

Visit Grand Junction
Advisory Board of Directors Meeting
October 1, 2024, 3 pm – 5 pm

The meeting was held at Courtyard Grand Junction, 765 Horizon Drive, Grand Junction, CO.

Presiding: Brenda Greene, Visit Grand Junction Advisory Board Chair

Visit Grand Junction Advisory Board Members present: Joe Burtard, Julie Shafer, Theresa Horvat, Elizabeth Fortushniak, Pat Nichols-Perrin, Mikhail Blosser, Tammy Anderson, Manon Desrosiers

Visit Grand Junction City Councilmembers present: Mayor Pro Tem Randall Reitz; Councilmember Anna Stout, Councilmember Cody Kennedy

City of Grand Junction Staff present: Andrea Phillips, Interim City Manager; John Shaver, City Attorney; Elizabeth Fogarty, Visit Grand Junction Director; Daniel Short, Business Analyst; Kim Machado, Administrative Specialist

Guests representing the Grand Junction Regional Airport Authority Board and staff: Tom Benton, Chair; Mesa County Commissioner Cody Davis; Angela Padalecki, Executive Director

Guests representing the Grand Junction Regional Air Service Alliance: Jay Seaton, Chair; Ben Snyder; Nina Anderson; Christi Reece; Patrick O’Leary; Tim Fry; Brad McCloud; Candace Carnahan; Curtis Englehart; Derek Wagner

The meeting was called to order at 3:02 p.m. by Visit Grand Junction Advisory Board Chair Brenda Greene.

City Councilmember Stout welcomed the Grand Junction Regional Airport Authority Board and the Grand Junction Regional Air Service Alliance Board to the Visit Grand Junction Advisory Board meeting. She outlined the purpose of the meeting, which was to provide an update on Visit Grand Junction’s (VGJ’s) destination management and marketing strategies and share direct flight data, followed by a discussion among the three boards.

Visit Grand Junction Updates

VGJ Director Fogarty shared a detailed presentation of the department's data-driven destination marketing and management strategies. Over forty of the slides were devoted to sharing detailed GA4 data which illustrated significant YOY lift in all Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJRA) direct flight markets for both owned and paid media. As a City of Grand Junction department and destination marketing organization (DMO), VGJ analyzes global behaviors using data science with a consumer-focused approach to attract the ideal visitor at the optimal time for the right reason. The science is woven into inspiring content and compelling imagery to encourage visitation to the Grand Junction area. In addition to marketing, VGJ prioritizes building the Grand Junction destination brand, fostering strategic partnerships, managing impacts of tourism, and driving economic impact to further diversify the local economy. The department promotes Grand Junction as a whole, without prioritizing any individual business or industry segment over another. Additionally, the department refrains from engaging in communications with specific businesses that includes strategies or content that could provide competitive insight, as that creates an unfair advantage and can be perceived as a conflict of interest.

Communication strategies targeting residents, stakeholders, and guests were also highlighted, including the Grand Junction Visitor Guide, VisitGrandJunction.com, and three monthly eNewsletters. The Stakeholder eNewsletter provides data insights, strategies and marketing education. VGJ’s PR eNewsletter shares PR results that are directly attributable to VGJ’s efforts such as the inclusion of Grand Junction in the New York Times “52 Places to Go in 2023” article. The Marketing eNewsletter provides information and inspirational content of why consumers should visit Grand Junction, while also serving residents.

VGJ Director Fogarty explained that VGJ uses a data-driven marketing approach, employing diagnostic, predictive, and prescriptive analytics to optimize its budget and stay competitive. She further shared VGJ’s marketing efforts for Breeze Airlines' direct flights and noted that over the past four years, VGJ has provided the Grand Junction Regional Airport with valuable data on passenger arrivals, top origin markets, lodging metrics, and consumer demographics and behavioral attributes to support the airport and airlines with targeted marketing.

Discussion with Grand Junction Regional Airport Authority Board and Grand Junction Regional Air Service Alliance Board:

A discussion ensued regarding VGJ's role as a destination marketing organization when collaborating with specific organizations and businesses on their marketing strategies. Councilmember Stout stressed that as a department of the City of Grand Junction, VGJ is responsible for marketing the Grand Junction area as a whole and that it is not appropriate for the department to allocate time and resources to meet with specific entities to discuss individual strategies. VGJ Director Fogarty added that in addition to providing the airport with proprietary data and publishing three eNewsletters per month, the VisitGrandJunction.com website and access to the media room is available to support the airport in attracting and marketing direct flights.

Members of the GJRASA and GJRAA boards raised concerns about their inability to effectively analyze and leverage data, expressing a need for greater support from VGJ in understanding how to use data, particularly when it comes to marketing direct airline flights.

VGJ Board Members replied that the airport consultants have been provided significant access to VGJ's data, and they are responsible for analyzing it.

City leadership emphasized that while everyone can benefit from the information VGJ provides, using public funds for marketing specific private interests like airlines or hotels is ethically and legally problematic. The concern arises when expenditures are directed too narrowly toward specific private interests.

VGJ Board Members stressed the need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities, sharing that the biggest concern is that taxpayers chose to raise the lodging tax in the community, which visitors are paying, with specific allocations to the Sports Commission, VGJ, and the GJRASA to achieve particular goals. Each entity is tasked with fulfilling objectives using those funds. Concerns were expressed that taxpayers might see GJRASA asking VGJ to take on tasks that the allocated funds to GJRASA were meant to cover. The boundaries need to be clarified to avoid any perception of misalignment with the ballot language, funding, and intent of the tax.

Members from GJRASA and GJRAA shared comments that included VGJ is not accessible. Elizabeth shared that she has always made it clear of the city's and department's open-door culture, and the monthly Stakeholder eNewsletter and the PR eNewsletter both include specific communications that encourage the community to reach out to her with questions or comments at any time.

In addition, the VGJ board clarified that Elizabeth, and her team invite community partners to each VGJ board meeting, including the Sports Commission, Grand Junction Regional Airport, public land partners, and Downtown Grand Junction. The VGJ board member shared that Elizabeth consistently asks each presenter: How can we support you, what can we improve upon, what can we do to help you further? The feedback staff receives each year has been positive from every partner, including the airport, which is different than what is being shared at the current board meeting, implying that VGJ staff isn't helpful.

Councilmember Stout mentioned and City Attorney Shaver confirmed that a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) is currently being drafted.

A VGJ board member who has worked in hospitality in the Grand Junction area their entire career added that before VGJ became what it is today, VGJ spent years trying to establish Grand Junction as a brand and desirable destination. They shared that the last six years, thanks to the current strategy by the VGJ staff, including data analytics and PR efforts, the VGJ department has finally achieved notoriety and brand recognition. Being recognized as a top 52 destination worldwide from the New York Times is incredible. The board member recognized VGJ's hard work and hours behind what has been achieved and because of the results, the airport has a better opportunity to market the area effectively.

Another VGJ board member thanked the VGJ staff and Elizabeth for providing unbiased data via the monthly eNewsletters, which is invaluable for businesses in the area, including helping area businesses make informed decisions about where to focus marketing efforts and social media.

GJRA Executive Director Padalecki raised concerns about VGJ's restricted ability to engage directly with airlines about marketing flights. She mentioned that the airport has many restrictions on what they can and can't do, including not being able to market flights and that the airport's marketing is managed by the GJRASA, which contracts with Ryan Sawyer Marketing Agency to promote flights. VGJ Director Fogarty responded that four airport consultants confirmed that airport staff can not only receive the information that VGJ is providing, both publicly and the proprietary data worksheet, but it can also take that information and have strategic discussions with individual airlines. Elizabeth shared that she asked the airport consultants what airport staff can't engage in. They stated the only thing airport staff can't be involved in, is writing a check to an airline. The consultants confirmed that VGJ's practice of sharing data with the airport without direct airline contact is appropriate, considering that VGJ is a department of the city. The consultants recommended VGJ continue its focus on data, while the airport and airport consultants manage marketing discussions with the airlines, GJRASA, and the local marketing agency.

A question arose regarding the status of the MOU. City leadership raised concerns about managing confidential information from GJRASA meetings, particularly regarding what can be shared with the council and city staff, given the involvement of public funds. The current MOU with the GJRASA, which expires December 31, 2024, may potentially broaden confidentiality expectations. Initial meetings have addressed these issues, and further discussions with the chairs of each board are planned to finalize non-disclosure terms.

Andrea Phillips, Interim City Manager, concluded the discussion and expressed concern about city employees working directly with individual airlines. She suggested the boards communicate to determine the best way to share and relay information to clients through the GJRASA.

There being no further business, Pat Nichols-Perrin motioned to adjourn; Manon Desrosiers seconded. Motion passed.

The meeting adjourned at 5:02 p.m.