



Visit Estes Park

Board of Directors Regular Meeting
Thursday, August 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM
Via ZOOM Meeting

Board Members Attending:

Sean Jurgens, Deborah Gibson, Pat Murphy, Nick Smith, Kirby Hazelton, Rich Chiappe, Jerusha Rice

Others in Attendance:

Kyle Patterson- Rocky Mountain National Park
Joan Hooper- League of Women Voters
Carlie Bangs- Town of Estes Park
Cato Kraft- Estes Park Nonprofit Network
Suzy Blackhurst- Estes Valley Voice
Dawn Wilson- Trail Gazette
Stacey Mullen-Inntopia
Tom Foley-Inntopia
Cindy Welch

VEP Staff:

Kara Franker, CEO
Michael Zumbaugh, CFO
Heidi Barfels, CMO
Cindy Mackin, CSO
Rebecca Domenico-Gelsinger, Operations Director
Dana Paiement, Destination Development Director
Rachel Ward Oppermann, Advocacy & Sustainability Director
Kendall Akin, Creative Manager
John Berry, Photographer
Claire Molle, Communications Manager

The meeting is called to order at 2:01 p.m.

CONSENT AGENDA & MINUTES:

Chair Sean Jurgens requests a motion to approve the agenda and minutes from the previous board meeting with the note that we will have to pause the executive session regarding the Interim CEO Contract Discussion and Executive Session because the

board needs more time to prepare. Trustee Kirby Hazelton moves to approve the agenda with that change. Director Pat Murphy seconds. All vote in favor. The agenda and minutes are approved.

CALL FOR TOWN BOARD UPDATES:

Trustee Hazelton says that the Town Board will be discussing hosted short-term rentals at next week's study session, which came out of the Bed & Breakfast discussion as part of a process to be more easily able to afford a home. She says this item will come on at 5 p.m. next Tuesday, the 27th, and there will be some space for public comment at this study session. She says this will not be the only time this is discussed.

CALL FOR BOARD MEMBER UPDATES:

There are no board member updates.

CALL FOR PUBLIC COMMENT:

There is no public comment.

EX-OFFICIO REPORTS

There are no Ex-Officio updates.

TRANSIENT INVENTORY REPORT PRESENTATION

Inntopia, which conducted the study, presents the Transient Inventory Report. Tom Foley summarizes the assessment as a holistic study of all lodging inventory available within the destination for short-term rental and summarizes the results. He starts with the area of study. There are two areas of study, the professionally managed Inventory and Rent-by-Owner STRs. Foley differentiates the types of inventories looked at in the study: professionally managed inventory, rent by owner, and hybrid. Foley shows that hotel and motel units are leading in lodging units by type, lodging, and pillow type, followed by cabins and cottages. He reports that the Spur 66 corridor has the most units available to rent, with 1,929 units available to rent, followed by downtown. Spur 66 also has the highest rental capacity, 35 percent of all pillows, and about 2 times the capacity of downtown. Foley reviews ratings based on economy, moderate, deluxe, and luxury.

He shows that there are the most economy units followed by moderate, then deluxe, then luxury. He reviews how these ratings are distributed by area of town as well. The report shows that the Rent by Owner units have increased each year since 2018 starting with 1,144 units in 2018 and growing to 1,922 units in 2024. Foley says a lot of the changes have happened in the Rent by Owner Marketplace in unit ownership, such as how owners use their properties and economic conditions that may force homes onto the marketplace. Foley reports on Rent by Owner unit types across the region, differentiating multi-family from single-family and cabins and cottages. Foley presents professionally managed vs. owner-managed units in the STR area. The report shows that 84.6 percent of the VRBO inventory in the Local Marketing District is professionally managed, with only 15.4 percent being owner-managed exclusively. Foley explains that the full report dives very deeply into all types of lodging inventory, including a lot of important information when drilled into. Foley concludes with a question-and-answer session.

6E ANNUAL FUNDING PLAN REPORT

Carlie Bangs presents the 6E funding plan from the town and the Estes Park Housing Authority. She reports that lodging tax revenue has been steady, and June revenue was up. She notes that the split between workforce housing and childcare will see a change in 2025. With the increased revenue projections, they plan to change to a 20 percent/80 percent split in 2025, with 20 percent going to childcare to fulfill the need there and 80 percent going to housing. She says that funds that have been transferred to the Estes Park Housing Authority will continue to go to the same priorities in workforce housing that they have been previously going to. She says not too much has changed besides the new split. She says they are working on something for the public to showcase the plan that is easily consumable. She says that they have been completing meetings with stakeholders as well as public meetings to see how the needs assessment aligns with the plan. Bangs says the 2025 plan is aligned with the feedback they received from these meetings. She says this plan will be sent alongside the Operating Plan and Budget from Visit Estes Park and will be approved by the Town Board and County Commissioners to proceed.

REVIEW:

1. Kara Franker gives the CEO report. She announces that this is her last board meeting which makes her very sad. She starts with an update to the Destination Stewardship plan, which will be presented by Clarity of Place at the September board meeting, which has been helping Visit Estes Park with Destination Stewardship strategies. She says a new tool, Wayfinder, picked Estes Park to test out the tool as free. Franker says that this will help us look at how to spell out

what destination stewardship means to the community.

Franker announces that the Operating Plan Review is scheduled for Monday, September 9, from 5 pm to 6:30 pm via Zoom. She says she tried very hard to get this date to be one when she was still here and could give the presentation but could not make that date work, and due to her agreement with her new job, the VEP team will be delivering the Operating Plan.

Franker reviews the proposed changes to the Operating Plan so that the board can vote at the end based on the agreement that the staff will make the changes that have been asked for.

Proposed Change: VEP should explain the importance of tourism and visitation, specifically overnight lodging, as it is the engine that drives funding of our community's workforce housing and childcare programs. The operating plan briefly discusses this wording. The board agrees that they are happy with this change.

Proposed Change: Add language about Frozen Dead Guy Days driving overnight stays. There was a brief discussion about the wording of this change. The board agreed they are happy with this change.

Proposed Change: "I would like to see an initiative that includes working with Vacationland and the Town's Visitor Center staff to accommodate the stated needs for printed and mailed guides. Based on my follow-up conversations with those folks, I think the cost would be nominal and wouldn't be a huge budget ask. And it's a way to show the Town Board that VEP is responsive to their questions/concerns." Trustee Kirby Hazelton says that she claims this proposed change is her own. She clarifies that she just wanted to see the partnership with Vacationland strengthened. Vice Chair Deborah Gibson expresses that she objects to this proposal, saying that printed material is less and less common in the industry. She says it's very problematic for Visit Estes Park to be promoting a private entity as a public quasi-governmental agency. Gibson says she thinks this is bad practice, and VEP needs to look at all of the options if they want to look at doing a guide. Gibson says she believes the board should provide a budget for this and let the Visit Estes Park staff decide the best way to provide a visitor guide. CEO Franker joins in that there is a conflict with Visit Estes Park being directed to partner with Vacationland when there are public officials that profit off of Vacationland. Franker says she believes the staff can do a better job on their own of producing a guide. Chair Sean Jurgens says that his hesitation is that naming one single company as a directive from the board isn't how things are normally done and we might want to bid this out to other companies. Jurgens says naming one specific company to use should not be done in the Operating Plan and should be left up to VEP CEO and staff. Vice Chair Gibson says she would like to know how much of an actual demand there is for a printed guide.

Trustee Hazelton says she agrees that we don't have to use Vacationland, but she doesn't want to see Visit Estes Park create another printed guide of their own. Franker proposes that one way to fix this is to research whether a new Visit Estes Park visitor's guide is necessary because there are still Trustees who want Visit Estes Park to do this. Chair Sean Jurgens says that the research shows that a print option could be in bigger demand than we think, so he likes adding the "research" terminology. Franker says the language in the tactic about Visit Estes Park creating a visitor guide will be changed to reflect "conducting research" to see what the demand is for a printed guide. Franker requests guidance from the board on what staff should do about the print media and how to handle the political pressure that is being put on the Visit Estes Park team to include Vacationland. Director Gibson says she is against naming a private business in the Operating Plan. Vice Chair Sean Jurgens proposes to change language to partner with applicable media in-market and stay abreast of what's out there. The board agrees to add a term about conducting research about print demand.

Proposed Change: "I'd like to see the section about local/regional partnerships strengthened a bit to "continuing to build the relationships." The board agrees with this proposed change.

Proposed Change: "I'd like to see some measurement that VEP's presence and representation at trade shows and conferences bring back to the community itself (not just the org). I'm thinking about things like public presentations from staff post-DI (for example) where they share the top three things they learned, or an article in the partner newsletter with those takeaways, or... in other words, when stakeholders see that staff are attending these out-of-state conferences, they can not just view how that gives VEP cred, but they can understand how it brings value back to the community to their businesses and/or quality of life overall. Franker explains that her issue with this proposed change is that it puts the staff at risk of losing their very valuable professional development by being held to not necessarily measurable goals by the Operating Plan. Hazelton says she clarifies that she wants to share takeaways from shows when applicable or relevant to the community. Franker says the staff will add a sentence to reflect this change, and the board agrees with this change.

ACTION ITEM: VOTE TO APPROVE THE OPERATING PLAN

Chair Sean Jurgens moves to approve the operating plan with proposed changes, Director Jerusha Rice seconds. All vote in favor and the motion passes unanimously.

2. CMO Heidi Barfels provides the Marketing Report. Barfels shares that the team is moving into fall and winter promotions and shows an ad going into Travel + Leisure. She shares cobranded eblasts which will be changing with each season, and shares stats about the most recent e-blast, which went out to 70,000 subscribers and had an open rate of 60 percent. Barfels reviews Padsquad ads from July. Padsquad does gamified ads that are more interactive than a typical ad. Barfels reports that one ad was 109.5 percent above bench-mark for how these ads usually perform, and the second was 260 percent above benchmark. Barfels shares the continued Staycation Advertising directed at our Front Range neighbors. Barfels shares social media highlights, including Instagram reels that we used to go full steam ahead following the fires, once we knew that travel was safe, to ensure that people were still encouraged to come to Estes Park. Vice Chair Deborah Gibson comments that the way Visit Estes Park handled communications during the fires was phenomenal. Barfels shares a new blog, "Love Stories of Estes Park," which was an idea from Gibson that features then and now photos and stories from couples who continue to come to Estes Park. Barfels presents the August Art Month Campaign promoting arts in Estes Park this month using paid social ads and a dedicated press release. Barfels shares the newest additions to the Estes Inspired campaign with the new release of the Nico Strange Owl video and the upcoming video with Jeremiah RisingBuffalo from Rocky Mountain National Park. She shares that Estes Park is up for the best place to visit for fall in USA Today's 10Best. Barfels showcases new media coverage, including an article from journalist Wendy Altschuler who just visited the destination in Forbes, coverage about the Elk Rut in Thrillist, and a lot of national spooky season coverage, including HGTV, Elle Decor, and Veranda, all encouraging people to come to Estes Park to experience haunted places. Barfels explains the upcoming photoshoot with the Colorado Tourism Office which is working to showcase all types of travelers visiting the destination. She says the photo shoot will be taking place next week.

2. Cindy Mackin presents the Community Relations report. She says the team met with a lot of partners over the last couple of weeks and shares a list. She shares that the staff attended the launch of Estes Valley Voice and said a sad farewell to Reel Mountain Theater. She says the staff met with Bogey's, the new sports bar in town. Mackin says Visit Estes Park attended and sponsored the Community Resource Fair. Mackin asks CFO Mike Zumbaugh to weigh in on Visit Estes Park's sponsorship of The End of Season Bash, which will be produced by Visit Estes Park board Director Nick Smith and the Estes Park Western Heritage Foundation, Inc. Zumbaugh says VEP's attorney says there isn't a conflict with the board member involvement as long as the event has been vetted appropriately. Director Smith says he would also be happy to provide a conflict of interest form to add a level of transparency to the program. Mackin says the staff attended the Outdoor Oath event held in Rocky Mountain National Park which really aligned with VEP's stewardship initiatives. Mackin says that

VEP worked on a way to support firefighters following the fires, so the team delivered local cookies to first responders all over the area. Mackin shares a Save the Date for the next Community Roundtable, which will be held on September 17, 2024, from 2-4 pm at the Estes Valley Community table, discussing the holiday season, the Beyond Program and marketing tactics. Mackin shares results from the Beyond Summer program with a successful click-through rate. Mackin shares the plan for the holidays. She says on December 7 will be the Snowman Festival, and on December 21 will be the Catch the Glow Sweets Stroll. She says the team walked the streets yesterday with the lighting folks, and the town will look fantastic for the holidays. Mackin passes over to Destination Development Director Dana Paiement, who talks about her experience with the Colorado Tourism Leadership Journey, where she focused on Dark Sky Certification and Eco-Tourism. Mackin says that Paiement will be graduating from this program at the Governor's Conference in September. Mackin says she will also be speaking at GovCon about International travel initiatives. CEO Franker chimes in to announce that Dana Paiement has received a promotion for all of her hard work in event management and leadership. Mackin reviews the Thank You Activations in which the team stuffed thank you bags and passed them out around town thanking guests for visiting. She says the team stuffed the final 200 bags, and Lauren Molle will pass them out in town this weekend for the last time.

3. CFO Mike Zumbaugh presents the financial report. He shows the July visitor center guest count is up 3.8 percent compared to July 2023. He presents the total lodging tax revenues for the month of June showing that we are 10.8 percent ahead of 2023 for the month of May after adjusted lodging tax dollars, and this month, Visit Estes Park is 0.1 percent ahead of 2023 figures, and year-to-date, is ahead 1.6 percent of 2023 figures. He says that for the month of June, Visit Estes Park is ahead of budget by 5.2 percent. Year to date, Visit Estes Park is 1.2 percent ahead of budget. Zumbaugh reviews the lodging tax breakdown by lodging category. Zumbaugh shares financial statement activities showing revenue and expense variances. CSO Cindy Mackin chimes in that the transportation department has reported that ridership for shuttles was up 4.2 percent for the month of July, which could be useful to add to our reporting.

ACCEPTANCE OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

Chair Sean Jurgens requests a motion to accept the financial statements as presented, Director Rich Chiappe moves to approve, and Director Nick Smith seconds. All vote in favor. The motion passes unanimously.

Vice Chair Deborah Gibson requests to hear a few comments from the board regarding Kara Franker's last board meeting. The board gives very positive feedback that Franker has elevated the organization, improved its reputation, grew a great team, and created a lasting legacy with 6E funding. The board also comments on her fantastic leadership, best exemplified by the team below the leader, which has been of the highest quality. Director Nick Smith emphasizes that Franker left the organization better than she found it.

Franker says that the team and leadership she is leaving behind at Visit Estes Park are top-notch, and she will be cheering us on from the islands. She says serving Visit Estes Park and its board has been an honor.

The meeting is adjourned at 4:01 p.m.

Upcoming Meeting: September 26 at 2 p.m. via Zoom.

Claire, Mollé, Recording Secretary

Jerusha Rice, Secretary

DATE: _____

DATE: _____