

Utah Board of Tourism Development
Meeting Minutes
virtual meeting
Friday, Dec. 12, 2025

Board Members Present	Lesha Coltharp, Kaitlin Eskelson, Joanie Hammer, Jessica Merrill, Graydon Pearson, Nathan Rafferty, Melva Sine, Jordan Smith, Kevin Smith, CJ Wade, Jennifer Wesselhoff, Shayne Wittwer
Board Members Excused	Victor Iverson, Jason Murray, Harold Simpson
Tourism & Film Staff	Tera Atwood, Jenica Barber, Rachel Bremer, Ben Cook, Rachel Creer, Lorraine Daly, Sorell Grow, Kim Heys, Todd K. Jenson, Camille Johnson, Denise Jordan, Becky Keeney, Carli Mahas, Christina Martin, Derek Mellus, Josh Paluh, Virginia Pearce, Liz Peck, Natalie Randall, Arianna Rees, Laici Shumway, Dave Williams, Diane Wilson, Heather Zang
Public	Sarah Benedict, Julie Comstock, Lindsay D'Alessandro, Raelene Davis, Machel Devin, Blaine Fackrell, Terra Girvin, Colin Greenberg, Brittney McMichael, Marissa Mallory, AnnDee Mead, Amy Myers, Chris Newton, Randy Rhodes, Emily Rovello, Angie Rothen, Wendy Schlichte, Jen Shakespeare, Bridget Siebert, Jonathan Smithgall, Mick Solenta, Adam Wahlen, Matthew Watson, Rachel West, Allison Yamamoto-Sparks

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

Board Chair Nathan Rafferty called the meeting to order, welcomed everyone and asked that everyone update their name and affiliation in their Zoom screen.

MEETING MINUTES

MOTION: Joanie Hammer motioned to approve the Nov. 14, 2025, board meeting minutes. **Kaitlin Eskelson** seconded the motion. The motion was carried unanimously.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Natalie Randall, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Expressed sincere condolences to the Green River community and Emery County following the unfortunate news of Green River Mayor Ren Hatt's recent death. Thinking of his partner and fiancée Maria Sykes, who hosted the board and staff in November. Asked for a moment of silence in Ren's honor.
- Finalized the social media contract with Sparkloft and excited to extend the relationship.
- Received two 2025 Adrian Awards, given by the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI). A silver award for the Utah Film Commission's 100 years of film and television public relations efforts. This was collaborative work between tourism and film teams, J/PR, and Love Communications. Also received a bronze award for the In Love In Utah chocolate pop-up shop hosted in Los Angeles and New York City. A collaboration between our communications and marketing team and J/PR.

- The VISIT USA Act was introduced in Congress at the end of November and appreciate Senator Curtis signing on to this. This bill restores critical funding to Brand USA that was cut by 80% earlier this year. Significant because it restores dollars for international efforts that are crucial for statewide partners.
- The Public Land Policy Coordinating Office (PLPCO) coordinated a State of Utah and National Parks Service Workshop in Salt Lake on December 1. It was attended by Associate Deputy Secretary Karen Budd-Fallen and regional NPS Denver office representatives. All five of the Utah national parks superintendents were there along with many gateway community members. Brought together a group that worked very closely through the government shutdown and continued collaboration on the importance of the parks and national places.
 - Our role was to kick off the meeting and share the importance of the parks to our local communities and businesses. Hone the focus to the three key pillars – maintaining the visitor experience; ensure Utah communities and businesses that rely on national parks and places feel and are supported; and, preserving our parks and Utah Forever work.
 - We supported and led on a state memorandum of understanding (MOU). This agreement allows us to have something in place should another shutdown occur and gives us a clear path forward of who we at the state are working with and how we can get money to the national parks to make sure they stay open and accessible.
- Continue to navigate the NPS non-resident fee and surcharges and what the implications will be from this change. The non-resident fee for the America the Beautiful pass has increased to \$250. The more concerning piece is the \$100 surcharge introduced at 11 places across the county including Bryce and Zion. The surcharge is per person and in addition to the standard park fee.
 - Recommendation is to lean in and look at purchasing the America the Beautiful pass. We have heard industry concerns and continue to lean on the Department of the Interior, who is leading on the implementation of these new systems. We are asking what the communication plan is and how it is being rolled out. Still working to get answers.
 - Working closely with our federal delegation and the administration. Interest from Zion, Bryce, Washington and Garfield counties to delay the surcharge implementation from January 1 but more to come on that. Concerned with the short implementation time.
 - Also all the national parks across the US are unique and different. There are quite a few parks in the 11 marked for the surcharge that are not open in January (or year round). The winter months are critical for Zion and Bryce and the gateway communities. Industry has leaned into winter visitation to our parks.
 - Continue to share feedback and will continue to advocate with the governor.

UTAH FILM COMMISSION

Virginia Pearce, Film Commissioner, Utah Film Commission

- Recent projects include *Homestead: The Series*, which was shot in Davis county and supported through an incentive. New episodes released on Angel network, November 26. Angel is a local television distribution company and streaming service out of Utah County.
- *The Wayfinders* is another project that we supported and is being shown on Angel. Latest project from Utah county producers Jason Faller and Kynan Griffin. They do a great job and are consistent, prolific producers. This is the biggest project they have done in Utah.
- *Finding Mr. Christmas* is currently airing on Hallmark Channel. Staff has a weekly viewing party. Midway and Park City look fantastic on the show.
- Navajo Highways produced a Christmas special—*Ya ah tee Keshmish* and it premiered December 5 on FNX. They did not apply for an incentive for this, but we supported the first two seasons of the project which teaches kids about their native culture and language.
- Great [blog post](#) at film.utah.gov that lists holiday movies that have been shot in Utah.

- The film incentive program was allocated \$20M for FY26. We are out of the rural film incentive funds but started the fiscal year with \$12M. The motion picture program is \$6.79M in tax credit and \$1.5M in cash rebate and we still have funds available.
- We have approved 18 projects this fiscal year and these have filmed in Davis, Grand, Morgan, Salt Lake, Summit, Utah, Uintah, Wasatch, Washington, Wayne and Weber counties.
- Have awarded more than \$20.6M which has resulted in almost \$85M in economic impact.

MOTION: Kaitlin Eskelson motioned to approve \$36,064 for an incentive for the following production which met the criteria defined by statute. Lesha Coltharp seconded the motion. The motion was carried unanimously.

Production	Estimated Utah Spend	Incentive Amount Per Production	Locations (Counties)
<i>A Snowflake Christmas</i>	\$180,319	\$36,064 - 20%	Salt Lake & Utah
	\$180,319 TOTAL Spend	\$36,064 TOTAL Incentive	

- Board Chair Nathan Rafferty asked for a Sundance update at the January meeting.

MARKETING COMMITTEE REPORT

Ben Cook, Director of Marketing, Utah Office of Tourism

- In the customer journey graphic, the office of tourism plays a significant part in the high level awareness, consideration and evaluation space. This is always a good frame of reference when looking at the marketing efforts.
- Starting with 2025 campaign results and just received the final wave of SMARI results.
- Very good results across all three campaigns last year. Advertising awareness from target audiences all increased from the previous year. The Parks & Beyond was 49%, Ski & Winter 55%, and Urban & Outdoors 42%. The creative is really working and the media targeting is really working.
- The results are very very high for our office. Very proud of the work and it is done with collaboration across all our agencies and our team.
- The incremental travel space is where our marketing really makes a difference. These are people who we believe would not have traveled had they not been inspired by our advertising.
- For last season, the incremental trip rate for our Ski & Winter campaign was 7.1% (600,000 trips). The prior year was 5.4% (400,000) trips.
- Parks & Beyond and Urban & Outdoor campaigns combined, the incremental trips is a lower percentage (3%) but looking at the number of trips influenced (1.5 million) it is much higher as many more people are visiting national parks than are skiing.
- The average trip spend of \$2,141 was a little bit higher than last year and resulted in higher visitor spending—\$3.3B. Advertising is moving the needle and inspiring people to travel to Utah.
- It is important to look at ad-aware vs. non-aware visitors because the ad-aware visitors engage in more activities, spend more and have a better experience. This encourages them to advocate and share their trip on social media. This is why advertising and marketing is critical.
- Brand awareness and powerful brands are motivators for travelers. It keeps Utah top of mind when planning travel. Good results across the board although, *The Greatest Snow on Earth*® was slightly down (4%). *The Mighty 5*® increased 24% over the prior campaign year and *Utah Life Elevated*® increased 29%.

- The holiday blitz media plan is a heavy-up that we run from 12/26/2025 to 1/10/2026. The budget is \$75K, which is a 40% decrease from last year. It is a nationwide targeting campaign (excluding Utah) and uses custom audiences.
- Obstacles and opportunities for the coming year are a lower budget but focusing on connected TV and leveraging a trusted partner in Viant to maximize the spend and efficiency. Launching a new creative concept –“Utah Person”-- and capitalize on a peak travel planning day–December 26th.
- Focusing audience targeting on the adventurers, venturistas and families. Have several versions of creative spots that focus on the specific targeted audience.

Julie Comstock, Creative Director, Love Communications

- Have 12 spots in total that will launch with the campaign (3-:30 sec and 9-:15 sec).
- Excited to broaden the story of Utah and showing things that have never been seen before including llamas, ebikes, via ferratas, cliff jumping and aerial tours.
- Kaitlin Eskelson asked how other communities that aren't as red rock oriented can play into this campaign? Visitors spend their money also in dining and shopping so want to make sure it is included.
 - The Parks & Beyond campaign intentionally features a lot of red rock as it performs very, very well. The Urban & Outdoors creative has not been built yet but it will feature more urban activities, proximity to activities and city life. Additional creative assets include banners, emails and online content that continues to tell the fuller story.

Whitley Schlichte, Media Strategist, Love Communications

- Providing a snapshot of the Parks & Beyond winter performance so far–Oct. 15–Nov. 12. The reporting format has changed to a three color category of what is performing exceptionally well, an interesting result and what is something we keep an eye on. Provides an easy reference to look at month after month as a campaign progresses.
- A notable result we are seeing is native advertising is delivering strong, on page engagement.
- An interesting item is that the media mix is very different this year so year over year comparisons are skewed.
- Actively pushing our partners to improve overall efficiencies to drive booking through the end of the campaign.
- Currently down across all of our main KPIs compared to where we were this time last year. This is due to the different media mix comparing previous years. Speculated that the government shutdown contributed to a sluggish start as well as increased cost of inventory.
- Working with Tripadvisor and adjusted the buy away from co-branded social posts as it is not as trackable. Shifting to more measurable tactics with higher confidence. More on-site inventory which was top performing tactic last year. Continue to monitor performance and push partners to improve over the coming weeks.
- Top three markets by booking share are Denver, Phoenix and Seattle and New York, tied for third. Houston and Las Vegas are two that were not in the top 10 last year.
- Shifting to Ski & Winter performance so far noting strong week-by-week growth in key metrics and all the KPIs are up early on.
- Noted a slow start to the venturista audience and they are a group that spontaneously books. But have moved up and performing well. The family audience has lagged behind.
- The [VisitUtah.com](https://www.visitutah.com) ad exposed page views are up 160% which is encouraging and will continue optimization efforts so positive trends continue.
- Denver remains the top designated market area (DMA) for this campaign followed by New York, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Three markets that have moved into the top 10 this year are D.C., San Francisco and Las Vegas.

Jonathan Smithgall, Managing Director, Love Communications

- Travel sentiment and trends for winter 2025 are a combination of reasons for concern and many reasons to be optimistic. Nationwide gas prices trend down in the winter, however, they are higher than four years ago. Average consumer still feels frustrated with prices.
- Inflation has remained at or below 3.2% for the past year but the consumer sentiment index has dropped to 53.3% (would like a higher number). This is down 29% year-over-year.
- More than 45% believe the US will enter an economic recession in the next 6 months while at the same time last year only 34% believed it.

- There are deterrents to travel being reported—it is too expensive, budget limits, airfare is expensive—but travelers are willing to make adjustments. Instead of flights, travel via car, train or bus, spend less while traveling and pick a less expensive destination.
- Almost 50% reported planning to travel outside the US for leisure in the next 12 months and this is a concern as sending more travelers outside the country than are traveling to the United States.
- Reasons to be optimistic about travel as almost 87% say they are excited about leisure travel in the next year, and 66% are planning to return to a winter destination that they have been to.
- Blended travel, business travelers who extend trips for personal or leisure purposes, is doing very well. It is up 31% from 2024. This emerged from the pandemic but it is a trend that has stayed.
- The blended traveler prefers to stay at a hotel (78%) and the most important amenity is good reliable wifi.
- Utah could be uniquely positioned to benefit from the more than 66% of travelers that want a spiritual, mental and physical experience when traveling.
- Utah is the 26th in the nation for the most desired domestic location for travelers that plan to travel in the next 12 months. Specifically in the west Utah moves up to 17th.
- Nathan Rafferty commented with the slow start to snow in the mountains, the opportunity for promotion of offslope activities.
- Jennifer Wesselhoff shared that they have a daily standing meeting to discuss how to enhance visitor experience during the holiday peak season if the snow quality doesn't improve. Working on activations and partnership opportunities.

COMMUNITY & PARTNER RELATIONS TEAM UPDATE

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

- CaPR team's three gear 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.

Diane Wilson, Industry Communication Coordinator, Community & Partner Relations, Utah Office of Tourism

- Have 1200 subscribers to the partner newsletter which is a 37% increase from last year and produced 20 issues in 2025.
- This newsletter helps strengthen industry communication and engagement and includes program updates, event announcements, research insights and share priorities.
- The industry website travel.utah.gov was redesigned and launched a year ago. Have seen increase of 36K users and 74K more page views. It provides resources and support for tourism partners and new pages built to share new programs like ELEV8 Utah, Utah Forever and legislative resources.

Rachel Creer, Partner Research Manager, Community & Partner Relations, Utah Office of Tourism

- The 2025 grant cycle went very well with Cooperative Marketing Grant awarding 54 applicants from 24 counties.
- Focused on transparency, clarity and training for the applicants to improve the process. The Co-op committee members are crucial in this process and appreciate Lesha Coltharp for leading. She was joined by Joan Hammer, Kevin Smith, Jordan Smith and Kym Buttschardt.

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

- Hosted the first DMO marketing workshop in Salt Lake City and had 54 attendees representing 25 counties. It focused on plans, tactics, actions, and plans to develop foundational marketing plans. Hosting the second one in March 2026 in Provo.

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

- The first Tourism Business Development (TBD) Workshop honing in on destination and visitor readiness. Focused on niche sectors of agritourism and astrotourism.
- Intense, productive two days with almost 200 attendees, 45 speakers and 15 experts. Provided memorable hands-on experiences for everyone.

Rachel Creer, Partner Research Manager, Community & Partner Relations, Utah Office of Tourism

- ELEV8 Utah is the new product development program launched this year. Partnered with Joe Veneto for a pilot program with three participating counties—Sevier, Kane and Iron.
- Twelve participating organizations (4 from each county) are getting coached on creating a new experience and being trained on Joe Veneto's design studio process.

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

- An advantage of the CaPR team being located throughout the state is the opportunity to provide in-person contact with partners throughout the state and we had more than 75 meetings, partner tours, conferences and speaker opportunities.
- Collaborate with state agencies, federal public lands and associations.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Joan Hammer reminded the group that the 2026 legislative session starts on January 20, 2026, and encouraged everyone to engage on a local level by getting to know your legislators.
- Two TOUR caucus meetings this year—Jan. 27 and Feb. 17 both starting at 7am. Good opportunity to spend one-on-one time with legislators.
- Tourism Day on the Hill is Feb. 6. Please mark your calendar and plan to attend.
- Jennifer Wesselhoff shared that Park City is preparing for the winter season and preparing for the final Sundance Film Festival in Park City. Planning a community wide celebration with an outdoor concert and films that will be in honor of Robert Redford and all he did for the community and state.
- Kevin Smith thanked the team for the impressive information received during the meeting and the data-driven marketing decisions are amazing. Very useful for areas throughout the state.
- St. George airport is still growing and expanding and has flights to/from Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix and Dallas. This is enhancing access to Southern Utah.
- Dave Williams noted that the research team is working with Jordan Smith and IORT to get a hands-on pulse of happenings in the industry and ask DMOs to complete the survey and share with partners and businesses throughout the communities.
- On behalf of the tourism and film office, thanked the board for the engagement, hard work and time volunteering for the industry.

MEETING ADJOURNED