

# The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Winter 2023 Edition

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## Contact us

**Casey Ressler**

President & CEO

863-4931

[casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com)

**Justin Saunders**

Marketing & Communications Mgr.

354-5032

[justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com)

**Katie Reeves**

Membership Manager

746-5001

[katie@alaskavisit.com](mailto:katie@alaskavisit.com)

**Tasha Belka**

Administrative Manager

746-5000

[info@alaskavisit.com](mailto:info@alaskavisit.com)

## Mat-Su CVB members receive tourism awards, recognition

The Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau honored five local businesses during its annual “Stars of the Industry” awards luncheon Nov. 9 at the Palmer Depot.

At the awards luncheon, the Cheechako Award was given to Paddle Sports by True North AK. The award honors a relatively new business that has thrived in its early years. Paddle Sports adds an excellent visitor experience to the Valley and has become a favored networking partner among tourism businesses. Derek Van Kampen accepted the award.

A second Cheechako Award was given to Alaska Zipline Adventure Park for establishing a world-class zipline experience in the Valley’s core area.

The Northern Lights Award honors a community or organization that has distinguished itself for tourism promotion. This year’s winner was Chickaloon Village Traditional Council for leading the industry in building a genuine cultural focus on tourism.

The Gold Star Award is given to a business that has made a significant accomplishment in the industry. This year’s award winner was Mat-Su 2024 Arctic Winter Games Host Society for its outstanding efforts to prepare the Valley for the 2024 Arctic Winter Games.

This year’s Tourism Angel Award was given to Roberta Warner of Alaska Tour and Travel. Roberta is an asset on Mat-Su CVB’s board of directors, a steady participant at member events, and an invaluable advocate for tourism at borough assembly meetings.

The Spirit of Community Award was accepted by Deputy Borough Manager George Hays on behalf of the Mat-Su Borough. The borough has a longstanding reputation of supporting the tourism industry in the Mat-Su Valley.



Mat-Su Borough Assemblywoman Stephanie Nowers presents the Gold Star Award to Amy Spargo on behalf of Mat-Su 2024 Arctic Winter Games Host Society.

Other tourism businesses in the Valley have recently received industry-wide recognition. Kierre Childers, founder of Revel Treks and Tours, received the Alaska Travel Industry Association’s Chuck West Award for exhibiting entrepreneurial creativity, innovation, and courage in the introduction of a successful new product.

Teal Sky Heller of BlueWater Basecamp received funding through ATIA’s Shark Tank program to enhance their lodge with the latest in advanced accessibility features for travelers with disabilities.

**2023-2024  
Mat-Su CVB  
Board of Directors**

Mark Austin,  
Musk Ox Farm  
Chair  
(907) 745-4151  
[mark@muskoxfarm.org](mailto:mark@muskoxfarm.org)

Kierre Childers  
Revel Treks & Tours  
Vice Chair  
(907) 903-1664  
[info@revelak.com](mailto:info@revelak.com)

Travis Taylor  
Premier Alaska Tours, Inc.  
Treasurer  
(907) 279-0001  
[travis@touralaska.net](mailto:travis@touralaska.net)

Mark Fleenor  
Sheep Mountain Lodge  
Secretary  
(907) 745-5121  
[info@sheepmountain.com](mailto:info@sheepmountain.com)

Roberta Warner  
Alaska Tour & Travel  
At-large Executive Committee Member  
(907) 550-0006  
[roberta@alaskatravel.com](mailto:roberta@alaskatravel.com)

Heather Dudick  
Alaska Railroad  
(907) 265-2622  
[dudickh@akrr.com](mailto:dudickh@akrr.com)

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

Mandy Garcia  
Salmon Berry Travel & Tours  
(907) 278-3572  
[mandy@salmonberrytours.com](mailto:mandy@salmonberrytours.com)

Jennifer Brandon-Hanks  
Alaska Glacier Lodge & Alaska  
Helicopter Tours  
(907) 272-7777  
[jenn@alaskahelicoptertours.com](mailto:jenn@alaskahelicoptertours.com)

Jeff Curtis  
Alaska State Fair  
(907) 745-4827  
[jeff@alaskastatefair.org](mailto:jeff@alaskastatefair.org)

*From the Board Chair's desk*

## Leaning into 2024 with new strength

I am pleased to see winter tourism and recreation get ever increasing attention and activity. We all know the Valley is a magical place this time of year. This is also a productive planning time for Mat-Su CVB as the organization leans into future goals for the Valley's tourism industry.

I am pleased to serve as board chair again this year, and I'm absolutely thrilled to be working with our new line-up of directors. Board elections were very successful, with close results across all candidates. I couldn't be more grateful to those who put their names forward, to the voters who participated in the election, and to the newly elected board members who have already shown impressive commitment to this organization. I am excited to see what we may achieve in the coming year.

I know it's already been well circulated that Mat-Su CVB's own Casey Ressler is the organization's new President and CEO. I just want to highlight the tremendous job Casey has done so far. We've always enjoyed great leadership. With Casey's vision and energy, this remains to be true. He's assembled a capable staff, and they are charging forward with a focus on our goals for infrastructure, community awareness, government advocacy, and an even greater connection with prospective visitors.

The board of directors was able to conference with Mat-Su CVB members at our annual Voice of the Membership Meeting on December 1, 2023. We had a good turnout and great engagement at

that meeting. This was our opportunity to hear and vote on issues brought forth by the membership. We reviewed the organization's funding avenues since the pandemic, and reaffirmed our goals for future funding. Member input is important to this organization. I'm grateful so many feel invested in Mat-Su CVB's success.

Equally important as the borough's continued funding support of Mat-Su CVB is our advancing progress toward the building of our new Gateway Visitor Center. Federal grant funding is secured for this project, of course, but some new challenges have recently arisen regarding planning and material costs. Though these new issues require some problem solving and creative solutions, I am confident in the continued progress toward our goal.

I'm excited for the board's upcoming annual retreat on January 25-

26. It will be our chance as a complete board, with its newly elected members, to collaborate and plan alongside Mat-Su CVB's strong staff so that we can take full advantage of the coming years with a clear vision for the growth and success of this organization. My sincere thanks to you, the member businesses who support us and stay involved. Active and vocal members are the primary reason why Mat-Su CVB has grown and thrived all these years.

Mark Austin ([mark@muskoxfarm.org](mailto:mark@muskoxfarm.org))  
is the chair of the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors.



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

## New board members elected

Following the October election by its membership, Mat-Su CVB welcomes four newly elected members to its board of directors; Jeff Curtis of the Alaska State Fair, Mandy Garcia of Alaska Salmon Berry Travel & Tours, Jennifer Brandon-Hanks of Alaska Glacier Lodge and Alaska Helicopter Tours, and Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours.

At the December board meeting, the new members were officially seated and officers were selected for the upcoming year. Mark Austin continues as board

chair, while Kierre Childers of Revel Treks & Tours serves as vice chair. Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours is the treasurer. Mark Fleenor of Sheep Mountain Lodge will serve secretary.

To prevent more than two board members terming off in a single year, the board followed by-law procedure and retained Roberta Warner of Alaska Tour & Travel for another one-year term. Also continuing on the board are Heather Dudick of Alaska Railroad and Sam Dinges of Alaska Trails.

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

# A promising new chapter with steadfast member support

While we won't be making any official New Year's resolutions this January, here at Mat-Su CVB, the new year is exciting for a number of reasons.

Following the retirement of Bonnie Quill and Neil Campbell, and the national search for Bonnie's replacement that stretched into the summer, staff roles have significantly changed in the last few months.

Tasha Belka came on board as our administrative manager and Katie Reeves now leads our membership department after years of working at Visit Anchorage in a similar capacity. After a few months together, the synergy of this "new" team has really come together, and I'm excited about what the next year holds.

With half the staff new, and the other half in new roles, we have the unique

opportunity to reshape what we do, and how we do it – all while preserving "why" we do it. The last thing we're concerned about is the phrase, "because that's the way we've always done it."

With fresh voices come fresh ideas, and we've been evaluating all of our marketing and membership programs to see how we can improve them and give Mat-Su CVB's members the most value for their membership while maintaining an efficient marketing plan promoting our one-of-a-kind destination to potential visitors.

In late January, the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors will host its annual planning retreat and chart the course for the upcoming year. It's humbling to have the continued trust and support of our membership over the years

and especially during this transition into new staff roles. We don't take that trust lightly. This is a new chapter for Mat-Su CVB, and we want our members to help us write it.

Our organization is only as strong as our membership, and your engagement and partnership is vital to our success.

I encourage members to give us a call or stop by our office to chat. As a staff – and a board – we want to hear from you and learn about what works for you and what doesn't. What kind of marketing programs would you like to see in the future? How does Mat-Su CVB fit your needs in marketing your business? Your input is valued and will help us go in new directions and grow as a reimagined organization with increasing benefits for our members, our community and our visitors.

Casey Ressler ([casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com)) is the President & CEO at the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau.



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

# Arctic Winter Games cultivates membership interest

The 2024 Arctic Winter Games takes place in the Mat-Su Valley March 10-16, less than three months away. Preparations for the success of this event have spanned over the past two years.

Because of the international draw of the Games, a major focus of the Mat-Su 2024 Arctic Winter Games Host Society has been the care and comfort of athletes, coaches, officials, judges, spectators, and other delegates.

Mat-Su CVB has partnered with the host society to help provide a comprehensive directory of accommodations in the Valley for the massive influx of visitors surrounding this event. Many lodging establishments are already listed on Mat-Su CVB's website, [Alaskavisit.com](http://Alaskavisit.com), but efforts to provide as many accommodation options as possible have resulted in a considerable uptick in interest in the benefits of Mat-Su CVB membership.

"The benefits of becoming a member are numerous and substantial," said Membership Manager Katie Reeves. "Our hosting the Arctic Winter Games in the Valley has really aimed the spotlight on what this organization can do for local



businesses." Reeves also noted the total new Mat-Su CVB members who joined in 2023 was nearly double the typical annual numbers.

Compiling accommodation listings for the Games has also created inroads to discuss Mat-Su CVB membership with numerous AirBnB properties in the Valley. "For many of the Valley's smaller lodging establishments, their sole presence online is AirBnB," Reeves said. "That can make it hard for us to connect with them, so it's very fortunate the Games has motivated them to reach out to Mat-Su CVB about membership."

Reeves will continue onboarding accommodations interested in the Games all the way up to the opening day of the event. The Games has aided Mat-Su CVB's goal to increase community awareness of its mission to promote tourism in the Valley. Mat-Su CVB hopes the growing interest in membership will continue beyond the Arctic Winter Games.

Those interested in volunteering at the Games are encouraged to call the Mat-Su 2024 Arctic Winter Games Host Society at (907) 745-4294, or visit [awg2024.org](http://awg2024.org) to learn more.



# Social media content to boost website engagement

Mat-Su CVB maintains an active presence on social media and does a decent job of accruing active followers. The organization has been trying some unique tricks to leverage social media activity into real engagement on our website, [Alaskavisit.com](http://Alaskavisit.com).

President and CEO Casey Ressler had successfully implemented a platform called Crowdriff to source user generated social media content for inclusion on the website. Several pages on the site have been pulling in relevant and current social media images, giving page viewers a wealth of visual content about our destination.

Fresh and relevant content is essential to search engine optimization and user engagement on the website. Website analytics have effectively shifted focus away from total sessions, placing greater emphasis on quality user engagement online. Things like time on site and interaction with content (conversions) are priority metrics that gauge the usefulness of the website for prospective visitors.

Integration of social media content into Mat-Su CVB's website content is an efficient tool in the effort to boost user engagement. Marketing &



**Crowdriff gathers visual content of the Valley from social media users into panels like this one on [alaskavisit.com](http://alaskavisit.com).**

Communications Manager Justin Saunders is now implementing a fairly new content management platform called SocialVenu.

"Where Crowdriff engages social media users for their image content," Saunders said, "SocialVenu engages smartphone

users for their video content."

Smartphone users visiting or otherwise recreating in the Valley can submit videos of their experiences straight to Mat-Su CVB through SocialVenu. Just like Crowdriff, SocialVenu allows Mat-Su CVB to seamlessly embed that video content into relevant pages on [Alaskavisit.com](http://Alaskavisit.com).

"If a picture is worth a thousand words, thirty seconds of video is invaluable," Saunders said. "The hope is that genuine video content from our visitors and residents will not only keep page viewers engaged on our site but will help them choose to visit the Valley and participate in the fun activities they view."

Saunders added that visitors sharing videos of their experience with various member businesses can also greatly enhance visibility for those members on the website.



**SocialVenu allows people to share smartphone videos directly with Mat-Su CVB.**

## Mat-Su CVB looks forward to ExTRAVELganza

Mat-Su CVB's primary fundraiser event, the ExTRAVELganza, is a travel-themed auction paired with a beer and wine tasting and a raffle for airline tickets and other prizes. Members have looked forward to this event every spring for over twenty years.

The event was held at Government Peak Chalet in May of last year for the first time since the pandemic. It was well attended, everyone had fun, and someone

even won a seven day cruise in the Caribbean.

"Last year Mat-Su CVB really dialed in on a fun vibe," said Membership Manager Katie Reeves. "We've begun reaching out to our sponsors and donors for the 2024 event. I'm already getting excited for it."

Be on the lookout in Mat-Su CVB's future communications for more details about our upcoming ExTRAVELganza at Government Peak Chalet on May 3, 2024.



# Alaska Media Road Show yeilds immediate returns

Mat-Su CVB met with more than 25 leading national travel writers in November at Alaska Media Road Show in Las Vegas, promoting the destination and our members.

Alaska Media Road Show brings together Alaska suppliers and top travel media for a weekend of appointments and receptions, building relationships that ultimately lead to coverage in national outlets, both in print and online.

"Road Show is great in that it's an initial introduction to the travel writers,

but through our years' of participation, we've developed strong relationships that help us generate stories that highlight our destination," said Mat-Su CVB President & CEO Casey Ressler. "It's an important program in our overall public relations efforts."

Writers at Alaska Media Road Show represented outlets such as the New York Times, AARP, Outside Magazine, Travel & Leisure, the Today Show and similar outlets.

"We are always trying to pitch them

stories that are unique to the Mat-Su," Ressler said.

Typically, it takes months – if not longer – to generate news stories based on conversations at Alaska Media Road Show. This year, however, the return was almost immediate.

"Within two weeks, Terry Ward gave a spotlight on the Arctic Winter Games and an overview of Alaska Helicopter Tours on CNNTravel.com, which was a welcomed surprise," Ressler said.

## 2024 Visitor Guide on schedule

The 2024 Mat-Su Visitor Guide will be printed and ready for distribution in January. Members can look forward to receiving their copies in the mail after the New Year holiday.

This year, 75,000 copies are being printed. The cover features a group walking the trail at Reflections Lake.

"The printed guide is still sought after by visitors. Mat-Su CVB trusts the data; even in a digital world, a printed guide is still effective," said Casey Ressler, Mat-Su CVB's President and CEO.

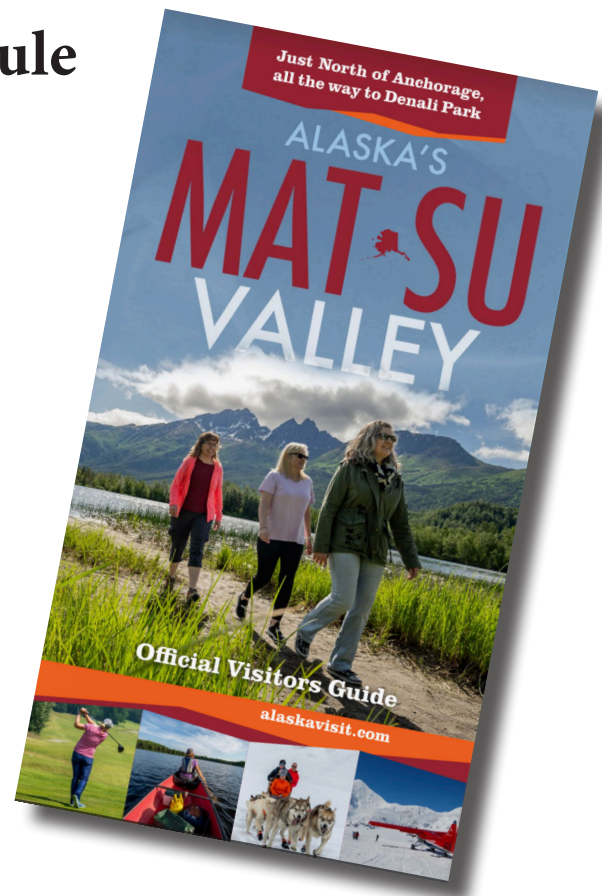
The visitor guide is also available in digital form with clickable links for all of the publication's display ads.

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.

The guide was created by Brilliant Media Strategies in Anchorage.

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 2024 guide, please e-mail [info@alaskavisit.com](mailto:info@alaskavisit.com) and we can make sure you receive enough guides for your guests.



## Marketing to American Bus Association tour operators

An essential part of Mat-Su CVB's marketing strategy each year is meeting and coordinating with group tour operators to highlight new products and travel itineraries that include the Mat-Su Valley.

Justin Saunders, Marketing & Communications Manager for Mat-Su CVB, will be attending the 2024 American Bus Association Marketplace event in Nashville, Tennessee in January. Saunders has prescheduled appointments with several tour operators and he plans



to discuss how the Mat-Su Valley can enhance Alaska vacation itineraries.

"It's certainly all about building lasting partnerships," Saunders said. "Group tour operators and travel agencies are all actively seeking resourceful partners who

can help them deliver an unforgettable itinerary. That's where Mat-Su CVB comes in."

Other tourism industry businesses from Alaska will also be attending the ABA Marketplace event. Saunders remarked on how advantageous it has been coordinating Mat-Su CVB's efforts with these partners. "Alaska's tourism industry has always cooperated well together in presenting our state as a solid and viable group tour option," Saunders said.



# Brochure distribution offered at 5 consumer 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.

The Mat-Su CVB will be attending the Los Angeles Travel & Adventure Show in February, the Princess/Holland America Alaska Cruise Showcase in March, and then three in-state shows in April – the Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show, the Great Alaska Sportsman Show and the Fairbanks Outdoors Show.

Mat-Su CVB also offers a lodging or tour giveaway at each show to engage attendees and promote tourism in the Valley.

“Donating a giveaway can really help a business stand out at these events,” said Marketing & Communications Manager Justin Saunders. Mat-Su CVB incentivizes giveaway donations by distributing the donor’s brochures for free at the show.

Tourism businesses are encouraged to participate in this brochure distribution program, and to consider donating a tour or travel experience as a giveaway.

Check your inbox for Mat-Su CVB e-bulletins that contain a link to the [sign-up sheet](#) or download and print one from the membership page on [Alaskavisit.com](#).

## Co-op marketing opportunities

Los Angeles Travel & Adventure Show  
Feb. 3-4, Los Angeles Convention Center

Princess/Holland America Alaska Showcase  
Date TBA, Seattle, WA

Great Alaska Sportsman Show  
April 5-7, Anchorage

Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show  
April 12-14, Wasilla

Fairbanks Outdoors Show  
April 19-21, Fairbanks

*Brochure distribution available at all consumer shows for \$25 each, or \$100 for all five.*

*Alaskavisit.com traffic, 2023 compared to 2022*

### Sessions

294,735



4%

### Unique Users

226,626



8%

### Pageviews

537,354



14%

## Stay connected to tell our story!



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

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



YouTube  
“yahoomatsu” channel

Instagram  
[matsuvalleyak](#)



# Important upcoming dates

Dec. 25-Jan. 1	Mat-Su CVB office closed for the holidays	
Jan. 12	Mat-Su CVB membership luncheon <i>Alaska Long Trail report by Sam Dinges of Alaska Trails</i>	Noon, Evangelo's
Jan. 25-26	Mat-Su Board of Directors retreat	Alaska Glacier Lodge
Feb. 3-4	Los Angeles Travel and Adventure Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Los Angeles
Feb. 9	Mat-Su CVB membership luncheon <i>TBD</i>	Location TBD
April 5-7	Great Alaska Sportsman Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Anchorage
April 12-14	Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Wasilla
April 19-21	Fairbanks Outdoors Show <i>Mat-Su CVB will have a booth</i>	Fairbanks
May 3	Mat-Su CVB Beer & Wine Tasting ExTRAVELganza <i>Travel-themed auction, Alaska Airlines raffle, Split-the-pot, and more</i>	Government Peak Chalet

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

Bell's Travel Guides  
Tim Bell  
(250) 768-2426  
[www.bellsalaska.com](http://www.bellsalaska.com)

Lakefront Landing Bed & Breakfast  
Cathy Lucas  
(907) 203-7127  
[www.airbnb.com/rooms/1151232](http://www.airbnb.com/rooms/1151232)

Alaska Travelgram  
Scott McMurren  
(907) 727-1113  
[www.alaskatravelgram.com](http://www.alaskatravelgram.com)

The Peak Outpost  
Collette Hand  
(907) 746-3320  
[www.thepeakoutpost.com](http://www.thepeakoutpost.com)

Long Lake Chalet  
Jenny Bouffiou  
(206) 902-7161  
[www.airbnb.com/rooms/836407394368363457](http://www.airbnb.com/rooms/836407394368363457)

Backwoods Lodge  
Kristopher Vloker  
(907) 987-0960  
[www.backwoodslodge.com](http://www.backwoodslodge.com)

Valet Stays  
Jessica Mount  
(602) 825-3832  
[www.valetstays.com](http://www.valetstays.com)

New Hope Suite  
Kathy Miller  
(907) 545-4444

Willow Creek Tours  
Lonn Goldbeck  
(907) 715-8683  
[www.tour-ak.com](http://www.tour-ak.com)

BlueWater Basecamp LLC  
Teal Sky Heller  
(907) 931-8143  
[www.bluewaterbasecamp.com](http://www.bluewaterbasecamp.com)

Lighthouse Island Alaska AirBnB  
Myron Schweigert  
(907) 240-7334  
[www.airbnb.com/rooms/913390623002207284](http://www.airbnb.com/rooms/913390623002207284)

Wild Habitat LLC  
Kelly Nelius  
(907) 707-4110  
[www.wildhabitatataska.com](http://www.wildhabitatataska.com)

Turning Heads Kennel  
Elise Cetvetello  
(907) 362-4354  
[www.turningheadskennel.com](http://www.turningheadskennel.com)



Happy Holidays from your Mat-Su CVB team! December 22 is our last day in the office, but we return in full force on January 2!

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

Mat-Su CVB  
610 S. Bailey St., Suite 201  
Palmer, AK 99645