

The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Fall 2020

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Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting going virtual on November 12

The Mat-Su CVB annual meeting is going virtual this year, but it's still an event you don't want to miss.

The annual meeting is on Nov. 12 from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. via Zoom. Members will receive a link in the e-bulletins leading up to the event.

This year, there will be a special presentation by Destination Analysts, the leading tourism research firm in the country. The Mat-Su CVB commissioned Destination Analysts to do a visitor survey that will return important research data to identify our visitors, their sentiment toward traveling and when they feel they'll be traveling again, and how they can be effectively marketed to.

"This information is extremely valuable to our members because it lays out the best way to market our destination and our businesses to the most engaged travelers," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill. "Destination Analysts is the premier tourism research firm, and they work with DMOs around the country to provide the most current and relevant data to help shape strategy."

Destination Analysts will kick off the annual meeting with a 45-minute presentation. Following, the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors will give a report to the members, and new board members will be seated. Staff will also give updates on marketing programs from 2019-2020 and programs coming in the future, as well as a membership report.

The Voice of the Membership will conclude the annual meeting. This is the opportunity for members to give their thoughts during an open forum.

"The Voice of the Membership is so

YAHOO!
Mat-Su



Destination
Analysts

important because the staff and board hear directly from the members what they would like to see, policies they are interested in and general feedback. We want to hear from you," Quill said.

There is no cost to members to attend the annual meeting, including the research presentation by Destination Analysts.

Typically, the Stars of the Industry awards are handed out at the annual meeting, but this year, no awards will be given out due to the pandemic. Instead, stay tuned following the Voice of the Membership for a special video highlighting the challenges and successes of our members.

For a complete schedule, please see Page 7 of this newsletter.

November 12, 10-11:30 a.m.

Online - no cost to members to participate!

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Board of Directors**

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Note: There is one vacancy currently on the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors. The remainder of the term (one year) will be filled during the current elections.

From the Board Chair's desk

Working harder and smarter brings value to your membership

As we prepare for the virtual annual meeting, I'd like to take the time to thank you for your membership. Now more than ever, the value of membership is greater than ever as we look to move into the recovery stage of the pandemic. Collectively, we are stronger than as individuals, and the Mat-Su CVB staff and board are committed to delivering value to you through marketing and advocacy.

This summer was a great challenge. We all know that. The Mat-Su CVB board of directors reduced membership dues for the upcoming year by 25 percent, and extended your membership for three months at no cost. Your support for the organization is vitally important, and we wanted to make it financially flexible for you to renew. Thank you to those who already have. For a small handful who have not, invoices were mailed Oct. 1.

Staff has been committed to reaching out to our members throughout the summer. More than 1,000 phone calls were made to members since March – just to reach out and get a sense of what members were experiencing, offering resources and information and just checking in.

Moving forward, we have made an investment with Destination Analysts to perform an in-depth visitor profile study and travel sentiment analysis. The results from this research project will help identify precisely who our potential

visitors are, and how we can best market our destination to them to generate leads and awareness. This research is valuable to you as members as well, and I encourage you to join us on November 12 at the virtual annual meeting when Destination Analysts will present their findings (see story on Page 1).

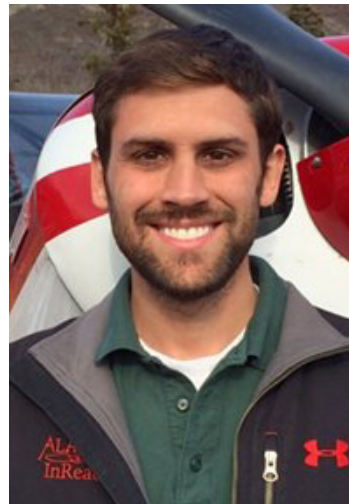
We've also increased our national advertising efforts through cooperative marketing campaigns with the Alaska Travel Industry Association and other destination marketing organizations (see story on Page 6). This includes print and digital ads in publications like Travel & Leisure, Outside Magazine and AARP Magazine. We've also greatly increased our partnership with Visit Anchorage and Explore Fairbanks for more exposure in their visitor guides.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to the staff or a board member if you

have any questions. And make sure you participate in the Voice of the Membership meeting on November 12 – this is your chance to have your voice heard, and we value your input as we navigate uncharted waters.

As an organization, we are committed to you to work harder and smarter than ever before to lead our industry back.

Mark Fleenor (info@sheepmountain.com) is the owner of Sheep Mountain Lodge, Sheep Mountain Air and is the Chair of the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors.



**Mark Fleenor,
Sheep Mountain Lodge,
Mat-Su CVB Board Chair**

Get out and vote!

In addition to the federal and state elections, the Mat-Su Borough also has races on the ballot on November 3. Remember to get out and vote! On Election Day, you can vote at your regular precinct. Early voting is currently under way at the Mat-Su Borough building in Palmer and the Wasilla Public Library. You can vote on both the Mat-Su Borough ballot races and the federal and state ballot races at the same early voting location.

From the President & CEO's desk

Summer silver linings identify new trends and bring opportunities

What happened this summer is going to change our industry in creating new visitor patterns and behaviors in the future and the Mat-Su Borough is at an advantage to benefit greatly. We are an outdoor recreation destination with world-class experiences and infrastructure ideally located in Southcentral Alaska between our state's international airport and Denali National Park.

Our summer minus out-of-state visitors, social distancing restrictions and high unemployment allowed in-state residents to explore our state less crowded, safely and promoting mental and physical healthy habits during the pandemic. State Park attendance this summer was up over 150 percent and public use cabins had the highest occupancy recorded. People are choosing to recreate outdoors in record numbers and those working from home have had more time to get outside. Surveys indicate these behaviors will likely stick after the pandemic ends.

The Mat-Su Borough has undeniably the best trail network in the state along with two of the state park system's jewels, Hatcher Pass and South Denali. Between Glacier View and the popular boating destination of Big Lake, our borough boasts outdoor opportunities for everyone.

We heard from many of our members in the outdoor recreation sector who focused on catering to locals and adapted their business strategies. I am confident the cruise industry will be back but think about ways you can invite and cater to

residents too.

The hardest lesson learned this past summer is the importance of the visitor industry to our economy. With the growing and future trend of outdoor recreation we are positioned to capitalize on welcoming, promoting and educating visitors of our destination. Mat-Su CVB with a dedicated leadership board, a talented staff with over 65 combined years of service to the bureau and a strong foundation of membership and stakeholders can seize this opportunity.

Two tactics we can immediately capitalize on are developing defined, targeted marketing messages and the completion of the Mat-Su Valley Gateway Visitor Center which would be the anchor to our assets. The investment in the Destination Analysts up-to-date research that will be presented at our annual meeting will meet the needs of our messaging for the next 6-18 months. And the submission earlier this month of an EDA CARES Act grant application to finish the Gateway Visitor Center could provide the final construction funds to break ground next spring.

Listening to the Alaska land managers and stakeholders at this week's Alaska Outdoor Alliance Confluence AK virtual conference, this is what the future economic impact of the visitor industry looks like.

Bonnie Quill (bonnie@alaskavisit.com) is the Mat-Su CVB President & CEO.



Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill, second from right, took advantage of the great outdoors on a recent hike to Curry Ridge.

Current Alaska travel mandates

Starting on October 16, the state of Alaska updated its current travel mandates for both residents traveling back to Alaska, as well as visitors entering the state.

The health and safety of our communities, residents and visitors is of utmost importance, and we encourage you to stay up to date on the changing mandates.

According to the current mandate, visitors arriving in Alaska must do one of the following: obtain molecular-based test 72 hours before departure and upload negative result into the Alaska Travel Portal; if tested 72 hours before departure and awaiting results, travelers will need to upload proof of test taken into the Alaska Travel Portal and quarantine at personal expense while waiting; if a non-resident arrives without a pre-test, testing is available for \$250 per test. The traveler will be required to quarantine at personal expense while waiting on results; and a second test taken between five and 14 days after arrival is recommended, but not required.

Testing is available at airports at no cost to Alaskans, who will also have the option for a 14-day quarantine instead.

Also as of Oct. 16, statewide restrictions have been removed for traveling to communities within the state. Some local restrictions still apply however.

A special hotline has been established for visitors to call for the most current information. The program is being coordinated by the Alaska Travel Industry Association. The number is 1-907-646-3322 and is manned 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The state has also established a web site, <https://covid19.alaska.gov/travelers/> that has all the information for residents and visitors.

Mat-Su Borough candidates provide feedback

Every fall, the Mat-Su CVB surveys candidates for the Mat-Su Borough Assembly about tourism topics that are relevant to our industry. This year, there are two seats up for election - District 4 and 5 - and seven candidates running.

Here are there responses.

Question 1

As with most local and regional convention and visitors bureaus, the Mat-Su CVB receives funding collected by the Borough through a bed tax of 5 percent. Historically the Assembly approved during budget deliberations an appropriation of \$747,500 for the Mat-Su CVB. This equates to 65 percent of the projected transient accommodations tax (bed tax) collection of \$1,150,000. In 2018 the Assembly also supported action to extend the existing grant agreement with the Mat-Su CVB for three years through FY21 with a 65/35 formula (35 percent dedicated to tourism infrastructure projects.) But this year due to COVID, the Assembly used the CARES Act grant from the state to fund the CVB for two years (\$1.5 million), recognizing the economic impact of the loss of visitors and bed tax collections and the need for recovery of the struggling tourism sector. The next budget cycle will be FY23. Do you support the historical funding formula? Why or why not?

Amber Sanchez, District 4: Favor. I am in support of whatever revenue is needed to keep the Mat-Su thriving in the tourism industry as that is one of Alaska's biggest resources. We can not afford to miss out on a slice of that pie, so to speak!

Colleen Vague, District 4: Favor. Tourism is an important tool to generate revenue to the Valley. Money gained through tourism is money that is not taken out of the residents pockets.

Rob Yundt, District 4: Favor.

Mike Alexander, District 5: Did not respond to survey.

Lisa Behrens, District 5: Yes, I support the current formula for distribution of the accommodations tax. The private/public partnership of the MSCVB use of accommodation tax and the contributions of MSCVB membership are working for Mat-Su. I would further be a budget hawk for the 35 percent of accommodation tax that goes to the Borough for improved and maintained tourism and recreation infrastructure.

Ken Koch, District 5: Favor.

Clayton "Mokie" Tews, District 5: Favor. The bed tax is collected and accounted for by that industry. Continued support of a split between the Borough and the industry should be continued.

Question 2

Because of state and local budget challenges, there is concern among tourism businesses that other groups and government will increasingly look at bed tax revenues as a funding source for non-tourism expenditures. Would you support the use of bed tax monies for non-tourism purposes? If yes, what?

Amber Sanchez, District 4: Oppose. I strongly feel that we need all the money we can get and put towards tourism and nowhere else we are in the heart of Alaska and should capitalize on that. Tourism is one of the biggest revenues of Alaska.

Colleen Vague, District 4: Oppose.

Rob Yundt, District 4: Oppose. Absolutely not. The Mat-Su Borough must continue to invest in tourism.

Mike Alexander, District 5: Did not respond to survey.

Lisa Behrens, District 5: I would not support the use of the accommodation tax for other purposes. Promoting tourism and supporting tourism businesses should be a goal of the Mat-Su Borough in its effort to increase economic development.

Ken Koch, District 5: Oppose.

Clayton "Mokie" Tews, District 5: Oppose. Again, since the industry collects and accounts for the bed taxes, the above stated distribution should be continued.

Question 3

Since 2008, the Mat-Su CVB has supported efforts to build a new Gateway Visitor Center through completion of a Feasibility Study, purchase of the property at Mile 36 Glenn Highway with \$1 million FY14 state capital funds and completion of building and site design with \$1.2 million state capital funding in FY15. The sale of the old center for \$1.2 million in 2016 is dedicated as a match for the \$8 million needed to complete the shovel-ready project. The borough currently has the project listed in its federal priorities and is submitting an EDA CARES Act grant application for completion. Do you support the development of a new Mat-Su Gateway Visitor Center? Why or why not?

Amber Sanchez, District 4: Yes!

And again I cannot stress enough the importance of tourism in the Mat-Su it plays a significant role. We are in the heart of Alaska in order to travel through Alaska by highway you have to come through our Borough and we must capitalize on this in order for the Mat-Su to thrive. I would say a Gateway Visitor Center is very necessary.

Colleen Vague, District 4: Yes. We need a centrally localized visitor's center that is easily visible and accessible not only for tourist but locals. When done well, visitor centers provide historical information as well as travel information. With this concept, a visitor's center could be used year round for school outings and other projects to teach locals as well as tourists about the history of the area.

Rob Yundt, District 4: Yes.

Mike Alexander, District 5: Did not respond to survey.

Lisa Behrens, District 5: MSCVB has been very effective in moving forward with the Gateway Center and should be commended for getting this facility shovel-ready for construction. I would support keeping it on the Federal and State priority list considering the positive impacts tourism has on Mat-Su and our State. A construction project like the Gateway Center would also be good for creating jobs during this economic downturn.

Ken Koch, District 5: Yes, because it supports tourism in the Mat-Su, which is a key source of business activity and revenue in the Valley.

Clayton "Mokie" Tews, District 5: A Visitor Center is a great outreach to tourists from within and outside of Alaska. As long as the center effort is maintaining the organization's efforts to fund as much of the project as possible, I would support it.

Question 4

On August 2, 2016 the Assembly heard testimony during a public hearing on an ordinance to increase the borough bed tax from 5 to 8 percent and submit the question to the voters on the October 4, 2016 ballot. In comparison, other Alaska destination bed tax rates are: Anchorage 12 percent, Fairbanks 8 percent, Juneau 7 percent, and Denali 7 percent. The Mat-Su CVB board of directors had forwarded the proposal to consider after much feedback

CANDIDATES: Responses to Mat-Su CVB survey

Continued from Page 4

and discussions with the membership. The testimony was divided and the Assembly voted 4-3 to oppose putting it on the ballot. What is your opinion on raising the bed tax to support tourism marketing and tourism infrastructure projects?

Amber Sanchez, District 4: I am generally opposed to raising all taxes however I have had personal experience in the hotel industry in Anchorage and am familiar with higher bed taxes. Having accessed that Wasilla has a rather low bed tax I would not be opposed to raising it as long as the accommodations tax was to match such as the new hotel being built. As I have stated before and will state again I am all about putting money towards tourism as that is one of Alaska's biggest revenues.

Colleen Vague, District 4: I would support a modest increase up to the 8 percent suggested in the bed tax. People

will continue to travel to Alaska and the Mat-Su Borough, even with this increase. As I have said, this is revenue to the borough that is not encumbered by the residents. The CVB board can use these funds to increase awareness about tourism opportunities in the valley, which will bring in a larger revenue source; it's a win-win.

Rob Yundt, District 4: Right now I believe our bed tax is plenty as those other destinations have more to offer. The Valley needs more hotel rooms which will increase revenue drastically. I am currently finishing the design of my first of two hotels that will be located very close to the Menard Sports Complex in Wasilla and my best friend, Cameron Johnson of H5 Construction, is also working on permitting to build a new Hilton at his Sun Mountain development in downtown Wasilla.

Mike Alexander, District 5: Did not respond to survey.

Lisa Behrens, District 5: I would

support putting the question of an increased bed tax on the ballot. It is my understanding that Mat-Su has one of the lowest bed tax rates in the state, and that the increase to 8 percent was previously recommended to provide construction funds for the Gateway Center. This method of funding has been used in Wasilla for the Menard Center and the new Wasilla Public Library; it was successful, and I think it could be a good solution to funding for tourism infrastructure.

Ken Koch, District 5: I am generally opposed to raising taxes, particularly when they are not allocated against very specific expenditures, and do not include a sunset provision. Therefore, I am opposed to raising the bed tax.

Clayton "Mokie" Tews, District 5: If presented with a study that indicates the raise in bed taxes would not adversely impact the tourism industry in the Mat-Su Borough, and the member-businesses support that effort, I would be amenable to a bed tax increase to 7 percent.

2021 Visitor Guide to publish in late December

The Mat-Su CVB is producing the 2021 Visitor Guide and will have copies available in early January.

This year, in response to financial challenges facing members, advertising rates were discounted by 25 percent, along with a 25 percent reduction in the membership fee.

"As people begin to travel again in the future, we felt it was important that we have a guide available to them," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler. "This is a challenging time, but as we enter the recovery stage, we wanted to have a current guide available."

The guide is once again being designed by Brilliant Media Strategies, who was awarded the RFP in March. The Anchorage advertising agency has designed the last three Mat-Su guides and

has a long history of designing visitor guides for organizations around the state.

Approximately 15,000 copies of the 2020 guide will be mailed to high potential leads in November. Originally, they were going to be mailed in March, but when it became apparent travel would be severely restricted this summer, the Mat-Su CVB decided to wait until the end of the year to mail them, when people would be starting their planning for the 2021 summer season.

"We wanted to wait to mail them when there was the most value to our members. We quickly realized that potential visitors were not going to be using the guide to plan a trip for the summer, so we held back," Ressler said.

Stay connected to tell our story!



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"yahoomatsu" channel

Instagram
[matsuvallyak](https://www.instagram.com/matsuvallyak)



In-state campaign proves successful in reaching locals

The Mat-Su CVB summer in-state marketing campaign, Show Up for the Valley, was very successful in reaching Alaskans who were looking to visit their own backyard.

The campaign ran July 1-August 31 and resulted in an 87 percent increase to the web site from Alaskan IP addresses, compared to the same time period in 2019.

A special web page was designed that included resident specials, Alaskans-only offers and value-added packages. Throughout the summer, 32 Alaskans-only discounts were posted to the site from members.

"The results exceeded our expectations, but I think it shows that Alaskans were ready to get out and explore, and the Valley is the perfect place to do that," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said. "Throughout the campaign, we promoted safety, enhanced sanitation protocols and

personal responsibility to our visitors."

The campaign included social media ads on Facebook and Instagram, radio in the Anchorage market, targeted pay-per-click advertising to Alaska IP addresses, eight full-color ads in the Warrior (JBER military base) newspaper, 36 full-color ads in the Anchorage Daily News, 100,000 digital impressions on ADN.com, 300,000 Google display ads in Alaska, 60,000 streaming television commercials and four placements in the Alaska Travelgram,

which reaches 14,000 Alaskans per edition. All advertising pointed to the Alaskans page on the site.

"It was our largest in-state campaign to date, across multiple platforms. It was important to focus our marketing on Alaskans this summer more than ever before," Ressler said.

In addition, eight Show Up for the Valley videos were produced in house and aired on social media. They generated 6,000 views.



New national print, digital ads debut

The Mat-Su Valley will be seen by a national audience this winter, during the planning season, with a series of ads in national magazines and online publications.

Throughout the winter, the Mat-Su CVB has placements in Travel & Leisure, Outside Magazine, AARP Magazine and a full-page ad in 2021 Milepost. That's in addition to enhanced ads in travel planning guides with Visit Anchorage and Explore Fairbanks.

"Now more than ever, we have to be seen by potential visitors to Alaska as people begin to start to travel again," said Casey Ressler, the Mat-Su CVB marketing manager. "When they are ready to travel, we'll be ready to welcome them."

The national ads are part of a cooperative program offered by ATIA.

"The co-op program is so important because it really stretches our marketing dollar," Ressler said.

All of the ads include a call to action to request a free visitor guide. In 2019, the AARP ad alone generated more than 2,000 inquiries.

"When they request a guide, they are receiving information about our members, and we are not only generating awareness about the destination, but highlighting our members through their listings and advertisements in the guide," Ressler said.

The Mat-Su CVB ad in AARP Magazine includes a digital placement as well. In 2019, the AARP ad generated more than 2,000 requests for a visitor guide.

NTA going virtual

The Mat-Su CVB is attending the National Tour Association Travel Exchange event next month, however, it is being held virtually.

Marketing Manager Casey Ressler will have prescheduled appointments with national tour operators from around the country who are looking for information about Mat-Su attractions, accommodations and activities for their Alaska itineraries.

"Obviously, group travel was greatly impacted by the pandemic this summer," Ressler said. "It's also given operators a chance to hit the 'reset' button and build new itineraries. We're looking at it as a new opportunity moving forward."

As part of the event, the Mat-Su CVB is partnering with Visit Anchorage and Explore Fairbanks to conduct an Alaska "Sales Mission" for tour operators. The three organizations are hosting 20-minute sessions that helps operators plan itineraries.

The virtual Travel Exchange event is Nov. 16-19.



Join us for the 2020 Mat-Su CVB Virtual Annual Meeting

Thursday, November 12

10-11:30 a.m.

Online via Zoom

Why attend? Here are five reasons you simply can't miss the 2020 annual meeting

1. Visitor research - what does 2021 look like?

The Mat-Su CVB has commissioned Destination Analysts, a leading national research firm, to conduct a visitor study. They will present the findings from this research project, including the demographics of our visitors, and what they are saying about their travel plans and sentiment for 2021.

2. Meet the new Board of Directors

Meet the newly elected Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors who will help guide the organization and its efforts to lead the economic recovery of the industry.

3. Report from the Board of Directors

The Board of Directors will give a report about the last year, including how it handled the changing challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Report from the Mat-Su CVB staff

Mat-Su CVB staff will give a report on current marketing programs, a look back at 2019-2020 marketing programs and a report on membership.

5. Voice of the Membership - your chance to give your feedback

Give your feedback to the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors and staff - this open forum is your opportunity to share your concerns and recommendations for consideration. This is an important part of your membership!

Look for a Zoom link in your upcoming e-bulletins. E-mail casey@alaskavisit.com for more info

Note: Typically, this is when we give out the Stars of the Industry awards. This year, instead of an awards banquet, stay tuned for a short video that highlights the challenges we've faced, and the silver linings for which we're so thankful.



An RV traveler stops to take in the view of Matanuska Glacier along the Glenn Highway National Scenic Byway.

YAHOO!
Mat-Su

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