

February 24, 2020

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority

From: Vic Isley

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

Overall overnight stays and the value the visitors bring to the entire Asheville community continue to suffer during the pandemic, and January of 2021 continues that trend. Hotel occupancy for the month of December was 41.8 percent, down 17 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. December vacation rental occupancy was up 8.5 percent reaching nearly 53 percent.

	Hotel Occupancy	Percentage Change YOY
January 2021	41.8%	(17%)

Source: STR Report

	Vacation Rental Occupancy	Percentage Change YOY
January 2021	52.9%	+8.5%

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. The recent increased spread of the virus will further hinder 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.

JANUARY BY THE NUMBERS

- During January, the sales team posted 856 personal contacts (down 2%). January sales activities generated 42 sales leads (down 64%) and 13 convention bookings (down 76%), representing 1,574 rooms (down 72%). Seven months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 52 percent and room nights represented are down 55 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated 1 group event in January (down 91%), with corresponding revenue of \$14,616 (down 94%). The services team assisted 1 group (down 93%).
- The PR team landed 21 significant placements in January (down 43%), with 53 media touchpoints (down 31%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$33.29 with reach of 4,129. Please note: The PR team is working through some earned media tracking issues with our vendor, specifically looking at print placements and broadcast reach/publicity values that didn't pull through this month. Online placements added \$1,409,753 in value and reach of nearly 750 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 358,451 visits (down 15%), including 249,852 to the mobile site (down 16%). Our Facebook fan base total is 300,544 (up 1%) and video views totaled 40,088 (down 40%).
- In January 2021, there were 2,913 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 3,753 the previous year.
- Paid search generated 72k site visits in January with average time on site of 1:28 and an average of 2.06 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 12.7 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 33 room nights (down 66%) with total room revenue of \$1,326 (down 90%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 2,112 visitors (down 72%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 438 visitors (down 61%).

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$33,451,292 in December (down 16%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 54.4 percent during December (down 21%). The average daily room rate was \$158.07 (down 12%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$86.05 (down 30%). Room demand decreased 17 percent with 146,294 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 61.6 percent (up 20%), ADR of \$108.24 (up 8%), and RevPAR of \$66.71 (up 29%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 9 percent to total 116,880 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 58 percent to total 59,772 in December.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

Project Updates:

- Asheville Restaurant Week: Logged nearly 7,000 web sessions (10 percent from owned social media channels) and delivered 7,441 click-throughs to Chamber ARW page. Web site slider and fly-ins resulted in 27,000 impressions.
- National Plan for Vacation Day: Implemented paid social campaign in association with National Plan for Vacation Day (Jan. 26) by promoting planning and offering free visitor guides – yielded 1,228 Visitor Guide requests. Amplified messaging via organic social media posts and homepage takeover on January 26.
- Curated Asheville: Created customized landing page that highlights safety-minded, socially distant activities in winter. Kicked off campaign with a social media giveaway in partnership with Grand Bohemian and travel writer @blushingalpacos (Barbara Skidmore) on Jan. 30, resulting in 3,800 new Instagram followers and featured Curated Asheville partners: Asheville Rooftop Bars, Namaste in Nature and Adoratherapy.
- Planning for the 2H FY21 paid media continued, including:
 - Specific media partner recommendations in discussion and being finalized.
 - Further refinement of creative approach, look and feel, and tonality continued in January. Development of new creative will be underway in February for launch in early spring.
- Met with paid search team to review new strategy centered around nonbrand terms which will allow us to focus more on capturing potential visitors who are still in the decision-making process for travel.
- Launched photo extensions in paid search as part of a Google beta opportunity
- Advertising supported “Muni” documentary by local filmmaker Paul Bonesteel that features Black caddies-turned-players. Will air on Golf Channel with air dates: Feb. 2, 6, 16 and 20. Internally developed a spring version of Let’s Go There commercial for use in these placements.
- Logged 53 media touchpoints, initiated 28 targeted pitches, and supported 4 media on the ground in Asheville in January.
- Provided story support for *Imbibe*, *Eater Carolinas*, *Zagat Stories*, *TOWN Magazine*, *ABA Destinations Magazine* and *News Break*.
- Supported VisitNC and their agency JPR in development of a virtual media event “Pulling Forward History: Changemakers in NC Travel.” Pitched several Asheville changemakers and connected them to Claude Coleman/Soundspace@Rabbit’s to represent the area. Nine media attended including freelancers from National Geographic, Fodor’s, T+L, USA Today, Essence and MSN.
- Attended International Media Marketplace’s three-day conference and conducted 26 appointments with media representing *Food & Wine*, *Travel + Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Outside*, *Lonely Planet*, *The Points Guy*, *Architectural Digest* and more.
- Finalized media list and destination news briefing doc featuring 2021 travel news with a focus on the people and histories behind the news for distribution February 1.

Future Updates:

- Full rollout of Curated Asheville promotion via social media series and website content.
- Content planning and focus on Black History Month in February.
- Planning for February media visits, securing lodging and “Curated Asheville” experiences for blogger Shiquita Hyman (The Unconventional Southern Belle) and providing support for the filming of an Asheville season of beer-themed show *Crafted* (Amazon Prime, Facebook Watch distribution).

- Partner outreach, media dashboard and target list and development for spring wellness media round-up.
- Updated audience profiles via Experian.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES

Project Updates:

- Held Meetings Elevated Virtual FAM:
 - Registered attendance: 464 / Actual Viewers: 242
 - 71 attendees expressed interest in holding meetings in AVL over next four year
 - 34 states represented
 - 3 RFP's received: 2 NC based groups and 1 NE group totaling 955 rooms
- Closer to Home Self Directed FAM initiative targeting the drive meeting market generated 16 requests for more information and two confirmed visits to date. Initiative runs through April.
- In person attendance at Asheville Wedding Festival - 148 brides in attendance.
- Held Mug Moments #3 featuring Nikki Phillips Steward with The Foundry Hotel:
 - Registered attendance: 43 / Actual Viewers: 32
- Virtually attended the following trade and industry meetings: Blue Ridge Parkway Association winter meeting, STS Sales and Marketing Coffee and Conversations, Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission, SCSAE Member Connect, and Asheville Chamber Buzz Breakfast.
- Finalized interviews with organizations who have held meetings in Asheville as part of a larger strategy promoting how groups have successful been meeting safely in Asheville.
- Continued finalizing deliverables related to Miles Partnership – Meeting Brand Refresh.
- Reviewed findings of Destination Analysts Meeting Planner Creative Survey with Miles Partnership.
- Finalized explainer motion graphic video detailing how Explore Asheville CVB adds value to meetings sourced through the Bureau.
- Partner interaction included site tours of Courtyard by Marriott in Biltmore Village, Holiday Inn Biltmore West, and the Salt Spa of Asheville.
- One motorcoach site visit was hosted and resulted in a lead totaling 155 rooms for April 2020.
- January bookings included: 2021 Maximum Cheer & Dance (40 rooms), 2021 ABYSA Kepner Cup Girls (100 rooms), 2021 ACECSC Bord (20 rooms), 2021 Montreat College Track & Field x2 (130 rooms & 100 rooms respectively), 2021 PACE annual Conference (519 rooms), and six 2021 Weddings (412 rooms total).
- Microsites were completed for upcoming groups: AAC Women's Lacrosse Championship and ABYSA Kepner Cup for Boys.
- Sixteen separate invitations were sent in January with messaging specific to each target group, inviting recipients to view Mug Moments and/or the Virtual FAM. The open rates ranged from a low of 5.61 percent to a high of 71.1 percent. The overall open rate hovered around 20 percent.

Future Updates:

- Initiate data analytics project.
- Host SoCon Men's & Women's Basketball Championships.
- Kick off meeting planner guide space specifications project.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Project Updates:

- In January, 48 partner account updates, 163 calendar events, and 2,913 individual Visitor Guide requests were processed.
- Six new partners were added in January: C.W. Moose Trading Company, Forestry Camp, Aisha Adams Media Group, Treehouses of Serenity, Stephan Pruitt Photography, Elope Outdoors.
- Five partner accounts were cancelled in January. Flipside Boardshop and ZaPow closed their physical locations and transitioned to online-only. Bliss Farm & Retreat closed permanently. Ambrose West closed due to COVID-19, but the business is up for sale, including the branding package, so may re-open under new ownership. Early Girl Eatery - North closed but the other two locations remain open.
- Eight One-on-One Wednesday sessions were held: four with current partners for listing/extranet support and four with potential new partners.
- Hosted a partner webinar presented by JB Media “Reinvent Your Path to Success – How to Promote New Experiences” on January 13 with 76 in attendance.
- Hosted a partner webinar presented by Mountain BizWorks: 'Relief for the Tourism Community - An Update on New PPP Funding' on January 19 with 90 in attendance.
- Co-promoted the Family Forward NC COVID-19 Rapid Response Program webinar on January 25 with 33 in attendance.
- The team conducted partner outreach to enhance the new Curated Experiences section of the website and conducted outreach to confirm major partner events for 2021.
- CE team members attended WomanUp and hosted table conversation on Remo platform at Leadership Asheville’s Breakfast Buzz.
- Nicole attended the African American Business Association's monthly meeting, Lunch & Leads Networking Group, and the Asheville Homestay Network.
- Pat attended the MLK Association’s Virtual Prayer Breakfast, and monthly meetings for the Block Community Collaborative, the Local Living Economy Working Group, and AGIA Business Outreach Committee.
- Pat presented a weekend webinar at Aisha Adam’s Entrepreneurial Accelerator Workshop.
- Wayfinding Projects: managing the kiosk refresh project to update all content and designs on every kiosk throughout the county.
- TPDF: tracking and compiling grantees’ Annual Reports due January 15; reports will be summarized and presented to the BCTDA in February.
- African American Heritage Trail: seeking research support and estimates for overall project budget in anticipation of presenting allocation request to BCTDA in February.
- Team members continue with Brainery certification coursework.

Future Updates:

- Partner virtual events are in development including “Cost-Effective Ways to Increase Reach and Website Traffic,” presented by JB on February 10, and the Hospitality Outlook on March 10.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Project Updates:

- Wrote and published six partner e-newsletters or e-alerts and launched the new Tourism Community Update on January 27, an e-newsletter published immediately following the BCTDA board meeting. The Tourism Community Update provided an overview of items addressed at the meeting and was delivered to a list of more than 1,700 stakeholders,

including partners, business and civic leaders, advocates/supporters, elected officials, and news media, with an open rate of 38.5%. In total in the month of January, 11,584 emails were delivered among the seven communications with an open rate as high as 40.1%, well exceeding industry averages.

- Wrote, published, and updated content on AshevilleCVB.com that included information on COVID relief opportunities, latest COVID-related executive orders (state as well as county), and partner forums as well as federal relief packages.
- Social media communications included promotion of partner forums, partner/community news, CVB-sponsored events, such as the Leadership Asheville Winter Buzz Breakfast series that kicked off January 27.
- Responded to several requests for interviews, quotes, or information, including:
 - Asheville Citizen Times: "Tourism Recovery Fund has been a success, but TDA rebuffs push to add \$3M more" (online 1/27/21; in print 1/29/21); Asheville Citizen Times - Economic Outlook for Asheville (Sunday cover story 1/3/21).
 - Pending: Assistance provided to the following: Spectrum TV News 1 (value of tourism; impact of pandemic), WNC Magazine (improvements in River Arts District), SouthPark Magazine (challenges/opportunities for the return of tourism), Asheville Citizen Times (snow and tourism).
- Arranged introductory interviews between Vic and reporters at Asheville Citizen Times and Mountain Xpress.
- Updated the TPDF video, which was shown at the virtual Explore Asheville "booth" at the January Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast as part of our sponsorship.

Future Updates:

- A full 6-month report of the Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund will be published in February, with plans for a press release, posting on CVB website, etc.
- Work on a comprehensive stakeholder communications plan is underway.

PRESIDENT & CEO + EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Project Updates:

- Executed the BCTDA's regular monthly board meeting virtually on January 27. Highlights included: welcoming new board members Councilmember Sandra Kilgore and Commissioner Robert Pressley, a 6-month report on the BCTDA's Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund by Mountain BizWorks, approval of a budget amendment to allow for a \$40,000 BCTDA contribution to the One Buncombe Fund, and a "Recovery Marketing & Messaging" presentation. Chairman Karvir appointed John Lockett (chair), Kathleen Mosher, and Chip Craig to serve as the BCTDA's 2021 finance committee.
- President & CEO completed individual meetings with County Commissioners, City Council and EA team members. Continued to meet with tourism community members, stakeholders, and strategic partners.
- On January 22, Glenn joined Vic for her first visit to Black Mountain with Sharon Tabor, Executive Director of the Black Mountain - Swannanoa Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center, and her board chair, Jon Brooks.
- 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.
- As a new team communications tool, worked with department heads to coordinate/format the new "Weekly Headlines" doc that is sent to staff members each Monday, designed to keep everyone abreast of "need to know" past and upcoming departmental highlights covering a two-week period.

- Initial discussions began with Insurance Services of Asheville for the FY 22 benefits package.

Future Updates:

- Continue to coordinate President & CEO's calendar, including scheduling internal and external meetings as she continues to meet with business owners, elected officials, and community leaders.
- Finalize the FY 22 budget process and timeline and schedule meetings accordingly.
- Prepare for the BCTDA's February 24 BCTDA meeting, and the Annual Planning Retreat and March meeting, scheduled March 25-26, 2021.
- Establish a process to allow for increased public comment at virtual board meetings.
- Work on a plan for resuming in person board meetings with a hybrid virtual component to implement when the time is right.
- Work on finalizing the policies and procedures for team members returning to the workplace.
- Begin developing the FY 22 budget, work on establishing a revenue goal, research benefits options and administrative expenses, and work with department heads during the budget planning process.