



## **Tourism Advisory Board**

**January 8, 2026 9:30 am**

**Caucus Room, City Hall, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor**

**9:30 am Call to order, approval of past meeting minutes**

**9:35 am Samantha Johnson – Monthly Tourism Report**

**9:45 am Sector Reports**

- **Lodging**
- **Restaurants**
- **Retail**
- **Attractions/Arts**

**10:05 am Staunton Shout-Outs**

**10:10 am Old Business**

**10:15 am New Business**

**10:20 am Adjourn**

# Tourism Advisory Board Meeting

November 13, 2025 9:30 am

Caucus Room, City Hall, First Floor

## Board Members/City Staff Participating:

Brad Arrowood – Vice-Mayor, City Council and SDDA Interim Director

Stephanie Cabacoy – American Shakespeare Center

Sandi Carraro – Book Dragon

Michelle Davis – Hotel 24 South

Camille Dierksheide – Staunton Music Festival

Andrew Greene - Heifetz Institute (Zoom)

Paige Hildebrand – Frontier Culture Museum

Samantha Johnson – Director of Tourism

Sarah Lynch – Baja Bean

Robin von Seldeneck – Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library

Ross Williams – Frederick House

## Board Members/City Staff Absent:

Brian Gearhart – Heritage Hospitality

Robert Higgs – Barren Ridge Vineyards, Accordia

Corrie Park – City Council Liaison

Jeff Ramsey – Gibson's Warehouse, Byers Street Bistro

## Call To Order and Approval of Minutes

The meeting was called to order. Introductions were made around the room. Samantha addressed an error in the previous minutes. There was a typo in the Director's Report under web traffic. It says 46% but should have said 10%. Sandi Carraro made a motion to approve the previous corrected meeting minutes, and Robin von Seldeneck seconded the motion.

## Georgi Tomisato – Robert Burns Supper Celebration

Georgi spoke about a proposal for a Robert Burns Supper Celebration in Staunton. She opened by reading the poem "Black Snake" about a snake in a henhouse. Robert Burns was a National poet of Scotland who wrote famous works including "A Red, Red Rose," "Auld Lang Syne," and "To a Mouse". He was known as "The Plowman Poet" - a poet of the people. His birthday (January 25th) is celebrated worldwide with Robert Burns Suppers. Some thoughts about why this could be good for Staunton in February 2027 include:

- Shenandoah Valley settled by Scots-Irish, providing strong historical connection
- Staunton has a literary community
- January is typically quiet with fewer events
- Staunton already celebrates "Bard of England" (Shakespeare) through Shakespeare Center; should also celebrate "Bard of Scotland" (Burns)
- Burns was a common man who couldn't vote but used poetry as his voice
- His simple, land-focused poetry aligns with local values

## Proposed Event Structure:

### Friday Night: Poetry reading

- Local poets read their own work
- Submissions required; approximately 20 selected

## **Saturday Night: Traditional Robert Burns Supper**

- Bagpipes
- Ceremonial haggis presentation with "Address to the Haggis"
- Parade
- Scotch drinking
- Festive atmosphere

## **Next Steps**

- Hoping for City of Staunton involvement
- Seeking community interest and participation
- Have the first event and assess for future growth
- Georgi has reached out to quite a few organizations who have expressed interest in participating, with initial plans to hold at the Arcadia Project with Trinity Church as a backup.

<b>Josh Knight - Wharf Update</b>
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## **Downtown Staunton Tunnel Repair Project Update**

### **Background**

- **March 2024:** Engineers discovered unsafe conditions during structural survey work; immediately closed parking lots and roads
- Conducted geotechnical surveys (core samples) and prepared repair plans throughout summer/fall
- Repair plans sent out for contractor bidding

### **Timeline**

- **November 20:** Bid opening (delayed from earlier date due to contractor questions)
- **End of 2025:** Contract award expected
- **January 2026:** Construction begins on Byers Street
- **Byers Street:** January-May 2026
- **Johnson Street:** June 2026-June 2027 (approximately 1 year; extended due to paving restrictions in winter)
- **New Street:** Begins after Johnson Street completion
- **Total project duration:** Approximately 18 months

### **Project Priorities**

1. **Public safety** - primary concern due to tunnel structural issues
2. **Minimize business disruption** - maintain access and communication
3. **Cost effectiveness** - complex project with utility conflicts
4. **Long-term solutions** - Phase 1 focuses on reopening roads; additional work needed in parking lot areas

### **Construction Approach**

#### **Three repair areas (in order):**

1. Byers Street

2. Johnson Street
3. New Street

#### **Repair method:**

- Top-down approach: remove road surface, remove/replace deteriorated tunnel walls and roof with reinforced concrete
- Relocate utilities and reroute streams/sewer lines

#### **Challenges**

- Utilities must be relocated
- Unknown conditions may be discovered during construction
- Winter weather will impact paving schedule
- Large portion of tunnel damage extends into wharf parking lot (not addressed in these road tunnel repairs)

#### **Business Impact Mitigation**

- Byers Street will reopen to serve as detour during Johnson Street closure
- Improved signage and wayfinding
- Better lighting and reduced construction barriers where possible
- Open communication channels with businesses
- Social media updates
- Pedestrian access maintained throughout

#### **Important Notes**

- When complete, roads will look identical to pre-March condition (no visual improvements despite expense)
- Construction barricades will be removed

#### **Johnson Street Parking Deck**

- **Will remain open** during construction
- Police entrance will **stay closed**
- Open entrance will remain accessible
- During Johnson Street repair work, access will be: Turn from Lewis Street → Enter garage → Exit garage (loop pattern)
- Signage will emphasize: "Parking Garage Open" and "Parking Garage Free"

#### **Detour Plans**

- Preliminary detour routes shown in plans are suggestions
- **Contractor must submit their own transportation/detour plan for approval**
- Final detour configuration may differ from current proposals

#### **Contact**

- Project communications lead available for questions and concerns
- Wayfinding/signage subcommittee established with Samantha

- One sheeter on parking is currently available at Visitor Center but word of mouth is also important

Encouraged businesses to report issues immediately

<b>Monthly Tourism Report – Samantha Johnson</b>
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**Activities:**

Visit Staunton staff took part in the following promotional, networking, or administrative activities in October:

- Staunton blog promotions featured Shop + Dine Out Is Ending: Sit Outside While You Can! and Staunton by Rail: Your Plane and Car-Free Escape
- Made of Magic campaign running in Philly
- Visit Staunton hosted motorcoach buses at several new attraction sites
- Samantha Johnson attended the VADMO Fall Meet-Up as Programming Chair
- Samantha attended Staunton Pride & VSDB Cane Quest
- Site-Visits of Queen City Space, The Frenchmen, Virginia Scenic Railway, Atlas + Ember
- Met with several prospective businesses and attractions
- Samantha attended the Shenandoah Valley Travel Assoc. Board Meeting
- Provided collateral for the Virginia Archeological Society’s Annual Conference and Staunton Music Festival fundraiser

Meetings Attended: SGMP, VADMO, GART, VA 250, HBA, QCMM, SVTP, VSAE, Virginia by Rail, Beerwerks, VRLTA, MATPRA, Creative Mornings

**Public Relations**

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

Date	Source Name	Title	Reach	AVE
10-29	NewsBreak	<u>US Road Trip Routes With The Best Free Camping Spots</u>	16,980,472	\$ 157,069.37
10-23	NewsBreak	<u>Staunton by Rail: Your Plane and Car-Free Escape!</u>	16,980,472	\$ 157,069.37
10-17	Axios	<u>New fall weekend getaways from D.C.</u>	16,230,835	\$ 150,135.22
10-14	Lonely Planet	<u>Don't miss these 3 train journeys through Virginia this fall</u>	2,259,891	\$ 20,903.99
10-25	Islands Magazine	<u>Set Between Roanoke And Raleigh Is A Riverside Virginia Beauty With Vintage Charm And Prime Antiquing</u>	2,047,237	\$ 18,936.94
10-29	Family Destinations Guide	<u>10 Charming Towns In Virginia That Are Perfect For Stress-Free Weekend Getaways</u>	1,321,332	\$ 12,222.32
10-28	Family Destinations Guide	<u>10 Dreamy Small Towns In Virginia That Look Straight Out Of A Postcard</u>	1,321,332	\$ 12,222.32

10-27	Family Destination s Guide	<u>10 Gorgeous Small Towns In Virginia That Feel Like A Cozy Hallmark Movie Set</u>	1,321,332	\$ 12,222.32
10-12	Family Destination s Guide	<u>The Fascinating Train Ride In Virginia Perfect For Your Next Weekend Adventure</u>	1,321,332	\$ 12,222.32
10-27	WWBT	<u>New wine trail coming to southern end of Shenandoah Valley to promote agrotourism</u>	809,076	\$ 7,483.95
10-17	WHSV-TV	<u>Staunton Jams music festival returns to the Queen City this weekend</u>	380,871	\$ 3,523.06
10-27	Richmond Times-Dispatch	<u>Staunton's Maude &amp; the Bear named one of America's top 50 restaurants</u>	350,633	\$ 3,243.36
10-16	Winston-Salem Journal	<u>Frontier Culture Museum of Virginia: Spotlight on Tiffany Fisk, Director of Interpretation</u>	144,946	\$ 1,340.75
10-25	Alexandria Living Magazine	<u>Virginia's Three Most Stunning Fall Views</u>	23,942	\$ 221.46
10-21	Family Travel Forum	<u>The Hidden Antique Trails In Virginia You'll Want To Explore This Fall</u>	9,835	\$ 90.97
10-21	Family Travel Forum	<u>These 7 Virginia Gastropubs Redefine Comfort Food for Every Traveler</u>	9,835	\$ 90.97
10-11	The Washington Post	<u>11 peak fall trips to sneak in before the holidays</u>	26,569,723	\$ 245,769.94
10-10	NewsBreak	<u>The Fascinating Train Ride In Virginia That's Perfect For An Unforgettable Day Trip</u>	16,980,472	\$ 157,069.37
10-04	WorldAtlas	<u>12 Safest Towns In Virginia For Senior Living</u>	7,515,130	\$ 69,514.95
10-25	WorldAtlas	<u>13 Of The Most Welcoming Towns In Virginia</u>	7,053,100	\$ 65,241.17
10-25	WorldAtlas	<u>These 8 Virginia Towns Have The Best Historic Districts</u>	7,053,100	\$ 65,241.17
10-22	Newsday	<u>Fall trips to sneak in before the holidays</u>	1,292,821	\$ 11,958.59
10-26	Matador Network	<u>13 Luxury Train Rides in the US That Are Worth Splurging On</u>	351,621	\$ 3,252.49
10-24	Family Destination s Guide	<u>13 Underrated Cities In Virginia That Are Perfect For Budget-Friendly Weekend Drives</u>	1,321,332	\$ 12,222.32
10-21	Country Adventures	<u>From Quirky to Creepy: The Most Bizarre Museums in All 50 States</u>	-	\$ -
			<b>129,650,672</b>	<b>\$ 1,199,268.69</b>

### Website Visitation

Website Traffic		
October 2024	October 2025	% Change
51,849 users	48,646 sessions	-6.18 %
134 guide requests	104 visitor's guide requests	-22.4%

## Top 10 Origin Markets and Visitor Spending

-September 2025-

Top 10 ▾

Visitor Origin Market	% of Visitors ▾	Same time previous year
Washington DC-Hagerstown MD	16%	17%
Roanoke-Lynchburg VA	14%	13%
Richmond-Petersburg VA	11%	10%
Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News VA	8%	8%
New York NY	4%	5%
Philadelphia PA	3%	3%
Harrisburg-Lancaster-Lebanon-York PA	3%	2%
Baltimore MD	2%	2%
Los Angeles CA	2%	0.4%
Charlotte NC	2%	2%

Top 10 ▾

Visitor Origin Market	% of Visitor Spend ▾	Same time previous year
Phoenix-Prescott AZ	23%	0.2%
Washington DC-Hagerstown MD	11%	15%
Richmond-Petersburg VA	9%	11%
Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News VA	8%	8%
Roanoke-Lynchburg VA	7%	10%
Clarksburg-Weston WV	3%	0.3%
New York NY	2%	2%
Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill WV	2%	1%
Wilkes Barre-Scranton PA	2%	3%
Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville NC	2%	3%

Out-of-state visitation represented 54% of total visitors in September 2025, with the regional visitor base remaining relatively stable year over year. Looking at your top origin markets, Washington DC-Hagerstown maintained its position as your leading source market at 16% of visitors (compared to 17% in September 2024). Roanoke-Lynchburg increased to 15% (13% prior year), while Richmond-Petersburg represented 11% of visitors (10% prior year). Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News contributed 8% of visitation, unchanged from the previous September.

Average daily visitor spend increased to \$59 in September 2025, up \$9 from \$49 in September 2024, representing an 18% increase in spending per visitor per day. This spending growth occurred across multiple categories, with Food & Beverage capturing 38% of total visitor spending, followed by Accommodations at 35%. The shift in spending patterns toward categories like dining suggests visitors are prioritizing quality experiences during their time in Staunton. The share of visitor spend directed toward local businesses was 17% in September 2025.

Samantha reported that Amanda Kaufman (Assistant City Manager) accepted a position in Minnesota and is departing towards the end of November. Marketing in Philly is going extremely well and the market has responded more to history and art content (less to architecture/food). Barren Ridge Vineyards and Stable Craft Brewing were recently added to the upcoming motorcoach itinerary. Staunton Jams had a positive impact on retail. Trick or Treat Downtown was well received. Please submit your events/hours/specials for use in our blog posts.

### Virginia Scenic Railway update:

- New hub location opening (just outside downtown)
- **Santa Train relocating there in December** (moving from train station)
- Running full season at new location
- Future location decisions depend on Santa Train performance

### Sector Reports – Retail

Michelle: From the STR report - September 2025

- **Occupancy:** Up 4.9%
- **Average Daily Rate (ADR):** Up 5.1%
- **Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR):** Up 10.2%
- **Short-term rentals:** Occupancy up 19%

For Hotel 24 South, best October since 2018 with occupancy up 6% and rate and food and beverage both up 11%. November currently flat in occupancy but last-minute bookings expected. For early December the first week is fully booked, the second weekend is building momentum and the weekend before Christmas is looking strong (possibly due to travelers avoiding flights/driving

instead). Both January-February 2026 are showing upward trends, and overall, the 2026 outlook appears positive. December 2-4 will host 150 guests dining independently. Be prepared for increased foot traffic. Samantha reminded everyone the number one search term for SEO is Things To Do In Staunton.

Ross: Ditto!

#### Sector Reports – Restaurants

Sarah: Most locations saw a month-to-month decrease (from September to October) but a year-over-year increase. Comparing October year to year shows more people from places like Roanoke, Pennsylvania, New York, Charlotte, and Charlottesville. The Frenchman is now operating at full capacity. The new Boba tea spot is doing well and is run by friendly people.

#### Sector Reports - Retail

Sandi: Sales are up, with a strong October overall despite one weak weekend, and year-to-date performance remains up in the double digits. Upcoming events are planned from late November through February. Many businesses are preparing for Small Business Saturday and are excited about the new market in the Wharf area, which is expected to attract visitors and be enjoyable for local business owners as well. Have seen an increase in international visitors (Ireland, Scotland, England, Canada).

#### Sector Reports – Attractions

Keith: MBU Finals conclude December 12, so students will be filtering out of town.

Paige: Year over year and month over month the FCM is way down and we attribute that to construction. Cider Fest had over 920 participants making it one of the strongest first -year events ever. Major success with strong support from the Virginia Humanities 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Series. Nikki West added there were long lines, high enthusiasm, live music and food selling out. Over 2,400 cider samples were poured. Hoping to make this an annual event and the FCM is the perfect spot, even with construction.

Stephanie: Fall visits were up, revenue was a little bit down. It's the final weekend of the fall season, after which operations will pause for a few weeks to prepare for *A Christmas Carol*. Attendance has been low on Wednesdays and Thursdays, so "pajama days" will be introduced on Wednesdays to boost interest. There's a request to find a family willing to appear in promotional photos wearing matching (ideally Shakespeare-themed) pajamas during the week of November 20, with a custom Christmas card as an incentive.

Robin: WWPL had a strong year, with November attendance holding steady instead of dropping as usual. Plans are underway for major growth next year, including opening a second floor with four new galleries in May. A new temporary exhibit, "*Remember the Ladies: Fashion, Freedom, and the Fabric of a Nation*," will highlight women's roles in early America through significant material culture, ranging from rare archaeological finds—such as an enslaved peoples' amulet—to historic wedding garments connected to national figures. Construction and demolition are already in progress as part of this expansion. The museum is also strengthening partnerships with presidential libraries and historic sites to expand collaboration and storytelling around presidential history.

Camille: Expressed excitement about strong participation from Staunton businesses in the *A Christmas Carol* program and invited others to partner as advertisers. The Staunton Music Festival has launched pass renewals and is considering adding new concerts, including an adults-only event before Mischief and Magic and a program combining live music with screenings of *Fantasia* and Warner Brothers cartoons, though securing screening rights remains a challenge.

Andrew: Heifetz Holiday Homecoming concert is on December 20 at Francis Auditorium, featuring a larger-than-usual alumni ensemble including a faculty pianist and artistic director Nicholas Kitchen, performing chamber works and holiday pieces. Preparations for next year are underway, with applications opening earlier than usual and early season pass renewals already coming in. The 2026 season will mark the organization's 30th anniversary, with special retrospective concerts and guest alumni planned. Additionally, the Staunton Music Festival and American Shakespeare Center are collaborating to bring back the Rhodes Scholars for Baroque Fest (April 10–12) and the summer festival (August 13–24), inviting partners to suggest complementary events.

### **Staunton Shout-Outs**

Josh Knight for a great job in his role in Staunton Citizen University.

Staunton Jams – fabulous and loved it!

Scotty for his work in Trick or Treating downtown.

Paige for her help with the Cider Fest as well as the Virginia Humanities rep.

Scotty – he sees opportunity everywhere and it is great to have him at SDDA.

### **Old Business**

[Link for TAB members to upload their photos to our database](#) for use in emails, social and other promotions. Please upload your own photos, or gets rights permissions to pass along to us.

### **New Business**

Brad: SDDA has a heavy slate of events for December and we could use volunteers. Using multiple venues to bring visitors to different parts of the city and downtown.

Scotty: Super excited about the downtown Storybook Window Walk. Grew up in NYC and went to see the Macy's windows every year and want downtown Staunton to feel magical like that. There are eight different windows that tell a story called the Holly Jolly Holiday that Scotty wrote. The launch is on Small Business Saturday. SDDA will host several December events, including Spirited Saturdays with Santa appearances, the Merry Market on December 6, and Sip, Stroll, and Shop on December 5 from 5–9 p.m. (the Friday after the parade). The Sip, Stroll, and Shop event is a rebranded, compliant version of a past event, with participation details and ABC licensing information available on the Downtown Staunton website. Communications are currently limited due to a temporary MailChimp suspension related to mentioning alcohol.

Samantha: No December TAB meeting.

Robert Brown: Essentially Zen reopening on Beverley as Ovid & Lane, Shout out to Robert's wife for winning a spot in Make of the Year in Virginia Living Magazine.

The Holiday Inn will be having a Breakfast with Santa on December 20<sup>th</sup> with a hot chocolate bar and watching the Polar Express.

Molly: QCMS is hosting a vocal retreat weekend co-produced by Jane Rothfield. Have heavy hitters in the roots/Americana music genre (Joe Newberry, Val Mendel, Jane and Alan Carr, and Robin and Linda Willimas concert on Dec. 20. Meeting with Josh in City Manager office for Staunton Jams May 1-3, 2026.

Exploring how we could possibly bring it back to the wharf area. Partnering with Blu Point to bring Wilson Springs Hotel there for NYE.

Sunspots has released their ornament of the year called the North Star and it is beautiful.

The Frenchman is now open until 5:30 and they are doing Mimosa Mondays. Also booking for special events, weddings, etc. Will be working with Amtrak for provisions down the road, and will also put a stand up with local business info.

Nikki: Michelle's Wreaths and Trees will be in Ciders from Mars back lot. Nikki poured cider on the Sip and Savor car at VRS and said it was a nice experience, and suggested others try it. There were visitors from DC, Richmond and Charlotte on the car. Merle Haggard's concert car is on the train.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned. Minutes: Kim Cormier