

# The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Summer 2020

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## From the Board Chair's desk

# Tourism industry is resilient, together we will lead the recovery

First off, and most importantly, I hope you're staying healthy and safe. This summer season is unlike any this industry has ever experienced, and it has been quite a challenge to overcome. During this unprecedented time, I'm proud of the work the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors and staff has done serving as leaders in the industry and helping us all navigate uncharted waters.

We've all been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. In January, we were forecasting a record year for visitation. By the middle of March, that changed dramatically, and surviving a summer with no visitors became a stark reality.

Since March, the Mat-Su CVB staff has worked tirelessly to reach out to members individually to offer assistance and learn how everyone has been impacted. They have been advocating for our industry to the Mat-Su Borough, showing the importance tourism has to the local economy and why tourism matters to not only us in the industry, but also our residents and communities. This is going to be a long-term recovery, but Mat-Su CVB is committed to leading it.

This newsletter is different than the typical quarterly newsletter you receive. You won't find a lot of information about marketing efforts – instead, you'll read about how the Mat-Su CVB has been working as a leading advocate for our industry; how we've been communicating

to our members daily; how we are providing resources for local and state grants and disaster loans; and how we have shifted gears to provide our membership the voice they need at a time they need it most.

Take time to read through this newsletter. You'll find information about how we've changed our membership structure for one year to provide economic relief for our members going through a tough financial year (Page 4). You'll find out more information about our Visitor Guide and discounted options for members (Page 7) so you can continue to market to next summer's potential visitors. You'll also find an update to the in-state marketing campaign and an update on Mat-Su CVB funding, which has been

secured for two years.

Lastly, we have three seats on the Board of Directors up for election this fall, as well as filling a one-year term for a fourth director. I'd encourage members to consider running for the board. Now more than ever, leadership is vital in moving our industry forward during trying times.

Thank you for your continued partnership. We value each and every member and are proud to work alongside you. Together, we are stronger, and we will get through this and rebuild our industry.

*Mark Fleenor (info@sheepmountain.com) owns Sheep Mountain Lodge and is the chair of the Mat-Su CVB Board.*



**Mark Fleenor,**  
**Sheep Mountain Lodge,**  
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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 October elections.

*From the President & CEO's desk*

## Communication, advocacy important during challenging time

This is a special edition of the Bureau Bulletin dedicated to the response and strategies the Mat-Su CVB implemented on behalf of our stakeholders and partners. From the beginning in mid-March of shutdowns and travel restrictions, the Mat-Su CVB staff and board of directors drafted a COVID-19 crisis plan. First, a six-week laser focus on what challenges and shifts needed to be immediately addressed. And second, reevaluate and adjust our marketing and messaging to the current travel sentiment.

Our first priority was you, our membership. Staff began phoning and documenting every member call to touch base and learn about your struggles and challenges. Some of these stories have been heartbreaking. Some have been inspiring and innovative. But it gave us a very real understanding so we could pivot and react to the needs of our partners.

In this urgency we have become a resource of up-to-date travel industry research-based information, hosting webinars, and communicating with much more frequency than ever before. We have continued to make phone calls to members a daily practice and are on our third round of calling each and every one of you.

But during this uncertain and

overwhelming time our organization was also preparing for a very challenging Mat-Su Borough budget cycle beginning at the end of April with four assembly public hearings scheduled on the FY21 budget.

Even though we were in the third year of a three-year grant agreement with the borough, it was very apparent bed tax revenues would fall short of our current funding level. More than a dozen members stepped up to the plate and testified very personal and passionate stories during the public hearings.

In the end of an extended three-month budget process, which included identifying Mat-Su CVB eligible for CARES Relief funds, the assembly



**Bonnie Quill**

on July 14 approved a two-year, \$1.5 million appropriation to the Mat-Su CVB (see related story on Page 3). The borough administration and assembly recognized the value of tourism in supporting this action and understand the Mat-Su CVB will be critical and essential in the economic recovery of tourism in the Mat-Su Borough. It was a huge relief and victory for our organization in a time when it feels like we are drinking out of a fire hose on a daily basis and little good

See CEO REPORT, Page 3

## Board of Directors nominations sought

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 in November.

There are three board openings among the 10-person board, as well as one vacancy that will be filled for a one-year term. Current board seats up for election are currently held by Roberta Warner (Alaska Tour and Travel), Cole Chambers (K2 Aviation/Rust's Flying Service) and Israel Mahay (Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures). Ina Mueller (Lakeside Events and Catering) resigned from the board, and the final year of her term will be filled.

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

Interested members may self nominate. Candidates should declare their candidacy to Quill ([bonnie@alaskavisit.com](mailto:bonnie@alaskavisit.com)) by Sept. 25. Candidates must submit a "letter to the membership" of no longer than 300 words, along with a photo, by Sept. 29. Ballots will then be mailed to members no later than Oct. 5, and due back no later than 5 p.m. Oct. 29.

For more information, interested members can e-mail [bonnie@alaskavisit.com](mailto:bonnie@alaskavisit.com).

# Mat-Su CVB receives two-year funding agreement

The Mat-Su CVB has agreed to a two-year funding grant agreement with the Mat-Su Borough, who appropriated the budget through its share of the federal CARES money.

The agreement ensures budget certainty for two years.

The appropriation from the Mat-Su Borough through the federal CARES money will help the Mat-Su CVB lead the economic recovery as people return to travel.

"This provides a level of certainty that other destination marketing organizations unfortunately aren't experiencing right now. It shows the commitment the Mat-Su Borough has to the tourism industry, and that they recognize tourism as a vital part of our economy," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill. "We can't thank the Mat-Su Borough Assembly enough for their support."

During the initial budget public hearings, 12 Mat-Su CVB members gave testimony as to why the Mat-Su Borough should fund the CVB during these uncertain times. They spoke about tourism's importance to the economy, why marketing will be an important part of the recovery, and their individual struggles during the economic downturn due to Covid-19.

"Those testimonies were very personal, very powerful and very instrumental in communicating to the Assembly the role

*"It shows the commitment the Mat-Su Borough has to the tourism industry, and that they recognize tourism as a vital part of our economy."*

- Bonnie Quill

tourism has not only for our economy, but for improving the quality of life for our residents," Quill said. "Tourism leads to infrastructure development that residents enjoy every day. It is really a shared community value to benefits us all.

"I'd like to personally thank those who spoke during the hearings, because they made a difference not only for the Mat-Su CVB, but for the entire industry," Quill said.

Those who testified included Zac Bramante (Caribou Lodge), Israel Mahay (Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures), Mark Fleenor (Sheep Mountain Lodge), Roberta Warner (Alaska Tour and Travel), Sassan Mossanen (Denali Brewing Company), Suzanne Rust (K2 Aviation), Lars Larson (Knik River Lodge), Rick Peterson (Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge), Alex Papasavas (Turkey Red), Sam Dinges (Palmer Museum and Visitor Center), Steve Solari (Meier Lake Resort) and Mark Austin (Musk Ox Farm).

## CEO Report

Continued from Page 2

news exists.

Consumer travel sentiments toward travel have changed drastically. It is clear tourism's recovery will unfold in waves. Mat-Su CVB will now be able to focus with this two-year commitment from the borough, and reestablish trust among travelers, developing stronger relationships with our communities and stakeholders to rebuild our visitor economy.

And finally I want to add that I am so very proud of the team at Mat-Su CVB. They have been working tirelessly, dedicated to listening to your challenges and spending hours on industry webinars to learn best practices. I have seen them professionally step up to the plate to this challenge, one we never saw coming.

Our team is here for you!

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

## Staff working remotely, providing important resources to members

In an effort to limit exposure, the Mat-Su CVB staff has been working from home since the end of March, but thanks to technology, it remains as connected as ever.

Every day at 3 p.m. the staff "meets" over Zoom to discuss current projects, review daily work reports and strategize for the future.

"We are accomplishing the same level of production, just in a different way," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill. "Even though we are working remotely, our team remains close. We are working hard to provide our members with the resources they need during these times."

In addition to daily calls to members, staff has also regularly attended virtual national webinars from organizations like US Travel, Destination Analysts and the Destination Marketing Association of the West, covering a range of topics including national relief legislation, traveler sentiment analysis, strategies for economic recovery and best practices for marketing a destination during the pandemic.

"We are using our relationships with national organizations to stay up to the minute on every aspect of the pandemic



**Mat-Su CVB staff members Neil Campbell, Casey Ressler, Justin Saunders and Bonnie Quill during their daily 3 p.m. virtual staff meeting.**

– from marketing strategies to federal economic relief packages," Quill said. "We can then pass that information on to our members so they are as informed as possible about things that are constantly changing."

The Mat-Su CVB also created a new members resources hub on the web site that has best practices information, safety protocols from leading national organizations, links to Mat-Su CVB hosted webinars and information from the Alaska Travel Industry Association. You can access that [HERE](#).

# Economic relief grants available for members

There are many local, state and federal grants and disaster relief loans available to members, and we encourage you to take advantage of these programs if they are a good fit for your business.

Locally, there are several ways members can receive grants. As part of the federal CARES grant allocation, the Mat-Su Borough has established a small business program of up to \$10,000 for businesses in the Borough that are not within the city limits of Palmer, Wasilla or Houston. Those cities have established their own grant programs using CARES monies received.

Links to all of the local grant opportunities are available at right.

"We encourage our members to look into the CARES grants offered by the Mat-Su Borough and the local cities," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill. "There are several rounds of applications, and terms will change, so check on them often."

The state of Alaska is also offering CARES grants to small businesses that have suffered during the pandemic. Qualifications are changing regularly, so make sure to check out the web site for the most current information.

The U.S. Small Business Administration is also offering assistance to businesses through the national Paycheck Protection Plan and the Emergency Injury Disaster Loan program.

Before applying, make sure you read all of the terms and conditions – the EIDL, for example, is more of a loan program that requires repayment, while the PPP turns into a grant if the monies are used according to established criteria. Some programs can be combined, while others may not.

The Alaska Small Business Development Center is a great resource for members looking for more information about economic grants and disaster loans. Visit their web site at <https://aksbdc.org/>

## CARES Grants links

U.S. Small Business Association (PPP and EIDL)

<https://www.sba.gov/>

Mat-Su Borough CARES grants

<https://msbcares.matsugov.us/>

City of Wasilla CARES grants

<https://www.cityofwasilla.com/>

City of Palmer CARES grants

<https://www.palmerak.org/departments/finance>

City of Houston CARES grants

<https://www.houstonak.com/>

State of Alaska CARES grants

<https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/ded/AKCARESGrant.aspx>

# EDA grant opportunity to fund Gateway Visitor Center

Since the final design and construction documents for the Gateway Visitor Center were completed in 2016 during the recession, state and local capital funding has declined significantly for projects. The Mat-Su CVB board and the Mat-Su Visitor Foundation have focused their efforts on securing federal grants to fund the final construction of the Gateway Visitor Center.

In April, a funding opportunity through the CARES Act and the Economic Development Administration (EDA) was announced and the Mat-Su CVB has been working with the borough administration and grant writers on submitting an application for final construction of the Gateway Visitor Center.

We are encouraged that this project fits the criteria of long-term economic impact and recovery.

The current timeline is final review and submission of the grant to EDA by the end of August.

"For the past two years we have been creatively researching federal opportunities and meeting with our congressional delegation to find federal funding opportunities for the construction of the Gateway Visitor Center," stated Bonnie Quill. "It is heartbreaking that the devastating result of the pandemic to our visitor economy would bring this



**Federal grants present an opportunity to secure funding for the construction of the Gateway Visitor Center.**

opportunity, but we are confident the project would bring lasting economic benefits to tourism businesses in the borough."

For more information about the Mat-Su Visitor Foundation and the Gateway Visitor Center project, visit [www.matsuvallleyvisitorcenter.com](http://www.matsuvallleyvisitorcenter.com).

# Mat-Su CVB webinars available online on demand

The Mat-Su CVB has hosted nine webinars providing information and updates to members since the onset of Covid-19. All of the webinars are available to view on YouTube in their entirety in case members missed the live feed and want to catch up. Click [HERE](#) for the link.

Topics have ranged from grant assistance programs to the Alaska State Parks and in-state marketing campaigns.

"The webinars are educational and informative and give members the most current information possible about a wide range of topics," Mat-Su CVB Marketing Manager Casey Ressler said. "Often times, such as with disaster loans and CARES grants, information is changing rapidly, so webinars are the best way for us to get information to members."

## March 27 – Mat-Su CVB response to coronavirus

The first webinar featured representatives from the U.S. Small Business Administration to talk about disaster relief loans, as well as Danalyn Dalrymple, a Palmer attorney who talked about contracts. Roberta Warner of Alaska Tour and Travel also spoke about the outlook for tourism.

## April 6 – Communications

The Mat-Su CVB team hosted a webinar on the ins and outs of Zoom communications, as well as using video to highlight your products virtually during quarantine.

## April 9 – Small Business Development Center

Julie Nolen joined the webinar to talk about how the Alaska Small Business Development Center can assist people with applications for the disaster relief loans and the Paycheck Protection Plan grants.

## April 16 – Impact of Disaster Relief Loans

Crystal Stanley, a CPA with Fosselman & Associates, talked about the long-term implications of various assistance loans being offered, and why some make more sense than others for small businesses.

## May 7 – Mat-Su Borough Economic Impact Survey

Mat-Su Borough Assemblymember Stephanie Nowers talked about the borough's economic impact survey and its importance for identifying industries and sectors hardest hit by the Covid-19



pandemic.

## May 14 – Alaska State Parks

Mat-Su Area Superintendent Stuart Leidner gave an overview of what to expect in Alaska State Parks for the summer season, with in-state visitors already visiting in record numbers.

## May 21 – Safety Protocols for Reopening

Alicia Maltby of the Alaska Hotel and Lodging Association talked about safety protocols and sanitation processes that businesses should be using when they reopen. Colleen Stephens of the ATIA board also spoke about a unified message for reopening for the industry.

## May 29 – Alaska Highway Neighbors

Representatives from communities along the road system gathered to give overviews of what is going on their towns, and what visitors can expect this summer.

## June 12 – Show Up For Alaska

Jillian Simpson of ATIA gave an overview of the new in-state marketing campaign, Show Up For Alaska. Casey Ressler of the Mat-Su CVB gave specifics about what is being done to market the Mat-Su Valley to Alaskans this summer.

## July 30 – Understanding CARES Grants

Nowers returned to discuss the Mat-Su Borough's CARES funding, including small business grants and individual grants. Nolen also returned to talk about the application process for city grants.

## Stay connected to tell our story!



[www.facebook.com/visitmatsu](http://www.facebook.com/visitmatsu)

[www.twitter.com/visitmatsu](https://www.twitter.com/visitmatsu)



YouTube  
"yahoomatsu" channel

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



# Mat-Su CVB launches robust in-state campaign

The Mat-Su CVB launched its largest in-state marketing campaign on July 1 and it will run through the end of August, highlighting the Valley as a place for Alaskans to recreate and a way to support local businesses during trying times.

The multi-faceted campaign stresses health and safety of destinations and activities in the Valley. A big component is Alaska resident special offers – more than 30 offers are currently on the web site.

“We knew this summer was going to be a challenge with virtually no out-of-state visitors, so we shifted our focus to promote our destination in a safe manner to locals, because they are more important than ever to our members,” said Casey Ressler, the Mat-Su CVB marketing and communications manager. “When times are tough, Alaskans show up.”

“Show Up For Alaska” is the statewide marketing program geared towards Alaskans, and the Mat-Su CVB adapted that to include a “Show Up For the Valley” theme.

All campaign components are geotargeted to Alaskans. It includes print



advertising in the Anchorage Daily News and The Warrior (military) newspapers, targeted pay-per-click advertising, digital ads on the Google ad network, streaming television commercials, social media advertising, radio promotion and social media influencers such as the Alaska Travelgram and Humans Outside podcast.

“It’s the most robust in-state campaign we’ve ever done, and we’re using every outlet possible,” Ressler said.

Video is a big component of the campaign as well. Mat-Su CVB produced eight “Show Up For The Valley” videos in

house, highlighting different destinations and activities, including one that encourages visitors to show up responsibly and adhere to safety protocols. You can view all of the Show Up videos, along with streaming webinars, at the [Mat-Su CVB YouTube channel](https://www.alaskavisit.com/alaskans).

The campaign has been a success in driving traffic to the microsite, [www.alaskavisit.com/alaskans](https://www.alaskavisit.com/alaskans). In July, site visitation from Alaskans was up 102 percent from 2019, with the Alaska resident special offers page one of the most visited.

## Members adapt operations, give back to the community

The tourism industry has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in a major way, but it’s not been only bad news. Since spring, Mat-Su CVB has highlighted several members who have found ways to turn lemons into lemonade. If you have a member success story, we’d love to hear about it!

Here are a few of their stories.

Mat-Su Resort and Local’s Pizzeria – when state mandates shut them down to in-person dining, these two Mat-Su restaurants decided to reach out and help first responders and front line medical workers. They delivered food to Mat-Su Regional Medical Center to provide meals for the employees, which was much appreciated.

Salmon Berry Tours – with group tours severely hard hit by cancellations, Salmon Berry Tours changed their operations. While still hosting group tours, they now use their vehicles for grocery pick-up and delivery for Southcentral Alaska residents. They also took over as the concessionaire for Independence Mine State Historical Park and are doing a great job.

Alaska Farm Tours – instead of bringing people to farms, they are taking farms to the people. They are using their vehicles to deliver CSA boxes to



**Eli Wouk of Salmon Berry Tours conducts a tour at Independence Mine. Salmon Berry is one of several members who have adapted their businesses this summer.**

subscribers and have delivered farmer’s goods to individuals in Southcentral.

MICA Guides – while normally busy trekking on Matanuska Glacier in early June, some of their guides used down time to help build and maintain trails in the

Glacier View area.

Denali Brewing Company – as the demand for hand sanitizer increased this summer, Denali Brewing Company stepped up and started producing it at their Talkeetna facility.

# Membership year extended, price reduced for 2021

The Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors voted to amend the membership year to give members more flexibility during this uncertain time.

Traditionally, the \$200 membership year begins on July 1, with renewal notices going out in early June. Following this one-time change, the membership year was extended until Oct. 1 at no cost to members. The membership fee for 2020-2021 was also reduced to \$150.

"We know many of our members and partners are facing financial hardships right now, and we want to work with them as we lead the economic recovery of the tourism industry," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill.

Members still have the option to renew early while filling out their visitor guide advertising packets to make things simpler.

"We value each and every one of our members and are committed to working with them during these challenging times," Quill said. "We are all in this together."

All Mat-Su CVB members receive a basic listing in the printed visitor guide, as well as online listing that includes a list of amenities, several photos, a description, and an optional TripAdvisor review integration. Members also have access to cooperative marketing programs offered throughout the year.

For any questions about membership, contact Justin Saunders at 354-5032 or [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com).

# Mat-Su Borough Assembly candidate forum set for Oct. 23

The Mat-Su CVB is hosting its annual Mat-Su Borough Assembly candidate forum this fall, with a twist – it will be a virtual luncheon, hosted on Zoom.

The forum will be Friday, October 23 at 1 p.m., and hosted as a Zoom webinar. Like the traditional luncheon, Mat-Su CVB

members will be able to submit questions ahead of the webinar, and the candidates will be asked them live.

This year, two MSB Assembly seats are up for election – District 4 (Ted Leonard) and District 5 (Dan Mayfield). Voters will decide those two seats on the November

3 ballot, which was moved from October as in the past. Early and absentee voting begins on Monday, October 19 and continues through Monday, November 2. For more information on Mat-Su Borough elections, please visit <https://www.matsugov.us/elections>

## Web site performs well against industry averages

As people cancelled travel plans during the pandemic, web site traffic to destination marketing organizations was negatively impacted. However, the Mat-Su CVB web site fared well against industry averages.

The Mat-Su CVB paused pay-per-click advertising in mid-March. Organic traffic to the site has only dipped two percent in 2020 (compared to 2019), while the industry average is a drop of 28 percent. Alaska DMOs as a whole had a drop of 13 percent, according to Simpleview, the company that manages destination web sites around the world.

Alaskans comprise a majority of the web site traffic since March, when the pandemic began. Traffic from Alaska web site visitors is up more than 100 percent compared to 2019.

"When the pandemic began, we shifted our focus to marketing to Alaskans, and the results have been good," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler.

# Visitor Guide ad packets mailed

The Mat-Su CVB is printing a 2021 Visitor Guide in late December, one of only a handful of guides that will be printed statewide for next year.

There will be 75,000 copies printed, and due to financial hardships our members are experiencing, display advertising has been discounted 25 percent.

"We decided to print a 2021 guide because as people begin traveling again, it will be more important than ever to have trip planning information for them, and for our members," Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill said. "We understand the strains that our members are feeling right now, and that's why we have tried to make it

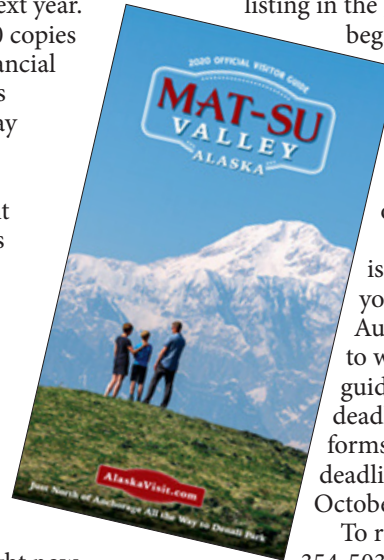
as affordable as possible and lowered the display ad prices."

All Mat-Su CVB members receive a free listing in the guide. Display advertising begins at just \$127.

Packets were recently mailed to members, and Membership Manager Justin Saunders is available to assist members with filling out the forms.

The early bird deadline is fast approaching - submit your completed forms by August 14 and you'll be entered to win a free 1/8 page ad in the guide, including design. The deadline for submitting completed forms is October 1 and the deadline to submit new artwork is October 16.

To reach Justin Saunders, call 354-5032 or e-mail him at [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com).



# 2020 Travel Auction cancelled

The 2020 Mat-Su CVB Beer & Wine Tasting EXTRAVELganza fund-raiser was cancelled due to the pandemic.

The event, originally scheduled for the spring, is the largest fund-raiser of the year for the Mat-Su CVB, and a signature gathering to not only raise money, but also awareness about the tourism industry.

"We were trying to postpone it until the fall, but out of an abundance of caution for the current situation, we felt like cancelling it was the right decision," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill. "We would still like to thank all of those who sponsored and donated to the auction to show their support for the event."



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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