**Mat-Su CVB**

**Board Meeting MINUTES**

**January 13, 2021**

**Zoom Meeting**

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| **Board Members Present**  Mark Fleenor (Z)  Roberta Warner (Z)  Israel Mahay (Z)  Travis Taylor (Z)  Cole Chambers (Z)  Cheryl Metiva (Z)  Heather Dudick (Z)  Rick Peterson (Z) | **Board Members Absent**  Fernando Salvador  Dan Wilcock (Z) | **Staff Present**  Bonnie Quill (Z)  Neil Campbell (Z)  Casey Ressler (Z)  Justin Saunders (Z) |

Mark called the meeting to order by at 10:00 am. The roll was called.

**AGENDA**

Mark stated that the executive session would be moved to be the last item on the agenda, coming after the board form/announcements. Travis moved to approve the agenda as amended. Cheryl seconded the motion. The motion carried without opposition.

**MINUTES**

Cheryl moved to approve the November 12, 2020 board meeting minutes. Israel seconded the motion, which passed without opposition.

**STANDING REPORTS**

**CHAIR’S REPORT**

Mark stated that he had nothing to report that would not be discussed later in the meeting. He urged everyone to watch the recording of the Assembly meeting, particularly the portion where Mayor Halter speaks in support of the Mat-Su CVB.

**ATIA REPORT**

Bonnie reported that the ATIA board held a one-day retreat on November 5th via Zoom. The meeting focused on a “Return to Cruise” agenda, appointing chairs for Southeast and Southcentral. Bonnie stated that she was contacted on November 16th to serve on the Southcentral taskforce, which will focus on preparing communities, transportation, tour operators, accommodations, and attractions to welcome back cruise ships and their passengers, along with working with state and local governments, and health officials on monitoring and advising on mandates. Two meetings have been scheduled and postponed, waiting for more information from the cruise lines to begin.

The ATIA/DMO Zoom meetings resumed last week. Laney, from CLIA Alaska, reported that they were working with communities on a framework to be aligned with the CDC and the Healthy Sail recommendations. She added that more information, for which the ATIA taskforce is waiting, will be coming. Sarah, President & CEO of the ATIA, stated that summer projections are very uncertain. Laney announced that when there is more assurance there will be a big bump in cruise advertising in the markets.

Bonnie reported that she was appointed to the ATIA marketing committee at their November 5th meeting. She stated that the current $2,000,000 program is focused on rebuilding and merging the TravelAlaska.com and the AlaskaTIA.org websites. The Governor released his FY2022 budget in December, which included $5,000,000 for tourism marketing. The ATIA government relations committee will be advocating support for this appropriation from the legislature. Bonnie noted that the ATIA is still waiting on approval of a federal EDA marketing grant that has been revised to $2,000,000, which could provide marketing support to this year if it is awarded. She added that it is also still possible that the ATIA could receive still-unspent State CARES funds to use for immediate tourism marketing.

Bonnie stated that the ATIA marketing committee has scheduled a planning retreat on January 20th and 21st, which she will attend, while the next ATIA board meeting is scheduled for February 5th, which she plans to attend as well.

**TREASURER’S REPORT**

Travis reported that the balance sheet, distributed in the board packet, reports that the Mat-Su CVB has well over $1,000,000 in revenue, which is unusual in this economic climate. He did note that $750,000 of that is for the FY2022 budget year. After all is said and done, there still exists $490,000 to $500,000 in funds remaining for the current fiscal year, compared to $430,000 a year ago. He credited the good financial position of the organization to Bonnie’s leadership. Bonnie added that, along with the $490,000 currently available, there is $120,000 in the budget reserve. She noted as well that an opportunity for an additional $56,000 stemming from the employee retention tax credit, which she hopes will apply after March 31st.

**PRESIDENTS’S REPORT**

Bonnie stated that this meeting is the tenth board meeting held since the last retreat at Meier Lake last January. She thanked the board for their service beyond expectations. She noted that staff has been focused on keeping the board up to date on operations and to pivoting activities to benefit Mat-Su CVB members and the community. She recalled that in early December she had recommended to Mark that the board planning retreat be delayed, based on five uncertain factors.

The first such factor is travel sentiment, which is currently stuck, due to uncertainties related to the corona virus. The second is the availability of and plan for the rollout of a vaccine to the general public, which is crucial to motivating travel. The third factor is the devastating economic impact to travel and hospitality that has resulted from the virus. It is not yet known what federal and state relief packages will be approved to stimulate travel. The fourth factor is the resolution of issues surrounding the CDC framework for conditional sail order and Canadian border issues, with which the cruise industry is currently grappling. The fifth factor is the status of the Gateway Visitor Center EDA grant application, which was submitted on October 20th. What positive strategies that will be created if awarded this next spring are unknown. These five factors were those communicated to Mark in suggesting that the planning retreat be delayed.

Also in play is the fact that the Mat-Su CVB is free from the MSB budget process this spring, having been awarded from the CARES Act two years of upfront funding. This blessing will allow focus and quick response once travel resumes.

Referring to the President’s report, emailed last Monday, regarding staff activities since the board meeting on October 23rd, Bonnie highlighted a few of the major accomplishments from that report. The last annual meeting on November 12th had over sixty participants who heard the presentation on the new research commissioned by the Mat-Su CVB. Casey compiled member feedback from that presentation, which was distributed to the board. The executive committee in November approved the marketing budget revisions—included in the board meeting information emailed earlier—drafted as a result of the changes to the marketing plan necessitated by the coronavirus. All the new opportunities have been scheduled or confirmed.

Topics have been selected for the next four webinars, beginning this Friday. That event is an update on this year’s Iditarod race, to be followed by a winter product showcase and networking event on January 27th. The third webinar will feature a presentation by national consultant Julie Hart of CFO by Design, who will summarize the new COVID Relief bill and financial assistance guidelines. A presentation in mid-February will focus on the launch of the new Listings Pro module on the Mat-Su CVB website.

Bonnie reported that 15,800 of the remaining 2020 visitor guides will be mailed this week by AKA fulfillment center in Portland to 14,000 ATIA leads, along with 1,800 leads from the alaskavisit.com 2018-2019 visitor guide requests. The 2021 visitor guide was printed last week, and deliveries of that guide are expected to arrive at AKA, Anchorage Brochure Distribution, and the Mat-Su CVB office later next week. Bonnie stated that the year-end website traffic report should be celebrated. Even though all paid search was suspended since March 15th, overall traffic to alaskavisit.com is only down 8% over 2019, well above industry averages. Commitment to adding new content, events, blog posts, video, and user generated content has contributed to an increase in organic traffic. Bonnie credited Casey for the effort and attendant results.

Bonnie attended two MSB Assembly meetings where she reported on and testified for passing legislation authorizing the appropriation of the 20% matching funds required by the Gateway Visitor Center EDA grant. Numerous hours spent contacting Assembly members and advocating support of the appropriation paid off. After overcoming the many challenges faced, all that is left is to wait to hear from the EDA about the grant.

**NEW BUSINESS**

**STAFF SHORT-TERM PLAN**

Mark asked Bonnie to report on the staff three-month plan, which Bonnie preferred to call the short-term plan in light of the existing uncertainty. She stated that staff has put together a three-part short-term plan including a marketing and messaging strategy, a proactive health and safety program, and an outreach and community engagement plan. She noted that these have been consistently recognized in previous industry updates as key areas to prioritize in efforts to strengthen the destination and be prepared for the resumption of travel. Bonnie asked Casey and Justin to summarize their plans and responsibilities in this. She noted that their plans were both emailed to the board earlier.

Casey stated that the plan was developed based on research, such as the Destination Analysts traveler sentiment surveys presented weekly. The plan includes print advertising in publications such as the AARP magazine, Travel and Leisure magazine, Outside magazine, Alaska magazine, some airport marketing, and The Milepost, all targeted at outside consumers who, research shows, are becoming more receptive to travel marketing and who find inspiration from print sources.

Casey reported that these potential travelers are also responsive to blog posts, such as the Mat-Su CVB weekly blog. The plan includes sponsorship of the TravelAlaska.com blog during the month of May, as well as purchasing audience extension ads in February and April, targeted at travelers who have already visited the TravelAlaska website. Based on the weekly traveler sentiment surveys and the Destination Analysts research commissioned by the Mat-Su CVB leading up to the annual meeting, several key markets have been identified which will be targeted with social media ad buys in February and March.

Casey noted that these efforts will be bolstered by in-house communications, such as the e-newsletters sent to consumers. There are two newsletters, one of which is the general consumer newsletter going to the national audience and an Alaskans newsletter focused on community events, trails, and outdoor recreation available in the Mat-Su. About 2,200 consumers receive the national newsletter while about 500 receive the Alaskan newsletter. Additionally, the Mat-Su CVB will take over the daily TravelAlaska Facebook posts for one week, reaching 450,000 followers. He stated also that in March that the Mat-Su CVB will be the sole sponsor the TravelAlaska consumer newsletter, reaching between 400,000 and 500,000 subscribers. He concluded by reiterating that the multi-faceted plan is rooted in the research noted.

Justin reported on his findings regarding the visitor industry response to the health and safety concerns of the traveling public. Conversation with DMOs in Alaska and across the US has revealed that the most popular strategy comes in the form of a pledge or commitment on behalf of their partners or members, an approach the Mat-Su CVB has already put into place.

Justin stated that simpleview, the Mat-Su CVB web hosting service, has developed and implemented a checklist of health and safety related amenities which member partners can use to identify those are being offered at their place of business. Members can log into the extranet and manage for themselves the information being conveyed to visitors. This is the primary means by which the Mat-Su CVB is communicating to visitors the health and safety provisions being undertaken by members on their behalf. Additionally, the existing COVID-19 resource page on the alaskavisit.com website will be reworked into a safe travel resource page, which will include the listings of any members offering one or more of the listed health and safety amenities. These features are being rolled out now and will be introduced to members in future webinars and workshops. Justin noted that the program being put into place is very adaptable and versatile. He added that there is discussion amongst Alaska DMOs about having a collaborative statewide pledge, something that would dovetail easily into the plan being implemented by the Mat-Su CVB. He ended by stating that the efforts of the CVB in the next three months will be to get members lined up and focused on effective ways to speak to those who are ready to travel and how to do so safely and responsibly.

Bonnie stated that the most recent research shows that visitors and people planning their travel are looking at DMOs as the official source of safe travel information. The Mat-Su CVB, as well as other CVBs and DMOs, is being proactive in getting into place the messaging and information needed and is prepared to be part of a statewide program, if one moves forward.

After thanking Casey and Justin for their efforts in putting these plans together, Bonnie claimed responsibility for the third part of the plan, focusing on community outreach and scheduling meetings with officials and community leaders. She stated that meetings have already been scheduled with the borough manager and, with the help of Cheryl, with the new Assembly member Mokie Tew. Bonnie stated her intention to meet with every chamber executive director and board president, the new Mayor of Wasilla, and John Moosey, the new manager of the City of Palmer. She will additionally, reach out to the Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation, Alaska State Parks, and the Mat-Su Health Foundation. This will be a focused, short-term outreach to stakeholders, sharing with them the importance of Mat-Su CVB efforts toward the resumption of travel. She concluded by noting that this is the short-term plan put into place to carry the organization through to the board strategic planning retreat to be scheduled later.

Mark asked Bonnie what information she was waiting for to revise the plan. She responded that the plan has already started and will remain in effect into May. Casey added that a new website module, Listings Pro, is being implemented to provide better value to member listings by bringing them to the forefront of website pages. Additionally, a new blog widget will tag and provide a link to member listings if the member is mentioned in the content of the Mat-Su CVB blog. He hoped that the new additions will be working by mid-February. Bonnie added that a future webinar will address the additions in the rollout to members.

**CHANGE OF BANKING INSTITUTION**

Bonnie stated that she has already decided to switch banking institutions but that she wanted it documented that she has board approval of her decision. She detailed her difficult and trying experiences in dealing with Wells Fargo while trying to manage Mat-Su CVB banking as early as last spring. The difficulties in transferring banking to another institution are many but the lack of customer service and the unresponsiveness of Wells Fargo has finally made it worth the effort. In addition, Wells Fargo is not a member of the Mat-Su CVB. First National Bank of Alaska is and has been a major supporter and sponsor of the CVB for many years. Mark and Israel spoke favorably for the switch.

Mark asked for a motion to approve the switch from Wells Fargo to First National Bank. Travis so moved with Cole seconding the motion. Cheryl spoke in support of the switch based on experiences similar to those described by Bonnie, adding that being able to give Mat-Su CVB business to a member is an added bonus. All members present voted for the motion.

**BOARD RETREAT/MEETING DATES**

Mark stated that the planning retreat previously scheduled for March was not going to happen due to the current progress of the vaccination program and the lack of knowledge regarding what summer travel will be like. He suggested moving the retreat to the end of April or early May, adding he expected a slow start to the season. Mark expressed a strong preference for an in-person retreat if at all possible.

Both Rick and Israel preferred a retreat in the first half of April, due to the constraints of their schedules and workload later in April and May. Mark reiterated his concern that COVID concerns would still be impacting summer travel planning enough to forestall informed planning that early in the season. He suggested that a decision to meet be made in a month or two when the state of COVID vaccinations is better known. Bonnie suggested that the March 23rd date for a board meeting be maintained and the retreat be reconsidered at that time. Travis expressed his belief that, in the seventy days until mid-March, not enough will be known or settled as regards the COVID situation to allow planning, much less in-person meetings. He suggested setting a date for a virtual planning session so at least some plans can be made.

Mark stated that unless Canada opens up and cruises are planned and booked by March there will be nothing for which to plan. Cheryl put forth the plan to hold a board meeting, as planned, on March 23rd and put a retreat on hold until such time as it makes sense to have one, perhaps just after the annual meeting and after the summer season. Additional discussion ended with Mark deciding to hold a virtual regular board meeting on March 23rd and to postpone a retreat until such time as enough is known to make the meeting worthwhile.

**EXECUTIVE SESSION**

After board member announcements, the board went into executive session to undertake the annual review of President & CEO Bonnie Quill at 10:50 am.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 am.

Respectfully submitted, Attest,

Neil Campbell, Recording Secretary Israel Mahay, Secretary

Date Date