



October 28, 2020

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

Visitation to Asheville and Buncombe County continued to improve in September, although hotel occupancy (again, just one indicator of the health of the tourism sector) was still well below 2019 levels. Hotel occupancy in September was 59.6%, down from 78.9% in the same month a year ago, but it was up just slightly from August. Weekday occupancy lags well behind weekend stays as meetings and conventions are still highly restricted and business travel is still almost non-existent.

However, Buncombe County hotel occupancy in September was higher than all peer markets measured by Smith Travel Research except Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. Short-term rentals continue to be very popular in most destinations, with AirDNA reporting that entire place short-term rentals in Buncombe County were booked at a 71.1% occupancy rate (down from 76.3% in August). Hotel occupancy continues to be strongest in the Tunnel Road and Biltmore Village submarkets but has begun recovering in the downtown district.

The renewed spread of the coronavirus pandemic continues to restrict Explore Asheville's ability to execute broad market digital advertising in accordance with the strategy presented to the board in late June. The outlook had been improving in September after the second wave of the virus in July and August, but the recent increased number of cases has prevented the CVB from implementing its digital advertising campaign in the drive-market radius. We are hopeful that we will be able to execute in time for the holiday and winter season in order to drive visitation during a crucial time of the year, but we will continue to monitor trends in virus spread both regionally and locally.

Explore Asheville continues to work on new initiatives to encourage adherence to mandates and safety protocols among both partners and visitors, recognizing that as colder weather arrives the need for responsible behavior will likely be greater than ever.

SEPTEMBER BY THE NUMBERS

- During September, the sales team posted 616 personal contacts (down 42%). September sales activities generated 28 sales leads (down 68%) and 18 convention bookings (down 40%), representing 3,786 rooms (down 17%). Three months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down one percent and room nights represented are down one percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 13 group events in September (down 75%), with corresponding revenue of \$130,335 (down 96%). The services team assisted 17 groups (down 63%).
- The PR team landed 43 significant placements in September (up 13%), with 52 media touchpoints (flat). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$131,426 with reach of nearly 748 thousand. Online placements added \$2,221,765 in value and reach of nearly 1.2 billion.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 472,107 visits (down 18%), including 317,251 to the mobile site (down 25%). Our Facebook fan base total is 297,968 (up 2%) and video views totaled 42,161 (down 43%).
- Online hotel reservations totaled 105 room nights (up 9%) with total room revenue of \$16,777 (down 8%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 9,087 visitors (down 58%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 3,535 visitors (up 47%).

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$34,409,280 in August (down 16%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 61 percent during August (down 24%). The average daily room rate was \$135.82 (down 17%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$82.79 (down 37%). Room demand decreased 24 percent with 145,627 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 75.1 percent (up 30%), ADR of \$101.09 (up 2%), and RevPAR of \$75.93 (up 32%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 15 percent to total 137,135 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 64 percent to total 55,005 in August.

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.
- Attended the opening of the new Hilton Garden Inn at the Asheville Outlets.
- Participated in the quarterly directors of sales call with local hotels and the group sales staff.
- Worked with Buncombe County finance and tax departments on plans to address late and non-payment occupancy tax penalty waivers.
- Worked with staff to develop new partner programming and plans for the annual meeting.

- Met with representatives of 360i to review destination advertising plans for pausing and restarting advertising in drive markets.
- Participated in a video meeting with the Asheville Police Department, representatives of the hotel community, and several business membership organizations on how to enhance communications around planned protests in the downtown area.
- Worked with the Asheville Buncombe Sports Commission and sports marketing firm KemperLesnik on plans for the Maui Invitational college basketball tournament.
- Answered routine questions as part of the annual audit process.
- Participated on the VisitNC committee reviewing CARES Act applications for funding.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS – Marla Tambellini & Team

Project Updates:

- Launched ExploreAsheville.com refreshed site.
- The paid media plan remains paused due to an uptick in the trendline in September reflecting an increase in County Exclusions data.
- Worked with Visit NC staff and agency on assets and deliverables for the Marketing Credit Program that launched in October and continues into November.
- Produced custom version of assets for both fall and holidays for the Let's Go There campaign which will also be used as part of the Visit NC marketing co-op.
- Integrated social messaging, pop-ups, and landing page for the "Let's Go There" national campaign spearheaded by US Travel to inspire future travel with a Book Now, Travel Later message.
- Provided guidance and sign off on holiday creative and messaging.
- Jointly developed a national sponsorship package with the KemperLesnik that builds brand awareness during the Maui Invitational.
- Supported ABRSC with a release welcoming the Maui Jim Invitational and offering destination perspective. Distribution included 186 sports editors, national networks, and college basketball reporters.
- The PR team logged 52 media touchpoints, initiated 216 targeted pitches, and hosted four media on the ground in Asheville in September. The pitch total includes 186 individual media pitches of the press release announcing the Maui Jim Invitational's move to Asheville for 2020.
- The PR team recently provided story support for *Travel + Leisure*, *Gannet*, *Readers Digest*, *All Recipes*, *Conde Nast Travel*, *USA Today*, *Instinct Magazine* and *TripSavvy.com*.
- Participated in planning efforts and content creation for Visit NC's October Virtual Media Panel. 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.
- Crafted and distributed a press release on the Group Sales & Services Team's recent series of timely virtual tools to support meeting planners and local industry partners, as well as the Asheville Cares Meet Safe Pledge. The pitch went to 24 editors of meetings-focused media outlets.
- There were 2,724 requests of the Official Asheville Visitor Guide in September compared to 2,856 the previous year.
- Launched Pledge for the Wild assets.

Future Updates:

- Shoot fall b-roll video and photography in mid-October.
- Work with agency on planning second half of FY21.
- Build out holiday content that aligns with PR efforts, including development of an online Holiday Gift Guide.

- Continued distribution and pitching of fall destination news and calls for partner news for winter, holiday and 2021.
- Provide media support, with anticipation of media interest throughout the fall.
- Participate in online version of the annual Society of American Travel Writers Conference.
- Align editorial calendar to FY21 second half and ensure alignment with shifting media and PR plans.
- Hire new director of content to replace Ritchie Rozzelle.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES – Dianna Pierce & Team

Project Updates:

- Staff presented at BCTDA board meeting.
- Fulfilled 11 wedding guides from the website, compared to 17 last year.
- Hosted one site visit in September for Best of Times Travel for business in future years.
- Held quarterly DOS meeting to update directors on current and future initiatives.
- Definite bookings for September include: Wedding – four groups; 2021 Anderson Coach’s Birthday Bash – 600 rooms (Group Tours), 2022 NC Association of Certified Public Accountants – 600 rooms, 2022 National Association of Publicly Funded Truck Driving Schools – 265 rooms, and more.
- Tentative bookings for September include: 2023 Scottish Terrier Club (result from targeted mailing) – 105 rooms, 2022 NC CPA’s – 600 room, 2020 Roark Capital Group – 80 rooms, 2021 Specialty Pharmacy President’s Club – 211 rooms, 2021 American Cornhole Championship – 700 rooms and more.
- Prepared hotel proposals for Maui Invitational bid for ABRSC.
- Coordinated “Basketball Bubbles in Asheville” virtual meeting with ABRSC and industry partners to review guidelines associated with the hosting of controlled sporting environments.
- Finalized and launched the Asheville Cares Meet Safe Pledge, a necessary item when talking to event planners about how the community is enacting safety measures.
- Attended the Blue Ridge Parkway Association fall board meeting virtually.
- Attended numerous webinars specific to meetings to stay current on trends affecting the various markets.
- Finalized landing page with links to 3D virtual hotel tours incorporating the messaging: *Tour 14 of Asheville’s top meeting hotels from the comfort of your office*. A tutorial/intro video was recorded/included advising visitors of best practices for use.
- Shared a press release spotlighting the team’s efforts to meet the new needs of planners with meeting- focused media. Included was information on virtual 3D site tours, “Mug Moments” and the Asheville Cares Meet Safe Pledge.
- Finalized and accepted delivery of new fact sheets and email marketing strategy and templates for brand refresh.
- Performed an audio interview with the Group Travel Voice targeting the motorcoach market.
- Finalized and launched updated city guide page on CVent for Asheville.
- Sent an email to 391 past connections from IMEX America (since 2020 in-person was cancelled) with open rate of 32 percent and 33 click-throughs.
- Sent an email to 3200 southeast-based clients to promote Asheville’s attractiveness as a regional meeting destination with an open rate of 18 percent and 208 click-throughs.
- Sent a promotional email for Mug Moments to 2847 clients with an open rate of 20 percent and 165 click-throughs.

Future Updates:

- Solidify framework for a new virtual education series called Mug Moments about how meetings are happening safely at Asheville's hotels. Episodes will feature casual and brief conversations with Directors of Sales and be available through GoToWebinar monthly (with the first episode on October 8).
- Establish a framework for updating meeting planners guide, most notable how to accurately display meeting room schematics.
- Craft next iteration of destination virtual tour to launch in November (replacing FAM).
- Finalize destination virtual tour targeting group tour / adventure operators.
- Attend virtual trade shows as assigned.

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

Project Updates:

- In September, 48 partner records were updated – 20 attractions & retail, 9 lodging, 13 food & drink, and 6 venue/wedding services. There were 152 events processed for the calendar.
- Seven new partners were added in September: The Regeneration Station, Fairfield Inn and Suites Asheville Weaverville, Rising Fern Events, Asheville Luxury Elopement Company, Ice Mill Ice Sculptures and Cocktail Ice, The Clean Plate, and Nick Levine Photography.
- Partner accounts cancelled due to permanent business closures are as follows: Creative Mountain Food Tours, Golden Fleece, Asheville Barn Weddings, Aux Bar, Button and Co. Bagels, Save Me The Waltz, Burgerworx South and C&Co Biltmore Village.
- Two partner webinars were hosted in September: "5-Step Action Plan for How to Handle Anti-Mask Guests" presented by NCRLA's legal partner on September 2 with 185 registrants and "Maximizing Your Digital Brand on Google" presented by 360i on September 23 with 111 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.
- Final TPDF disbursements were processed for the City of Asheville Harrah's Cherokee Center and the Asheville Art Museum.
- The new Wayfinding inter-district signage system designed for the River Arts District was installed and includes vehicular, pedestrian, gateway, kiosks, and a landmark.
- Pat met with City staff to discuss a future request for assistance in parking signage for public lots in West Asheville in support of the West Asheville Business Association.
- Pat was invited to participate in the Biltmore Ave Corridor Study Steering Committee and attended the first meeting.
- 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 will be produced and distributed in the community in the coming weeks.

Future Updates:

- Partner virtual events and webinars are in development including the BCTDA Annual Meeting on October 7, and a follow up Sales, Marketing & Community Engagement Update on October 20.

- 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.
- Robert Stevenson of Homeward Bound, the City's liaison contracted to connect people in the community with resources, will meet with CVB staff to share insights on his work, and Pat will coordinate a convening of tourism partner organizations to learn more about current homelessness-related issues in the community and provide Mr. Stevenson with direct feedback from businesses.

PUBLIC INFORMATION – Kathi Petersen

Project Updates:

- Managed all aspects of the FY 2019-20 BCTDA Annual Report including: planning; developing, writing, and editing content; working with the designer on layout; copyfitting, proofs; and final publication.
- Continued training on and development of plans for the partner/community e-newsletter using a new platform, Act-On. Wrote copy for partner newsletters and e-alerts – in total, 5 were sent out in September.
- Made numerous updates to the industry website to include information on new public health orders from Gov. Cooper; also developed other additional new content for AshevilleCVB.com.
- Widely publicized and helped coordinate a partner webinar on handling anti-mask customers; followed up with various media outlets and developed post-publicity on AshevilleCVB.com and on industry social media.
- Provided in-person, one-on-one, tours to six final candidates for the position of new Explore Asheville President & CEO.
- With other Explore Asheville team members, wrote a draft press release announcing the relocation of the tournament to Asheville; disseminated to local media and assisted reporters as requested. Publicized tournament on industry website and social media; also conducted research on potential sponsors.
- Included publicity for 2020 BCTDA Annual Meeting.
- Participated in a business community call with the Asheville Police Department related to downtown protests and keeping industry partners appropriately informed about recommended actions and precautions.
- With other Explore Asheville team members, participated in the “virtual” Chamber Challenge 5K race, then publicized afterward on industry social media.

Future Updates:

- The new Act-On platform for partner/community e-newsletters originally scheduled for implementation in September is expected to be operational by the end of October, with Kathi managing all aspects of content and production/publication.
- Continued support of the BCTDA in announcing and preparing for the new President & CEO, including responding to media requests.

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

Project Updates:

- At the September 30 meeting of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, Brenda Durden was welcomed as a new board member appointed by the Buncombe County Commissioners, and the reappointment of Andrew Celwyn to a second term by Asheville

City Council was announced. The board acted to automatically approve all COVID-19 related penalties due in March through September 2020, which will be passed along to the Commissioners for further and final consideration.

- Assisted the CEO Search Committee with public meeting notices and coordinated the in-person interview meeting logistics in the Explore Asheville boardroom.
- Completed the onboarding process for the newly hired Community Engagement Specialist.
- Divvied up the Director of Finance job responsibilities as she began a three month leave effective September 30.
- Assisted the Community Engagement department with technical and logistical assistance related to partner engagement events.
- In collaboration with Ms. Tambellini, managed the application process to hire a new Director of Content.
- Met with Geograph to review and discuss the locations for Wayfinding kiosks in the River Arts District.
- Onboarded new Team Member, Nicole Will, into the Workday financial platform; Kathi Petersen into the BCTDA's 401(k) plan; and Dodie Stephens into the BCTDA's medical plan with Aetna.
- Terminated former Director of Content, Ritchie Rozzelle, from Explore Asheville and all benefit providers.

Future Updates:

- Prepare for the virtual special BCTDA meeting to hire a new President and CEO scheduled on October 15, and the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled on October 28, 2020.
- Work with Buncombe County Finance on the annual audit.
- Further assist the CEO Search Committee with CEO hiring logistics as appropriate.
- Continue working through the hiring process for a new Director of Content.