

ALBANY COUNTY TOURISM JOINT POWERS BOARD  
210 E. CUSTER ST., LARAMIE, WY  
MONDAY, MAY 18, 2020

Present via Zoom: Kathleen Bertoncelj, Page Malmstrom, Kaley Holyfield, Rebecca Walsh, Mike McShane, Pat Gabriel-Laramie City Council Liaison, Terri Jones-Albany County Commissioner, Scott Larson-Executive Director, Sara Haugen-Marketing Manager, Lyndee Johnston-Office Assistant

Absent: Brad Jackson

Guests:

**1. Regular Board Meeting called to order at 4:05 p.m. by Interim Chair Mr. Mike McShane**

- a) Confirmation of a Quorum - YES
- b) Introduction of Guests if Any – no guests

**2. Additions and/or Corrections to agenda**

- a) Mr. Larson stated that Ms. Bertoncelj had sent some minor corrections which he changed.

**3. Consent Agenda**

**a) April Minutes**

**b) Profits and Loss Budget vs. Actual** – Mr. Larson reported that we surpassed the total projected income for the fiscal year which is great. Total expenses for the year came to 81.8% with marketing expenses contributing 81.2%.

**c) Advertising and Grants** – Mr. Larson stated that the only other notable item on the report was the ViaMedia March Madness ad which Mr. Larson was able to repurpose that money towards another advertising opportunity instead of watching the money go to waste.

**Motion by Mrs. Walsh, seconded by Ms. Holyfield that the Consent Agenda be approved and that each specific action on the Consent Agenda be approved as indicated. The motion passed unanimously.**

**4. Old Business**

- a)

**5. Grant and Sponsorship Requests**

**a) Laramie Jubilee Days** – Mr. Larson reported that the representative from LJD would not be at the meeting today as the committee is still working out details to work around COVID-19.

**6. Financial Reports**

**a) Lodging Tax Collections 2019-2020** – Mr. Larson reported that over the month of April we brought in \$42,332 in lodging taxes which was down 25% from what was budgeted. Mr. Larson stated that from his conversations with state partners and local businesses he believes that number is inaccurate. Mr. Larson suspects that the actual lodging taxes over the month were down significantly more and some businesses were late on reporting their numbers for March. He is optimistic that April will be the lowest month and then we can progressively move forward. Mr. Larson stated that the booking traffic on our website is picking up and looking promising. Across the state, the lodging tax reports for April are similar to ours. The only county in the green was Sweetwater which increased 1% YOY. Sheridan, Park, and Fremont were flat. Natrona was down 52%, Laramie was down 48%, Teton was down 39%, and the entire state was down 35%. Mr. Larson asked the board members associated with the hotels in the county what their situation is. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that the Hilton's occupancy rate is at 25%. She also reported that as the hotels compete for the same business, their room prices drop which causes other hotels to advertise competitive prices. Mrs. Malmstrom reported that their price is stuck around \$109/night while other hotels post lower prices. She also noted that the Hilton is in the middle of town rather than adjacent to the interstate so those hotels might have had better occupancy rates. Mr. McShane chimed in stating that April has been and is typically the slowest month out in Centennial. They usually have graduation parties in May which didn't happen this year. Mr. McShane also stated that they have had people calling recently asking if the hotel is open, which people are surprised that they are open. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that another challenge is that the Hilton organization sent out guidelines/recommendations for the staff to follow as far as cleaning rooms and days in between guests. The suggestion was three days in between guests before the staff can clean the rooms. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that the demand is higher at her hotel and she will need to decrease the amount of days in between guests to accommodate travelers. Although it is great for the guests to have fresh rooms, this has put a strain on her employees because they feel safer after waiting three days. Mr. McShane agreed that the media and organization guidelines has made people more scared than they should be. He believes July or August might be good months for the hospitality industry. Mr. Larson stated that it didn't surprise him at all that people are calling to see what's open because over the weekend he made a trip to Steamboat Springs, CO where no hotels or Airbnb's will let you stay overnight. We are definitely seeing more Coloradoans looking north to us because everything down there is shut down. Mrs. Malmstrom and Mr. McShane said our advertising messaging right now should be "Laramie's Open". Mr. McShane asked Mrs. Walsh what the status of her downtown business is now and what is she telling her staff. Mrs. Walsh stated that some of her employees are no longer employed there because they don't feel comfortable working in a retail environment where they fit customers for backpacks, shoes, etc. and get up close and personal. She also stated that she feels repetitive on social media advertising that they are open and sanitized, but that is what people need to hear right now. Mrs. Walsh was asked if customers are wearing masks or not. Mrs. Walsh reported that it's about 50/50, some people are relieved they don't have to wear a mask and others are grateful for them wearing masks. It makes communication difficult on the phone or with certain customers also. Mr. Larson stated that the staff will work on promoting that we are open. Mr. Larson also noted to the board that we broke a million dollars in lodging tax collections and will end the fiscal year with approximately \$44,000 surplus (4.5% increase

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YOY). Mr. Larson believes we will be under budget by the end of June and we will have money to put in reserves. Another idea that Mr. Larson had was to use that money now while we have it to offset some of the cuts made for the next fiscal year.

**7. New Business**

**a) Marketing Dashboard** – Mr. Larson stated that the board can review these on their own and that he would only report on a few items. As far as web stats, there was a spike in the number of users on April 23<sup>rd</sup> which was due to a marketing email that performed very well. Halfway through the month the number of users began to increase which was largely due to switching over to summer display campaigns. Some of that can be contributed to Visit Laramie not going “dark” as other destinations did once COVID-19 hit. Mr. Larson explained that continuing to promote Laramie as a future destination and adjusting to a neutral message has kept our web traffic up significantly. Mr. Larson pointed out the top web pages which were up dramatically (where to stay, biking, and fishing). Not only were emails and website traffic great, but the social media stories reach was through the roof. Mr. Larson noted to the board that Ms. Johnston and Mrs. Haugen have worked really hard to put together story posts and organize a social media contest spanning across Facebook and Instagram. Mrs. Haugen reported that there were 141 entries and prizes were given away. Mr. Larson also pointed out that the staff organized this to coincide with National Tourism and Travel Week.

**b) 401k Plan Update** – Mr. Larson reported that the plan will be delayed to start on July 1<sup>st</sup> to match up with our fiscal year budget. Mr. Larson also addressed Mr. McShane’s question from the April board meeting as to whether or not the committed amount can be changed throughout the year. The plan can be changed if need be, but not too many times throughout the year. Mr. McShane made a motion to start at 2% rather than 4% at this time and if we hit our projected budget number, we can backfill the remaining 2% into employee bonuses at the end of the fiscal year (not a guaranteed bonus). A second was not made at this time. Mr. Larson stated that he did not know the rules/regulations on backfilling and he would feel more comfortable talking with Vanguard before voting. Mr. McShane explained that he does not believe it is fiscally responsible at this point to start 4%. Mrs. Walsh asked to clarify that the 2% was from gross wages. Mr. Larson said yes, it is calculated from gross wages. Ms. Bertoncej asked what the staff had committed to. Mr. Larson stated that before the recent transitions, three of the staff members committed to 4% and one committed to 2%. Mrs. Walsh asked the board if they knew how much the university matches for their employees. Ms. Bertoncej stated that the rate varied upon position, but when she worked at the university they matched 11%. Mr. McShane stated that we shouldn’t be comparing the university to the tourism board. Mrs. Walsh stated that she was concerned about our organization staying competitive in a town with a university so we attract quality employees. Mrs. Walsh also stated that if the difference between 3% and 4%, which isn’t a lot of money out of our budget, is going to make or break an employee’s future, then she would like to take care of our employees. She believes 2% is too low and she would rather see 3% if the board will not approve 4%. Mr. McShane pointed out the current employees came to the organization without any benefits. Mrs. Malmstrom reminded the board that should we see that we are starting to pull out of this pandemic, then the board can change the rate down the road or increase it for the next fiscal year. Mr. Larson stated that he plans to take the budget (if the board approves it at this board meeting) and then sit down in September to reallocate and adjust accordingly. Mrs. Walsh asked Mr. Larson how much money is 4%. Mr. Larson stated that with the three current employees the board would match \$5,800-\$5,900 each year. Mrs. Walsh reminded the board that there is a time to look at the numbers and a time to look at the people and this is not that much money in the grand scheme of things. Mr. McShane called everyone to vote. Mr. Jackson, Mr. McShane, and Mrs. Malmstrom voted to match 2% now and reevaluate later in the year. Ms. Holyfield, Mrs. Walsh, and Ms. Bertoncej voted to not approve 2% at this time. Mr. McShane requested that this discussion be tabled until the next board meeting in June.

**c) Summit Update** – Mr. Larson reported that he has been in contact each week with the state tourism office to discuss the Summit facilities. The planned opening date would have been May 15<sup>th</sup>, but obviously it hasn’t opened up yet. Mr. Larson said that per his last conversation with the state, we should be aiming to open up the center around mid to late June. Mr. Larson had asked Ms. Korpitz to run the numbers on how much it costs to staff and maintain the center throughout the summer. Last year, the center saw approximately 90,000 travelers. Mr. Larson also mentioned that he has been in communication with last year’s staff and they are not comfortable working up there at this time because of health concerns. Mr. Larson also mentioned this to the state office and that message was not received very well. The state is currently looking to install plexiglass shields to reduce contact and prevent germs from spreading while communicating with travelers. One issue is that brochures are still being passed around and the brochure racks would be difficult to keep sanitized. Mr. Larson stated that the museum portion of the center should not open up to keep travelers safe. He also stated that the downtown Laramie staff could make the trip up to the Summit once a day to restock brochures. Mrs. Malmstrom pointed out that the state office isn’t actively participating with the Summit facilities anymore. Mr. Larson agreed that they manage and maintain the building, but Visit Laramie is responsible for staffing and he would like to use that money elsewhere in the budget. He will be staying in contact with the state and playing it by ear because it is a great opportunity to promote Albany County.

**d) Board Positions** – Mr. Larson reminded the board that there is one vacant city seat and two renewable city seats and one vacant county seat that is available at the end of June. Mr. Larson stated that he will be working with the city and county to move this along to get the board established for the new fiscal year. Mrs. Walsh and Ms. Holyfield have the opportunity to renew and Mr. McShane’s six year service has expired. Ms. Holyfield asked what marketing is being done to promote that these positions are open. Mr. McShane and Mr. Larson explained that we can’t do anything as far as advertising. Mr. McShane stated that we just have to wait and he believes his position has already been filled, it just hasn’t been announced. Mrs. Jones chimed in that you can suggest to potential candidates that they should apply. Ms. Bertoncej also noted that the

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Boomerang prints the vacancies in the paper, but asked that Mr. Larson include that information in his next article to the Boomerang. Mr. McShane asked that Mr. Larson check into the rules associated with selecting a new board member because he doesn't believe that's allowed. Mrs. Jones stated that Mr. Larson is not allowed to mess with the selection process but the other board members aren't involved in making the decision so they can encourage potential candidates to apply.

At this point in the discussion Mrs. Jones reported on COVID-19 related news. Mrs. Jones stated that some businesses are reportedly not following the protocols the state put in place as far as social distancing in restaurants and bars specifically. Mrs. Jones also reported that the legislature passed a bill where part of the bill will grant immunity for businesses from COVID-19 transmittal from customers. In order to have this immunity, the businesses must follow the guidelines set forth by the state.

**e) Marketing Co-Op Program Update** – Mr. Larson asked the board to look at this document in the board packet. The intent is to help our local community rebound as quickly as possible by providing some advertising relief. Mr. Larson would like to distribute more of our money around the community for them to advertise outside of the county. Mr. Larson was not able to budget enough money for this project so he requested to the board to approve transferring \$50,000-\$100,000 from the reserves specifically for this program. Mr. Larson reminded the group that we no longer have to take \$175,000 out of the reserves to prepay rent for our co-location with LCBA as they will be utilizing their own reserves to pay for the building costs. Mr. Larson also reminded the group that by the end of the fiscal year, there should be \$1 million-\$1.1 million in our reserves. Mr. McShane made a motion to take \$75,000 from the reserves to fund this program then revisit this when the money is gone to see how successful the program was at promoting sales and lodging tax with all businesses, not just lodging partners. Mr. Larson agreed that the funds are intended to benefit all of the businesses in the county. Ms. Bertoneclj seconded the motion and asked if the total amount of \$75k will have to come out of the reserves. Mr. Larson stated that all of that money will most likely have to come out of the reserves unless there is a surplus at the end of the 2021 fiscal year. To complicate things less Mr. Larson would like to set aside the entire \$75k from the reserves. Ms. Bertoneclj asked if there would be any time limits, deadlines, or a first-come-first-served policy. Mr. Larson threw the idea out there that there could be a deadline at the end of the calendar year. Mr. McShane chimed in that there is a requirement limiting each business to two ads or a maximum reimbursement amount of \$750. Mrs. Malmstrom asked how many ads we expect to support with this campaign. Mr. Larson expects approximately 100 total ads with some businesses leveraging all of it and others leveraging none of it. Mrs. Malmstrom stressed that this program be advertised well within the community so no one complains in the future that we didn't help them out. Mrs. Walsh stated that she personally doesn't by ads when she can advertise on social media for free and right now she has no money to spend on ads. Mr. McShane asked if businesses can use this amount to pay for social media marketing as well. Mr. Larson stated that that would be acceptable as long as our logo is featured in the ads. Ms. Holyfield suggested that we change the requirement to a maximum amount of \$750 and they can have as many ads as that much money will give them. The board agreed that changing this requirement would give companies more leeway. The vote passed unanimously.

**f) Employee Benefits Document** – Mr. Larson stated that he would appreciate it if the board could take some action on this document as summer is approaching and this has been a work in progress since the fall of 2019. Mr. Larson has been working recently with Mr. Jackson to revise the document and clean up the wording, but Mr. Jackson was not satisfied with the Paid Time Off/Vacation Time section. Ms. Bertoneclj also sent over some revisions and expressed to the board that at the last meeting it was discussed that our holidays would reflect the university holidays including the winter closure. This would still come to a total of ten offered vacation days. Mr. McShane noted that the vacation section doesn't even include the number of vacation days offered. Mr. Larson stated that Mr. Jackson simplified that section to where it was up to the executive director's discretion. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that it would be clearer to specify which holidays because it is vague. Mr. Larson stated that he had the days previously listed and if the board wants to get rid of President's Day it is a Federal Holiday which the document states we recognize all Federal Holidays. Mr. Larson stated that he can send a specified list to the board the next day and they can approve it over email. Mrs. Bertoneclj moved to approve the benefits and compensation details pending the paid holidays' portion. Mr. McShane pointed out that we did not discuss the portion of the Paid Time Off/Vacation Time amending the carry-over of vacation days and the payout policy. Mrs. Malmstrom expressed to the board that she is in favor of not carrying over the vacation at the end of the year because it is messy and can be unclear at times. She also expressed that she is in agreement with Mr. Larson about if an employee gives a two week notice the employer pays out the remaining vacation time that employee had. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that most companies do have policies like this. Mrs. Jones chimed in that at the county level, the amount of vacation time accrued is limited because of liability reasons. Mr. Larson explained that the carry-over is only 50% of the total amount of vacation time offered. So if an employee is allowed two weeks throughout the year, they can carry-over a maximum of one week into the next year and the rest of the vacation expires at the end of the year. Mr. Larson explained his reason behind this policy is that employees shouldn't feel forced to take a couple of vacation days because they are about to expire, not that employees can save up to take a longer vacation. Mr. McShane pointed out that in his and other board members careers, there was never an option to carry-over any vacation days and it was a use-it-or-lose-it system. He stated also that it would be inconvenient to the other staff members and the company if, for example, one employee took three weeks off at one time. Mrs. Walsh stated that she doesn't approve of the carry-over policy, but it should be up to the discretion of the executive director if there was an important life event or other circumstances preventing the employee from using their vacation time in one year. Mrs. Malmstrom chimed in that at the

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Hilton there is no carry-over either, but she has a one cook who she cannot replace and she gives him a window during the least busy times throughout the year for him to take his time off. So she believes it should be a really good reason to carry-over any vacation time. Mr. McShane stated that it would be too vague and if any of the staff were to leave, it might not be clear enough for future employees. He also stated that one of his previous bosses would right him a check if he didn't use his vacation time, so Mr. McShane suggested that Mr. Larson could payback the time the employees didn't get to use at the end of the year. Mrs. Walsh stated that she would rather give her employees the time off they deserve, but if she were to save her vacation time she would save it for a check at the end of the year. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that if you paid your employees for the time they didn't use, now you are adding to your yearly wages. Mr. Larson asked the board if it would be clear to write in the document that vacation time is a use-it-or-lose-it policy with carry-over exceptions made on a case-by-case basis with the executive director's permission. Mr. Larson explained some situations like a honeymoon or an upcoming surgery warrant some extra time off so the employees should be allowed to carry-over unused vacation days if they have them. Mr. McShane stated that a case-by-case basis could be discriminatory if the executive director isn't careful. Mrs. Malmstrom suggested to the board that in the policy, the wording should be black and white stating that it is a use-it-or-lose-it policy, but it is ultimately up to the executive director to use his discretion on a case-by-case basis. Mr. McShane agreed that the board should vote on no carry-over for vacation days what-so-ever and the executive director manages the staff as he sees fit. The director can alert the board or not on these matters, but the board shouldn't micro-manage the staff. Ms. Bertoncej and Ms. Holyfield agreed. Mr. Larson recapped that the policy should be use-it-or-lose-it with discretion by the executive director, but the only part that is in black and white is the use-it-or-lose-it portion. The board agreed that the discretion portion should not be written in the document. Mr. Larson asked the board if they were in agreement with the other portion of the policy on payout upon leave. Mrs. Malmstrom stated that she is for the policy if the employee puts in a two week notice, then they are paid out their remaining vacation days. Mr. McShane agreed. Mr. Larson confirmed that if the employee is terminated or they leave without a two week notice then they receive nothing from the company, but if they put in a two week notice they are paid out the unused vacation time they had accrued. Mr. Larson recapped again that there would be no carry-over with some between the lines action, no payout if an employee is fired, any unused vacation is paid out if the employee gives a notice, and Mr. Larson will follow up with the specified vacation days. There was no formal motion made about the policy, but the board voted on the subject. The vote passed unanimously. The board will communicate via email about the designated holidays and formally vote on this at the next board meeting.

**g) Proposed Budget for FY 2020-21** – Mr. Larson introduced the proposed budget for the next fiscal year. The projected lodging tax collections is \$650,000 and Mr. Larson suggested that in early to mid-September, this number will be reevaluated/readjusted as need be. Mr. Larson noted that when factoring in interest income and co-op revenue the total income comes out to approximately \$665,000. The budget is set a net zero, as it always is. Mr. Larson stated that with this decrease in income, that puts our marketing expenses down 40% and the overall expense down 32% compared to this fiscal year's budget. Mr. Larson highlighted a few sections. The unappropriated marketing section was sitting around \$50k last year and this year he has dropped it to \$10k. The unappropriated grant fund has been decrease to \$0. Mr. Larson stated that he would have liked to of removed more from the overhead and operating expenses rather than marketing because that actually brings money back to the county. Mrs. Malmstrom asked where the other grants were listed in the budget like the LJD grant and the USTA tournament grant which the board approved last year or were they added into the grants listed. Mr. Larson stated that by the end of this fiscal year, we should know whether or not these events will take place so he did not include those grants at this time. Mr. Larson stated that if, for example, the tennis tournament was still on we should be able to find the money for their grant in other section of the budget. He believes that the board should continue to support the events if they are still happening, but right now the money has been spread thin. Mr. Larson pointed out to the board that the Pilot Hill Project is not listed either which we have supported them with a \$10,000 grant in the past, but for this upcoming year it would not be feasible to give them more money. Mr. McShane interjected stating that the Pilot Hill Grant was not \$10,000 every year. Ms. Bertoncej stated that the grant was \$10,000 for five years. Mr. McShane stated that he reviewed the budget closely and compared it to the budget from the very first year he was a board member where the projected tax collections came to \$650k as well. He believes that some of the budgeted magazine funds should be moved to unappropriated for safety. Mr. McShane specifically said the \$9,000 in AAA Living Magazine should be moved to local grants because the at-risk population right now will be market reading from AAA and they most likely won't be traveling any time soon. Mr. Larson stated that the budget is a guide at the moment and the money can be shifted as the year progresses with some exceptions. For example, money budgeted for marketing can't be shifted to employee salaries. Mr. McShane stated that he is in agreement with how Mr. Larson set up the 2020-21 budget. Mr. Larson reminded the board that this is just for them to review and the board will vote to approve the budget at the June meeting. Mr. Larson must advertise the budget to the public before the next meeting as well.

At this point in the discussion, Mr. McShane stated that the next board meeting will be his last and he thanked the board for working with him and said that he had a great time working with all of the members. He does believe that he is leaving the board and the company in better shape than when he started six years ago. Mr. McShane personally thanked the staff and hopes to continue to watch the company flourish. Lastly, Mr. McShane nominated Mrs. Malmstrom to step in as chairwoman of the board. Mr. Bertoncej and Mr. Larson stated that voting on the new chair should take place at the June meeting.

## 8. Review of the Board/Staff Activities

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a) **April Office Stats** – Mr. Larson stated that the board should review the stats on their own and can contact Ms. Johnston if they have any questions.

b) **Staffing Update** –

i) **Transition, All Staff** – Mr. Larson reported to the board that the decision was made to let Mr. Gray go from the staff because of economic/financial reasons, not knowing how the next 12 months will play out. Mr. Larson did state that he received a severance package as part of his departure. Mr. Larson reported that the staff will remain as a three-person team for the time being and everyone is doing a great job during this transition. In the future, Mr. Larson would like to make some adjustments. He also reported that the office was opened back up to the public today and posted a sign telling visitors to ask for information rather than touching everything. The front door has also been propped open so there is less contact and each staff member has a mask to wear. Mr. McShane thanked Ms. Johnston and Mrs. Haugen specifically because she will be doing much more than her job initially required of her.

c) **Johnston**

i) **Rebranding Efforts** – Mr. Larson reported that Ms. Johnston has been working on our rebranding efforts and that the board will review some samples at the June meeting before anything is finalized.

ii) **Design Help** – Mr. Larson reported that Ms. Johnston has stepped up to help with ads and design work, as well.

d) **Haugen**

i) **Marketing** – Mr. Larson reported that Mrs. Haugen has been working hard and doing a great job on marketing emails and campaigns on social media.

ii) **Website RFP** – Mr. Larson reported that he and Mrs. Haugen have been in contact with a number of people who are interested in designing a new website for Visit Laramie. Mr. Larson would like to make a decision on the candidate by the end of June so that a pre-paid deposit can be made out of this fiscal year's budget. Mr. Larson reported that our current web developer has decided not to put in a bid for the project. He anticipates a fresh, updated look for Visit Laramie which will match up perfectly with the Thrive Laramie unified messaging that the city put together.

iii) **Design Help** – Mr. Larson reported that Mrs. Haugen has stepped up to help with ads and design work, as well.

e) **Larson**

i) **COVID calls, Meetings, etc.** – Mr. Larson reported that there are too many calls and meetings he is involved in to list them all. He is staying updated as far as statewide, countywide, and communitywide partnerships and co-ops go to make the most of this year.

ii) **Website RFP** – Mr. Larson reported that he and Mrs. Haugen have been in contact with a number of people who are interested in designing a new website for Visit Laramie.

9. **Public Comments**

a) None

10. **Adjournment**

**MOTION BY Mr. McShane seconded by Ms. Holyfield to adjourn the meeting. The motion was passed unanimously. Meeting was adjourned at 5:45 pm.**

**The next ACTB board meeting will be at the ACTB Office at 4 p.m. on Monday, June 15, 2019**

Minutes respectfully submitted by Director Larson and Lyndee Johnston, Office Assistant