

# 2020 VISIT VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE ANNUAL REPORT



BE A #TRAILSETTER



# MESSAGE FROM THE Chair & President



**W. Lee Wilhelm, III**  
Chair

For 2020, we decided to rename the annual recap for *Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge* from **Progress Report** to **Annual Report**. The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the world, United States, and, especially, our region, (VBR) *Virginia's Blue Ridge*.

So many of our fellow citizens suffered personal loss of relatives, friends, and business associates, while doing anything and everything possible to sustain business operations and employment during the worst year ever for the *Virginia's Blue Ridge* hospitality and tourism industry. The year 2020 will be remembered for a time when we missed seeing each other in person for a handshake or hug. And, we learned the true meaning of lockdown and quarantine with family, and for many, alone.

Despite all the negatives, we have learned how important it is to be together and to view everyone, our neighbors, co-workers, and those we often overlooked in a more equitable and inclusive way. As Americans, we certainly hope it will lead us to a better future.



**Landon C. Howard**  
President

## THERE WERE WINS THAT WE SHOULD RECOGNIZE:

- **Cares Act Funding** – Our governmental partners including the Cities of Roanoke and Salem, as well as the Counties of Botetourt, Franklin, and Roanoke provided \$228,200 in federal relief funds for the *Worth the Wait* campaign that focused on a Fall/Holiday campaign that promoted our fall colors, outdoor experiences, and the holiday events like Illuminights.
- **Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)**, working with the *Transportation Planning Organization (TPO)*, approved \$12 million dollars to install lights on local Interstate 81 exit and access ramps. This will provide safety for visitors and visibility to businesses along the interstate.
- **VBR Life** – The Roanoke and Roanoke County/Salem Chambers of Commerce changed the name of their print publication to include *Virginia's Blue Ridge* in the title and publication content.
- **Sports Tournaments** – Group sports business, thanks in large part to *Salem Parks & Recreation*, led VBR out of the pandemic by opening fields after July 1st to multiple softball and other tournaments.
- **Outdoor Wealth** – VBR's outdoor assets, with over 1,000 miles of hiking, biking, and water trails, brought residents and visitors out to discover everything outside. Unlike many destinations, we quickly learned how fortunate we are to have a place to bike, canoe, and play in our *Blue Ridge* mountains.
- **Stay Safe Pledge** – When we were able to invite our guests to VBR, *Visit VBR* and our businesses knew that we must do so in a manner that kept our guests and employees safe. We are grateful for all the businesses that supported this program.

Now that vaccines are widely available, we are looking forward to a much more successful 2021. Next year, we hope to once again rename this recap to a *Progress Report*. We look forward to working with our VBR tourism industry to turn recovery into prosperity.

## Direct Travel Expenditures:



- **Front Cover:** The Blue Ridge Parkway was the #1 visited unit of the National Park Service in the country, with 14.1 million visitors in 2020.

## SOCIAL MEDIA & Marketing: *Maintaining visibility & inspiring future travel during a Pandemic Year*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge created and launched its **Worth the Wait** campaign, a message that encouraged customers to plan a visit when they were ready to travel again. The campaign featured an inspirational video, dynamic website landing page, and unique images & graphics for promotion on social media and other communication channels.



- **WWBT/WUPV - Channel 12 – Richmond**  
**Fall Foliage Forecast:** VBR Owns the Weather (October 6 – November 2)



Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge made a commitment to developing new content and initiatives that showcased Black owned businesses and unique perspectives from the Black community in the region, including stories about notable figures of Black history and spotlighting local Black creators, artists, and musicians.



VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDE		
<b>24 CHEESY WESTERNS</b>  10 FEET	<b>18 PINTS OF CRAFT BEER</b>  6 FEET	<b>6 LARGE CALZONES</b>  6 FEET
<b>1 MOONSHINE STILL</b>  10 FEET	<b>1 KAYAK</b>  6 FEET	<b>1 FISHING POLE</b>  6 FEET
<b>1 SNOW LEOPARD</b>  10 FEET	<b>2 BASEBALL BATS</b>  6 FEET	<b>1/2 HEIGHT OF STEAM LOCOMOTIVE</b>  6 FEET

VBR Support Local BINGO		
WRITE A REVIEW FOR YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL BUSINESS ★★★★★	SHOP ONLINE FROM A LOCAL STORE 	ORDER TAKE OUT 
HIKE A LESS POPULAR TRAIL 	<b>VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE Support Local BINGO</b>	STREAM MUSIC FROM LOCAL MUSICIANS/BANDS 
FOLLOW 3 LOCAL BUSINESSES ON SOCIAL MEDIA 	TAKE YOUR DOG FOR A WALK 	SHARE YOUR FAVORITE SCENIC PHOTO WITH US 

- Received **WanderLove** Grant

**WANDERLOVE**  
VIRGINIA IS FOR MOUNTAIN LOVERS



## SALEM SOFTBALL



**WAID PARK  
ENDURO**  
FRANKLIN COUNTY

## VBR Sports Leads

40  
with 13  
canceling



actual groups booked

42



leads

12,278  
with 1,813  
canceling



room nights



**VBR  
GRAN FONDO**  
BOTETOURT COUNTY

## VBR Meetings Bookings

34  
with 20  
canceling



actual groups booked

29



leads

13,995  
with 9,150  
canceling

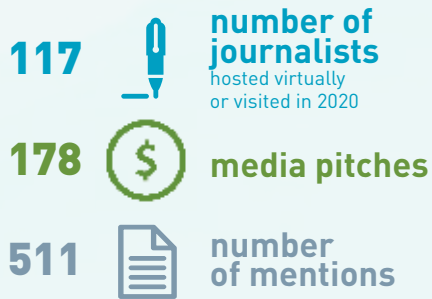


room nights



# PUBLIC RELATIONS

## Media / PR Results: *Best Ever!*



## MAGAZINES & ONLINE

### Virtual Tours:



## SOCIAL MEDIA



Despite the global pandemic, the world heard about Virginia's Blue Ridge.



# PUBLIC AFFAIRS: *Adapting to challenges of the pandemic & supporting VBR partners*

## • Stay Safe Pledge rollout:



Twin Creeks Distillery supporting the Stay Safe Pledge



Partners Holiday Inn Hotel Tanglewood displayed the Stay Safe logo in creative ways

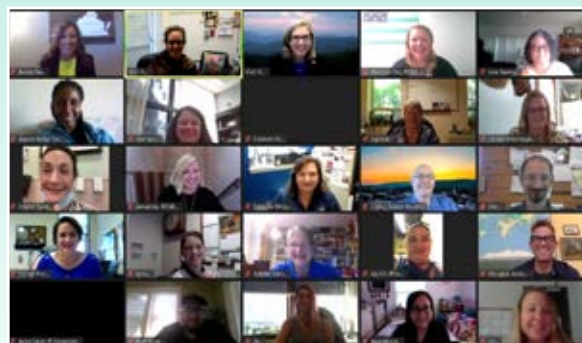
## • Launched VBR Savings Pass:



[VisitVBR.com/Savings](https://VisitVBR.com/Savings)

## • Partner Engagement:

## VIRTUAL EVENTS



Educational partner meetings via Zoom



Roanoke & Roanoke County/Salem Chambers of Commerce rebranded their print publication to VBR Life



**2020 marked a year of challenges and loss.** Through it all, we realized how much travel exposes us to different cultures, history, heritage, cuisine, art and most importantly, people. We celebrate our diverse people, place and history that make **Virginia's Blue Ridge** a special place to visit, work and live.

# Board of Directors

**VBR  
Team**

**W. Lee Wilhelm, III**  
McNeil Roofing, Inc.  
*Chair*

**Shirley B. Holland**  
Carilion Clinic  
*Secretary*

**Douglas Blount**  
Roanoke County Parks, Recreation & Tourism  
*Treasurer*

**Barton J. Wilner**  
Entre Computer Center  
*Past Chair*

**Dave Andersen**  
Dominion Lodging

**Gretchen Beedle**  
The Conner Group

**Lynne Pearo Boone**  
ABoone Homes, LLC

**John Carlin**  
WSLS-TV 10 (NBC)

**Meg Carter**  
5Points Creative  
(7/2018 - 3/2021)

**Robert S. Cowell, Jr.**  
City of Roanoke

**Renee "Butch" Craft**  
The Roanoker Restaurant  
(7/2013 - 6/2020)

**Whit Ellerman**  
Cardinal Bicycle

**Lisa D. Garst**  
The Dilly Dally

**Michael Hamlar**  
Hamlar-Curtis Funeral Home

**Gary Larrowe**  
County of Botetourt

**Annette Lewis**  
Total Action for Progress (TAP)

**Mark S. Lucas**  
Mill Mountain Technologies

**Ann Blair Miller**  
Roanoke Regional Partnership

**Daniel R. O'Donnell**  
County of Roanoke

**Kirtesh Patel**  
TRU by Hilton

**Shaleen Powell**  
Roanoke Cultural Endowment

**Ken Randolph**  
Rockydale Quarries Corporation

**James Revercomb, Jr.**  
Virginia Mountain Adventures  
(7/2016 - 5/2021)

**Bob Rotanz**  
Mac & Bob's Restaurant

**Sunny Shah**  
Baymont Inn & Suites Salem

**John Shaner**  
City of Salem Parks & Recreation

**Susan E. Short, Ph.D.**  
Virginia Tech

**James E. Taliaferro, II**  
City of Salem

**Lucas L. Thornton**  
Hist:Re Partners, LLC

**David B. Trinkle, M.D.**  
Virginia Tech Carilion  
School of Medicine

**Joyce Waugh**  
Roanoke Regional Chamber

**Leonard Wheeler**  
Mel Wheeler, Inc.

**Christopher L. Whitlow**  
County of Franklin

**John B. Williamson, III**  
RGC Resources, Inc.



## Staff

### Administration

**Landon C. Howard**  
President

**Heidi R. Bowling**  
Director of Operations/Assistant  
to the President

**Marlee Richardson**  
Information Systems Technology Manager

### Marketing

**Debora Wright**  
Vice President of Sales & Marketing

**David Aldridge**  
Director of Marketing

**Taylor Spellman**  
Director of Public Relations

**Shannon Terry**  
Marketing Manager

**Kathryn Lucas**  
Marketing & Public Relations Coordinator

**Grayson Bond**  
Sports & Sales Coordinator *(part-time)*

### Public Affairs & Destination Development/ Visitor Services

**Catherine Fox**  
Vice President of Public Affairs  
& Destination Development

**Holly Marden**  
Events Coordinator *(part-time)*

### Visitor Information Center *(part-time)* \*

**Jane Smith**  
Visitor Services Lead

**VISITOR SERVICES SPECIALISTS:**  
Marlene Efke  
Linda Franklin  
Ray Keys

#### **WEEKEND (PART-TIME):**

**Ahondryea Brooks**  
Weekend Visitor Services Lead

**VISITOR SERVICES SPECIALISTS:**  
Chris Kessler  
Heidi Miller  
Wayne Sanburn

*\*Note: VBR Visitor Center is operated  
and staffed seven days a week*



## ACCOLADES

Virginia's Blue Ridge picked up several new awards and accolades in 2020, including the following:



**1. Roanoke: Top Adventure Town**  
by *Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine*

**2. Smith Mountain Lake: Prettiest Lake in Virginia** by *Reader's Digest*

**3. Natural Bridge State Park: Best State Parks in the South** by *AFAR*

**4. James River: Most Beautiful River in Virginia** by *Cheapism*

**5. Roanoke: Top Romantic Getaways in Virginia** by *U.S. News & World Report*



New Water Tower in Franklin County on Route 220 North

### • Virginia's Blue Ridge Regional Wayfinding Progress:



NEW Roanoke - Blacksburg Regional Airport Wayfinding



Pedestrian Wayfinding in Downtown Roanoke



**VISIT VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE**

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**VISITVBR.COM**