

**ALBANY COUNTY TOURISM JOINT POWERS BOARD**

**210 E. CUSTER ST., LARAMIE, WY**

**MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2020**

Present: Kathleen Bertoncelj, Page Malmstrom, Kaley Holyfield, Rebecca Walsh, David Wright, Tessa Cedillo, Scott Larson – Executive Director, Sara Haugen – Marketing Manger, Lyndee Johnston – Office Assistant, Pat Gabriel – Laramie City Council Liaison.

Absent: Brad Jackson, Terri Jones – Albany County Commissioner.

Guests: Becky Peckston, Dan Johnson

**1) Regular Board Meeting called to order at 4:04 PM by Chair David Wright.**

- a) Confirmation of Quorum – Yes.
- b) Introduction of Guests – Becky Peckston with USA Softball was in attendance to present a recap of the state softball tournament that was held in Laramie in July. Dan Johnson with the Laramie Fire Department was in attendance to provide a recap of the golf tournament that was held in Laramie in July.
- c) Introduction of Board Members and Staff – Each board member and staff member gave a brief introduction.

**2) Additions and/or Corrections to agenda – None.**

**3) Consent Agenda**

- a) July Minutes – No notes.
- b) Profits and Loss Budget vs. Actual – No notes.
- c) Advertising and Grants – No notes.

*Motion by Kathleen Bertoncelj seconded by Page Malmstrom that the Consent Agenda be approved and that each specific action on the consent agenda be approved as indicated.*

**4) Old Business**

- a) USA Softball- According to Becky Peckston, 53 teams attended the 2020 State Tournament in Laramie, surpassing the previous record high attendance of 52 teams. Approximately 1,500 individuals traveled to Laramie for the event and the event brought in umpires from 5 surrounding states. About 8 teams were from Laramie and 5 Cheyenne teams drove back and forth – these teams did not produce any room nights. All other teams stayed at Laramie hotels. Becky noted that the umpires especially enjoyed their stay at the Hilton Garden Inn. Becky reported that the community was welcoming. For example, police officers recognized that a coach was here for the tournament and the Subway employees were trusting that the teams would pick up food even before a payment was made. David Wright asked if the tournament is coming back next year. Becky stated that the event requires one more softball field in order to return and explained that Undine Park may arrange for another field. Becky emphasized that the event attendees were thankful to have ball games this summer. Becky stated that Laramie is in the rotation of towns she will be calling to host the tournament. The tournament costs about \$24,000 and Becky noted that she is lucky if she pulls in \$23,500. Becky explained that she did not ask Laramie businesses to sponsor the tournament because she knew they were already struggling with COVID-19 impacts. Becky praised Mike (from Parks and Rec) for doing a great job and keeping the fields in great shape.
- b) State of Wyoming Firefighter Golf Tournament – Dan Johnson presented a packet that included the original application he submitted, reports from the tournament, and receipts for the lunch that was sponsored by ACTB. Dan thanked David Wright and Page Malmstrom for their additional help. ACTB had

provided 72 bags with the ACTB logo for the tournament. The bags contained maps, information about local businesses, information packets about what to do in Laramie, a tournament shirt, and golf gear. The \$500 donation from ACTB was used for box lunches on the second day of the tournament. The tournament had 72 participants, 60 of which came from out of town. The furthest traveler came from Houston, Texas. 60 room nights were produced, although this number might be higher because some guests arrived early. Estimated guest counts were accurate since participants had to pre-register for this event. The budget was met for the event with \$33.92 leftover. No staff was paid as this was strictly a volunteer event. ACTB received recognition through tournament announcements, branded goodie bags, and a branded banner. Last year there were 15 teams and this year there were 18 teams. Dan thanked the ACTB for the support and offered to provide more information as needed to close out the grant. There were no questions from the board or staff.

**5) Grant and Sponsorship Requests – None.**

**6) Financial Reports**

- a) Lodging Tax Collections FY 2020-2021 – Scott Larson announced that July collections are just over \$61,000, which is down about 44-45%. Visit Laramie missed the budgeted amount by 13%. Larson budgeted for a 36% decrease. Larson announced Laramie will not host the state high school football championships this year. This decision was driven by school districts as a way to conserve money by reducing athletic department travel. However, the state football championships will be returning to Laramie in 2022. This event costs ACTB about \$20,000 and ACTB will be saving about 2% by not having this event.
- b) CARES Act Funds – ACTB received about \$228,000 in CARES Act funding from the state tourism office. About \$5 million was secured by the state tourism office and distributed to the counties around the state, each amount being pro-rated based on how much tax revenue counties generate during the year. Larson analyzed the last 18 months of transaction data to identify what was spent that can be recovered using CARES Act funds or what items can be pre-paid. As of now, about \$145,000 of the \$228,000 is spoken for. Approximately \$80,000 is left to be used. Larson pitched an idea to create a campaign that focuses on how to be a safe and responsible traveler. This campaign will include billboard advertisements, social media posts, etc. Larson is also brainstorming fall and winter campaigns. Larson has been working with Brad Enzi (LCBA) and Trey Sherwood (Downtown Laramie) to coordinate campaigns. Larson asked what business owners have been observing. Rebecca Walsh stated that she doesn't believe the economic impacts are as grim as the people are saying. Rebecca's numbers are "through the roof" right now. Page Malmstrom reported that the bulk of business at the HGI is transient and there is less business travel. Malmstrom explained that their ADR is hurting because they cannot drive rates with last minute bookings, but occupancy is 15% ahead of last year. Larson asked if he could make calls to encourage hotels to drive rates. Malmstrom agreed that it would be helpful, but noted that they should not fix rates. David Wright explained that he normally offers on and off peak rates. This year he decided to continue offering on peak rates and he has been successful with revenue coming in at 126% of the prior year. Wright reported that normally stays are around 4-6 days in length, but right now stays are averaging 2 days. Wright reported that the "mountain is packed" and that the majority of business is from Colorado (rather than the Midwest). Wright observed that Wyoming has fewer COVID restrictions – i.e. bars are open until 2 am instead of 10 pm and guests can walk into a restaurant without a mask. Wyoming is still taking safety precautions, but there seems to be more freedom and guests are seeking this freedom. Wright observed that guests are looking at holistic COVID case totals when they choose where to travel and Wyoming's low case count helps identify Wyoming as a safe place to go. Guests tend to judge safety based on COVID case numbers, not procedures. Page Malmstrom noted that the guests who may have lost someone to COVID-19 are extremely cautious and ask many questions about company procedures. Before Hilton started requiring facemasks for all guests, about 95% of guests did not wear masks. Rebecca Walsh observed that her business is trending

backwards – she is selling products now that she would have historically sold in June. Wright challenged the group to come up with something for people to do since fall sports are cancelled. Malmstrom stated that with school classes being held online parents will likely continue vacationing and guests who work remotely will also continue vacations. Larson said he will revisit the safety message based on this feedback. Walsh suggested that Visit Laramie weave in safety messages with the fall marketing. Kathleen Bertonecelj shared that she choose to spend one night in Sheridan because she felt safer in Sheridan than in Billings, MT. She observed that Sheridan was busy and Billings was not as busy. Tessa Cedillo noticed that when she went to the Snowy Range and drove past the parking lots, 90% of cars were from Colorado. Additionally, when she asks guests what brings them to Laramie, some answer that they just want to get out of Colorado. Sarah Haugen stated that ACTB has traditionally not focused on marketing in Colorado because Colorado residents tend to drive back to Colorado the same day instead of staying overnight. However, this appears to be changing. Wright reported that 48.6% of customers are new and 84.7% are from Colorado. The guests often rebook for 3-4 weeks out. Kaley Holyfield asked the group what will happen when the University of Wyoming tests all students/faculty/staff and COVID case numbers inevitably increase. Larson noted that his colleagues around the state have been asking the same question and he hopes that travelers can draw the conclusion that the increase in cases is due to an increase in testing. Wright explained that our open space is an asset and should be included in our safety messages. Malmstrom mentioned that UW events displace business and suppress rates, so she is curious to see what happens now that most UW events are cancelled.

#### **7) New Business**

- a) Marketing Report: Scott Larson explained that he is re-assessing the marketing plan with Madden and looking at the strategy from another angle. He is considering what marketing window is comfortable for consumers and the changing COVID-19 situation. The office is working on prospecting, display ads, Google ads, Facebook ads, banner ads, etc. The ACTB website saw a 51% increase in new users in July and August website visitation is up 120%. Larson noted that there was more traffic with the booking widget last month than ever and this trend is still in place for August. Albany County is continuing to see a substantial amount of interest and demand. Social media reach and engagement is up across all three platforms. David Wright suggested that all board members share the Visit Laramie link on behalf of their respective associations/businesses.
- b) Fall Marketing Campaigns: Scott Larson explained that he is utilizing regional partnerships to create a 7 night/8 day fall road trip campaign. For example, a suggested road trip loop would cover Cheyenne, Laramie, Saratoga, and Rawlins. All three counties will contribute \$4,000 each to the campaign. Another road trip campaign that might require a regional partnership is a loop covering Fort Collins, Steamboat, and Laramie. This could be branded as the “Rocky Mountain Adventure Loop.” Larson is working with his former boss on putting this campaign together. Larson will re-group in October and evaluate the COVID-19 situation, the status of students returning to campus, and the winter forecast/predictions.
- c) Larson is working on a marketing plan with Wright. This plan is in a developmental stage at the moment.

#### **8) Review Board/Staff Activities**

- a) July Office Stats: According to Scott Larson, walk in traffic is only down 25% YOY. Lyndee Johnston reported that 29 walk-in visitors were from Wyoming and over 100 walk-in visitors were from Colorado. Typically, the office sees the same amount of Wyoming and Colorado visitors.
- b) All ACTB staff members completed a UW Tourism Recovery Course by Dan McCoy from the Haub School. This course was held online and required a registration fee of \$50/person. Larson explained that they are investing in their staff by taking trainings like this.
- c) Larson presented the rebrand details. Larson described the current website as transactional - not inspirational or aspirational. Larson stated the current website does not do a great job with storytelling and it doesn't tell visitors why they need a hotel. The current website focuses on one or two elements

but leaves out other elements of Albany County. The rebrand focuses on four “Brand Pillars” – Sports & Education, History & Western, Arts & Culture, and Outdoor Recreation. Larson presented the vision statement: “The Laramie area offers a vibrant and cultural college community with a historic western past and an abundance of outdoor recreation.” The tagline reads: “Your adventure awaits in Laramie and the only question is how you define your adventure using the long list of things there are to do here.” The rebrand takes into account the Thrive Plan – a 10 year economic development plan that the City of Laramie created. Larson co-chaired the Tourism, Recreation, and Arts & Culture committee with Brian Harrington (City Council). One of the top priorities of the Thrive Plan is to ensure Laramie messaging is consistent and cohesive. According to Larson, as of now we are not working in sync to get more done and the City of Laramie approached ACTB as DMO to piece the messaging together. Larson moved on to the re-brand style guide. Larson explained that Visit Laramie is not walking away from what exists currently, but instead adding to it. Larson presented the new Visit Laramie logos, both with icons and without icons and in different color schemes. Larson explained Visit Laramie will primarily use the blue logo as it is consistent with the City of Laramie and Main Street blue logos. Larson presented a list of community stakeholders from different entities across town that helped with the rebrand. Larson aims to launch the website in February or March 2021. In terms of a physical space, Visit Laramie is working towards moving into an office building with Brad Enzi and the LCBA team. Larson is still working with Trey Sherwood (Downtown Laramie) on a wayfinding project. The wayfinding project will tie in the new colors, fonts, and branding featured in the rebrand. Additionally, Larson’s goal is to update the gateways into Laramie. In summary, Larson explained how the rebrand will have a “halo effect” and the whole community will be moving in the same direction. Larson stated Albany County has tremendous potential and he is excited to bring it to life. Pat Gabriel asked if everyone on the stakeholder’s page was in agreement on the re-brand. Scott Larson answered yes. On August 18, Visit Laramie will have a meeting with Simpleview (experts in DMO world) to conduct a findings presentation. A mock-up homepage should be available in October 2020.

**9) Public comments – None.**

David Wright challenged Visit Laramie to continue their marketing efforts. He explained that organizations who stop marketing are no longer around. Wright encouraged the group to make sure we are not sitting still and doing nothing and cautioned that now is not the time to sit on money. Saving money is not going to get us to prosperity.

David Wright made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 5:29 PM and Rebecca Walsh seconded the motion. The motion passed.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Kaley Holyfield, Secretary.

**The next meeting will be held at 4 PM September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020 at the ACTB Office.**