



## **Tourism Advisory Board**

**March 14, 2024 9:30 am**

**Caucus Room, First Floor, City Hall**

- 9:30 am** Call to order, approval of past meeting minutes
- 9:35 am** Zartico Presentation
- 10:05 am** Sector Reports
- Lodging
  - Restaurants
  - Retail
  - Attractions/Arts
- 10:25 am** Old Business
- Shop and Dine Out Downtown Update
- 10:30 am** New Business
- 10:35 am** Adjourn

# Tourism Advisory Board Meeting

February 8, 2024 9:30 am

## Members/City Staff Present:

Steve Claffey, Mayor – City Council Liaison  
Michelle Davis – Hotel 24 South  
Gabe Glassmann - Mary Baldwin University  
Andrew Greene - Heifetz Institute (Zoom)  
Paige Hildebrand – Frontier Culture Museum  
Sarah Lynch – Baja Bean  
Jeff Ramsey – Gibson’s Warehouse, Byers Street Bistro  
Robin von Seldeneck – Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library  
Jessica Williams – Staunton Tourism

## Members/City Staff Absent:

Greg Beam – SDDA  
Stephanie Cabacoy – American Shakespeare Center  
Sandi Carraro – Book Dragon  
Robert Higgs – Barren Ridge Vineyards, Accordia  
Ross Williams – Frederick House

## Others Present:

Megan Burrows – Burrow and Vine  
Breanna Decker – Juniper Lane  
June Collmer – Heifetz Retail Store  
Chase Hoover – Batten Green  
Brooklyn Kennedy – Blackburn Inn  
Josh Knight – Engagement and Communications Manager, City of Staunton  
Owen Marshall – SDDA  
Natasha McCurdy – Queen City Gifts and Games (Zoom)  
Dave Metz- Downtown Resident  
Pamela Mason Wagner (Zoom)  
Michelle Waitier – SDDA  
Tara Wall - WWPL

## Call To Order and Approval of Minutes

The meeting was called to order. A motion was made by Jeff Ramsey and seconded by Robin von Seldeneck to approve the previous meeting minutes. The minutes were approved. Introductions were made around the room.

## January 2024 Tourism Report – Jessica Williams

The Tourism Department staff took part in the following promotional, networking, or administrative activities in January:

- January promotions included Staunton’s Cures for the Holiday Hangover, Staunton Hotspots, A Winter Getaway, and Top Things to Do While Planning Your Dream Vacation.
- Attended the strategic planning session of the Shenandoah Valley Tourism Partnership (SVTP).
- Attended the strategic planning session for the Blue Ridge Parkway Association (BRPA).

- Tourism hosted a Richmond travel writer who will do a feature on Staunton in the Mar/Apr issue of Richmond Magazine.
- Tourism hosted a Style Blueprint writer who will also do a feature in the Spring.
- Jessica Williams attended the American Bus Association to promote Staunton to group tour operators.
- Stuart Hall students stopped at the Visitor Center to get information on the Tourism Department.

**Public Relations**

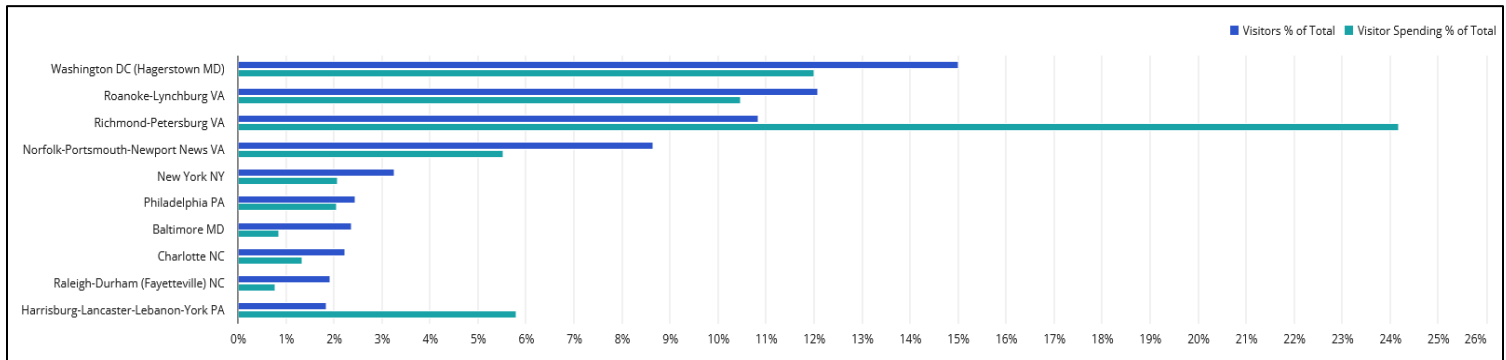
The following is a list of newspapers, websites, magazines, and television stations that published articles about Staunton:

Date	Headline	Source	Reach
Jan. 8	<a href="#"><u>23 Chefs Share The Best Thing They Ate In 2023</u></a>	Forbes	73,844,154
Jan. 31	<a href="#"><u>11 Top-Rated Small Towns In Virginia</u></a>	World Atlas	4,610,468
Jan. 23	<a href="#"><u>6 Most Memorable Small Towns In The Mid-Atlantic</u></a>	World Atlas	4,610,468
Jan. 11	<a href="#"><u>9 Most Memorable Small Towns In Virginia</u></a>	World Atlas	4,610,468
Jan. 22	<a href="#"><u>Ride The Rails Through Virginia's Countryside On This Historic Train</u></a>	Only In Your State	3,528,867
Jan. 3	<a href="#"><u>American Shakespeare Center Reveals Vanessa Morosco As New Executive Director</u></a>	BroadwayWorld.com	1,625,996
Jan. 5	<a href="#"><u>Vanessa Morosco Appointed Executive Director Of American Shakespeare Center</u></a>	Playbill	1,405,318
Jan. 24	<a href="#"><u>New Shared Use Path Coming To Staunton</u></a>	WHSV-TV	537,876
Jan. 19	<a href="#"><u>Blackburn Inn Partnering With Virginia Scenic Railway For Train Excursion Experience</u></a>	WHSV-TV	537,876
Jan. 17	<a href="#"><u>Marino's Lunch In Staunton Set To Reopen</u></a>	WHSV-TV	537,876
Jan. 20	<a href="#"><u>New American Shakespeare Center Director Brings Acting, Directing And Educational Chops To Role</u></a>	The Daily Progress	352,878
Jan. 4	<a href="#"><u>American Shakespeare Center Announces New Executive Director</u></a>	News Leader	106,674
Jan. 3	<a href="#"><u>Latin Soul, A New Staunton Restaurant, Set To Open Saturday</u></a>	News Leader	106,674
Jan. 8	<a href="#"><u>Vanessa Morosco Named American Shakespeare Center Executive Director</u></a>	American Theatre	40,603
			<b>96,456,196</b>

**Website Visitation**

Website Traffic		
January 2023	January 2024	% Change
37,992 visitors	29,933 visitors	-21.2%
73 visitor's guide requests	159 visitor's guide requests	+117.8%

## Top 10 Origin Markets and Visitor Spending



## Smith Travel Research (STR) Hotel Occupancy Report

Occupancy (%)	Year To Date												2021	2022	2023
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec			
This Year	40.6	45.9	54.1	60.9	65.8	65.6	61.0	60.9	60.8	67.4	53.5	40.1	49.5	58.4	56.4
Last Year	39.6	42.9	51.3	63.8	64.4	65.0	65.0	64.2	67.3	71.7	58.1	47.2	34.4	49.5	58.4
% Change	2.5	7.2	5.3	-4.5	2.2	1.0	-6.1	-5.0	-9.7	-6.1	-7.9	-15.0	43.8	18.1	-3.4

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### Sector Reports - Lodging

Michelle: January, we were pretty much flat in occupancy, but we did see a lift in ADR, so it was an overall good month for us. Piggybacking off the STR report, because I know that's Harrisonburg and Staunton combined. Here in Staunton, we have two comp sets, so two different groups of hotels that we compare ourselves to. We've seen in December, they were down as a whole about 20% in occupancy. Luckily, we were not in that group; it's more local market data for the hotel, so February we were up like 17% in occupancy. It looks to be a very strong month for us, whereas March is actually backwards. It seems we're getting the groups here in February, but not in March. Spring season looking strong.

Jeff: Gibson's daily rate is down a little to drive occupancy, which has been good. Weekday rentals are up, and not sure if this is business travel or retired people. January and February traditionally stink. May is already crushing it. I anticipate everything just to kind of resume back in in March, April, May.

### Sector Reports - Restaurants

Sarah: Baja has modified their hours, and are now open seven nights a week, and we have had some great dinners. We are closed Tuesday and Wednesday for lunch. We are pretty flat, and still haven't hit pre-Covid numbers, but not shrinking either.

Jeff: We have been past pre-Covid numbers for a while now fortunately. 2023 was a good year. January 2024 stunk because of weather. We are back at normal hours, however, we are out of the late night business, closing at 10 on weekdays and 11:00 on weekends. My restaurants in Staunton, Harrisonburg and Lexington seem to be going well and the labor market is starting to turn. We are getting inundated with applications and people are showing up for interviews. Jeff thinks the economy is still slowing and

is hopeful to not head into a recession. After we get through January and February, things will begin cranking up again.

### **Sector Reports - Retail**

Sandi (via email) : Frontline Models: While January was slow he still ended up in sales. Excited to be offering new products, such as trains. Weather had a big impact on the number of customers who came in. Queen City Gifts and Games: January was very slow store hours were adjusted. Heifetz-June reported: Not unexpectedly both sales and new customers are down from December's holiday shopping and Christmas out of town visitors. We also expect the low temperatures in January adversely impacted our sales. We are seeing increasing interest in sales of our CDs and vinyl records category - which is January was our top-selling category. We anticipate continued growth of sales in this category as word spreads about this treasure that we have. With our upcoming concert in early March and season tickets for the summer on sale beginning this month we are now seeing increased traffic in the shop of people buying tickets. Juniper Lane: closed in January for a remodel and has reopened. Book Dragon: While January was slow, we did end up a bit ahead of last year. Our best weekend was Martin Luther King Day weekend. The American Shakespeare performances have been great for bringing more customers in. The weather did have an impact on people coming in. I'm looking forward to Shop and Dine out starting back up.

### **Sector Reports - Attractions**

Gabe: Feb. 24, March 23, April 20 and April 27 will all be MBU prospective student visit days, and we hope they will all come downtown. Our Annual Day of Giving is March 13 and 14 and our fundraising will go towards campus beauty, buildings renovations, internship grants and general fund.

Robin: Down 6% over last year in visitation for January, and we think that had everything to do with weather. Our fundraising gala is on February 24<sup>th</sup> at the Blackburn, and tickets are selling very briskly. We will likely have a grand opening of the visitor center at WWPL in June. This is the first of several phases happening on the campus. The education staff will then move into a building, which then allows us to expand the museum, doubling the current space. We hope to have the new museum open by January of 2026. Also talking about what's going to be happening in the gardens, as they will be changing as well.

Paige: Down just a bit, no school groups right now due to the colder weather. Field trips start the beginning of March, and Toddler Times have been a success, helping to contribute to our numbers.

Andrew: Wrapping up applications for the Summer Institute. We have matched our application total from last year, which was an all time high. Summer season will run from June 14 to July 28, and we will have staff moving in and out a few days before and after that. You should also see a lot of families these days moving their kids in and out. Around July 1 there will be another spike of people coming in for the Junior Division. Season passes have been on sale, and there will be 54 public concerts and another two dozen or so outreach concerts. Spring concerts are coming up March 3 (Garth Newel Piano Quartet) and March 16 (Bach Around The Clock). Heifetz received \$20,000 renewed funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, and we are currently working on our application for 2025.

### **New Business**

Gabe asked if the Tourism Director position had been filled, and Sarah said there would be an announcement next week.

### **Old Business**

Pamela attended a tourism webinar about the Virginia American Revolution 250 Commemoration committee. Page added the VA 250 committee is currently meeting every other month, typically held at the Frontier Culture Museum, headed up by Davis Tierney. The Tourism Directors are the chairs, but we

have a variety of groups that are on it. The entire theme of it is revolution... a revolution of ideas. If anybody is interested in joining the committee, or just sitting in to listen, please email Paige. It's great for us to collaborate on things. One of the things that the state as a whole wants is to have a lot of those community collaborations in order to celebrate the 250th. We just had our meeting for February yesterday. We discussed a sign that we got funding for. Davis has been talking to Mayor Claffey about that, and it's going to be put in downtown Staunton near a building that was part of a complex that stored a lot of firearms, and it's also where the Augusta County Militia started their muster. There is historical evidence, and it's really important for Staunton, to be kind of where the revolution started. There is another sign that will go up at Rockfish Gap where a lot of the Virginia militia men actually mustered to go and fight. They apparently went to the top of the mountain and stood there with the idea the British army is not going past this point. The signs are similar to the Civil War Trails signs. Mayor Claffey added the tentative location for the sign is the wide sidewalk in front of the SunTrust building, so the people can stop and read it as opposed to being on the sidewalk. The 250th anniversary is going to come up in September, so we're on a mission to get things up and running before the September anniversary date, so that we can celebrate that. That's where they actually departed from 250 years ago, and they went to Point Pleasant before the full battle. If you look it up, it's known as Lord Dunmore's War. Pamela added the themed events can be anything related to "revolution" such as menu items, and she believes we should invite other members of the community in to brainstorm ideas of how they can all participate. Robin agreed, we can see how we can all program together. The series of events could occur September 2025 until the end of 2031, which is what the Frontier Culture Museum plans on doing. Robin said some communities have already started programming events for this.

Shop and Dine Out Update – Jessica Williams: Shop and Dine Out will occur this year from April 5 through October 27. Organizational meetings are scheduled for February 21 and 23.

VTC Grants – Jessica Williams: Attended a webinar on upcoming VTC grants, and Jessica will send out the links to all. There are two grants that are coming up: The MLP or the marketing leverage program, where they are looking at hub and spoke itineraries. New this year is two tiers of funding because VTC is no longer making it an in-kind match; it has to be a cash match. The first is a \$20,000 grant, meaning the organization needs to put up \$20,000. For the \$50,000 grant, you need to have \$100,000 in marketing in order to get \$50,000 reimbursement. The MLP and Special Events and Festivals now must have a lodging partner to encourage overnight stay. It can't be a new event; it has to be an existing event with historical data from back in 2017. That can be an in-kind match. There are three different tiers based on attendance (\$5,000, \$10,000, \$20,000). All grants must have a letter of support from your DMO. There are DMO grants as well as VA250 grants (opens March 5), Microbusiness grants (opens mid-June), and then Special Events grants for 2025. After this year, the grant process will happen only once per year in June. Jessica will reach out to our VTC rep Kelly to see if webinars are recorded.

Sarah: There is a need to appoint a new vice-chair since Greg left his position at SDDA. It was agreed to hold off until the new Tourism Director is in place. Jessica said this leaves a position open on TAB for an At-Large member. She will send the link to apply out to all members if they know anyone interested. The nominating committee meets as needed to choose board members.

Jeff: Received an email about the budget process with the City beginning. Jessica said the budget was submitted in December, and next there will be a discussion about what we have submitted and hear their recommendations. Jeff suggested with the issues that have happened in the past, we need to stay on top of this. Remember, lodging facilities all collected taxes that a certain portion were to be directly funneled though to the Tourism budget, and that was not happening. It didn't happen for years. There was a correction to it, but we need to stay on top of this, especially since all costs are increasing across the board.

Sandi (via email): The next Book Festival meeting is Sunday Feb 11th at 10am at The Book Dragon and all are invited.

Sarah: QCMM emails will begin soon and it will be a little different. We are having a lot of correspondence with a law firm from California that is not Warner Brothers. Her contact at Warner Brothers left during COVID, so we are trying to figure out if this is a predatory firm. Sarah has a very astute young lady, Stacy McDonough, that works out of the IHub and is copying me on everything and having great back and forth with these people. Sarah believes worst case scenario is we'll have to button it up a little bit and really stick to the guidelines.

Megan: Doing a women's event again this year, Mar 8-9 in Staunton and Waynesboro. The goal is for it continue to grow and evolve to a valley-wide celebration. There are pop-ups, performers, artists and other types of events.

Chase: We own and operate Batten Green, the former Inn at Old Virginia. We've been operating as an inn and venue for about a year and a half now and remodeled it last winter. We're going to be doing a Spring Festival this year, probably, April 28. It will be an open house to invite our current and potential brides, business owners, etc. We'd love to have you all out.

<b>Adjourn</b>
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With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:16 am.

Meeting minutes submitted by Kim Cormier.