

**Visitors Promotion Committee**  
**Meeting at Lincoln Chamber of Commerce**  
**February 21, 2024**  
**MINUTES**

In Attendance: Jeff Barclay, Jeff Cunningham, Jason Hoehne, Tara Knuth, Dave Derbin, Bennie Shobe, Aaron Stitt and Rick Vest

Absent: Tim Savona, Bryan Sullivan and Riley Slezak

Staff Attending: Jeff Maul, Derek Feyerherm, Ron Kalkwarf, Diane Pryor 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 November Minutes:**

Chair Stitt asked if there were any comments or questions regarding the regular quarterly meeting in November'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 minutes. Jason Hoehne made a motion to approve the minutes and Tara Knuth seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Jeff Barclay, Jeff Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Tim Savona and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

**Approval of January Financials:**

Ron Kalkwarf presented the financials showing the Visit Lincoln Profit & Loss Budget vs. Actual for July 2023 through January 2024. Beginning with Room Tax-CVB, he said, it is under budget. The budget is 1/12 of the annual budget and we continue to request funding as needed. Other Income is higher than budget due to printing of the new Visitors Guide and because of grant income offsetting expenses we incurred for several months as we waited for the grant to come in, which it now has. On the Expense side, Printing is higher because of the Visitors Guide, Professional Fees is over as we have been working with CueMotion on some special projects and Sports Event Promotion-CVB is down due to timing of an invoice. Also, Kalkwarf said, Medical & Dental Insurance is under budget because of a new, less expensive plan. Net Income is \$9, which is rounding, according to Kalkwarf. There were no comments, so Stitt asked for a motion to approve the financials. Cunningham made a motion to approve the financials and Barclay seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Barclay, Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Savona and Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

**Visitors Improvement Fund Grant 2024 Update:**

For the next order of business, Stitt asked Jeff Maul to update everyone on the Visitors Improvement Fund Grant program. Maul said, as discussed at the last meeting, we formed a small group committee to set some parameters that would protect the fund. Maul, Stitt, Knuth and Derbin made up this committee. There was never a cap on the size of grant that could be requested. We all know the fund is used to improve attractions in Lancaster County. We would accept requests, listen to their pitches and then make recommendations to the Lancaster County Board regarding the various grant requests, Maul said. The small group committee reviewed our current procedure and developed some parameters going forward. Maul asked Dave Derbin to give an update on the current fund. He said we have approximately \$2.457M in

the fund today.. Prior commitments from the fund to be paid over the next two years include two for the Lincoln Zoo, two to the Ag Society and two to Sandhills Global Event Center (SGEC). The Zoo should be paid out by 2025 and SGEC by 2027, he said. We are trying to keep between \$2M and \$2.5M in the fund. To keep it growing, we could utilize about \$500,000 a year, Maul said. Knuth added we would like to be able to give a few larger grants and set some back for smaller grants as well. Stitt said the goal is to use \$400,000/year for four \$100,000 grants and the other \$100,000 for ten \$10,000 grants. They reiterated they would like to keep at least \$2M in the fund at all times. Maul said we will begin hearing grant requests in May. Barclay thanked the group for their time doing the work and Hoehne said he appreciates having these guidelines in place saying it gives more structure to our process. There were no further comments or discussion, so Stitt asked for a motion to approve the new guidelines. Barclay made a motion to approve and Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Barclay, Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Savona and Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

### **2024 Vacant Committee Seats**

Stitt let everyone know Jeff Cunningham's term on the Committee is expiring after the May meeting and started a discussion about a new member. Maul thanked Cunningham for his time on the committee over the terms he's served. Continuing, Maul said this spot has typically been filled with a downtown retail businessperson to have involvement from that sector. Stitt also thanked Cunningham and said your leadership has been remarkable. Stitt asked everyone to consider Todd Ogden from Downtown Lincoln Association and gave a brief background on him. Barclay asked if he had talked to Ogden about the possibility. Maul said he talked to him, and Ogden would be interested if the invitation to serve was made. Cunningham added that he thinks this is a good choice and that Ogden is very involved, and Stitt agreed. Stitt said we would welcome any other recommendations. Knuth said she felt we had enough information to decide and made a motion to approve Todd Ogden to join the committee. Barclay seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Barclay, Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Savona and Sullivan were absent. Motion carried. Maul said this recommendation would go to the County Board for their approval and the term would start in July, if approved.

### **Directors Report:**

Stitt asked for the directors' report. Jeff Maul began with a convention center update. Assemble Lincoln has been doing an amazing job of leading the process. They meet monthly with three sub-committees working on funding and public engagement. This week they held a "town hall" meeting to gather information and hear questions from the public. Legends consulting firm was hired as the project consultant and will lead us through until the opening. The RFLI yielded four sites, Maul said, including near Assurity, in the Hudl block, east of the Cornhusker Hotel and the Golds Building site. The site RFP was issued, and they are due on February 29. The architect RFP was issued and is due on March 1. Derbin added things are moving along, the meeting on Monday went really well and he was impressed at the feedback received.

Next, Maul drew attention to the Visitors Guide and a new marketing sheet in the folders. These are done internally by our team, and he gave kudos to them. With an update on the Sandhills Global Youth Complex Maul said we could be a year away. Opening early 2025 for full play in spring 2025. Dirt work is complete as they are making great progress. We have an operator agreement and will be hiring staff soon to start booking dates for next year. Maul said to follow the progress on social media and the website, [Lincolnyouthcomplex.com](http://Lincolnyouthcomplex.com).

Visit Lincoln projects and marketing we've been working on include, Visit Lincoln Visitors Guide which are now available and the 2024 Visit Lincoln Marketing Plan was distributed. This is an annual document, he said, as a reminder of our strategies and our mission. It shows the trends for 2024 and what we will be

tasked with. Maul said he is very thankful for the staff we have as they continue to work on bringing a variety of exciting events to Lincoln. We'll have NSAA State Swimming/Diving February 22-24, NSAA Girls State Basketball on February 28-March 2, NSAA Boys State Basketball on March 6-9 and in mid-March and early April, State Education Conferences will be happening with DECA, FFA and FCCLA. The state basketball tournaments will continue with the four-day format, city team ambassadors and Tracie Simpson will host the pizza feeds for all players, teams and coaches.

Maul said every year he and Simpson travel across the state to the Nebraska Tourism Summit. This year, it is in Lincoln, and they attended on February 7 at the Graduate Hotel. 125 tourism professionals came from across the state. The closing night reception was at the NE History Museum and the primary focus is to connect with state senators and the governor on the value of tourism in our statewide economy. It will be held in Lincoln the next two years at the Cornhusker Marriott and the Embassy Suites. In addition, he said, we continue to monitor legislation in this year's session and continue to work with the county.

The Visit Lincoln staff continue their involvement with events, Maul said, earlier this month we held Coffee Week, and it was a huge success with 19 participating coffee shops all around the city. 4,500 passports were handed out to keep track of your progress. One winner was chosen to receive a \$150 gift certificate to a coffee house of their choice. We had 9,600 website views just in that week. We added 791 new followers to our social media as we reached 78,000 people. Owners, patrons and staff let us know lines were out the door and it was the most successful week of coffee revenues ever for many of the local business owners.

Maul said he continues to work on that one opening on the committee still – a representative from the UNL Chancellor's office. There is a group tour planning guide and other sales support materials handed out today, he said, as we work on Visit Lincoln tourism focus in 2024 to showcase better destination marketing of our neighborhoods, unique stories, shopping and more. In closing, he reminded everyone of the dates of the 2024 VPC meetings on May 15, August 21 and November 20.

Derek Feyerherm gave the sales update next with a sales breakdown. Visit Lincoln has issued 29 sales leads for 14,904 room nights. Of that, 17% of the leads are for new events, 81% of the leads are for national events and 13% are for regional events. In definite bookings, we had 21 events booked for 13,557 room nights. Of that, 21% of the booked rooms are for new events, 11% were national and 8% were regional. He said we have seen multi-year bookings pick up some even five years out.

Looking next at the 2 Synergize & Simpleview comparison reports on leads and bookings. There is participation from 230 DMO's, 82 without convention centers, like us. Trends are reported based on convention center size and by US region. The first trend compared from 2023 vs 2019 was the number of leads issued. There was an increase of 16% nationwide, Visit Lincoln showed an increase of 21% and the Midwest had a decrease of 8%. These are broken down by region and we are above averages, Feyerherm said. The second trend compared from 2023 vs 2022 and the number of leads issued. There was an increase of 12% nationwide, Visit Lincoln also showed an increase of 12% and the Midwest had an increase of 19%. To show number of events getting booked trending for 2023 vs. 2019 was a decrease of 8% nationwide, Visit Lincoln showed an increase of 8% and the Midwest had a decrease of 17%. The number of hotel rooms booked showed a decrease nationwide of 15%, Visit Lincoln had an increase of 101% and the Midwest had a decrease of 10%. 2023 vs. 2022 year-end trends in number of booked events shows an increase of 16% nationwide, Visit Lincoln shows an increase of 15% and the Midwest shows a 23% increase. In the number of hotel rooms booked we see an increase of 15% nationwide, Visit Lincoln shows an increase of 75% (much above our competitors) and the Midwest shows a 21% increase. Feyerherm said these numbers look very good and 2024 is projected to be even better.

Feyerherm wanted to show the trend of 2023 vs. 2019 year-end numbers of how different types of events measure comparing Visit Lincoln to the Midwest. In the sports market, the largest, Visit Lincoln had an increase of 29% and the Midwest had a decrease of 10%. The religious market shows Visit Lincoln with an incredible 145% increase and the Midwest down 12%. Feyerherm said Kelsey Meyer has really made great progress in this market in Lincoln. The social/fraternal markets decreased 15% with Visit Lincoln and is down 17% in the Midwest. This is not a shock, he said, as we just don't see the participation in those conferences any longer. The education market had Visit Lincoln with an 8% increase and the Midwest with a 4% increase. Clay Simpson has really ramped up this area for us and is working on growing our relationship with UNL.

Next, Feyerherm gave an update on tradeshow the staff has been attending with the Connect Faith show that Kelsey Meyer attended in Washington, D.C. on November 27-29. She had 26 appointments to follow up with after that one, Feyerherm said. Meyer also attended the RCMA in San Antonio, TX on January 9-11 with 31 meetings. This is a large faith-based conference. On January 12-16, Tracie Simpson attended the ABA Conference in Nashville. She ended up with 31 appointments and had a great time attending. Clay Simpson attended Connect Midwest in Grand Rapids, MI on January 22-24. This one is a blend of association, specialty and corporate planners. Simpson ended up with 19 appointments. Derek Bombeck traveled to the USOC Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, CO on January 17-19 along with Sports NE partners. He had 15 meetings. Feyerherm said we continue to build relationships there and hosted a reception one of the evenings that went very well.

There are some Cities of the Big Ten changes that we helped create, Feyerherm said next. The conference signed off on a change of initial focus. The conference encouraged recruitment of USC, UCLA, Washington and Oregon. Penn State is leading the change, he said. We are demoing a potential passport program where prizes are given to those who visit multiple cities of the Big Ten in a year. Lastly, he talked about meeting planner and sports events. We have four events planned for 2024 and a sports planner series has been created with the first one in January. We are also hosting a military fam tour May 9-11, working with the Army Divisions Association and have 11-13 meeting planners planning to attend.

**New Business:**

In new business, Knuth talked about some new interests at the Lincoln Children's Museum including the new agriculture exhibit and ways to offer the museum to everyone including the Blue Star Program letting all military in free all summer.

**Adjourn:**

Knuth thanked everyone again for their attendance. She adjourned the meeting at 2:37 p.m.