

June 30, 2021

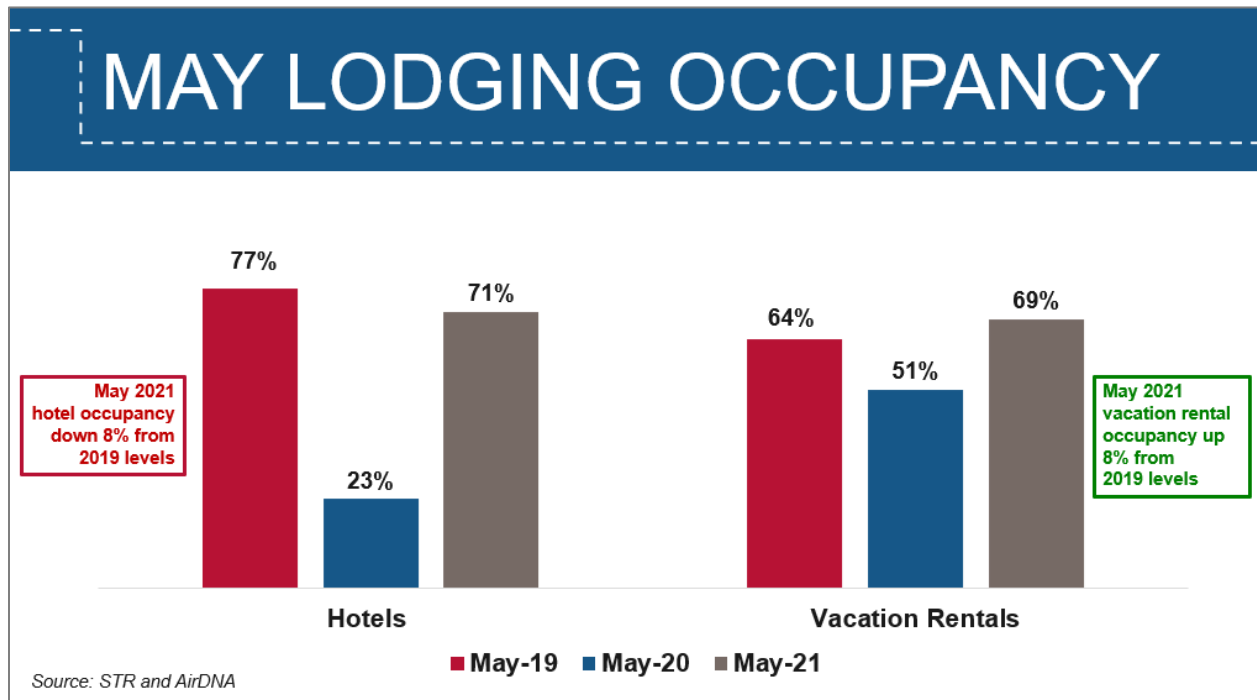
To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority

From: Vic Isley

Subject: President & CEO's Report of May 2021 Activities

Hotel occupancy for the month of May 2021 reached 71 percent, up significantly from the 23% in May 2020, though still down 8% from May 2019 levels.

Short-term vacation rentals reached 69% in May 2021, up 8% from the benchmark year of 2019. This continues to be good news for local residents owning vacation rentals and earning more and benefitting from the return of visitors to our community. It also marks the first month since the pandemic that hotel occupancy eclipsed vacation rental occupancy.



## **MAY BY THE NUMBERS**

- During May, the sales team posted 562 personal contacts (down 39%). May sales activities generated 48 sales leads (up 50%) and 28 convention bookings (up 115%), representing 4,325 rooms (up 352%). Eleven months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 29 percent and room nights represented are down 37 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 11 group events in May (up 100%), with corresponding revenue of \$56,755 (up 100%). The services team assisted 23 groups (up 100%).
- The PR team landed 16 significant placements in May (down 24%), with 71 media touchpoints (up 294%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$632k with reach of 6 million (up 72%). Online placements added \$844k in value and reach of more than 471 million (up 92%).
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 1,094,132 visits (up 452%), including 808,257 to the mobile site (up 536%). Our Facebook fan base total is 302,949 (up 2%) and video views totaled 35,868 (down 67%).
- In May 2021, there were 2,863 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 1,314 the previous year.
- Paid search generated 92k site visits in May with average time on site of 1:24 and an average of 2.02 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 18.4 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 59 room nights (up 883%) with total room revenue of \$11,786 (up 9,464%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 14,041 visitors (up 4,519%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 4,831 visitors (up 2,190%).

## **LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS**

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$44,431,592 in April (up 1,749%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 62.8 percent during April (up 120%). The average daily room rate was \$138.68 (up 24%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$87.09 (up 173%). Room demand increased 159 percent with 333,704 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 68 percent (up 41%), ADR of \$108.75 (up 27%), and RevPAR of \$74.10 (up 79%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 145 percent to total 137,673 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport increased percent to total 175,767 in April.

## **MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **Project Updates:**

- Spring Ad Campaign: Launched final advertising campaign creative assets in May for spring campaign which will extend through July.
- Nonstop Flights: Developed and launched paid social campaign to raise awareness of nonstop flight service in the following markets: Boston, Chicago, Dallas, DC, NYC, and

Philadelphia. Additionally, a new nonstop flight / transportation webpage was created and launched dynamic content via Bound geotargeting for homepage sliders and on advertising landing page.

- Matador Content Partnership: Produced two influencer videos to be distributed via Matador travel site social channels, REI's social channels and EA owned channels.
- Contracted and delivered assets for participation in the Pride Journey's LGBT travel directory.
- Signed sponsorship agreement for American Cornhole League tournament. Sponsorship package included on-air commercial during broadcast, graphics on graphic boards throughout the arena, and b-roll video exposure.
- Worked with SMARI to launch creative testing of new advertising assets. Initial results should be delivered in June.
- Received 15 agency responses from our RFP process. Narrowed down to 4 finalists for next round of the selection process in June. Selection should be finalized and presented to board in June.
- Created first of three videos for new social/web campaign focused on area trails/waterfalls told through the lens of local naturalists and outdoor tour guide with emphasis on sustainability/Leave No Trace. First one featured Catawba Falls.
- Created content series around month-long Wilma Dykeman Greenway/RADTIP celebration.
- Developed new web story and social media content around self-care experiences in Asheville authored by Black Travel Alliance influencer Jewels Rhode.
- Revamped Wildflower Bloom Schedule on EA.com to add more viewing locations and added in July blooms to extend season.
- Logged 71 media touchpoints, initiated 37 pitches, and supported 9 media on the ground in Asheville in May.
- Hosted the *Samantha Brown's Places to Love* (PBS) crew of eight for five nights in the destination. The PR Team provided local connections, shoot logistic support, accommodations, b-roll/photo assets, and other details as needed. Filming locations include Citizen Vinyl, Biltmore, Moogseum, Blue Ridge Parkway, Folk Art Center, Smoky Park Supper Club, Eda Rhyne Distilling, Chai Pani, The Block with DeWayne Barton and Noir Collective.
- Provided story support for *TripAdvisor*, *Eater*, *Today.com*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Thrillist*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *The Points Guy*, *SHAPE*, *PrideJourney.com Country Magazine*, *Southern Living*, *Southbound Magazine*, *Ultimate Road Trips Guidebook* and *Sunseeker In-flight Magazine*.
- Photo support provided for *Chicago Tribune*, *Going on Faith*, *AmericanSparkTV*, *VIP Murfreesboro Magazine* and *Carolina Traveler*.
- Outreach: Team attended the Black Travel Alliance Wavelength event for content creators and influencers. Team conducted 15 one-on-one meetings and hosted another 20+ people in the Explore Asheville booth.
- Crowdriff file review and clean up for streamlined media asset support moving forward.
- Cision Media Database dashboard review and organization to update media targeting searches and earned coverage by theme. Moving toward incorporating pillar searches/dashboards for tracking and onboarding new Cision premier support rep.
- Updates of press sheets (general and culinary), accolades and online newsroom highlights.
- Assessed COVID-related policies for media site visits moving forward, looking at what other DMOs are doing to update or phase out current protocols.
- Wrote and produced 9 community stakeholder/partner newsletters and alerts – a total of 13,474 emails delivered with the unique open rate as high as 42.17% and averaging 34%. These included the Tourism Community Update and several alerts related to the Tourism Summit 2021 webinar series.

- Assistance provided to local media and/or coverage received: Included April board meeting, budget for FY 22, and projected lodging tax revenues, especially from vacation rentals; tourism jobs and the shortage of workers in tourism sector; selection of Asheville on a places-rated article in Money magazine; \$45K grant to Wortham Center; strategic pillars and Tourism Summit 2021 webinar series; Business NC Power List (includes Vic, current and former BCTDA board members); funding issues around Asheville Tourists McCormick Field; growth of vacation rentals occupancy and slower recovery of hotel industry; GRINDfest 2021 (Explore Asheville is a sponsor); SoCon Basketball Championships (Vic spoke at press conference); completion of RADTIP (Explore Asheville mentioned as supporter)
- Content on AshevilleCVB.com included Tourism Summit 2021 webinar series (speakers, recordings of discussions, explanation of strategic pillars); a perspectives piece on responsible tourism by County Commissioner Terri Wells; post on the Explore Asheville staff community service project (litter cleanup); other routine updates.

#### **Future Updates:**

- Hire new agency.
- Hire new positions in marketing: research analyst, PR manager and PR coordinator.
- Second & third videos for the Explore Asheville trails video series.
- Develop interactive map for EA.com homepage for the towns/neighborhoods' microsite project. Will develop new profile video on River Arts District in July.

### **GROUP SALES & SERVICES**

#### **Project Updates:**

- Connie Holliday and Marshall Hilliard attended South Carolina Society of Association Executives annual meeting in Spartanburg. Marshall participated in a panel discussion on the benefits of using CVB services.
- American Bus Association's Virtual Marketplace: meeting one-on-one with 30 tour operators.
- Hosted ConferenceDirect third party planner out of Atlanta with her corporate client AGCO, a tractor manufacturer.
- Attended a meeting with REI Program team along with Marketing.
- Attended a new sports tradeshow Sports Express. Conducted 26 one on one appointments with sports planners and attended networking events. Met several new sports planners that have potential to come to Asheville. Received 1 RFP from the show at this point.
- Attended Connect Diversity and conducted 40 one on one appointments with meeting planners. Attended several education and networking events. We have received 3 RFP already from attending this show.
- DLP Real estate in Asheville for a site inspection. Group contracted 720 total hotel rooms after their visit.
- May bookings include (but are not limited to):
  - Alabama Natural Gas Association 2023 Annual Meeting – 817 rooms
  - DLP Real Estate Elite & Prosperity Event - Summer 2021 – 720 rooms
  - Asheville Lacrosse Classic (Girls) 2021 – 400 rooms
  - North Carolina Association of Municipal Attorneys 2022 Summer Conference – 352 rooms
  - Blue Ridge Furfest 2022 – 279 rooms
  - Gulf Games 2023, 2024, and 2025 – 177, 175, and 177 rooms respectively
  - 2021 Khrais / Soliman Wedding – 120 rooms
  - 2022 Martin / Cobb Wedding – 120 rooms

- Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange 2022 Summer Board Meeting – 108 rooms
- Work began with Miles Partnership to update the online meeting planners guide to reflect new brand messaging.
- The team took steps internally and with Simpleview to improve Account market segments to help with prospecting and reporting of industries aligned with organization goals.
- In preparation of the first in-person tradeshows this June and July, five new tabletop banners design were completed this week. Promoting Corporate Social Responsibility projects is the focus of one of the banners.
- Explore Asheville has advanced to the Finalist Round in the [2021 Stella Awards](#) from Northstar Meetings Group.
- An e-newsletter was sent to 12,661 meeting planners. Open Rate:13.7% and Click-To-Open Rate: 6.2%.
- In prep of more in-person meetings occurring, bulk attendee gift items and welcome gift inventory was filled.
- Met with KemperLesnik clients and Sports Commission staff to discuss building an event microsite promoting the event and ticket sales for a November sport event.
- Team members attended/participated in the following community events/projects.
  - Marshall Hilliard met with area Directors of Sales individually as part of his onboarding.
  - Explore Asheville Service Day in the River Arts District.
  - Civic Center Commission Monthly Meeting.
  - Attended the Blue Ridge Parkway Association Board Meeting.

#### **Future Updates:**

- Prepare for Quarterly DOS Meeting
- Meetings Database Institute
- Client FAMILIARIZATION Trips
- Chicago Client Event

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

#### **Project Updates:**

- In May, 179 calendar event listings were processed, and 37 partner records were updated in May including: 8 Attractions, 4 Food & Drink, 9 Lodging, 15 Retail, and 1 Wedding Service.
- Four new partners were added in May: Glamorous Picnic Company, ASAP Farmers Market, Enka-Candler Tailgate Market, & Black Mountain Tailgate Market.
- Cancelled Accounts: five accounts were cancelled in May. Fresh Quarter, Oakley Farmers Market, and Asheville City Market South closed due to Covid 19. Green Sage Westgate closed but their locations (Merrimon Ave, Downtown, and South) remain open.
- Three One-on-One Wednesday sessions were held: two with current partners and one prospective partner.
- Visitor Guide distribution included 2,863 Individual Out-of-Market requests fulfilled; and 2,552 books or 58 cases of In-Market delivered to 25 industry partners; and 4,992 books or 114 cases of Out-of-Market delivered to 26 welcome centers/AAA offices/etc.
- Sent partner survey to collect short-term group services information for the Group Sales team. 121 partners responded with updated information.
- Audited listings in the tailgate and farmers markets category, cancelling accounts for discontinued markets and adding new.
- Created a new industry-specific YouTube channel to separate partner and industry specific recordings from the consumer-facing channel, which will house extranet training videos.

- CE team members attended community meetings and events including: African American Business Association, the Chamber's Member Advisory Council, AIGA Business Outreach Committee Meeting, Chamber Challenge 5k, Lunch & Leads, River Arts Business Association (RADBA), Partners in Progress with the Weaverville Business Association (WBA), and Town Hall: Addressing Homelessness.
- Sponsorships: EA provided sponsorship for GRINDfest, the Big Crafty and the Asheville Downtown Association's Downtown After 5 series, Holiday Parade and Fourth of July.
- Partner Events: The Tourism Summit 2021, a four-part virtual series of panel discussions on the four new pillars with partners and community partners took place on May 10, 12, 17, and 19.
  - *'Deliver Balanced Recovery & Sustainable Growth'* panel discussion on May 10 had 132 registered and 84 attendees; panelists included: UNC Asheville Chancellor Nancy Cable; Asheville City Manager Debra Campbell; Buncombe County Manager Avril Pinder; Kit Cramer, President & CEO, Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce.
  - *'Encourage Safe & Responsible Travel'* panel discussion on May 12 had 129 registered and 73 attendees; panelists included: Amy Allison, Director, NC Outdoor Recreation Industry Office; Dawn Chavez, Executive Director, Asheville GreenWorks; Peyton O'Connor, Director, Buncombe County Parks & Recreation; and Buncombe County Commissioner Terri Wells
  - *'Engage & Invite More Diverse Audiences'* panel discussion on May 17 - 171 registered and 84 attendees; panelists included: Aisha Adams, Program Developer, Lenoir Rhyne Equity & Diversity Institute; Adriana Chavela, Founder & Executive Director, Hola Carolina; Himanshu Karvir, President & CEO of Virtelle Hospitality; Chair, Buncombe County TDA; Catherine Mitchell, Executive Director, River Front Development Group, Inc.; Anthony Thomas, Board Member, YMI Cultural Center; Tina White, Executive Director, Blue Ridge Pride.
  - *'Promote & Support Asheville's Creative Spirit'* panel discussion on May 19 - 183 registered and 82 attendees panelists included: Franzi Charen, Director, Asheville Grown Business Alliance, Co-Owner, Hip Replacements; Katie Cornell, Executive Director, Asheville Area Arts Council; Cleaster Cotton, Artist; Founder, Youth Artists Empowered; Inventor, ALNUGE Codes; Jessica Tomasin, Founder, Connect Beyond Festival; Studio Manager, Echo Mountain Recording; and Lucious Wilson, General Manager, Wedge Brewing Co.; President, River Arts District Business Association.
- Staff Service Day: EA staff participated in a clean-up on May 7 in the River Arts District on May 7 in coordination with GreenWorks, RAD and RADBA to assist with the RAD community's month-long grand opening celebrations
- Wayfinding: Continued efforts for the kiosk content refresh project are in progress including updating localized maps to include walk times in the downtown area. An order to replenish the final inventory was placed with local artists. Safety messaging panels at each kiosk location will be replaced with updated Bear message that welcomes back guests and a reminder to be kind and have patience as the community emerges from lockdown.
- TPDF: The City of Asheville submitted a request to waive the punch list requirements and receive balance of grant award to close out the project. The amendment will be presented to the board in June. The YMI will present an update on project and a refined scope at the June board meeting.
- African American Heritage Trail: Conducted three working sessions with research project team to review research, develop trail content themes and possible routes, and start planning next round of Community Engagement sessions. Consulted with MERJE on best practices for market content organization. Solicited proposal for equity review consulting services of the project process.

**Future Updates:**

- Partner event strategy is in development for FY 21-22. Early planning underway for partner event focusing on the responsible travel pillar in combination with a summer social.
- Earned Revenue: Plans underway to update the Festivals & Cultural Events grant program and Sponsorship.
- Business equity support working group: Pat is planning to convene municipal and community partners to learn and collaborate on shared resources.

**PRESIDENT & CEO + EXECUTIVE OFFICE****Project Updates:**

- Executed the BCTDA's regular monthly board meeting virtually on May 26, 2021. Highlights of the meeting included: Vic provided a lodging market overview of trends and hotel/motel compared to short-term rentals metrics; the proposed FY 22 budget presentation, including two ordinance scenarios, one of which will be approved on June 30 based on the current legislation at the time; and a public hearing took place to open a period in which to receive public comments related to the budget. Public comments will be received via email through June 29, 2021.
- Onboarded two new staff members in May: Marshall Hilliard, VP of Sales, who joined the team on April 26, and Holly Oakley, Marketing and PR specialist, who started on May 3.
- Starting May 3, staff began returning to the office following over a year of mostly working remotely. Two departments returned at a time on alternating weeks to allow for social distancing. Based on the Governor removing restrictions on indoor gatherings, all staff will return to the office on July 6, 2021.
- The BCTDA agreed to sponsor the historic Sky View Golf Tournament for the first time with a \$8,500 grant using funds from Earned Revenue.
- Health benefits were finalized for the 2022 fiscal year. Medical coverage moved from Aetna back to United HealthCare with far better rates and better coverage for all team members. After four years, the vision insurance moved from Community Eye Care to Lincoln Financial. Again, team member costs were decreased with increased coverage.
- Vic and Jenn met with the finance committee to review the details of the proposed FY 22 BCTDA budget, which was presented to the BCTDA board at the May 26, 2021, meeting.
- Vic and other staff participated in Explore Asheville's four Tourism Summit panel discussions/webinars in May, which focused on the new strategic pillars.
- Vic was appointed to the AIR Board and attended the general membership meeting. She and Marla presented Explore Asheville's program of work to members at a special AIR meeting.
- Staff participated in an Explore Asheville service day to clean up the River Arts District, coordinated by the Community Engagement team.
- Vic met one-on-one with each BCTDA member in the month of May.
- Vic attended the NC Travel & Tourism Coalition's virtual board meeting.

**Future Updates:**

- Prepare for and execute the BCTDA's June meeting, to be held in person on June 30, 2021.
- The BCTDA Board will vote on the proposed FY 22 budget at the June 30, 2021, meeting.
- Finalize job descriptions and work with our partner, Craft HR Solutions, on the hiring process to fill five staff positions.
- Review contracts and think through upcoming expenditures to see where changes can and should be made to align purchases with our new Strategic Imperatives.