

August 26, 2020

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

Following a rough start to the month in terms of coronavirus spread and consumer sentiment regarding intent to travel, July ended on a more positive note as transmission of the virus simmered down once again and travel picked back up. However, the southeastern U.S. continues to experience COVID spread that is above the national average, and we have not resumed destination advertising other than the search engine marketing we use to direct travelers to the Explore Asheville website where they can find current safety information.

Area lodging occupancy began to improve in late July and early August. Hotel occupancy lags that of entire-place short-term rentals, a trend that has been observed regionally and nationally as well. Travel consumers are expressing preference for whole-home rentals as a way to gather with friends and family and as a means of avoiding crowds.

Locally, hotel occupancy is strongest in the Tunnel Road and Biltmore Village submarkets and weakest downtown and along I-26 in the southern half of the county. Asheville's hotel occupancy for the month of July was comparable to that in Charleston, Savannah, and Myrtle Beach, although beach rentals make up a significant portion of the lodging market in South Carolina.

The entire team is responding to the new challenges of this time by focusing upon both short-term needs of the community and partners, and the long-term selling of the destination. We unfortunately continue to see the closure of some tourism-related businesses in Buncombe County, demonstrating the need for continued aid from Washington and Raleigh and for Americans to engage in responsible behavior when out in public to reduce the spread of the virus.

JULY BY THE NUMBERS

- During July, the sales team posted 810 personal contacts (down 24%). July sales activities generated 31 sales leads (down 64%) and 30 convention bookings (up 36%), representing 1,978 rooms (down 49%). In the first month of the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are up 36 percent and room nights represented are down 49 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 11 group events in July (down 72%), with corresponding revenue of \$78,563 (down 95%). The services team assisted 11 groups (down 70%).

- The PR team landed 26 significant placements in July (down 38%), with 25 media touchpoints (down 44%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$1,471,138, with reach of over 1.4 million. Online placements added \$1,005,758 in value and reach of nearly 545 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 395,228 visits (down 14%), including 274,363 to the mobile site (down 18%). Our Facebook fan base total is 297,890 (up 3%) and video views totaled 56,609 (up 15%).
- Online hotel reservations totaled 40 room nights (down 58%) with total room revenue of \$7,214 (down 51%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 4,532 visitors (down 82%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 2,684 visitors (down 15%).

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$21,909,885 in June (down 47%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 41.8 percent during June (down 49%). The average daily room rate was \$115.01 (down 29%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$48.10 (down 64%). Room demand decreased 46 percent with 104,237 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 63 percent (up 6%), ADR of \$95.58 (down 1%), and RevPAR of \$60.23 (up 5%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 1 percent to total 114,321 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 74 percent to total 39,669 in June.

Interim Executive – Chris Cavanaugh

Project Updates:

- Met individually with most BCTDA board members to discuss short-term priorities.
- Convened a meeting of representatives of local tourism-related organizations, including Asheville Grown, ASAP, Homestay Network, Asheville Bed and Breakfast Association, Asheville Buncombe Hotel Association, Asheville Independent Restaurants, Asheville Regional Airport, Asheville Downtown Association, Asheville Brewers Alliance, and Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce to introduce myself and to listen to their business overviews. These will continue in future weeks.
- Also met with Cathy Ball, Stephanie Monson-Dahl, and Dana Frankel of the City of Asheville.
- 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.
- Met with representatives of 360i to review destination advertising plans and data platform for pausing and restarting advertising in drive markets, and to discuss the agency's contract.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS – Marla Tambellini & Team

Project Updates:

- In paid media, an analysis of the Covid market exclusion data and insights from recent research prompted a suspension of all paid media, with the exception of SEO.
- SEM: Paid search generated 55k site visits with average time on site at three minutes and 3.2 pageviews per visit. Clickthrough rate (CTR) up 9.5% for July and 12% year-over-year.
- Production: Shot new images that capture mountaintop yoga, couples, picnics against the backdrop of sunrises and sunsets that showcased the layers of mountains.
- The PR team logged 25 media touchpoints, initiated two targeted pitches, and hosted four media on the ground in Asheville in July. In preparation for fall outreach the PR team initiated a call for partner news and update of seasonal destination information.
- The PR team, with support from the sales team, worked to research industry best practices around media and meeting planning site visits during the pandemic. The PR team drafted a white paper with recommendations and a waiver for leadership and legal review.
- ExploreAsheville.com logged 395,228 user session in July versus 480,060 the previous year, a decrease of 17.6 %.
- Final edits were underway to the design refresh for ExploreAsheville.com.
- There were 2,058 requests for the Official Asheville Visitor Guide in July compared to 2,975 the previous year.

Future Updates:

- Agency to finalize creative for other media partners and revise the media plan buy based on \$1.5 million in net media versus original allocated \$3 million. Additional media buys will be added based on metrics and current situation.
- Explore inclusion in US Travel “Let’s Go There” campaign based on plan now, book later theme.
- Launch refresh of ExploreAsheville.com.
- Integrate new Act-On marketing automation platform for marketing promotions.
- Develop a mask contest for social media.
- National distribution and targeted pitch effort around fall travel story ideas and destination news.
- Provided story support for media that will manifest in the future including *Readers Digest*, *MSN*, *US News*, *Southern Living*, *Atlanta Magazine*, *American Way*, *Fodor’s Travel*, *Conde Nast Travel*, *Taste of the South* and *Outside*.
- Finalize Marketing Recovery Plan.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES – Dianna Pierce & Team

Project Updates:

- Aerial drone footage, coupled with 3D Matterport virtual imaging, was filmed of 13 meetings properties to share with area meeting properties for use in facilitating sales when no on-site visits are occurring. Once completed and distributed, the next step will be to add the tours to a gated page on the EA meeting pages of the web.
- The current virtual site visit with details on the destination’s accessibility, meeting and hotel properties, cultural resources, and Explore Asheville continues to be viewed with 37 additional registrants in July, bringing the total registrants from the time of launch to 237. Follow up was conducted by the sales managers as well as a follow up mailer.
- Site visit inquiries are trickling in. Two sites were hosted in July including: 360 Adventure Collective (24 rooms for September 2020) and Bob Mann Tours (future interest).

- Sponsored advertorial in a gated eBook by Meetings Today “A Guide to Face-to-Face Meetings and Events After the Pandemic Shutdown” targeting the meetings industry. We will receive contact information on all planners who download the guide.
- Connie attended a TNSAE event, which included eight senior association executives, where she was the single supplier.
- The team made connections with HPN Global and Experient regarding use of the current virtual tour to educate their global sales teams. HPN circulated a custom link to their global network of sales associates of our virtual tour.
- Staff has collected updated meeting room layouts, current site visit protocols and other key sales information from area meeting and event locations to stay abreast of current conditions as planners inquire about current and future events.
- Critiqued and edited brand refresh deliverables including trade show banners, fact sheets, advertorial, digital ads, and other elements.
- In preparation for the next iteration of a virtual tour (with live presentations by area hotel DOSs) we have met with four providers of virtual tradeshow/FAM platforms. A provider decision will be made in early August and final product launched in September.
- Final details are being worked out to implement a monthly Economic Impact Calculation “EIC” for all groups meeting in Asheville. The EIC is the gold standard in evaluation the total impact of group business on a community and will be presented as part of the sales monthly recap beginning in August.
- Staff attended key industry sponsored webinars assessing the current COVID-19 stats and understand best current practices in sales and communications messaging as we move forward.
- Dianna attended Advancing Racial Equity 101 produced by the City of Asheville by virtue of sitting on the Civic Center Commission.
- Glenn researched and updated the corporate social responsibility program available for future use by planners. Many incentive planners require this as part of their agendas.
- LinkedIn posts captured 1305 views.
- Staff continues to contact planners with future events confirmed or tentative that are scheduled through 2021.
- Microsites were completed for three sporting events: GameOn August, GameOn September and GameOn October.

Future Updates:

- Attend Meeting Focus’ virtual trade show with one-to-one appointments with independent meeting planners.
- Launch the opening meeting for a potential Stay Safe Pledge to be developed for the meetings and events segment of our industry.
- Full implementation of the ACT-ON Dashboard.
- Execute programs mentioned above to support hotel/planner interaction during COVID-19
- Being unable to attend the annual MPI Sunshine Summit due to COVID, we will be attending the conference virtually. An entry level sponsorship will allow us to do a pre-conference mailer, post- conference mailer and have all contact information for future use. This meeting normally has 300 attendees and is put on by the four FL MPI chapters.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS – Pat Kappes & Team

Project Updates:

- 111 partner records were updated in July (9 Accommodation, 33 Attraction/Retail/Venue, and 69 Food & Beverage businesses) and 120 events were processed.
- Three new partners were added in July: Asheville Picnic Company, Geraldine's Bakery, and Patricia Cotterill Art Studio. Four partner accounts were cancelled due to closures: 828 Family Pizzeria – South, Asheville's Fun Depot, Intown Motor Lodge, and The BLOCK off Biltmore.
- The NC Arboretum submitted a TPDF contract amendment request to extend the completion deadline to September 2020, and the City of Asheville requested a full grant disbursement for the US Cellular Center Theater and Meeting Room Conversion Project which received a Certificate of Occupancy in early 2020 but has been delayed due to a minor punch list item. The BCTDA approved both requests at the July board meeting.
- In support of Buncombe County's effort to encourage the use of masks, the County's graphic was installed on nine Wayfinding kiosks throughout downtown, Black Mountain and Biltmore Village.
- The Community Engagement Phase I Report of the African American heritage trail project has been completed and posted to AshevilleCVB.com. Pat is exploring local resources to aid in the next phase of research and story development.
- Pat presented at the July meeting of the African American Business Association to share information on how businesses can work with Explore Asheville.
- Pat participated in two virtual meetings with Assistant City Manager Richard White, City Parks Department staff, and River Front Development Group (RFDG) to continue working through the museum at Stephens-Lee Recreation Center project to inform the MOU between the City, RFDG, Stephens-Lee Alumni and East End Valley Neighborhood Association.
- Pat continues to work with the team on transitioning from Distribion to the new Act-On email management platform.
- Pat and Glenn met in the River Arts District with MERJE, Geograph and staff from the City of Asheville to walk-through the new Wayfinding signage system to confirm locations and ensure there are no traffic or utility conflicts. Pat hosted a Community Update meeting on August 11 with partners in RAD to share the final designs, locations, and messages. Additionally, Pat is managing a process for updating the content on all kiosks throughout the county which have not been refreshed since original installation more than 10 years ago.
- Pat attended a meeting at Center for Craft for an update on the Broadway Cultural Gateway and parklet design development.

Future Updates:

- Staff is developing a series of Partner Forum webinars to provide business education and resources for partners. Plans include coordinating a free webinar "Our Changed World – Things Your Tourism Business Can Do to Pivot & Adapt" presented by Yelp's Senior Field Marketing Manager and Small Business Expert on August 20.
- The new Wayfinding signage in RAD is on track for installation in late September, possibly early October.
- Local author and photographer Andrea Clarke is in the process of creating the James Vester Miller Historic Trail to recognize buildings by the prominent contractor, and her grandfather, James Vester Miller. Pat has met with Andrea to discuss her request for support and partnership on the development of the virtual trail on ExploreAsheville.com. The request is in consideration with the marketing team.

PUBLIC INFORMATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – Kathi Petersen

Project Updates:

- Responded to numerous local media and public records requests, to include participating in or setting up interviews, providing background information, conducting research, and more. Topics included: the CVB's marketing and advertising plans, lifting of restrictions on hotels and lodging, questions about tourists potentially coming from pandemic hotspots, the tourism economy, unemployment rates in the tourism industry due to the pandemic, the CEO search, the Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund, TPDF-funded projects, downtown protests and unrest, the hotel occupancy tax, the Asheville Cares Stay Safe Pledge, and the local wedding industry. Outlets included: AVL Watchdog, Mountain Xpress, The Laurel of Asheville, Asheville Citizen Times, Carolina Public Press, Our State Magazine, WLOS, WYFF, Today's Hotelier, and freelance writers.
- Developed a Communications Plan draft which outlines ideas for content and ways to integrate and repurpose that content in the CVB's various communication channels, including live/virtual partner programs, e-newsletters, AshevilleCVB.com, and the CVB's industry/partner social media.
- Developed and published two partner newsletters.
- Promoted the kiosk mask campaign in partnership with Buncombe County Public Health.
- Spent considerable time spent training for new e-news platform and making ongoing updates to AshevilleCVB.com.
- Assisted partner Black Mountain Brewing with local media for the Roberta Flack mural.
- Responded to numerous questions, comments, and requests from the public related to downtown protests, mask mandates, the CVB's advertising plans, the City's reparations announcement, feedback on the visitor experience.

Future Updates:

- In news media, stories are pending/expected in Our State magazine (Asheville Art Museum, recipient of TPDF funds), Conde Nast (Asheville Cares Stay Safe Pledge), Ashvegas (Asheville wedding industry).
- New platform and template for the e-newsletter will be introduced in September with enhanced content to include promotion of partner businesses and their innovations and resilience, plus information on the ways the CVB can provide service and support.
- The CVB's annual report will be published in September, with considerable time spent developing the content and planning for the report's release.
- Efforts to publicize the Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fun and respond to media inquiries will continue, including coordinating a presentation for Buncombe County Commissioners.

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

Project Updates:

- At the July 29 meeting of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, Interim Executive Chris Cavanaugh thanked and commended outgoing BCTDA Chair Gary Froeba and welcomed incoming Chair Himanshu Karvir.
- Developed a draft policies and procedures guide for the Families First Coronavirus Recovery Act, Extended Family and Medical Leave provisions.
- Began the recruitment process for the Public Affairs Specialist opening.
- Reviewed and corrected all employee benefits onboarding issues for the new fiscal year.
- Collaborated with Buncombe County Finance to set up electronic invoice processing in Workday, to enhance efficiency and strengthen the controls in place for approvals.

Future Updates:

- Prepare for the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled August 26, 2020 via Zoom.
- Work with Buncombe County Finance on annual audit.
- Assist the CEO Search Committee with meeting logistics as appropriate.
- Complete and submit the FY20 Workers Comp audit.
- Finalize and share with the Team, Explore Asheville's policies and procedures for the FFCRA Extended Family Leave.
- Complete the hiring process for the open Public Affairs Specialist position.
- Transition invoicing to fully electronic approval system within Workday.