



## Travel and Recreation Council Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, November 17, 2021  
3:30 pm – 5:00 pm

**Members in attendance:** Brian Cain (via phone), Willie Docto, Karen Duguay, Maricela Ehmann, Matt Harrington, Jeff Lawson, Molly Mahar, Amy Spear (via phone), Steve Wright. **Absent:** Jody Fried

With Chair Amy Spear unable to attend in person, Commissioner Heather Pelham chaired the meeting.

**Introductions:** New TRC board members Karen Duguay and Maricela Ehmann were welcomed to the board, and each provided a brief summary of their professional background and areas of interest in serving on the board. As the meeting was held in conjunction with the annual Vermont Tourism Summit, attendance was strong, with many industry professionals able to attend and participate.

### State of the Industry Reports:

Brian Cain—Echoing what many on the lodging industry have been experiencing, revenues have been great over the summer and fall seasons but staffing challenges are terrible. As an example, at a recent job fair, only 20 people attended in total, over the course of a 6-hour event.

Willie Docto—Again, revenues are up 30+%, even gift sales are up. Areas of concerns: no restaurants are open Mondays and Tuesdays. Other projects: assisting with DEI training sessions for VACCE. Next business challenge: even small businesses are now taking crypto currency and locking out OTAs in the process.

Matt Harrington—Industry challenges: supply chain issues for restaurants, inflation pressures, cost of goods, cost of workforce, workforce supply (innkeepers doing multiple shifts), extreme burnout (mental health needs), housing pressures, childcare capacity. Bright spots: local investments in Putnam Block, new \$14M rec center in Manchester, \$5M project in Arlington; population boom in SW VT (even Pownal and Rupert), with new people we are seeing more diverse representation.

Jeff Lawson—Occupancy rates have been amazing, but will it last? Complicated by restaurants not open midweek and workforce issues. Saw shortage in Uber drives when rates went up, hotels pitched in with BTV transfers. Holiday bookings are strong, above 2019 rates, no rush expected from Canadian visitors until testing is eased. BTV direct flights increasing (Minneapolis in Spring), looking forward to Amtrak's arrival, lots of interest from journalists, short booking window continues.

Molly Mahar—Ski visits 12% below 10-yr average, 20% off 2018-19. Killington opened 11/5, World Cup coming, brings in \$6M in economic impact, hope snow-making conditions will cooperate. Reservations in some cases up over 2018-19, season pass sales strong. Coming season: technology advances here to stay, outside for food and rentals, no masks outside, varies by resort for inside, no vaccination requirements to ski but some areas have requirements for inside spaces.

Amy Spear—Business sentiment: consumer confidence volatility, mental and health and fatigue in hospitality. Legislative updates: still ARPA dollars at play, bridge grant program redeployment expected; S.79 may see new

bill, municipalities becoming more active in pushing for local STR regulations; continue to modernize liquor laws, always have funding for tourism as a priority.

Steve Wright – Staffing has been slow (typically hire 1200-1400 per season), doubled foreign workers (best success with in-country workers as pool was full), being able to offer housing has made all the difference. Season pass sales are strong, bookings strong for winter holidays and Canadian holidays.

Karen Duguay—Newly formed Downtown Coalition will have three areas of focus: Outreach, Advocacy and Data. Retailers are still operating in a continuous adjust and adaption mode, especially for tastings and events on what operational procedures should be, and basically skittish overall.

Maricela Ehmann—Wedding and events season was strong after event restrictions lifted, had to turn away work due to staffing shortages, esp. rental businesses (not taking bookings for 2022), excessive interest in 2023. Similar supply chain issues (floral, rentals). 60-80% out of state guests and bridal parties, looking to match seasonal summer staff with local winter staff. Diversity is a concern and priority: if potential guests don't see themselves in the staffing and promotion they will go elsewhere. Seeing some new faces because folks can't travel internationally.

### **Staff Updates:**

Nate Formalarie, Communications—Winter marketing campaign will include digital display, pre-roll, and out of home, with approx. \$500K investment. Also investing in film production for project to promote 2022-23 winter season. With an increase in funding, fall campaign extending into stick season with three tactics: Halloween Atlas Obscura promotion about spooky places in Vermont, editorial native partnership with Travel Noire aimed at the Black traveler audience, and a AAFM partnership to promote maple syrup recipes for the holiday season with videos featuring Food Network star Gesine Prado. Saw high engagement with recipes in foliage newsletter, so adding more food-related items to content strategy.

Lauren Masseria, Recruitment—41 grant applications received for the Tourism and Economic Recovery Marketing Grants. Applications under review with approvals to be made in December. Worker Relocation grants are live and accepting applications. Tourism sector encouraged to utilize as part of recruitment strategies. Remote worker grants will go live in February of 2022.

Sara DeFilippi, International—VDTM and Hello Burlington attended a trade and media luncheon hosted by the US Commercial Service in Montreal. People seemed excited about VT's free testing options especially since VT was the only destination there to offer free testing. Campaign with Expedia Canada starts in early December will French and English landing pages. Brand USA partnership allows us to leverage additional funding. Our Japan rep, Shoko, has been meeting with the Japan Association of Travel Agents and most tour operators are specifically focusing on New England because of our high vaccination rates. VDTM will participate in Brand USA Global Marketplace for Asia and the Pacific in December and for the UK and the EU in early February (both one on one appointments).

Trevor Audet, Agriculture—Wrapping up the Maple 100 campaign, adding more partners for maple promotion next fall, adding TikTok to channels for recipe videos. New England Dairy Business Innovation Center is offering multi-business agritourism grant opening in February.

Jackie Dagger, Outdoor Recreation—BEA released outdoor recreation economic impact analysis, Vermont stayed strong in 2020, dropped from 5.2% to 3.7% GDP but greater losses elsewhere (Montana is #1). VOREC community grant program will award \$6M to local communities. 104 letters of intent received, 37 invited to apply with \$12.8M in requests. Awards to be announced in January.

Nate McKeen, State Parks—Over 1 million State Park visits in 2021, making this the 5<sup>th</sup> highest year ever, and highest visitation numbers since 1988. Average occupancy on weekends was 70%, with 80%+ weekend and 57% midweek in high season, not counting all the people using other state lands.

### **Updates / Comments / Questions from Around the Room:**

Short booking windows:

- Also seeing in short-term rentals, with guests staying longer and looking for opportunities for short-term housing (Julie Marks, VSTRA).
- Basin Harbor Resort also saw high occupancy and more OTA bookings, could be indication of need for bundled experiences or looking for last minute availability.
- Stowe Area Association fielding more short-term requests (24-36 hours), with properties booking 6+ months out for holidays.

Guest experience / expectations:

- Jay Peak seeing 30% increase in bookings (non-Canadian), pulled inventory from OTAs. With guests paying full rates, expectations are even higher
- In Burlington, anecdotal nightmares of ridiculous expectations with rates so high. Lodging establishments have a responsibility to help guests find places to eat, esp. if properties are isolated. Patience will wear thin with rates so high (Jeff Lawson, Hello Burlington).
- In Stowe, bus tours were driving visitation to 400+ visitors per day at info centers (vs previous highs of 300 or less) and coming on weekdays when places were closed (Stowe Area Association).
- We need to maintain the Vermont Brand by living up to those expectations, how can VDTM help, how can we recalibrate when staffing is so challenged to retain those guests? (Brian Maggiatto, Inn at Manchester)
- Also seeing multi-family groups (5-6 families with 15 children), having no luck finding a place to eat (Trapp Family Lodge)