

Utah Board of Tourism Development
Meeting Minutes
Virtual Meeting – Friday, September 12, 2025

Board Members Present	Lesha Coltharp, Joan Hammer, Jessica Merrill, Jason Murray, Nathan Rafferty, Jordan Smith, Kevin Smith, C.J. Wade, Shayne Wittwer
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Board Members Excused	Kaitlin Eskelson, Commissioner Victor Iverson, Graydon Pearson, Harold Simpson, Melva Sine, Jennifer Wesselhoff
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Tourism & Film Staff	Tera Atwood, Jenica Barber, Rachel Bremer, Ben Cook, Rachel Creer, Lorraine Daly, Michelle Evans, Sorell Grow, Kim Heys, Todd K. Jenson, Camille Johnson, Becky Keeney, Emma Kwanin, Anna Loughridge, Ben Mangelsdorf, Josh Paluh, Liz Peck, Natalie Randall, Laici Shumway, Dave Williams, Heather Zang, Stacey Zoller
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Public	Josh Aram, Stacey Boney, Julie Comstock, Machel Devin, Colin Greenberg, Alison Harford, Marissa Mallory, Brittany McMichael, Barbara Mirabelli, Emily Rovello, Jen Shakespeare, Bridget Siebert, Whitley Schlichte, Jonathan Smithgall, Maria Twitchell, Allison Yamamoto-Sparks, Shanny Wilson
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WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

Chair Nathan Rafferty called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

MEETING MINUTES

Nathan Rafferty asked the board if anyone was opposed to approving the August board meeting minutes? There was not. By unanimous consent, the minutes were approved.

MANAGING DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Natalie Randall, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Many team members attended ESTO in August. Great to see many partners and hosted a partner dinner. We heard a lot about AI and productive time to engage with other state and regional tourism offices. International efforts also were top of mind at ESTO. Brand USA talked about launching their road trip efforts and shared national level trends.
- Joined a Korean CEO FAM that included representatives from Delta, Korean Airlines as well as a few tour operators. Good opportunity to highlight how Utah is the crossroads of the west and how the proximity of our airport offers access to the broader intermountain west and the broader western United States.
- Also able to highlight everything our state offers and how we are still working to differentiate our state at the broader, global level.
- A reminder that the direct flight to Korea opens up 80% of the world to our state.
- Presented to economic development directors at the Utah Association of Counties meeting and an opportunity to talk to the directors about partnering businesses with tourism and integrating their tourism resources.
- The legislative interim session is coming up in October and it is a key time for us. We will present to the economic community development appropriations subcommittee on Tuesday, Oct. 14. Opportunity ahead of session to share how we have been navigating the TMPF and the investments being made throughout the state.
- Will also highlight the motion picture incentive and the need to continue this and continue the investment in the rural incentive.
- On Wednesday, Oct. 15, we will do a legislative report to the economic development and workforce services committee, which is our policy committee. Will dive into tourism and the nexuses that exist within the industry and film. Would love to have industry partners join us.

- The legislature always recognizes through the great work of UTIA, that we truly are a grassroots industry and the impact tourism has on communities across the state is significant and extremely important.

QUALITY VISITATION INITIATIVE UPDATE

Natalie Randall, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

Becky Keeney, Director of Strategy, Utah Office of Tourism

- The office was asked to lead out on unified stewardship messaging for the state, as a result of the outdoor recreation strategic plan.
- Able to leverage EDA funding and the office has been working on this for almost 2 years.
- Preview the entire framework for statewide engagement and will be sharing industry specific information at the tourism conference in October.
- Have had the goal in our strategic plan to be an industry leader in responsible visitation education and messaging.
- In early 2024 engaged SMARI to do a brand perception study which included interviews and surveys with consumers and stakeholders. *Forever Mighty 5*® brand had low consumer brand awareness and 40% of stakeholders felt it didn't fit their communities.
- Recommendations were to keep "forever" as it is universally appealing and well-understood, and add Utah in the title as it strengthens the connection for stakeholders.
- The initiative aims to establish Utah as an industry leader in responsible visitation education and messaging. In partnership with stakeholders, develop and strengthen responsible visitation and stewardship messaging across all audiences.
- The overarching "why" of the program is to educate and inspire people to change behaviors. Specific to tourism, want travelers to feel welcomed, valued and prepared.
- Three projects within this work – statewide efforts, a one-time in state campaign, and ongoing integration and evolving of the messaging.
- Started with a discovery phase that included town halls, an industry survey and reviewing existing data sources, followed by developing a strategy, and resource development.
- Nine strategic considerations were identified and formed a collective impact council to bring together a group of people that represented different organizations and entities.
- The council spent a lot of time working on the messaging framework and a unifying strategy, objectives and core messaging pillars.
- *Utah Forever* is a call to action around one mission – preserve the natural beauty, vibrant culture and unique traditions that make the state so special.
- Created quite a few resources that are available on a web test page and invite board members to review them.
- One resource is a messaging lexicon as strength in consistent language across messaging efforts.
- The stakeholder stewardship pledge is another resource and will be able to report how many people take the pledge.
- Next steps include the roll out and communication of the efforts. Share with the industry at tourism conference and coordination with other state agencies to share with their audiences.
- UOT team is working on implementing the framework and plans for an in-state campaign in 2026.

COMMUNITY & PARTNER RELATIONS REPORT

Camille Johnson, Community & Partner Relations Director, Utah Office of Tourism

Laici Shumway, Partner Outreach & Collaboration Coordinator, Utah Office of Tourism

Rachel Creer, Partner Resource Manager, Utah Office of Tourism

Tourism Business Development Workshop Report

- CaPR team's three gears system:
 - Relationships: maintain collaborative relationships with industry partners and key stakeholders.
 - Resources: provide for the industry partners that promote and develop enduring resilience.
 - Education: empower and inspire local stakeholders to leverage resources enabling them to achieve their goals and optimize their tourism economy.
- The gears come together by engaging, assessing, supporting and activating.
- The TBD workshop is an educational piece developed with EDA funding. Hosted by Maria Twitchell and her team at Visit Cedar City.
- Engaged with existing and new partners to educate on tourism business development – agritourism and astrotourism.
- Developed the programming based on DMO feedback from a 2024 survey with a purpose of building tourism resiliency in a post-pandemic world.
- Had 194 attendees from the government sector, tourism, hospitality, education and non-profits.

- It was a packed conference with keynote speakers, breakout sessions and group presentations. It was organized into three tracks – product development, agritourism and astrotourism.
- Offered three hands-on learning experiences during the evening session so every group could participate in each of them.
- Feedback on the post-event survey was very positive and more than 84% of respondents said they would participate in more events produced by UOT.
- The 2026 TBD Conference will be held in Kanab, April 22-23.

INTERNATIONAL TEAM REPORT

Rachel Bremer, Global Markets Director

FY26 Strategy and Updates

- The state of the industry around international includes trade friction, concern with border and immigration security enforcement.
- Travelers are feeding into the media hype they are still seeing about political issues and UOT actively trying to counteract that messaging.
- Still seeing trade wars and tariffs that are affecting the economy. Economic factors are the primary reason we see decreases in international inbound visitations.
- Still watching travel visa wait times as are still long in Mexico and India and increased costs occurring for international travelers.
- Economic reports from the World Travel & Tourism Council and Tourism Economics show that the U.S. is forecasted to see a decline in international travel spending.
- Big Beautiful Bill includes advocacy and funding for air traffic controls and increase of customs and border patrol officers, but also cuts Brand USA funding by 80%. This does hurt our efforts as we work very closely with Brand USA.
- Brand USA is still executing missions and travel week that UOT participates in.
- Tourism economics reports that the top six countries that visit Utah – Canada, China, France, Germany, United Kingdom and Australia – are down collectively 5.5%. The largest decrease is from Canada, which also is Utah's largest market for international visitors.
- Forecasted spend from 2023-2028 at 93% and forecasted visits at 45%.
- Significant opportunities in 2026 include the Route 66 100th anniversary, FIFA World Cup, America 250 celebration. Also Temple Square reopening in 2027, Los Angeles Olympics in 2028 and Salt Lake hosting winter games in 2034.
- Passenger numbers at SLC airport continue to grow and have a strong pace year-over-year. Great impact of new airport build and access for international visitors.
- Have seasonal flights out of Monterrey, MEX, with Aeromexico, and with Latam Peru starting in December during the ski season and with adding the direct flight to Korea, more accessible for international visitors.
- The direct Delta flight to Incheon airport makes Salt Lake City one stop away from 80% of the world's population.
- We are down year-over-year in international visitation and spending and we do not expect to recover this year but do have opportunities to recover quickly.
- Plan thinking ahead for 3-5 years with the primary goal of attracting international visitors who spend more and stay longer.
- Goal also to increase brand awareness by creating avenues for global marketing engagement statewide. Looking for ways and creating ways to help statewide partners be international market ready and be a part of global marketing engagement.
- Work in the international space with three pillar approach:
 - Travel Trade - tour operators, agents, wholesalers, etc.
 - Consumer - online travel agencies, social media, consumer activations, Brand USA, etc.
 - PR/Media - journalists, freelancers, media companies, print, online, etc.
- The international visitor has an average spend of \$1140. Primary key performance indicator for this fiscal year is to increase the average spend per visit by 6%.
- Secondary ones include earned media value from targeted publications and receiving Barcelona Scoring of 80 or above.
- Also increase additional room nights and/or increased length of stay; increase international website traffic and social media engagement.
- Product development in the international space is creating new itineraries and package products for tour operators and travel agents to sell.

- Enlisted Rocky Mountain International, a marketing and data agency, to conduct a product development and room nights audit across all markets and top tour operators. Get a better baseline of what the travel trade is selling.
- Have international landing pages on the website and work with Hanson Dodge to translate the website but not all languages of top inbound markets. Working on this.
- Alignment with Brand USA and promoting the “Great American Roadtrip” and making our efforts more accessible to our partners.
- Set up reverse missions for India and Germany. Bring 8-10 buyers to Utah to meet in one-on-one B2B meetings with partners and stakeholders.
- Supplier inclusion helps be more international market ready and drive forward efforts to gain market share.
- Launching a virtual mission much like was done during Covid and opening it up to suppliers and DMOs.
- Australia one has 23 tour operators meeting 19 Utah suppliers across 368 individual meetings in a virtual trade show format.
- Coordinating with Western states as international visitors often visit more than one state.
- Formed an airline development working group and includes representatives from Wyoming and Idaho.
- Continued collaboration with domestic social media firms and international vendor management paid campaigns.
- Adding Korean and Dutch languages to the agent training education program, Utah Specialist Academy. Have just under 2,000 trained Utah specialists. Developing a 2.0 that will include niche components.
- Developed cooperative marketing campaigns that partners can participate in to help leverage resources and maximize ROI. This creates opportunities for partners to get into international markets and curate content.
- Undergoing a market indexing with the data team to assess how we prioritize markets. By the end of the year, roll this out and talk with the travel trade advisory committee about any adjustments.
- Also create toolkits and resources for partners to use.
- Will use the Rocky Mountain International product inventory for partnerships.
- Executing a proactive and targeted messaging campaign to counteract negative national perceptions, show industry leadership and support Utah’s visitor economy.

BOARD ANNOUNCEMENTS

Joan Hammer

- The tourism conference is fast approaching. Housing is sold out but don’t be discouraged as some may cancel.
- The content is amazing and activities are spectacular.
- Thank you to everyone who has donated as the silent auction is a very important part at the conference as it helps fund all the advocacy work we do.

Jessica Merrill

- Western Sports Park community grand opening event on Sept. 17.

Kevin Smith

- Tuachan announcing its season later today. It will include *Les Miserables*, *Disney’s Finding Nemo*, *Grease*, *The Play That Goes Wrong* and *Holiday Inn*. It has taken 5 years to get Les Mis.

MEETING ADJOURNED

The next board meeting will be held on Wednesday, Oct. 1 at 9:45am at Utah Tourism Conference in Bryce.