



March 18, 2020
PRESS RELEASE

Update from Explore Asheville and Buncombe County TDA on Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The health and safety of our community is the top priority of Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority.

Our interest in protecting the lives of local residents also includes concerns about their livelihoods. The economic fallout of the pandemic is unprecedented in our community and around the world. Tourism and the hospitality industry are an important part of our economy, supporting more than 27,000 jobs, or 15 percent of Buncombe County's employment.

During this incredibly difficult time, we stand with our colleagues in the tourism industry, working nonstop to identify solutions to help sustain our community's businesses, which include hundreds of small, independently owned ventures. Many of these are micro-enterprises employing only one or two individuals. Many will find it challenging, if not impossible, to survive.

After talking with fellow industry colleagues, we identified the need to bring together and share resources to help support businesses during these catastrophic circumstances. Buncombe County Manager Avril Pinder responded by convening a call to establish a COVID-19 response team for the business community involving Explore Asheville, AIR, the Chamber, and other community leaders and city and county staff. We are in active discussions with this group and others addressing information such as guidelines on unemployment benefits and identifying sources of emergency funding.

We also initiated contact with Senator Terry Van Duyn, requesting that she represent the concerns of our local businesses to Gov. Roy Cooper as relief packages are being developed.

In late February, we created a [coronavirus web page on our industry site, AshevilleCVB.com](#), where tourism partners can easily find industry-specific information on the developing situation. We are continuing to update that page to include the business resources mentioned above. These include information

on President Trump's stimulus package and Gov. Cooper's efforts to expand unemployment benefits, both announced March 17.

As a service to residents and visitors as well as to tourism partners including hotels, restaurants, attractions, breweries, and so on, we are actively collecting and listing information on cancellations, postponements, and other changes on a [special section of our ExploreAsheville.com website](#), which attracts more than 5 million user sessions a year. We are also promoting initiatives to support local businesses, such as Asheville Strong, through the website and our social media and other communication channels and will promote this resource to residents looking to support local businesses.

Last week we suspended our paid advertising campaign. When we restart efforts to bring visitors back, which will enable local businesses to resume operations and put local people back to work, it will be with whatever monies that remain in our reserves – along with the talents of the Explore Asheville team whose efforts have played a significant role in developing the vibrant customer base that has supported our local businesses and generated jobs.

Using reserves will be necessary because without visitors staying in local hotels, bed and breakfast establishments, and short-term rentals in the next few weeks, we are projecting little to no revenue from occupancy taxes.

As responsible marketers, we will rely on data from marketing research firm SMARInsights, which is conducting a travel intentions survey in our target markets. Information gleaned from the survey will allow us to make data-based decisions for a robust re-start of our marketing efforts to come out of this crisis fast and strong.

There are some actions that some in the community are calling for, which Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County TDA are not able to take. As a public authority, the BCTDA is legally obligated to administer funds as intended; in this case, to stimulate a base of customers for local businesses – a mission that we care deeply about, and never more so than in these troubling times.

The investment in tourism promotion creates a customer base that sustains local businesses year-round, provides funding for community services and assets enjoyed by residents, and generates awareness and a reputation for Asheville that supports all economic development goals. While clearly there are immediate needs in our community during this crisis, history has proven that these resources can help make Asheville strong again and recover faster than communities without this resource. Promoting Asheville as a destination for leisure and business travelers has played a significant role in our community's recovery from past crises – whether national, like 9/11, or regional and local, such as weather events.

Until then, we know this is a deeply troubling time for restaurants, attractions, outfitters, artists, makers, musicians, lodgers, tour operators, craft beverage makers, and the fellow 1,300 tourism partners who would typically be gearing up for the busy spring and summer tourist seasons. We are heartbroken for the impacts of this crisis on our community, on our industry colleagues, and on their workers.

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