and approaches with the 360i team and began the production process moving into March.
- Discussed potential partnerships and moved the creative process forward with several media outlets, including Garden & Gun, Samantha Brown, AFAR, Matador, and T + L.
- Participated in discussions on the Visit NC Leave No Trace project and Pledge for the Wild as part of efforts to build out a platform around responsible tourism.
- Black History Month: Implemented series of social posts and Instagram Story profiles featuring historical and present-day Black figures and landmarks in the Asheville community, including Hood Huggers International, Muni Documentary, Roberta Flack and SoundSpace @ Rabbit's Hotel.
- Created new blog post focused on virtual and in-person events happening around Valentine's Day for 2021 and amplified "828 Love Asheville" Go Local campaign via social and email distribution.
- Curated Asheville: Launched social series featuring weekly roundups of Curated Asheville partners and personalized interviews shared via Instagram Stories.
- Planning for the 2H FY21 paid media continued, including:
  - Finalized media plan and partner recommendations.
  - Further refinement of creative approach, look and feel, and tonality continued in February and is being finalized for a rolling launch in early spring.
  - Kicked off content partnerships with Samantha Brown's Places to Love, Garden & Gun, Travel + Leisure and Afar. Also restarted discussions with Matador for production in May (this was pulled forward from last year's plan as we could not move forward due to the pandemic).
- Logged 77 media touchpoints, initiated 234 pitches, and supported 5 media on the ground in Asheville in February.
- Provided story support for *USA Today*, *Frommer's*, *Southern Living*, *Departures and Country*.
- Presented "What New in 2021" to Visit NC editorial and PR team.
- Provided photo support for *Girl Camper*, *Southern Travel + Lifestyles* and *Leader's Edge* magazines.
- Distributed the "What's New in 2021" news round-up via 313 individualized email sends. Also distributed the news to media via an Act-On send (1,681 delivered with a 25.5% open rate) and PR Newswire (picked up 134 times for total potential audience of 120 million).
- Cleaned up main media distribution lists and continued work to input the team's main media list into Cision for future distribution.
- Provided Cision direction, key terms and a "bulls-eye" list of articles to use in creating a wellness coverage dashboard.
- Reviewing and distributing outreach to meetings media around the Safe Meeting Case Studies.
- Participated in a webinar focused on Diversity in Travel.

### **Future Updates:**

- Development and initial rollout of 2021 spring content plan.
- Editing and distribution of the wellness release.
- Planning for upcoming spring site visits (*Country Magazine*, *The Sophisticated Life* blog, *Departures*, *Better Magazine*, *Places to Love*)
- Continue to work with Experian on audience profiles.
- Reviewing business intelligence dashboards.

## **GROUP SALES & SERVICES**

### **Project Updates:**

- Closer to Home Self Directed FAM initiative targeting the drive meeting market generated 40 requests for more information on visiting and generated 13 confirmed reservations to date.
- Held Mug Moments #4 featuring Robert Sponder with Holiday Inn Biltmore West.
  - Registered attendance: 41 / Actual Viewers: 31
- Met with Meetings Database Inc. regarding data analytics project for meeting and group events.
- Staff hosted a site visit with Society of Industrial and Office Realtors for May 2021.
- Virtually attended the following trade/industry meetings:
  - Georgia Society of Association Executives Hybrid Luncheon
  - Face Book live with HPN Global managers
  - Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast
  - UNC Asheville's Bulldog Sports Roundtable
  - NC Sports Association Meeting
  - Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission
  - SoCon Team Host Hotel Meeting (review safety protocols)
  - Sports ETA Women's Group
- Virtually attended educational webinars by Cvent on outlook for meetings industry, Destination International's strategies for connecting with black travelers, Simpleview's and Stamats' presentations on data cleansing.
- Attended Wedding Industry Preview Event hosted by AC/Aloft/Arras.
- Attended Nomadness BIPOC Diversity in Travel Data Reveal 3.0.
- Eight wedding guides were downloaded this February versus 15 last February.
- February bookings included (but are not limited to): 2021 NCYSA Kepner Cup – Girls (100 rooms), 2021 Biltmore-Kiwanis 15K/5K Classic (90 rooms), 2021 The Upledger Institute (40 rooms), 2021 National Hospitalist Conference (266 rooms), 2021 Epic Dance (80 rooms), 2022 Property and Liability Resource Bureau (91 rooms), 2020 Maximum Cheer and Dance (40 rooms), 2021 AAI Staff Retreat (18 rooms), 2021 Comfort Systems (105 rooms), 2021 Buyers Intelligence Group (45 rooms), and 2022 Southern Headache Society (325 rooms).
- Finalized the *Safe Meetings in Asheville* landing page and the *Safe Meeting Case Studies*.
- Staff was interviewed for *Small Market Meetings* article about incentives available to meeting planners.
- Featured in the Jan/Feb edition of American Bus Association's Destinations
- An e-newsletter was sent to 12,463 planners in the database. (Open Rate: 11.9%, Click-to-Open Rate: 12.4%)
- An invitation for Mug Moments Episode 4 was sent to 165 past episode registrants. (Open Rate: 35.2%, Click-to-Open Rate: 36.2%)
- Received 1,839 views on various LinkedIn posts.
- Created four microsites: Kiwanis 15K/5K Classic, Epic Dance 2021, NCYSA Kepner Cup, and Montreat College Track & Field Qualifying Meet.

### **Future Updates:**

- Sales Retreat on Tuesday, March 9.
- Structure FY 21 budget.
- Host Mug Moments #5, the final edition.
- Hold DOS quarterly meeting.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### **Project Updates:**

- In February, 40 partner account updates, 102 calendar events, and 2,247 individual Visitor Guide requests were processed.
- Nine new partners were added in February: Ambiente Modern Furniture, Gather 'Round Charcuterie Co., Montgomery Sky Farm, I Do Asheville Weddings, PIE.ZAA, Summit Coffee Company, Parkway Picnics LLC, Evolve Skin Studio, and Flourish Flower Farm.
- Two partner accounts were cancelled in February: Jen Aly Designs due to closure and the Herb Mountain Farm transitioned property from retreats/venue rental to residential community.
- Nine One-on-One Wednesday sessions were held: three with current partners for listing/extranet/general support, four new partners and two with potential new partners.
- Hosted a partner webinar presented by JB Media “Cost-Effective Ways to Increase Reach and Website Traffic” on February 10 with 55 in attendance.
- Calendar submission form on the frontend and in the extranet undergoing updates to improve usability for partners submitting events.
- Partner support benefit information and onboarding process on AshevilleCVB.com is being reviewed for improvement with the JB Media team.
- CE team members hosted a table at Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast featuring guest speaker Paul Farber from Monument Lab, and attended the following community meetings: RAD Leadership Roundtable, African American Business Association, Asheville Homestay Network, RADBA (River Arts District Business Association), Asheville Downtown Association’s State of Downtown, and Chamber’s Business After Hours, and a Preservation and History Meet Up hosted by The Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe.
- Pat met with regional tourism and forest agencies to discuss Visit NC’s Leave No Trace program and attended the NOMADNESS BIPOC Diversity in Travel Data Reveal 3.0 webinar.
- Wayfinding: managing the kiosk refresh project to update all content and designs on every kiosk throughout the county.
- A summary overview of the TPDF Project Annual Reports was compiled and presented at the February board meeting by Pat.
- TPDF: The BCTDA approved a request from the City of Asheville to extend the Riverfront Destination Development project deadline to May 31, 2021.
- TPDF: Exploring capital needs of performing arts venues and outdoor cultural events related to COVID restrictions with various community partners.
- African American Heritage Trail: received budget allocation approval from BCTDA and moving forward with research phase.
- Team members continue with Brainery and Lenoir Rhyne Equity, Diversity & Inclusion certification coursework.

### **Future Updates:**

- The Hospitality Outlook virtual event is in development for March 10 with Adam Sacks from Tourism Economics as the Keynote Speaker.
- Wayfinding: planning underway for spring maintenance and set up of online inventory management system.
- African American Heritage Trail: kick-off of research phase and coordinating tours with the project team and staff.

## **PUBLIC INFORMATION**

### **Project Updates:**

- Wrote and published five partner e-newsletters or e-alerts, including the second edition of the *Tourism Community Update* on February 24, an e-newsletter published immediately following the BCTDA board meeting. In total in the month of February, 6,949 emails were delivered among the five communications with an open rate as high as 47.66%, well exceeding industry averages.
- Wrote, published, and updated content on AshevilleCVB.com that included information on COVID relief opportunities, including One Buncombe Fund; latest COVID-related executive orders; BCTDA board meeting documents; new public comment protocols; Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund 6-Month Report; e-newsletters and alerts; partner forums including Hospitality Outlook.
- Social media communications included promotion of the February BCTDA board meeting; the *Tourism Community Update*; Leadership Asheville Winter Buzz Breakfast series (CVB-sponsored); PPP and other COVID relief info; the 828 Go Local Challenge; Travel Confidently - Valentine's weekend (US Travel Assoc); partner webinars; Black History Month.
- Responded to several requests for interviews, quotes, or information, including:
  - WLOS-TV: [Giving hotel workers COVID-19 vaccine priority would help Asheville's tourism industry](#) (02/24/21)
  - Asheville Citizen Times: [Should less tax money be spent on Asheville, Buncombe Tourism Marketing](#) (02/25/21)
  - Mountain Xpress: [New TDA boss sketches post-pandemic tourism plans](#) (02/17/21)
  - BizRadio Asheville: [23-minute interview with Vic on The Matt Mittan Show](#) (02/02/21)
  - Sunshine Request: Questions on public comment protocols.
- Other coverage of note includes coverage of January BCTDA board meeting:
  - Mountain Xpress: [TDA will not support additional COVID-19 relief from room tax revenues](#) (02/01/21)
- Press Releases/Advisories sent: BCTDA Board meeting, to include new public comment processes and protocols.
- Assisted in the development and public announcement of the protocols for live (virtual) public comments during board meetings.

### **Future Updates:**

- Continue developing a comprehensive stakeholder communications plan.

## **PRESIDENT & CEO + EXECUTIVE OFFICE**

### **Project Updates:**

- Executed the BCTDA's regular monthly board meeting virtually on February 24. Highlights of the meeting included: New [Public Comment Protocols](#) were adopted and a nominating committee was appointed to include Gary Froeba (chair), John McKibbin, and Leah Ashburn. A TPDF update was given to include the annual project status report, budget amendment to close completed projects was approved, a contract extension request by the City of Asheville was approved, and a \$500,000 budget for the African American Heritage Trail project was established. A *Recovery Marketing & Messaging* presentation was shared by Marla and Ashley Keetle w/ 360i and a *Preparing for Group Recovery* presentation was giving by Dianna.

- Developed new protocols for verbal public comments to be received during BCTDA virtual board meetings, which will allow for a limited number of people to share live comments if they sign up in advance and follow the new rules adopted by the board on February 24. Written comments are still accepted via email as before.
- Marketing & PR Assistant Audrey Wells resigned and her last day of employment was February 19. Applications for the Marketing & PR Assistant opening were accepted through month's end, with more than 110 people applying for the position.
- Jenn began the FY22 budget season, including creation of the FY22 budget template docs, had initial meetings with Vic and each department head to provide overview of budget season expectations, began the FY21 revenue and expense forecast, created the FY22 revenue forecast and had initial meeting with Vic and BCTDA Finance Committee to discuss FY22 revenue objective.
- Continued to schedule meetings for Vic Isley with staff, tourism community members, elected officials, stakeholders, and strategic partners.

**Future Updates:**

- Prepare for and execute the BCTDA's Annual Planning Retreat and March meeting, to be held virtually March 25-26, 2021.
- Develop a plan to recognize VP of Sales Dianna Pierce, who is retiring on March 26 after 26 years of service to the CVB.
- Work on a plan for resuming in person board meetings with a hybrid virtual component to implement when the time is right.
- Continue working on developing the FY 22 proposed budget.
- Continue to coordinate Vic's calendar, including scheduling internal and external meetings as she meets with business owners, elected officials, community leaders, and industry professionals.