

# Utah Board of Tourism Development

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, Feb. 5, 2026, 2:30pm

Western Sports Park, 25 N. Sports Park Way, Farmington

<b>Board Members Present</b>	Lesha Coltharp, Joanie Hammer, Jessica Merrill, Jason Murray, Graydon Pearson, Nathan Rafferty, Melva Sine, Jordan Smith, Shayne Wittwer
<b>Board Members Virtual</b>	Kevin Smith, CJ Wade
<b>Board Members Excused</b>	Kaitlin Eskelson, Victor Iverson, Harold Simpson, Jennifer Wesselhoff
<b>Tourism &amp; Film Staff</b>	Tera Atwood, Jenica Barber, Rachel Bremer, Ben Cook, Rachel Creer, Lorraine Daly, Michelle Evans, Sorrel Grow, Kim Heys, Todd K. Jenson, Camille Johnson, Denise Jordan, Becky Keeney, Emma Kwanin, Anna Loughridge, Carli Mahas, Derek Mellus, Josh Paluh, Liz Peck, Natalie Randall, Arianna Rees, Dave Williams, Diane Wilson, Heather Zang, Stacey Zoller
<b>Public</b>	Lori Allred, Suzanne Brose, Julie Comstock, Machel Devin, Lora Eschtruth, Terra Girvin, Jordynn Hewitt, Alesa Larsen, Chris Newton, Emily Rovello, Angie Rothen, Bridget Siebert, Jonathan Smithgill, Matt Sterzer, Maria Twitchell, Rachel West, Peggy White, Louis Williams, Allison Yamamoto-Sparks, Cortney Yazzie

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## WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

**Board Chair Nathan Rafferty** called the meeting to order, welcomed everyone and asked for head table and board member introductions.

Davis county tourism director **Jessica Merrill** welcomed the group to the Western Sports Park. The building opened in September 2025 and was fully funded by TRCCA (Tourism, Recreation, Cultural, Convention, and Airport Facilities) tax funds. Invested almost \$75M into it and bonded \$55M against it. Immediately seeing positive impacts with big sporting events, including wrestling, cheer, tumbling, volleyball, etc. Anticipating an economic impact of \$50M over the next two to three years as we build and establish events and customers.

**Nathan Rafferty** reminisced about the Utah Tourism Conference outing to Lagoon and asked when it opens this spring. Jessica explained it is planned for the first weekend in April through the first week in November. The park is opening new rides this year and plans for more new rides in the next few years.

## MEETING MINUTES

**MOTION: Nathan Rafferty** motioned to approve the Jan. 9, 2026, board meeting minutes. All board members were in favor.

## MANAGING DIRECTOR'S REPORT

**Natalie Randall**, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Welcomed everyone and happy to see so many partners in town during this busy week – Passport to Prosperity event tonight and Tourism Day on the Hill tomorrow.

- During the legislative session, navigating film commission and film program funding with the economic and community development subappropriations committee and recently presented to them. Share handouts to help explain the three things that are top of mind.
  - First handout includes the Governor’s Office of Economic Opportunity (GOEO) framework. This is something the governor is leaning into around his economic development plan. Specifically presented to the committee how tourism and film are critical pieces to the broader economic development efforts. The industry has been talking about it for years.
  - As an industry, will start to hear more things around the creative, experience and innovation economies. In an effort to weave together the great work that is already happening with tourism and film and elevate it to the broader economic work that is developing.
  - We presented how film is a core piece to the Utah economy. Looking at the films that come to Utah and looking at all we have invested into the Life Elevated brand, this is what is attracting businesses and workforce to relocate to Utah. It is the quality of life and the brand promise that the industry has led out on building.
  - Specific information on the second side of handout about the film commission programs, including three grant programs, that are being looked at and recommended by the legislative fiscal analyst recommendations.
  - Conversations are surfacing around the rural film incentive and request for appropriations to renew funding and refresh the \$12M. We have no concerns about adjustments to the TMPF this year, which is great.
  - As many are navigating conversations on the Hill tomorrow, leaning into “we have to be present to remain resilient”. It is more important than ever as there are a lot of headwinds with the industry and the impact of weather, government shutdowns, and industry concerns. Lean into brand promise at both a domestic and global level.
  - Link on the bottom of handout and at [travel.utah.gov](http://travel.utah.gov) legislative resources. Industry partner dashboard so legislators can look at specific districts and have information at fingertips.
- Thank you to the Utah Tourism Industry Association, Celina Sinclair (executive director) and board representative Joanie Hammer for leading our day on the hill. We follow the outdoor recreation industry in the rotunda tomorrow and look forward to welcoming everyone.
  - Also pulled together floor special privileges that are being taken on the house and senate floors tomorrow to build awareness of our time in the rotunda. Rep. Brooks will speak on the house floor about the importance of tourism and Sen. Vickers will do the same on the senate floor.
  - Also plan to welcome Lt. Gov. Henderson to the rotunda between 11:30am-12pm.
- Hosting the Passport to Prosperity event this evening to celebrate tourism and film’s annual report for 2025. The passport piece (orange booklet) tells the story of the visitor economy value and why visitors make life better in Utah. Built as a resource for the industry to talk about the importance of tourism.
- Natalie recognized Ancient Wayves owner Louis Williams from San Juan County who was commended for excellence in tourism by UK-based JRN Magazine and awarded top prize for “best tourism experience”.

## **UTAH FILM COMMISSION**

**Virginia Pearce**, Director, Utah Film Commission

- It is the 20th anniversary of *High School Musical* and legendary choreographer and director Kenny Ortega was in town to celebrate. He visited East High School, where it was filmed, and currently the school is preparing for a musical presentation of *High School Musical*. Ortega spent time with the students during their rehearsal. He also spoke at Summit, the Silicon Slopes and Visit Salt Lake conference that is currently at the Salt Palace.
- *Marshals* premieres March 1 on CBS. This is a *Yellowstone* spin off and has been filming in Park City for the past six months. It shows off Summit and Wasatch counties very well.
- Premiering at SXSW (South by Southwest) in March is *Edie Arnold is a Loser*. This is a small independent film that has a great script. Very proud of the team behind this film and look forward to seeing where it goes.

- Finally, *Wardriver* is premiering March 20 in select theaters. This project was a slow burn as it took almost four years to get off the ground. It is a cyber thriller, has a great script and has some great up and coming young talent.
- As Natalie reported, we are working hard during the legislative session to keep our rural incentive program going. Senator Stevenson, who is chair of the executive appropriations committee, is in support of the rural incentive program and he feels passionately about it.
- 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 22 projects this fiscal year and these have filmed in Davis, Grand, Juab, Kane, Morgan, Salt Lake, Summit, Tooele, Utah, Uintah, Wasatch, Washington, Wayne and Weber counties. This is a big year for us already with 22 projects at the halfway point and I believe we may hit 30 total.
- Have awarded more than \$21.2M which has resulted in almost \$87.5M in economic impact.
- This month we have three projects to review.
- *Unwell Winter Games* is a project from broadcaster and podcaster Alex Cooper. She will be in Milan Cortina on the NBC broadcast team but this is a youtube show with former athletes, celebrities, media personalities competing against each other. It is shooting in Park City. They are hiring a lot more crew than they initially anticipated which is very good for our local workforce.
- *Real Housewives of Salt Lake* is in season 7. They have applied for incentives early in the production but didn't receive any because of limited funding and uncertainty about the project. It is one of the top performers in this franchise as millions of viewers around the world tune in. They do a great job showcasing the city and the focus is the women and their businesses. It is a cultural moment as it gets mentioned by celebrities as the "show currently watching", by SNL and Jimmy Fallon.
  - Because it is unscripted, the baseline is 10%. Could qualify for additional 5% if they shoot in rural Utah and another 5% if they don't have to shoot in Utah. The \$200K of incentive will go a long way and it is worth it.
  - **Shayne Wittwer** commented that he has not watched it but asked how it makes Utahns look? Dislike how these reality programs make us look.
  - *Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* does talk a lot about Utah culture but this one focuses more on the women who live here and own businesses. **Melva Sine** commented that this seems to be a lot of draw.
  - When presenting to the legislative committee, one asked how projects that make fun of Utah are handled. Explained we take it seriously, review scripts thoroughly and also Utah is a proud state and we know who we are. It is not a show about our predominant religion and it is not making fun of our culture.
  - The production has been a great partner—brought other projects to Utah since they have a good experience shooting here and they hire locals. The economic benefits are good.
  - Natalie Randall noted that the subcommittee has reviewed this request and approved it and has brought it to the board as a recommendation. Graydon Pearson, a member of the subcommittee, noted there will be a return on the investment.
- The Chosen, also in season 7, had a very impactful season 6. The production spent almost \$5M in Utah and booked more than 2800 room nights. Also more than 600 fans travel to Utah to be an extra and buy their own food, rooms, etc. Worldwide it has 280 million viewers.
  - Season 7 will be the last of the series and the production plan is much bigger. Estimated spend is over \$8M (previously \$5M). They split the production between Goshen and some place in Texas.
  - **Melva Sine** asked if they will give top billing to Utah in the credits since it is filmed in Utah and Texas.
- In summary the projects reviewed today are bringing in more than \$11M to the state.

Production	Estimated Utah Spend	Incentive Amount Per Production	Locations (Counties)
<i>Unwell Winter Games</i>	\$927,710	\$185,542 - 20%	Summit & Wasatch
<i>Real Housewives of Salt Lake City Season 7</i>	\$2,210,000	\$221,000 - 10%	Salt Lake
<i>The Chosen Season 7</i>	\$8,159,663	\$1,631,933- 20%	Utah & Juab
	<b>\$11,297,373 TOTAL Spend</b>	<b>\$2,038,475 TOTAL Incentive</b>	

**MOTION: Melva Sine motioned to approve \$2,038,475 for incentives for the three productions presented which have met the criteria defined by statute. Jason Murray seconded the motion. The motion was approved with 11 yes, 1 no vote by Shayne Wittwer.**

### **COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE**

**Anna Loughridge**, Director of Communications, Utah Office of Tourism

CY2025 Public Relations Recap & CY2026 Plan and Trends

- Introduced Sorell Grow, UOT PR Manager, moved over to the communications team recently. The communications team works closely with Love Communications (in state efforts and J/PR national efforts).
- In the business of storytelling and promoting Utah as a top tier travel destination. Tell the ‘why’ visitors make life better in Utah and share everything that makes Utah unique and capture the soul and heart of our culture.
- Successful at owning the Utah story and sharing and shaping the stories and headlines. Examples include during Sundance see stories about the thriving Utah film industry. During the government shutdown, Utah’s *The Mighty 5*® were open and welcoming visitors. And, Utah is a top travel destination for unrivaled dark skies.

**Terra Girvin**, Senior Account Executive, J/PR

- Highlights from the 2025 calendar year, 120 earned media effort placements in regional and national outlets, headline stories and roundups. Totaled 2.7B media impressions from print, digital and social impressions.
- This results from 31 media hostings and the best stories come from journalists who travel and experience Utah themselves.
- Barcelona Principles average score of 92 for the 120 placements. In the public relations space we look at the quality and quantity of the media placements. Consider if it is a full feature story, KPI messages included, a link or image goes into the scoring. A score of 92 (out of 100) is incredible.
- Highlights from 2025 include stories in Travel + Leisure, Vogue, Outside magazine, USA Today, People magazine and many more.
- The public relations strategy for 2026 includes three group press trips. Bring four to five journalists to Utah and visit at least two destinations over three or four nights. These journalists want as many story opportunities as possible. Tie together the different campaigns and work with editors for specific story lines to enhance coverage.
- Do three trips a year, considering budget, but also follow marketing and pair with the campaigns. Create a high quality experience so that the media won’t want to turn down the very selective invitation. Also rotate through destinations yearly to share the love. End of March combining skiing in Brian Head and with activities in Washington county and Zion national park.
- Going after the America250 theme “great American road trips” as a lot of editors and outlets are doing complete issues on this and focus on domestic travel. A Boulder and Torrey planned trip in June.
- Third trip is planned in August and showcases northern Utah as a hub for independent film, artistic retreats and emerging creatives alongside outdoor recreation and adventure.

- Host individual media visits (IMVs) and develop themes for journalists so that they tell the right story at the right time to a specific audience. Examples include Provo scenic highway and new Inn at Sundance; solo travel and wellness in nature; or, dark skies and astrotourism.

**Suzanne Brose**, Executive Vice President, J/PR

- Capitalize on media moments and media missions throughout the year. Attended TravMedia’s International Media Marketplace (IMM) and had over 25 appointments with editors, journalists and content creators.
- Three additional media missions scheduled for 2026 include visits to SoCal, Texas and New York for Ski Utah’s annual media event, which was started by board chair Nathan Rafferty.
- Have built great relationships with top publishing houses and journalists after many media missions, press trips and individual media visits.
- Create a yearly editorial calendar identifying monthly themes based off of key messages, campaign focuses and seasonal story lines. This is posted on industry website [travel.utah.gov](http://travel.utah.gov) and encourages partners, destinations and local businesses to share ideas.
- More and more consumers are using AI platforms called LLMS (large language models) for trip planning, product comparisons and decision making. This is a shift away from traditional search engines. AI models prioritize earned media and third-party credibility and so need a high-impact PR strategy. Consistent coverage in trusted publications is very important.
- Media trends for 2026 include Substacks, return of blogs and media channels. Journalists sharing long form content may have engaged, large audiences on Substack, newsletters, blogs. Large language models (LLM) like structured blog content on owned websites and third party validation – Reddit, Tripadvisor, Yelp, etc.
- LLMs place a high degree of weight on trade publications and are a critical component of generative engine optimization (GEO) and industry awards have evolved by showcasing the win to consumers.
- U.S. travel trends include passion driven travel which is traveling to a location for a concert, a sporting event (F1 or FIFA) or a fashion show. These items anchor the itinerary.
- Also comfort and safety of travel is a current trend. With geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty American travelers are prioritizing safety, ease and predictability but see the rise and return of road trips. According to Google, outdoor destinations searches continue.
- **Jason Murray** asked with the planned editorial calendar the best way hoteliers, guides, local companies get front and center and considered for these? Welcome opportunity to be pitched and learn more about locations, businesses, etc. J/PR wants to continue to be an extension of the UOT’s public relations team.
- **Nathan Rafferty** asked if there are challenges pitching Utah? During Covid, big media was not as receptive but right now, Utah is having a moment so no we do not get pushback. Great start to the year for interest in Utah. Look at sentiment in how Utah is being perceived on the national level.
- **Melva Sine** asked if the ongoing trial of the young man in Utah county (due to Charlie Kirk killing) and the continuation of media coverage will have an impact. Kept an eye on the sentiment but media that work close with travel industry are focused on tourism storyline and not hearing concern or feedback from travel journalists.

**MARKETING COMMITTEE REPORT**

**Ben Cook**, Director of Marketing, Utah Office of Tourism

Parks & Beyond Spring Campaign Plan & Marketing Updates

- The customer journey begins at the awareness level and it works its way around to get the powerful loyalty loop. If you do it right, people will keep coming back and back and back. The tourism industry leans in on the loyalty loop in different places and everyone has a role to play. The office is at the beginning of the customer journey and storytelling. Where it has the most influence.
- The parks & beyond campaign goals include inspiring trips to southern Utah during the spring and summer, attracting quality travelers who stay longer, experience more and travel thoughtfully; and, educating travelers to plan ahead and be prepared.

- Our campaign KPIs include maintaining strong numbers. This year's campaign took a 30% cut in media buys. It will be a challenge to maintain the strong numbers last year's campaign reported. Great, new creative that will help maintain strong campaign performance.
- Have been targeting specific audiences for a full year and the SMARI ski campaign study is just getting started. Exciting to see new trends emerge from audience targeting.
- The audiences targeted with this campaign will be adventurers, families and venturistas.
- The campaign concept continues the new Utah Person creative. Launched with the ski campaign and will continue it with the parks & beyond and also the urban & outdoors that will launch in April.
- Key messages include *The Mighty 5®*, as our national parks is a brand we want to keep top of mind. Also Utah is a place to have emotional and transformative experiences. Think, feel and do – want travelers to feel welcome and that they'll fit in when visiting Utah, and we do want them to take a trip here.
- The budget is more than \$2.9M and TMPF carryforward of \$38K that will be applied to this campaign.
- Campaign will run 2/1/26-6/15/26 with nationwide targeting.
- Marketing strategy will use beautiful spots on connected TV and retarget those people that saw the ads with digital and online advertising. The preparedness piece is done through native and endemic partnerships.
- The creative has stunning new photography, bolder headlines and leaning into orange color.
- Campaigns are fully integrated and doing a lot with paid social, primarily on meta platforms—Facebook, Instagram. Also doing some on Reddit which is new for us and pinterest. Objectives with the platforms are to drive traffic to the site and encourage video views. Target top 25 markets on social media and there is good overlap with the connected TV spots.
- The media flow chart shows various areas going to and a wide spread over time.
- Comparison from 2025 media budget to 2026 shows the decrease in paid search as we reduced the overall paid search budget and are pulling more from the media budget because it is changing dynamically with AI. Be more nimble with paid search, and this was a recommendation that we supplement the paid search.
- **Shayne Wittwer** commented that they've seen the booking window changing, as travelers are booking closer to when they are traveling, in southern Utah. See effectiveness with marketing with spikes in May and June and again in the fall. See a substantial drop in July and August while used to be great now two of the worst months. May need to look at when ads are running since the demand season is changing.
- Talk about a campaign united idea as SMARI insight reported 62% of ad-aware travelers see multiple campaigns. View campaign ads and see the similarities between ski campaign and national park creative. One of the best ways to make marketing powerful is to allow people to see themselves in it.
- See some similarities and show different motivations for what may bring travelers to Utah. Leaning into an audience centered approach as we continue to target specific audiences.
- Parks & beyond winter campaign recently wrapped and waiting for data to come in from ADAR. It took a hit due to the 40% budget cut, the government shutdown and the economy presented challenges for travel. Reviewed with the marketing committee and will have more results to share.
- The ski campaign is live and seeing exciting results and good ad performance. Ad-exposed page views and visits to [VisitUtah.com](https://www.visitutah.com) are performing well. The creative is resonating with the audience. Bookings have been impacted by the weather and hope for good storms in the next few months.
- **Nathan Rafferty** asked when the weather does change, are there ways to be dynamic and agile and load up the snow message? Definitely in the social space and met with Love to discuss adjustments.
- Top markets by booking share include Denver—which is very high, New York, Los Angeles and Phoenix. These line up with what the PR team is doing.
- April is Dark Sky Month and this is the fifth year Gov. Cox has declared this. Utah and in particular, Anna Loughridge, has shown a lot of leadership and initiative to establish Utah as the dark skies capitol of the world. Consider dark skies a future and core part of our brand as so much potential with dark skies.
- **Nathan Rafferty** asked why April is the dark sky month? Believe the weather, designations and a lot of others to compete with and coordination with the governors team.
- The core strategy for a “mini” dark sky campaign are unique website experience, powerful video and strategic partnerships. Always partner with the International Dark Skies Association.

- **Melva Sine** asked if the website includes information about the best places to go to see dark skies? The landing page has a lot of resources and it lists all of the dark skies communities and parks which currently is 27 and that number increases regularly.

#### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- **Nathan Rafferty** reminded everyone about the Passport to Prosperity event at Cafe Molise from 5-7pm. It is a celebration for the great work the industry has done together and another way to tell the story of why visitors make Utah life better.
- The next board meeting will be held virtually on Friday, March 13 at 9am.
- **Joanie Hammer** reminded everyone that tomorrow is Tourism Day on the Hill. Check in begins at 8:30am in the Capitol Boardroom, room 240. Full UTIA membership meeting is at 9:10am in room 445. Booth set up can begin at 11am and lunch from 11:15am-1:45pm. Excited to see everyone there.
- **Jessica Merrill** shared on behalf of Sara Toliver and Ogden that the World Curling Championships are March 27-April 4 and tickets available at [worldcurling.org](http://worldcurling.org).
- **Graydon Pearson** shared thoughts on how the industry drives the economy as reflected in all the information and presentations today. John Huntsman when he was governor, was a global traveler, a global tourist, and he understood global tourism. And as our governor, he singlehandedly put a lot of money into what this group is doing today. The international traveler is missing from our economy and when the funding goes away, so does the visitor.
- Graydon continued when having opportunities to express the importance of the industry and what it does for the state, the jobs, etc., it is very important. Very important for the tourism funding to not be cut and it needs to be enhanced.
- The state has experienced growth in the film industry over the past 15-20 years and Sundance did more than just fill hotel rooms in Park City for two weeks. It is much broader. Funding cut to the rural program will decrease the film presence and rural communities should speak up.
- **Nathan Rafferty** added if you know a snow maker or a snowcat operator, please thank them. If resorts hadn't invested in snow making equipment, surrounding areas would be closed. Working through a tricky ski season.

#### **MEETING ADJOURNED**