

July 29, 2020

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

---

Overall national travel demand during the month of June increased during the first part of the month, buoyed by improving consumer sentiment and intent to travel beginning with the Memorial Day holiday weekend. However, as the month ended and July began, that same sentiment and intent started to decline again as coronavirus case spread worsened, especially across the Sunbelt states.

The Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund grants were a welcome infusion of financial support for hundreds of recipients in the last part of June. The speed at which the funding was approved in Raleigh and in which the \$5 million in grants were made by Mountain BizWorks is nothing short of remarkable. However, the community's small businesses, entrepreneurs, and tourism-related non-profits still face a challenging path ahead in the coming weeks and months and our work is far from done. We also continue to monitor legislative and regulatory activity in Washington and Raleigh that has had and will have a significant impact upon the local economy.

### **JUNE BY THE NUMBERS**

- During June, the sales team posted 471 personal contacts (down 51%). June sales activities generated 29 sales leads (down 55%) and 16 convention bookings (down 52%), representing 1,000 rooms (down 84%). In the final month of the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 34 percent and room nights represented are down 37 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated zero group events in June (down 100%), with zero revenue (down 100%). The services team assisted 5 groups (down 89%).
- The PR team landed 22 significant placements in June (down 55%), with 46 media touchpoints (down 33%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$710,699 with reach of over 1.5 million. Online placements added \$628,421 in value and reach of over 334 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 325,667 visits (down 49%), including 215,901 to the mobile site (down 58%). Our Facebook fan base total is 297,718 (up 3%) and video views totaled 51,333 (down 34%).
- Online hotel reservations totaled 77 room nights (down 29%) with total room revenue of \$9,938 (down 51%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 3,097 visitors (down 86%), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 1,958 visitors (down 15%).

## **LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS**

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$6,673,236 in May (down 83%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 22.4 percent during May (down 71%). The average daily room rate was \$80.16 (down 50%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$17.93 (down 85%). Room demand decreased 72 percent with 52,557 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 48.9.2 percent (down 3%), ADR of \$92.79 (down 6%), and RevPAR of \$45.33 (down 9%). Total demand for short term rentals decreased 20 percent to total 76,814 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 90 percent to total 15,096 in May.

## **Interim Executive – Chris Cavanaugh**

### **Project Updates:**

Nothing to report for June—started work as the interim executive on July 1. In July:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

### **Future Updates:**

- Finalize timing of TMIP presentation by PGAV.
- Develop TMIP implementation options for consideration by the board.
- Introduce and implement crisis strategic plan.

## **MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS – Marla Tambellini & Team**

### **Project Updates:**

- Produced an updated video for reopening by re-editing the Together In Spirit video and removing the end card and tag. Developed additional digital assets that incorporated the dual messages of serenity and safety.
- Worked with the agency to develop a new media targeting approach that overlays COVID-19 data onto our geo-markets and develop an attribute set to model a responsible traveler audience.
- Further developed the Stay Safe Pledge and safety message, infusing it into owned assets including social media and ExploreAsheville.com as well as PR messaging, creative and the advertising landing page.
- The PR team logged 46 media touchpoints, initiated 264 targeted pitches, and hosted two media on the ground in Asheville in June. Pitch numbers were high due to an “Open Spaces” pitch that was widely distributed.

- Responded to a national call from Black Travel Alliance on equity and inclusion data.
- Work progressed on design and structural updates to ExploreAsheville.com.
- Shot new imagery with people in face coverings.
- Developed new content to share an itinerary based on social distancing guidelines.
- Led the work on a transition to the new Act-On marketing automation/email platform.
- Participated in US Travel online congressional visits to discuss and advocate for recovery initiatives.
- ExploreAsheville.com logs record number of user sessions. There were 325,667 user sessions to ExploreAsheville.com in June 2020 compared to 643,735 sessions the previous year. However, ExploreAsheville.com logged 5,243,437 user sessions for FY 20 vs 4,870,605 sessions for FY19.

#### **Future Updates:**

- Monitor and adjust media plan based on COVID-19 data methodology.
- Expand media plan by finalizing media channel plan for anticipated rollout in August.
- Review and update social media strategy.
- Mountains photo shoot scheduled for late July.
- Begin planning for fall marketing efforts.
- Finalize transition to Act-On.
- Provide story support for media that will manifest in the future. This included *American Way*, *Y'all.com*, *Indy South*, *AAA Carolinas GO Magazine*, *Fodor's Travel*, *WSPA-TV* and *TravelAwaits*. Asheville imagery was also provided to *AFAR* and *AAA Living Magazine*.

### **GROUP SALES & SERVICES – Dianna Pierce & Team**

#### **Project Updates:**

- Launched the second virtual site visit with details on the destination's accessibility, meeting and hotel properties, cultural resources, and Explore Asheville services. Through June 188 registered to watch it. Follow up was conducted by the sales managers as well as a follow-up mailer.
- Pushed out an email promoting the virtual visit video to 33,050 association, corporate, and independent planners by Convention Planit with an open rate of five percent and 1,403 clicks.
- Hosted the Georgia MPI Tech Summit with 66 people attending. Deliverables included a video presentation by EA, speaker introduction, virtual expo portal presence, sales materials in packages mailed to participants in advance and website link.
- Sponsored the June 20th Smart Meetings Medical Meeting Compliance Guidelines webinar. More than 1,000 people attended, with 545 planners identified as potential clients. A targeted email promoting viewing of the virtual site visit was sent to the target group and received an open rate of 23 percent and 46 clicks.
- Staff prepared AAA TripTik materials for inclusion into a virtual FAM presentation by Blue Ridge Parkway Association to southeast AAA clubs.
- Connie participated in a FSAE roundtable discussion on diversity with 60 other members.
- Staff attended key industry sponsored webinars assessing the current COVID-19 stats to understand best practices in sales and communications messaging moving forward.
- Staff reached out to planners scheduled for events be held in December 2020 through June 2021 to provide servicing.
- Microsites were completed for two sporting events: Turf Titans Tournament & the USSSA Fastpitch 2nd Annual L-Town Invitational.

### **Future Updates:**

- Continue Act-On training in anticipation of an August 1<sup>st</sup> conversion from Distribion.
- Finalize details for virtual site visit filming using 3D imaging of major meeting hotels.
- Continue the brand refresh project with staff working closely with Miles to finalize refresh elements.
- Staff is close to implementing the Event Impact Calculator's (EIC) full integration into the CRM and accompanying industry roll out targeting August 1. A calculation will be completed for each secured event thus allowing a more comprehensive overview of the economic importance of events to our community.

## **PUBLIC AFFAIRS – Pat Kappes & Team**

### **Project Updates:**

- A Virtual Partner Forum was presented online to 134 partners on June 18. The team shared updates on marketing and advertising plans for the next phase of reopening, on the upcoming website upgrades, and extranet training tips.
- 166 partner records were updated in June (14 Accommodation, 45 Attraction/Retail, 2 Wedding Service, 105 Food & Beverage businesses) and 66 events were processed.
- There were six new partners in June: Beauty Bin Day Spa, Cantina Louie, Coley K Photography, Rise Above Bakehouse, Riverside Rhapsody Beer Company, and The Bull & Beggar.
- Seven partner accounts were cancelled in June due to closures: Asheville Wedding Celebrations, Eco Depot Marketplace, Margaret and Maxwell, Rezaz, Rustic Grape Wine Bar, The Mothlight, and Twisted Laurel West.
- Pat is working with SimpleView as well as the Marketing & Sales teams on the integration of the new Act-On email management platform. Distribion, the current system used to manage partner email communications, will no longer be available after July.
- The public affairs team is supporting the marketing team's website upgrade efforts by managing partner updates and amenity review as the amenities will become a high-profile search feature in the new website page layouts.
- The leadership team of the Asheville Bed & Breakfast Association (ABBA) requested a meeting to discuss opportunities to work with Explore Asheville on attracting a more diverse visitor audience. Pat and Marla provided insight on current advertising efforts and discussed a monthly check-in to encourage collaboration.
- Public Affairs Specialist Joe Phelps resigned; his position has been posted and former Public Affairs Specialist Brit Martin is filling in on a part-time basis during the search process.
- Working on final steps for the installation of the Wayfinding signage program in the River Arts District which is scheduled for roll-out in late August or September. 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.
- TPDF disbursement requests for the NC Arboretum and Buncombe County's Enka Recreation Destination project are in review.

### **Future Updates:**

- In support of Buncombe County's effort to encourage the use of masks, nine Wayfinding kiosks throughout downtown, Black Mountain and Biltmore Village will get a replacement panel with the County's graphic requiring the use of masks.
- Staff is in early planning stages for a series of online educational webinars to help partners optimize Explore Asheville's sales & marketing opportunities.

- Explore local resources to aid in the research phase of the African American Heritage Trail Project.
- Coordinating a meeting in July in the River Arts District with MERJE, Geograph and staff from the City of Asheville to walk-through the new Wayfinding signage locations to ensure there are no traffic or utility conflicts.
- TPDF contract amendment requests to extend completion deadlines are anticipated from the NC Arboretum and Buncombe County for the Woodfin Blueway & Greenway.

## **PUBLIC INFORMATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – Kathi Petersen**

### **Project Updates:**

- Considerable time has been spent on the announcement of the 394 local businesses that received Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund, including making personal pitches to area media (resulting in several stories on WLOS-TV and the Asheville Citizen Times, as well as coverage in other local media); writing and disseminating a press release that included a timeline and a “by the numbers” feature; setting up interviews; updating the AshevilleCVB.com website; writing a partner e-alert; promoting via social media; providing related content for the Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast on business reopening needs.
- Solicited FAQs from partners in the wedding industry on pandemic-related issues, then worked with Buncombe County to convene a town hall on June 17 to address those concerns. Created a compliance toolkit for the wedding industry on AshevilleCVB.com, which Beth McKinney publicized in a follow-up communication. Publicized to lodging partners Buncombe County’s decision to lift lodging restrictions effective June 25.
- Following the unrest in downtown Asheville, responded to numerous questions and requests from the public and shared information on the state of emergency via an e-alert to partners.
- Responded to numerous local media requests on topics that included the CVB’s marketing and advertising plans, unemployment rates in the tourism industry due to the global pandemic, the Tourism Jobs Recovery fund, departure of Stephanie Brown, TPDF-funded projects, CEO search.

### **Future Updates:**

- In news media, stories are pending/expected in AVL Watchdog, Mountain Xpress, The Laurel of Asheville, Asheville Citizen Times, Carolina Public Press.
- A plan to roll out TMIP to the public is in development.
- As partner businesses continue with their recovery, plans are in development to promote their innovations and resilience via our various communication channels, while also providing enhanced content on the ways the CVB can provide service and support.
- Continue updates on AshevilleCVB.com to make content more useful and relevant to partners and the general community.
- Continue efforts to push out the Stay Safe Pledge to partners and other community businesses, while the Marketing and PR teams push out the pledge to prospective visitors.

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

### **Project Updates:**

- At the June 24 meeting of the BCTDA, Mountain BizWorks publicly announced the 394 recipients of the Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund grants totaling \$5 million, awarded to local non-lodging tourism businesses. The grants were all paid in June.
- Successfully executed the end-of-employment process for outgoing President & CEO Stephanie Brown and prepared to onboard incoming Interim Executive Chris Cavanaugh.

- Following a six-month ever-changing planning process, the FY 21 BCTDA budget ordinance was approved at the June 24 BCTDA meeting. The budget went into effect on July 1.
- Posted the vacant Public Affairs Specialist position.
- Worked with the ISA team to transition benefits into the new fiscal year. Dental and eye coverage were retained at the same rates. After three years, the United HealthCare plan was discontinued in favor of two plan options with Aetna, including a high deductible plan and a traditional PPO plan. The high deductible plan is partnered with Vickery Family Medicine, a Direct Primary Care provider. All team members participating in a BCTDA medical plan are eligible for a \$1,000 Health Reimbursement Account that provides reimbursements for deductibles, co-pays and pharmaceutical costs not covered by their respective plan.

**Future Updates:**

- Prepare for the virtual BCTDA monthly meeting scheduled July 29, 2020 via Zoom.
- Complete the onboarding process for Interim Executive Chris Cavanaugh.
- Provide training for all staff and implement usage of Microsoft's Teams communications and virtual meetings program, fully transitioning from Slack in July.
- Work with Buncombe County Finance on annual audit.
- Work with Pat Kappes on hiring a new Public Affairs Specialist.