

**Visitors Promotion Committee**  
**Meeting at Lincoln Chamber of Commerce**  
**August 20, 2025**  
**MINUTES**

In Attendance: Jeff Barclay, Dave Derbin, EK Franks, Jason Hoehne, Todd Ogden, Tim Savona, Bennie Shobe, Riley Slezak, Aaron Stitt and Bryan Sullivan

Guests:

Absent: Sean Flowerday and Tara Knuth

Staff Attending: Derek Feyerherm, Ron Kalkwarf, Jeff Maul, Jason Ball, Diane Pryor, Derek Bombeck, and Katie Bohlmeier

**Call to Order and Introductions:**

Chairman Aaron Stitt called the meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. He asked the attendees to introduce themselves and for that to serve as the roll call.

**Approval of May & June Minutes:**

Chairman Stitt asked if there were any comments or questions regarding the regular quarterly meeting in May and the special grant meeting in June's minutes, that had been sent out ahead of time in an email to the group. There were no comments, so he asked for a motion to approve the May minutes. Bryan Sullivan made a motion to approve the minutes, and Jason Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Hoehne, Todd Ogden, Tim Savona, Stitt and Sullivan voted yes. Tara Knuth was absent, and Jeff Barclay was absent for the vote. Motion carried. Next, Stitt asked for a motion to approve the June minutes. Sullivan made the first motion to approve the June minutes, and Ogden seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Hoehne, Ogden, Tim Savona, Stitt and Sullivan voted yes. Knuth was absent, and Barclay was absent for the vote. Motion carried.

**Approval of July Financials:**

Ron Kalkwarf presented the financials showing the Visit Lincoln Profit & Loss Budget vs. Actual for July 2025. Beginning with Room Tax-Operations, he said the budget is 1/12 of the annual budget and we continue to request funding as needed, which shows it over budget by \$12,828. In Expenses, Kalkwarf said, Salaries are down a bit because the intern budgeted for is not starting until September. Also, Office Supplies are up due to additional supplies being purchased. He said Net Income is evened out this month at \$0. There were no questions on the financials, so Stitt asked for a motion to approve the financials. Savona made a motion to approve them, and Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Hoehne, Ogden, Savona, Stitt and Sullivan voted yes. Knuth was absent, and Barclay was absent for the vote. Motion carried.

**Director of Sports Update:**

Next, Chair Stitt invited Derek Bombeck, Visit Lincoln Director of Sports, to give an update to the Board. He began by thanking Tim Savona and the team at PBA for their part in bringing in the AVCA First Serve, the largest D1 volleyball tournament in the U.S. this year. It's happening August 22-24 with eight teams participating. Bombeck said over 45,000 spectator tickets have already been sold with 40% of tickets sold

being from outside 50 miles of Lincoln, 31% from outside of 100 miles of Lincoln, 23% from outside of Nebraska and 11% from outside of 400 miles away from Lincoln. The tournament will also be nationally broadcast on FOX (on Friday), FS1 (on Saturday) and ESPN (on Sunday). Bombeck said the top volleyball organizations in the country will be here throughout the week/weekend and we've been working to set up meetings with them and providing welcome gifts to showcase Lincoln as the "volleyball capital of the world". He has been working with USA Volleyball, NCAA, Big Ten, Pro Volleyball Federation, Athletes Unlimited, LOVE Volleyball and many more on this great event.

In addition to hosting one of the world's largest volleyball events, we have helped coordinate and promote the AVCA Block Party scheduled for each day of the event right out in front of PBA and in the Railyard. There will be many activities including a watch party, photo booth, live music, games, clinics as well as a pep rally and red carpet walk. The goal for this event is two-fold. One, to let those who were unable to get tickets still experience the atmosphere and watch the games on the Cube in the Railyard. And, secondly, we want the experience of this event to exceed anything else these athletes and volleyball organizations will see this year, including the NCAA championship.

Bombeck told the VPC that in addition to all this volleyball activity, we also have an international bike racing event occurring this weekend known as Gravel Worlds, bringing in nearly 2,200 riders from all 50 states, 20 countries and 6 continents. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> year out at the Sandhills Global Event Center, and they've found it provides more room and easy access to the gravel for their start. The event will be streamed all over the world, similar to the Tour de France, on YouTube channel. Live broadcast starts at 5:45am this Friday and the event could become the largest gravel racing event in the world in the next five years, he said.

Immediately after the very busy weekend, Bombeck and the sales team will be heading to Miami, FL for the Connect Marketplace Conference. Bombeck said he can request meetings with rights holders, and they can request meetings with him. He said he was requested by more than 30 rights holders and national governing bodies for this conference, which has not happened before. He requested 60 appointments and is looking forward to getting his schedule so he can continue to build relationships and spread the word about all the great things happening in Lincoln, NE.

The summer of 2026 will be very busy in Lincoln, he said, because we have won the bid for the USA Archery JOAD Nationals, being held at LSF July 22-26, with the option of hosting in 2027 as well. In addition to that, the National High School Rodeo Championship will be at the SGENC July 19-25 as well as in 2027. And we are currently working with the USA Roller Sports National Championships to bring them here in 2026, too. He thanked the group for providing Star City BMX with grant funding. We have been bidding on the USA BMX Nationals, and it is very competitive. We did recently learn our bid for 2026 was not accepted, but they did let us know they were so impressed with the bid they'd like to carry it over to 2027 and see what improvements are made with the recent grant funding. He said over 70 cities bid on it, so we are right there with the best.

Stitt thanked Bombeck for his update and all the work he is doing. Jeff Maul also thanked him and the VPC for investing in sports and the SGENC and LSF. Tim Savona thanked Bombeck as well saying he does amazing work!

### **Directors Report:**

Jeff Maul next gave a report on the Visit Lincoln (VL) projects and marketing. He began with a convention center update. Discussions continue on the Garfield site located at 13<sup>th</sup> and M (Block 90), just east of the Marriott Cornhusker Hotel. The Lancaster County Board has approved the Turnback Tax Application and submitted it to the State of Nebraska for the governor's approval. The VL team toured the Younes Center

in Kearney and were asked about the convention center. They are interested on the progress, competitively. Maul said in a Sandhills Global Youth Complex (SGYC) update they have held 2,300+ games, 99.1% of them have been played with only 21 games lost due to rain/lightning. 16 baseball and 12 softball tournaments have been held so far, and 600+ games are scheduled for this fall, including baseball, softball, and soccer. We have averaged 5,800 visitors per week through the gates. Wesleyan and Community Learning Centers have held free clinics, UNL athletes have helped promote the facility and the Complex played host to the Special Olympics, which were amazing, Maul said. The facility is staffed by five full-time and 62 part-time positions.

Next, Maul said we kicked off Haymarket Walking Tours and the 2<sup>nd</sup> opportunity will be September 28 at 1pm. They last about one hour, and registration is going well. Visit Lincoln has a regular presence and outreach with local media, including 1240KFOR, 1400KLIN, B107.3Ticket, 106.7Boomer Radio and 10/11 TV. We continue with our VL podcast series featuring people that make the place in tourism. Both Ball and Maul credited Brooke Zimmerman for her idea of the podcast studio and its highlights. We have had a lot of content delivered through our team members, including hotels, the zoo, the event center, many attractions and all things tourism, they said. He said we continue to work on new facilities and growth and expansion of the existing for ice hockey, track & field, soccer, pool and roller sports. Food and culinary tourism is big in Lincoln, too, with Keenan Sorano, of Keenan Eats, to host “Here for the Food Festival” October 18<sup>th</sup> from 5-9pm under the West O bridge from 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Streets. The first-year goal is 2,000 people and 12-15 food vendors, he said. And the 27<sup>th</sup> Street feature with Maly Marketing, the Lincoln Chamber and Visit Lincoln will be a great opportunity for people to try all kinds of different ethnic foods from all over the world in this one corridor of our city. It is going over very well, Maul said.

In projects and marketing, he said Violet PR and their national earned media campaign is going well. He thanked Ball, Brooke Zimmerman, Dave Derbin and the County for their hard work in getting coverage of our business culture, community highlights and our tourism. We will have media writers in town this weekend to cover the AVCA, Gravel Worlds and all the attractions. He also said kudos to Ball and Kathy Andersen from Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development who recently traveled to New York City on a media tour about all things business start-ups. In addition, stories have been shared out to their contacts on the convention center and the SGYC. As of July, we have had 28 pieces of coverage, 280 million audience and 101,000 views. It has really paid off in the short term, Maul said and has extended our already broad reach of storytelling.

Derek Feyerherm gave the sales update next. Visit Lincoln has issued 113 sales leads for 78,275 room nights. Of that, 22% of the leads are for new events, 25% of the leads are for national events and 34% are for regional events. In definite bookings, we had 105 events booked for 76,480 room nights. Of that, 12% of the booked rooms are for new events, 23% were national and 36% were regional. Feyerherm said these numbers will increase as we catch up throughout the year.

Feyerherm gave an update on tradeshow and conferences. Connect Marketplace is August 25-27 in Miami, FL for associations, specialties and sports. Bombeck will attend in the sports market, Clay Simpson is going to meet with specialty event planners and Lindsey Bolander will meet with National Association Planners.

Looking at the 2Synergize data for the first six months of 2025 we see the number of leads for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO's) without convention centers at -6% compared to 2024 as the national average, with Lincoln at -1% under 2024 and -9% as the national average for Midwest cities. In number of bookings, looking at DMO's without convention centers, 6% over 2024 is the national average with Lincoln at 10% over 2024 and 18% over 2024 is the national average for Midwest cities. In number of booked hotel room nights, 2025 vs. 2024, there is 0% increase as the national average for non-convention

center cities, 14% is the national average for Midwest cities and Lincoln is 35% over 2024. Additional trends, Feyerherm said, includes market segmentation where we see health and medical/pharmaceutical being down the most overall in bookings and leads. All the top ten market segments are down year-over-year nationally except technology/science/engineering and recreation/sports/athletics. All regions saw decreased volume except Canada and the West Pacific. The largest decline occurred in the South/Southeast and the Northeast and Upper Midwest due to the decline in international travel. Lead volume is down 6.1% nationally, he said, and it is the first time since the 2019 recovery that leads have been down. We are down 1%, he said, in comparison.

Cities of the Big 10 Passport is excited to relaunch again soon. The only change is that it shows all 18 cities and is individualized. Feyerherm said the VL team continues to work on advertising sales for the Visitors Guide, Threshold 360 and Bandwango passports. Tracie Simpson and Clay Simpson have hosted two breakfast events at UNL City Campus and East Campus for faculty and staff to let them know how we can be a resource to them. He next said Lindsey Bolander is getting certified. She has a new certification as a certified faith-based meeting professional and just needs to take the final test to be a certified meeting professional. We are proud of her accomplishments, he said.

### **New Business:**

In new and other business, Stitt said he would like to invite everyone to give an update on their business. Kalkwarf said we received the first draft of the audit so we will be reviewing that. Savona said they have a lot going on and August through December will catch them up for the entire year. There's a lot of exciting things going on with volleyball, shows and media events. His staff is doing a great job, he said, and thanked the group for the grant funding for Pinewood Bowl. Riley Slezak said the city and JPA have an investment in PBA and are looking forward to a great weekend there. Youth sports are growing in Lincoln, he said, and they are excited about the announcement of the new volleyball facility being developed near North Star High School. They are just waiting for the governor's approval, Slezak said. Hoehne said his two hotels in south Lincoln are steady and said hats off to the great events coming up. Bennie Shobe next said he's going to the Block Party and is excited for the busy weekend. Sullivan said football is very beneficial to them providing 43% of their annual income. 14% of room revenue is during the season, he said, where they book 2-3 nights/per room for each home game weekend. EK Franks said football helps enrollment, too. Students are coming back and there is a lot of activity as classes start next Monday. Ogden said they've been busy with Railyard Rims, Shop the Dock and the many Halloween events that are coming up. Project O Street will begin after football season to dress up and refresh downtown, he said. We will see new sidewalks, benches, canopies, trees and the street will get a new water main and be resurfaced. In addition, Ogden is excited for the development of Boehmer Street as a music street that hopefully will become a nationally known attraction. He also talked about the partnership with the county for a study on a new outreach shelter and ambassador program in downtown Lincoln to aid those experiencing homelessness. In Stitt's update, he said thank you to Jason Ball and his team for a successful grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony. They are selling out and doing good and the Courtyard is doing great, too, Stitt said. They are doing our best to help increase the lodging tax revenue and look forward to fall events, too. He said the slip road in front of their hotel will be opening up all the way through which should help the traffic flow through the north side of the Haymarket. Next, Barclay said this committee makes things happen. At his restaurant he wants his customers to have a positive experience, and he needs feedback to make sure that happens. It does make an impact, he said, as feedback is key to all of us. Thank you all for all you do, Barclay said. Maul thanked him and Preston Marsh for all the work they do for the community. Katie Bohlmeier said the summer is winding down and things are picking up as we are working on some things as we prepare for the next legislative session. Dave Derbin said he is gearing up for this huge weekend in Lincoln, which is full of events. He thanked everyone for their work. Lastly, Ball thanked the County for their partnership with the Chamber and Violet PR. The Chamber had their founder, April Mason, speak at our Face the Chamber lunch today and it was

compelling, he said. He let the group know Monolith and Don't Panic Labs had some recent layoffs and as a response held a career hiring fair in our office early this week with 30 attendees, 11 businesses and four resource agencies. He said the room was full of folks with hope and optimism. On the policy side, he said, we are having some concerns about the direction things are going with the DED. But, on a high note, he closed by saying the Topeka-Lincoln City Swap finished up at the end of July with about 40 coming from Topeka, a huge welcome reception at PBA (thank you, Tim!), a great kick-off tour hosted by Maul and great hospitality at the Embassy (thank you, Bryan!). It was awesome, Ball said and let everyone know we will be going to Madison, WI next July 14-17 for our intercity visit and everyone is welcome to attend.

**Adjourn:**

Stitt thanked everyone again for their attendance and adjourned the meeting at 3:06 p.m.