

The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

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Contact us

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> **Tasha Belka** Administrative Manager 746-5000 <u>tasha@alaskavisit.com</u>

Annual meeting set for November 9

The Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting is November 9 at the Palmer Depot. It's your chance to meet the new Board of Directors, offer feedback to the organization, and learn about membership and marketing programs.

The morning begins at 10 a.m. with a one-hour session focusing on the 2024 Arctic Winter Games. The Host Society will give an overview of the Games, and talk about how Mat-Su CVB members can work with the organization to help promote the event, and provide accommodations and services to the many visitors it will bring.



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Quill retires, Ressler named new CEO

The Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau announced the appointment of Casey Ressler to the President & CEO position, succeeding Bonnie Quill, who announced her retirement after 23 years leading the organization.

Quill announced her intention to retire this summer during the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors Retreat in February. During her successful career at Mat-Su CVB, Quill has held numerous leadership positions both statewide and nationally. In 2021, she earned the CDME Accreditation (Certified Destination Management Executive) from Destinations International. It is the tourism industry's highest individual education achievement. In 2022, she was honored with Destinations International's Destination Organization Leadership Award, one of the most prestigious individual honors in the destination marketing industry. She is the only Alaskan to have received the award. She was instrumental in securing funding for the Gateway Visitor Center project.

"Bonnie's leadership has been significant statewide for the tourism industry. She has been an advocate and



Longtime Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill recently retired after 23 years.

ambassador for the Mat-Su Borough and we congratulate her on her retirement," Board Chair Mark Austin said.

Following her announcement in February, the Board of Directors hired SearchWide Global, a national search firm,

Fall 2023

2022-2023 Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors

Mark Austin, Musk Ox Farm Board Chair (907) 745-4151 mark@muskoxfarm.org

Roberta Warner Alaska Tour & Travel Vice Chair (907) 550-0006 roberta@alaskatravel.com

Israel Mahay Mahay's Jetboat Adventures Secretary (907) 733-2223 izzymahay@gmail.com

Mark Fleenor Sheep Mountain Lodge Past Chair (907) 745-5121 info@sheepmountain.com

> Kierre Childers Revel Treks & Tours Treasurer (907) 903-1664 <u>info@revelak.com</u>

Cole Chambers Rust's Flying Service & K2 Aviation (907) 243-1595 <u>cole@flyrustsk2.com</u>

Fernando Salvador Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge (907) 733-9501 <u>fsalvador@alaskacollection.com</u>

> Heather Dudick Alaska Railroad (907) 265-2622 dudickh@akrr.com

Sam Dinges Alaska Trails (907) 354-3321 sam.dinges@alaska-trails.org

Note: There is one vacancy on the Board of Directors, which will be filled during the October elections.

<u>From the Board Chair's desk</u>

Mat-Su CVB ushering in a new vision with leadership change

I hope everyone had a busy and productive summer season welcoming visitors to the Mat-Su and that you all managed to find some time to get out and explore yourselves. This time of year is always a transition for those of us in the tourism industry, and that holds true at Mat-Su CVB this year as well.

Last February, at our Board of Directors planning retreat, Bonnie Quill officially informed us of her intention to retire this summer. Bonnie led the organization for 23 years, and her accomplishments and successes are too many to mention – she was a leader not only for this organization, but also on the state and even national levels.

The board of directors hired industry leading SearchWide Global to find her replacement. SWG was capable of casting a

nationwide net for candidates specializing in the visitor industry. It was imperative that the board identify the best candidates possible and maintain a high level of transparency to our stakeholders and members, as well as ensuring that we would attract leading candidates beyond our immediate circles. The search was an extremely comprehensive and exhaustive process over three months.

SWG recruited, courted, and then filtered many dozens of applicants delivering nine candidates to the hiring committee. These were winnowed down to seven Zoom interviews mediated by SWG, and finally three in-person interviews were held. In the end, the best person for the job was with us all along – longtime Mat-Su CVB Marketing Manager Casey Ressler! Congratulations Casey, we are thrilled to have you leading the CVB into the next 23 years!

The board of directors is happy that Casey was interested in the role, we're excited to have him leading the organization after 17 years. He has the local knowledge, fantastic experience, incredible support from throughout the visitor industry in all corners of Alaska, and the leadership to continue the success of Mat-Su CVB, well done sir!

Bonnie's retirement closed the book on a long chapter of Mat-Su CVB's story, and as a board, we are looking forward to writing that next chapter, which has a new story to tell. In the past year, we have secured funding for the Gateway

> Visitor Center, completed a Sustainable Tourism Master Plan, and embarked on a Cultural Tourism Marketing Plan, three big accomplishments. As we bring these all to reality, we have the great opportunity to incubate a new vision governing the growth of this organization. The role of destination marketing organizations are changing nationally, and we too need to change and adopt new ideas as well. In the summer, our hotels are full, our attractions are sold out and visitors are coming to

our doors. We've accomplished this due to effective and efficient marketing. We need to continue our marketing efforts, but also take on an expanding "management" role in our communities. Mat-Su CVB needs to be a community leader in advocating for sustainable practices, responsible infrastructure development, workforce development, and ensuring that the Mat-Su Valley is not only a great place to visit, but always a great place to live for our residents.

The board is holding a brainstorming session Sept. 21-22 to develop this new vision for the organization. Your input is valued as well. Our board election is right around the corner, with four seats up for election, this will also help shape a new direction for your CVB. Interested in sharing your expertise and talents, we would love to hear from you! Please keep an eye out for your ballot and make sure to return your choices – Mat-Su CVB is built around the strength of its members, and your voice will help guide us in the future.

Mark Austin (<u>mark@muskoxfarm.org</u>) is the chair of the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors.



Mark Austin, Musk Ox Farm, Mat-Su CVB Board Chair

From the President & CEO's deskNew faces, new roles, same strongcommitment to our membership

For nearly 17 years, I've helped craft the President & CEO message for this newsletter, but this time it seems a little different since it's got my name on it for the first time. After an exhaustive search process – a stressful one if you are a candidate! – I was honored to be offered the position by our board of directors in

July. I gladly accepted the position.

I'm excited about leading an organization I care so deeply for, and the work we do. I feel like I had the best mentor someone could ever ask for in Bonnie Quill, and she probably is already tired of me texting her questions almost daily! She created an atmosphere that felt like a family, yet challenged employees to grow professionally and exceed goals daily. She's a big reason why Mat-Su

CVB has enjoyed so much success, and it's something I want to bring to our staff and daily work program.

With a change in leadership comes a fresh beginning, however, and I'm ready to bring new ideas and a new direction to Mat-Su CVB.

Our small staff of four had been together for 13 years prior to this year. Neil Campbell retired in January, and Bonnie retired in July, leaving us as a two-person team for a while.

I'm proud of the work Justin Saunders has done trying to fill the gaps, and we didn't miss a beat despite being shorthanded during the busiest time of the tourism year.

I was pleasantly surprised when Justin stepped into my office a few weeks ago and said he was interested in moving over to the marketing position.

Justin served as our membership manager for 13 years, and has developed

strong relationships with our members. That's an important quality for the marketing manager position, so it was a natural transition for him and the organization.

While you'll be introduced to a new membership manager soon, know that you have a familiar face marketing to visitors

> on your behalf, and that our marketing efforts will benefit greatly from this continuity.

We brought on another new hire, as Tasha Belka joined the staff as our administrative manager in late August.

Tasha hit the ground running and is a perfect fit for our team. She'll handle the day-to-day management of our office and bookkeeping, but we're also excited to have her supporting both the membership and marketing

programs as well. She's eager to learn more about our members and what they have to offer.

While there are new faces and new roles, our commitment to marketing the Mat-Su Valley as a premier Alaska visitor destination will not change, and neither will our dedication to working with our members to give them the tools they need to succeed.

I'm excited about the opportunity to continue working with our members and bringing a fresh, new voice to the organization.

My door is always open, and you are always welcome to give me feedback, ideas or comments. As a staff, we value all of your recommendations and strive to meet all your expectations.

Casey Ressler (<u>casey@alaskavisit.com</u>) is the Mat-Su CVB President & CEO.

Keep an eye on your e-mail inbox in October for your Board of Directors online ballot from Election Buddy

Board of Directors nominations open

Nominations are being accepted for the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors. Members will vote on the candidates in October, and new board members will be seated at the annual meeting on Nov. 9.

There are three board openings among the 10-person board. Each member serves a three-year term. Current board seats up for election are currently held by Israel Mahay (Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures), Roberta Warner (Alaska Tour and Travel) and Wes Hoskins (Mat-Su Trails & Parks Foundation).

"By serving on the board, you make valuable contributions to the future of the tourism industry," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Casey Ressler.

Interested members may self-nominate. Candidates should declare their candidacy to Ressler (<u>casey@alaskavisit.com</u>) by Sept. 30. Candidates must submit a "letter to the membership" of no longer than 300 words, along with a photo, by the Sept. 30 deadline. Ballots will then be e-mailed to members no later than Oct. 6, and due back no later than 5 p.m. Oct. 27.

For more information, interested members can call 746-5000.

CEO: Ressler

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and the process to find her replacement was comprehensive, transparent and wide-reaching.

"After a thorough and competitive interview process, we are happy to announce Casey Ressler has been promoted to the President & CEO position," Austin said.

"He brings a new vision and direction for the CVB, but also continuity and the community knowledge and experience we need for the next era," Austin said.

Ressler has been with the Mat-Su CVB for nearly 17 years, serving as both the Membership Manager for two years and the Marketing Manager for the last 15 years.

"I'm excited to continue working with our members, staff and board to promote a destination that means so much to me," Ressler said.



Casey Ressler, Mat-Su CVB President & CEO

Nominate a peer for the 'Stars of the Industry' awards

Join us as we celebrate the "Stars of the Industry" at the November 9 luncheon, held in conjunction with the annual meeting at the Palmer Depot.

If you know of someone who has made a difference in the industry, nominate them for one an award using the submission form on this page. You can mail them to the Mat-Su CVB office (610 S. Bailey St. Ste. 201, Palmer) or e-mail them to justin@ alaskavisit.com

The Northern Lights Award honors a community or organization that has distinguished itself for outstanding tourism promotion and/or development.

The Gold Star Award recognizes a business or organization that has made significant accomplishments in the visitor industry.

The Tourism Angel honors an individual who has supported and assisted Mat-Su CVB and has shown a true concern for the success and growth of the tourism industry.

Finally, the Cheechako Award is given to a new business or organization that has shone entrepreneurial zeal and managed to not only survive, but thrive in its early years.

The awards luncheon is held in conjunction with the Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting on Nov. 9. The luncheon begins at noon at the Palmer Depot.

Northern Lights Award

Honors a community in the Mat-Su Borough that has distinguished itself for outstanding tourism promotion and/or development. I nominate:

Gold Star Award

This prestigious award recognizes a business or organization that has made a significant accomplishment in the tourism industry. I nominate:

Tourism Angel Award

Awarded to an individual who has supported and assisted Mat-Su CVB and has shown true concern for the success and growth of all members in the Mat-Su Borough. I nominate:

Cheechako Award

Awarded to a new tourism business, organization or entity showing entrepreneurial zeal and managing not only to survive, but to thrive in its early years. I nominate:

... It Happens Award

Awarded to an individual, business or organization that took a lemon and made lemonade. It is intended to laugh with, not at, others! I nominate:

Special Awards: If you feel someone deserves recognition but doesn't fit a category, tell us who they are and why they merit special commendation!

Submit nominations to Mat-Su CVB by Oct. 21 Mat-Su CVB; 610 S. Bailey St. Suite 201; Palmer, AK 99645; Fax (907) 746-2688 or e-mail to justin@alaskavisit.com

Mat-Su CVB hosts 3 FAM trips for media, operators

The Mat-Su CVB hosted two national travel writers on familiarization trips in late summer, in addition to a group of German tour operators.

Familiarization trips are a great way for travel writers, travel agents and tour operators to experience the destination, so they in turn can sell it as part of tour packages or write about the destination.

In July, Mat-Su CVB hosted John Kreye, a social media influencer, as part of a statewide itinerary. On his social media channels, he a reel of content of his Mat-Su adventures that was viewed by more than 37,000 people. He also posted several photos that were liked by more than 2,500 people.

In August, Mat-Su CVB worked with

Visit Anchorage and the Alaska Travel Industry Association to host 16 German tour operators and representatives from Lufthansa Airlines.

New Mat-Su CVB Marketing Manager Justin Saunders met the group in Talkeetna and talked with them about the Mat-Su Valley while experiencing dog sledding, lunch and shopping.

Finally, Mat-Su CVB assisted Thompson & Co., ATIA's public relations agency, on an itinerary for Robert Annis. Annis was on assignment for National Geographic.

His story assignment is about the Alaska State Fair but he also spent time exploring the Knik River Valley and Palmer during his time in the Valley.



Mat-Su CVB announces new staff member, roles

The Mat-Su CVB welcomed Tasha Belka to the team in late August as the new Administrative Manager.

"We're excited to have Tasha on board," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler. "She brings a strong bookkeeping background to the team, but is eager to branch out and support all of our efforts in destination promotion."

Justin Saunders, the longtime Membership Manager, has also switched positions, assuming the Marketing & Communications role left open by Ressler's promotion.

"Justin's relationships with our

members, his knowledge of the industry and his personality make him the perfect fit for his new position," Ressler said. "We've worked alongside each other for the last 13 years, and I'm happy and excited for Justin in his new role."

Mat-Su CVB is hiring for a new Membership Manager as a result. This position works with our members, organizes the annual travel auction fundraiser, handles all visitor guide ad sales and organizes member events such as luncheons and after-hours mixers. If interested, please e-mail <u>casey@alaskavisit.</u> <u>com</u>.



Tasha Belka, Mat-Su CVB Administrative Manager

Accommodations information needed for AWG

The Mat-Su CVB is working with the 2024 Arctic Winter Games Host Society to maintain a listing of accommodations available for the March 10-16 event.

All Mat-Su CVB accommodations members in the Wasilla and Palmer areas appear on the special web site page, and both organizations are trying to build out listings for AirBnB and VRBO listings that are available.

"If you know of someone who is on VRBO or AirBnB and

is not a Mat-Su CVB member, please reach out to us so we can include them," Mat-Su CVB's Justin Saunders said.

The list is also being distributed to the eight contingents coming to the Games, who will then make the list available to traveling parents and other spectators.

"We want as many people as possible staying in the Mat-Su Valley for the Games" Saunders said.

For more information, e-mail justin@alaskavisit.com.

MEETING: Focus on 2024 Arctic Winter Games

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The "Voice of the Membership" meeting starts at 11 a.m. The board of directors will be introduced to the membership, and there will be two presentations from the marketing and membership departments. Following, the floor is open for members to bring forth any resolutions or just provide input to the board of directors.

At noon, the "Stars of the Industry" awards luncheon takes place, honoring those who have gone above and beyond.

The annual meeting is a great place to meet other members, network and build

connections. Mat-Su CVB will be giving away a 1/8-page ad in the 2024 Visitor Guide to one lucky attending member.

Tickets for the event, including lunch, are \$25 each.

For more information, interested members can contact Justin Saunders at justin@alaskavisit.com.

2024 Mat-Su Visitor Guide to print in December

The 2024 Mat-Su Visitor Guide will go to print later this year, with 75,000 copies ready to mail to high-potential visitors at the turn of the new year.

Advertising sales are ongoing, and it's not too late to purchase affordable display advertising. The deadline for display advertising is October 1.

"Digital marketing opportunities are obviously very important for members, but research has shown that travelers still request printed visitor guides for their trip planning," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said.

A digital version of the printed guide is also available for download on AlaskaVisit.com, giving advertisers exposure both in the printed and digital guide.

Brilliant Media Strategies is designing the guide, as they have the last two years. In June, a week-long photo shoot resulted in more than 400 new images from around the Valley.

Copies of the 2024 guide will be available to members in January.



The annual photo shoot resulted in 435 new images, including some of kayaking and paddleboarding.

Short-term rental market continues to grow in 2023

The Mat-Su CVB recently subscribed to AirDNA, a software platform that aggregates short-term rental data and provides a snapshot of the industry by geographic region.

There are now 1,016 short-term rentals listed on AirBnB or VRBO in the Mat-Su Borough, representing a 19.3 percent increase in listings over the previous 12 month period.

In July 2023, the occupancy rate was 71 percent and the average daily rate was \$264 per night. In all, short-term rentals accounted for 958 bookings in July around the Mat-Su Borough. "The short-term rental market is exploding everywhere, and we're definitely seeing it here in the Mat-Su Valley."

> - Casey Ressler, Mat-Su CVB President & CEO

"The short-term rental market is exploding everywhere, and we're definitely seeing it here in the Mat-Su Valley," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler. "This new software platform will allow us to see the pace of bookings and where people are booking, and we can coordinate our marketing efforts to line up with those trends."

The platform also breaks down the data in specific geographic regions within the Mat-Su Borough. The Wasilla and Big Lake has 350 listings available, followed by the Palmer to Sutton region with 189 listings. Talkeetna and north to Denali State Park has 166 available listings.

The Mat-Su is in line with trends statewide regarding the short-term rental market.

Statewide, there has been a 22 percent increase in listings with an occupancy rate of 76 percent for the last 12 months.

Mat-Su CVB onboards user-generated video platform

The Mat-Su CVB is onboarding a new software program that collects usergenerated video, which we can then use in marketing, on social media and on the web site.

Social Venu is a startup company that has a growing list of Alaska clients. The platform gives businesses and organizations the ability to create QR codes and links that users can then use to upload 30-second videos created on their smartphones.

Once users submit their videos, they give the CVB rights to use them in all marketing channels.

After the initial onboarding, Mat-Su CVB will work with members to display the QR code at their businesses and encourage their customers to submit videos of their tours, lodging or attraction. Once a user submits a video, Mat-Su CVB can then share that video with the specific member so they can use it in their marketing as well.

"It's a win-win situation, where the organization can leverage user videos in our marketing efforts, and also share that video content with members," Mat-Su CVB's Justin Saunders said. "Video content is more important than ever, and this is an easy way to collect and use video of your tours."

You can scan the QR code at right to test out the platform and share your own videos the CVB can use in promotional materials.

For more information on the platform or to get a specific QR code for your business, members can contact Saunders at justin@alaskavisit.com.



October 6 is Mat-Su Borough Assembly candidate forum

Mark your calendars for Friday, October 6 as the Mat-Su CVB member luncheons start back up for 2023-24.

The first membership luncheon of the fall is the Mat-Su Borough Assembly Candidate Forum and will take place at Everett's in Wasilla, starting at noon. The forum is your chance to ask Assembly candidates their thoughts on tourismrelated issues and other topics impacting Borough residents.

This November, there are three Assembly districts up for election. Running unopposed in District 4 is current Assemblyman Rob Yundt. In District 5, incumbent Mokie Tew is being challenged by Bill Gamble. In District 6, there are four candidates running – incumbent Dmitri Fonov, Stafford Glashan, Jackson Abney and Kerby Coman.

There is no cost to attend the program, and lunch is available for purchase off the menu at Everett's.

In November, the annual Stars of the Industry award luncheon, held in conjunction with the Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting, takes place Thursday, Nov. 9 at the Palmer Depot.

For information about member events, e-mail justin@alaskavisit.com.

Industry calendar

Upcoming member events Assembly candidate forum

Friday, October 6 Everett's, Noon

Annual meeting and awards lunch Thursday, November 9 Palmer Depot 10 a.m. - Arctic Winter Games 11 a.m. - Voice of the Membership Noon - Awards luncheon

October 6	Mat-Su CVB Membership Luncheon Annual Mat-Su Borough Assembly candidate forum	Everett's, Noon
October 23-26	Alaska Travel Industry Association convention Mat-Su CVB staff will attend	Fairbanks
November 4-6	Alaska Media Road Show Mat-Su CVB will attend and take appointments	Las Vegas
November 9	Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting, Award Luncheon Highlight of Arctic Winter Games, Voice of the Membership	Palmer Depot, 10 a.m.

November 23-24 Happy Thanksgiving!

Welcome to these new Mat-Su CVB members!

Join us in welcoming these new members to the Mat-Su CVB team this summer!

Gate Creek Cabins http://gatecreekcabins.com Amanda Allard (907) 375-3826 amanda.allard@msialaska.com

Historic Chulitna River Lodge www.truealaska.org Bonita Prince (601) 278-8712 bprince@truealaska.org

Alaska Adventure Castle Ting Zhu (720) 965-7487 <u>alaskaadventurecastle@gmail.com</u>

Hatcher Pass ATV Tours Daniel Conley (907) 250-5419 hatcherpasstour@gmail.com The Lazy Husky Guest Houses David Shuck (907) 717-9384 <u>dbshuck@hotmail.com</u>

Alaskan Short Stays Melissa Prickett (609) 470-9195 maprickett77@gmail.com

17 Mile Lake Cabins <u>17milelakecabins.com</u> Traci Barickman (907) 315-0324 <u>admin@17milelakecabins.com</u>

Kingdom Cabinz LLC Bonnie Mitchell (406) 231-5847 Kingdomcabinz@gmail.com Wedgewood Resort <u>www.wedgewoodresortalaska.com</u> Karen Wilken (907) 458-6114 <u>karenw@fdialaska.com</u>

Mat-Su CVB office closed

Sophie Station Suites www.sophiestationsuites.com Karen Wilken (907) 458-6114 karenw@fdialaska.com

Bear Lodge at Wedgewood Resort <u>www.bearlodgealaska.com</u> Karen Wilken (907) 458-6114 <u>karenw@fdialaska.com</u>

Glacier Suites <u>www.glaciersuites.com</u> Melany Brooks (907) 726-3684 glaciersuitesAK@gmail.com





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