

# The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Winter Edition

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Mat-Su CVB's Justin Saunders presents the Cheechako Award to Skeetawk.

## 'Stars of the Industry' honored

Several local tourism businesses and individuals were honored by the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau Nov. 18 during the organization's annual Stars of the Industry luncheon.

The Cheechako Award honors a new tourism business or organization that has thrived in its early years. This year, Skeetawk Ski Area was honored after their first two successful winters of operation. The non-profit organization is currently

expanding and expects to have night skiing available this winter for the first time ever.

The Northern Lights Award honors a community in the Mat-Su Borough that has outstanding tourism promotion and development. This year, the Willow Area Community Organization won the award for their promotion of Willow as a year-round destination, along with running the

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## Gateway Visitor Center part of panel discussion

New visitor data, master plans and visitor centers – all that and more was covered by an expert panel during the Mat-Su CVB Annual Meeting Nov. 18 at Evangelo's.

Sarah Leonard, President & CEO of ATIA; Julie Saupe, President & CEO of Visit Anchorage; and Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill gave important updates from around Southcentral Alaska to the attendees.

Leonard gave an update on the ATIA marketing plan, new cultural marketing programs and reported a \$10.5 million

budget for destination marketing. She also spoke about the new Alaska Visitor Statistics Program findings.

"We found that 61 percent of our visitors were independent visitors and 35 percent were cruisers, which is a complete flip-flop of the numbers when we last did the AVSP," Leonard said.

Saupe reported about the recently completed Anchorage Strategic Master Plan. Among the goals it identifies is to increase total annual revenues and

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Mat-Su CVB  
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*From the Board Chair's desk*

## Future of our industry is bright

The Mat-Su CVB sat its newly elected board members at the November 18 Annual Meeting, and organized its officers for the upcoming year. I'm excited to step in as the Board Chair for this year, and look forward to working with members as we continue to move our industry forward.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Mark Fleenor, the outgoing chair who led the organization for the last three years. He stepped into the role just months before the pandemic reshaped our industry. His continual leadership and foresight not only allowed our organization to survive, but thrive. Mark remains on the board and the executive committee, and I thank him for guiding Mat-Su CVB so admirably the last three years.

I'd also like to welcome Kierre Childers of Revel Treks and Tours and Sam Dinges of Alaska Trails (formerly of the Palmer Museum) to the board, along with incumbent Fernando Salvador of Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge. I would also like to thank outgoing board members Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours and Rick Peterson of Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge; we wish you the best and look forward to continuing our work with you promoting tourism in Mat-Su.

This is an exciting time for our industry, as you heard from Sarah Leonard, Julie Saupe and Bonnie Quill during our panel presentation at the annual meeting. Travel has not only recovered but rebounded impressively. There are many positive developments in the Mat-Su Borough that will continue this growth, and using our recently completed Sustainable Tourism Master Plan, grow responsibly.

I've been a passionate supporter of

the Gateway Visitor Center since I was first elected to the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors nearly 15 years ago. So much work has gone on behind the scenes to make this project become a reality, and in October, the Mat-Su Borough Assembly voted to accept a \$6.7 million U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Grant.

We look forward to starting construction in the spring, with an estimated completion date in late 2024.

The center will be something we can be proud of as a community. While termed a "visitor's center" we view this equally as a community center to bring people together from all over the Valley and beyond. We will celebrate our rich cultural heritage in all its manifestations at the center, as well as each region of the vast and diverse Matanuska and



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

Susitna Valleys that offer so much to our residents as well as our visitors. Thank you to all who have worked so hard to bring this project to reality.

Finally, thank you to you our members, the work that we do is for you. Without your support, we would not be able to accomplish what we do as an organization. The staff and the board is always open to hearing from you, and we encourage you to provide us feedback.

The board of directors will be attending a planning retreat on January 17-18 please let us know of any topics or issues that you would like the board to discuss.

*Mark Austin is the Executive Director at the Musk Ox Farm in Palmer and the new Chair of the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors.*

### MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

#### Upcoming Mat-Su CVB Membership Luncheons

January 20 - Turkey Red  
"Using social media to grow your business"

February 24 - Turkey Red  
"How Mat-Su CVB marketing works for you!"



## *From the President & CEO's desk*

# Mat-Su CVB staff forms a strong, professional working family

The snow is fast piling up outside as I write this column reminding me of the challenges this record snowfall will bring but also the opportunities. Heck it's not even winter yet and we have more snow to play in than I can remember.

Staff has been on the phone this week contacting our members for winter product updates preparing for new content, blog and social media posts to inspire winter visitors.

For the past three years the staff at Mat-Su CVB has been light on our feet and nimble dealing with the restrictions and mandates of Covid. We are conditioned and invested in research and resources to implement the best practices to inspire a visit to the Mat-Su Valley.

The true value of your membership is the access and knowledge of the Mat-Su CVB staff. Collectively we have worked as a team for nearly 80 years!

We are connected to our communities and passionate about the visitor industry.

I am so thankful for my work family and I want to recognize the team that makes us better.

Justin Saunders joined the Mat-Su CVB in 2008 as our Membership Manager. He knows all of you on a first name basis. He is responsible for organizing all our events and your placement in our annual visitor guide and website.

Justin was born and raised in Palmer and spends all of his free time hiking outdoors, photographing wildlife and birds. His appreciation for this place we call home is so deep, a quality I frequently call him my "compass."

Casey Ressler has been with Mat-Su CVB since 2006. He was a well-respected reporter and editor for many years at the Frontiersman and I

convinced him to jump ship to join the visitor industry.

He has become a rockstar Marketing & Communications Manager hosting journalists and tour operators,



**Bonnie Quill,  
Mat-Su CVB  
President & CEO**

coordinating photo shoots, representing the CVB at industry events, and implementing all our marketing programs and website development. He has the most likeable nature and that is a priceless quality for someone representing the Mat-Su Valley. A fishing pole and sports balance out his life.

Neil Campbell is the longest-serving employee of the Mat-Su CVB.

Behind the scenes he has been the Administrative Manager for nearly 25 years.

Neil is our glue, historian and keeper of all the passwords. He is our scrupulous and detailed bookkeeper I rely on to safeguard our finances. Neil most likely is the first person you hear on the phone and he will connect you or answer your questions. He attends and drafts all the Mat-Su CVB board meeting minutes that records all of our activities and priorities.



**Neil Campbell will  
retire from Mat-Su  
CVB on Dec. 31**

Neil recently announced his retirement for December 31, 2022. Although we knew this was coming, he will definitely leave a big hole in our organization and taking a quarter century of information with him. He has experienced the birth, growth and respected reputation the Mat-Su CVB has earned and he has been a big part of our team's success.

We will miss him but congratulate him on a career well-done.

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

## PANEL

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profitability for tourism in Southcentral Alaska; improve the liveability and appreciation of tourism among residents; and ensure natural assets are protected and sustained for locals and visitors to enjoy for generations to come.

Quill finished the presentation by updating members on the \$6.7 million EDA grant to complete the Gateway Visitor Center, distributing a handout of the Sustainable Tourism Master Plan goals, and an update on cultural marketing initiatives.

"We are excited about the Gateway Visitor Center, and what it will bring to the Mat-Su. We expect construction to begin in spring of 2023 and have it complete toward the end of 2024," Quill said.

If you missed the annual meeting, you can see the presentation in the Member Resources section of the web site. Click [HERE](#) for the panelist slides.

## AWARDS

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Willow Winter Carnival.

The Gold Star Award recognizes a business or organization that has made a significant contribution to the tourism industry. The Alaska Railroad was this year's winner, for their efforts in connecting communities, expanding winter operations, partnering with local businesses and providing an elite visitor experience.

Mark Fleenor of Sheep Mountain Lodge was the recipient of the Tourism Angel Award.

Fleenor served as the Mat-Su CVB Board Chair for three years, leading the organization during the pandemic. Under his leadership, the Mat-Su CVB received national recognition for marketing efforts, as well as secured a \$6.7 million EDA grant for the completion of the Gateway Visitor Center.

Two Spirit of Tourism Awards were given out during the luncheon. The first was a memorial for Chuck Spaulding of Nova Alaska River Guides. Spaulding was a pioneer in the local tourism industry and passed away in 2021.

The second Spirit of Tourism Award went to former Mat-Su Borough Mayor Vern Halter, for all of his contributions and support for the tourism industry.

## Mat-Su CVB meets with writers at Media Road Show

Mat-Su CVB met with leading national travel writers and bloggers at Alaska Media Road Show in Las Vegas in late October, highlighting the destination and pitching stories about the Mat-Su Valley.

"Alaska Media Road Show is a great opportunity to meet new travel writers, and strengthen relationships with writers we've met in the past," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler. "It's a very productive and efficient way to tell our story."

At the three-day event, Mat-Su CVB had 22 15-minute appointments with writers from outlets such as CNN Travel, Bloomberg, AARP Magazine, Matador and other top publications. Alaska Media Road Show also features networking opportunities.

"Developing ongoing relationships with travel writers is so important to generate coverage," Ressler said.

Mat-Su CVB highlighted new products including Talkeetna, Glacier View and Knik River Valley opportunities, and spoke about the cultural aspects of the region.

"The writers all have a different niche, so it gives us the opportunity to pitch a wide variety of stories in one setting,"



Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler and Bonnie Quill meet with a travel writer during an appointment at Alaska Media Road Show in Las Vegas.

Ressler said. "We may be meeting with a food writer during one appointment and then an outdoor adventure writer in the next appointment."

The program is coordinated by Thompson & Co., the Alaska Travel Industry Association's public relations agency.

## 2023 Visitor Guide printing in late December

The 2023 Mat-Su Visitor Guide is printing next week, and members can look forward to receiving their copies in the mail in early January.

This year, 100,000 copies are being printed. The cover features a group hiking, with Knik Glacier in the background.

"The printed visitor guide is still an important marketing tool. Research has shown that even in this digital world, travelers still rely on a printed guide," said Casey Ressler, Mat-Su CVB's marketing manager.

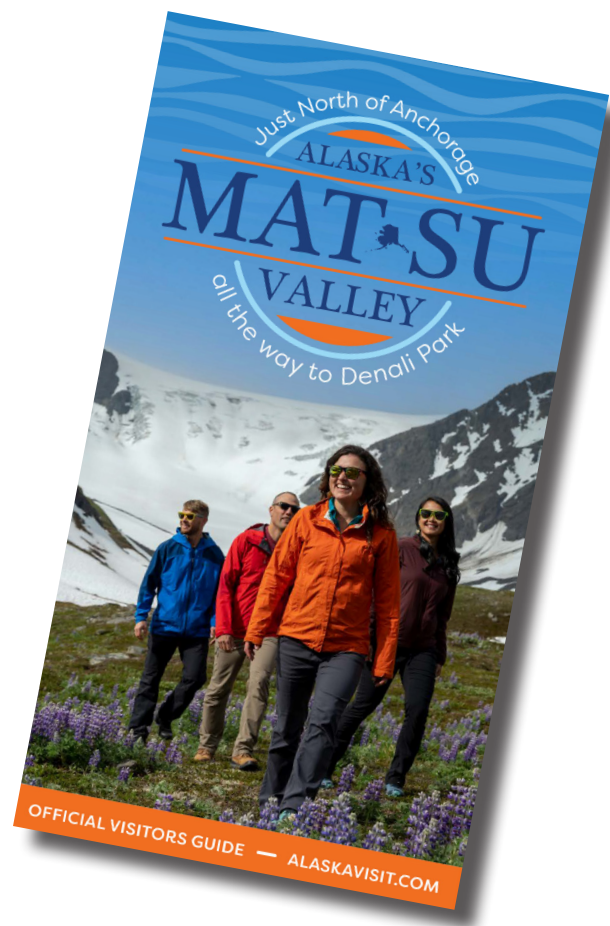
The guide is distributed to potential visitors who request a copy on the Mat-Su CVB web site, to tour operators and travel agents at industry events, as well as throughout Alaska at a high-traffic areas for visitors.

The Mat-Su CVB also purchases leads from the Alaska Travel Industry Association of people who have requested a state vacation planner and more information about visiting. An ad in AARP Magazine also generates approximately 3,000 leads for distribution.

The guide was designed by Brilliant Media Strategies in Anchorage and features new images from a successful summer photo shoot that included new products such as ziplining, glamping and paddleboarding.

All Mat-Su CVB members receive a complimentary listing in the guide, as well as the opportunity to purchase display ads and narratives.

If you would like more copies of the 2023 guide, please e-mail [info@alaskavisit.com](mailto:info@alaskavisit.com) and we can make sure you receive enough guides for your guests.





# New board members seated at annual meeting

The Mat-Su CVB sat two new board members during its Annual Meeting and Voice of the Membership Nov. 18 at Evangelo's.

The 10-person board welcomed Kierre Childers of Revel Treks and Tours and Sam Dinges from Alaska Trails. Fernando Salvador of Pursuit/Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge also won reelection to the board, and all three will serve three-year terms.

Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours and Rick Peterson of Holland America-Princess were honored for their contributions to the board.

At the annual meeting, the organization's new officers were also announced. Mark Austin of the Musk Ox Farm will serve as chair, with Roberta Warner of Alaska Tour & Travel as the vice chair. Wes Hoskins of the Mat-Su Trails & Parks Foundation is the treasurer, and Israel Mahay of Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures is the secretary. Mark Fleenor of Sheep Mountain Lodge is the past chair, and Childers will join the executive committee.

Continuing on the board are Cole Chambers of K2 Aviation and Heather Dudick of the Alaska Railroad.

# Co-op marketing available at in-state, national shows

The Mat-Su CVB is offering brochure distribution at five in-state and national travel shows as part of the cooperative marketing program.

Members can have up to 100 of their rack cards distributed at each show Mat-Su CVB attends for \$25, or opt for all five shows for \$100.

"Brochure distribution is an affordable way to reach Alaskans and their visiting friends and relatives," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said. "And there are two opportunities to reach high-potential visitors at national shows in Seattle and Los Angeles."

The Mat-Su CVB will be attending the Los Angeles Travel & Adventure Show in February, the Princess/Holland America Alaska Showcase in Seattle in

early March, and then a series of three in-state shows in March and April – the Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show, the Great Alaska Sportsman Show and the Fairbanks Outdoors Show.

At the Los Angeles Travel and Adventure Show, Mat-Su CVB is offering a booth share for \$300, which is limited to two members (travel costs not included).

Giveaways are also needed for the Mat-Su CVB booth at in-state shows. If your business would like to donate a trip or an experience, Mat-Su CVB will distribute your brochures for free at all the shows and you'll be featured on a table-top display.

You can register for the co-op marketing program [HERE](http://HERE). For more information, e-mail [casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com)

## Upcoming consumer shows

**Los Angeles Travel & Adventure Show**

Feb. 18-19, Los Angeles

**Holland America Alaska Showcase**  
March 18, Seattle

**Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show**  
March 24-26, Menard Center

**Great Alaska Sportsman Show**  
April 14-16, Dena'ina Center

**Fairbanks Outdoors Show**  
April 21-23, Fairbanks

# Reach visitors by advertising on AlaskaVisit.com

Through a partnership with Destination Travel Network (DTN), the Mat-Su CVB offers affordable advertising on AlaskaVisit.com, to complement your free online listing.

Advertising on AlaskaVisit.com lets you leverage Mat-Su CVB's investment in digital marketing and bring visitors to your web site. The Mat-Su CVB partners with DTN, which handles all the sales, design and delivery of ads on the website, and DTN employees typically reach out to members on Mat-Su CVB's behalf.

"Advertising on AlaskaVisit.com is a way to get in front of potential visitors when they are actively planning," said Mat-Su CVB Membership Manager Justin Saunders. "DTN can tailor a package to any member's budget. Ads are designed so that they look like part of the regular site content."

Packages include page sponsorships, featured listings, run-of-site ads and mobile ads. Every member has a complimentary listing online, and DTN ads only amplify your presence on the site.

Mat-Su CVB has robust paid search engine marketing and search engine optimization programs, so by placing a digital ad on the site, you reap additional benefits.

If you are interested in learning more about online advertising opportunities, contact Justin Saunders at [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com).

The screenshot displays the AlaskaVisit.com website interface. At the top, there are two featured banners: "FREE ALASKA PLANNER" and "EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY OF ALASKA". Below these, a grid of travel packages is shown, including "Alaska Tour & Travel", "Stay at Alaska Sunset View Resort", "Glacier & Wildlife Cruises", and "Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures". Each package includes a description and a "Learn More" link. To the right of the grid, a text box labeled "Interior page advertising" points to the layout. Below the grid, a section titled "Advertise on the home page of AlaskaVisit.com" shows a row of four smaller advertisements for "Stay at Alaska Sunset View Resort", "Kenai River Lodge", "Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures", and "Create Your Perfect Adventure".

# AlaskaVisit.com sees large increase in web traffic

The Mat-Su CVB's largest marketing investment, www.AlaskaVisit.com, continues to pay off, as site visitation has increased by more than 18 percent over 2021.

Through Nov. 30, more than 313,000 sessions generated a half a million pageviews.

"Our site analytics continue to be well above industry average, and while some DMOs experienced a noticeable decrease in organic traffic in 2022, ours increased by 17 percent," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said.

The Mat-Su CVB invests in a search engine optimization program that ensures potential visitors find the site when searching relevant terms online. A strong content strategy featuring regularly published blogs and new site content is part of the overall SEO strategy.

"We always want to have fresh and relative content on the web site to help with organic traffic," Ressler explained.

Mat-Su CVB also has a strong search engine marketing, or "pay-per-click" strategy that brings paid traffic to the site. In 2022, paid search traffic increased by 49 percent, while the cost per click remains below industry averages.

In 2022, Mat-Su CVB also invested in a new trail map widget for the web site, which is also search engine optimized. It gives site visitors information about local trails, such as length, difficulty and usage, as well as a Google Earth map.

"The web site not only gives visitors information about the destination and trip planning advice, it also drives visitors to our member listings," Ressler said. "It's important that we give members good visibility on the site as a member benefit."



*AlaskaVisit.com traffic, Jan. 1-Nov. 30, compared to 2021*



## 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  
[matsuvallleyak](https://www.instagram.com/matsuvallleyak)





## Celebrating the stars!



Left, the Willow Area Community Organization accepts the Northern Lights Award at the 'Stars of the Industry' award luncheon. Right, Heather Dudick of the Alaska Railroad accepts the Gold Star Award from Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Bonnie Quill.

## Industry calendar of events

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Location</u>
Dec. 24-Jan. 2	Mat-Su CVB office closed for holidays	
Jan. 17-18	Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors Retreat	Alaska Glacier Lodge
Feb. 18-19	Los Angeles Travel and Adventure Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Los Angeles
Feb. 27-March 2	Go West Summit	Anchorage
March 2-7	Mat-Su CVB Winter photo shoot	
March 18	Princess/Holland America Alaska Showcase <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Seattle
March 24-26	Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Menard Center
April 14-16	Great Alaska Sportsman Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Dena'ina Center
April 21-23	Fairbanks Outdoors Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Carlson Center

## Welcome to these new Mat-Su CVB members!

Susitna Brewing Company  
Whitney Dow  
(907) 892-2337

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Blue Lantern Lodge  
<https://www.thebluelanternlodge.com>  
Kurt Hansmeier  
(907) 227-3439  
[reservations@thebluelanternlodge.com](mailto:reservations@thebluelanternlodge.com)

Glacier Breeze Cabin  
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Chris Mobley  
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[theglacierbreeze@gmail.com](mailto:theglacierbreeze@gmail.com)

Susitna Adventure Lodge  
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[codystrathe@gmail.com](mailto:codystrathe@gmail.com)

Alaska Lakes Guide Service  
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Alaska Trails  
[www.alaska-trails.org](http://www.alaska-trails.org)  
Sam Dinges  
(907) 334-8049



Happy holidays from the Mat-Su CVB Board and staff! Our office will be closed December 24 through January 2 to celebrate the holiday season.

**YAHOO!**  
**Mat-Su**

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