

Utah Board of Tourism Development
Meeting Minutes
virtual meeting
Friday, March 13, 2026

Board Members Present	Lesha Coltharp, Joanie Hammer, Jessica Merrill, Jason Murray, Graydon Pearson, Nathan Rafferty, Jordan Smith, Kevin Smith, Shayne Wittwer
Board Members Excused	Kaitlin Eskelson, Victor Iverson, Harold Simpson, Melva Sine, CJ Wade, Jennifer Wesselhoff
Tourism & Film Staff	Tera Atwood, Jenica Barber, Rachel Bremer, Ben Cook, Rachel Creer, Michelle Evans, Todd K. Jenson, Camille Johnson, Denise Jordan, Becky Keeney, Anna Loughridge, Carli Mahas, Derek Mellus, Liz Peck, Natalie Randall, Dave Williams, Heather Zang, Stacey Zoller
Public	Klell Bradshaw, Raelene Davis, Terra Girvin, Erin Judd, Loren Micalizio, Michelle Moore, Amy Myers, Mike Roe, Angie Rothen, Emily Rovello, Bridget Siebert, Celina Sinclair, Mick Solenta, Peggy White

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

Chair Nathan Rafferty called the meeting to order, welcomed everyone and asked that everyone update their names on the Zoom screen recognizing board members.

- Nathan announced that Raelene Davis with Ski Utah is being inducted in the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame on April 11. The event will be held at Snowbird.

MEETING MINUTES

MOTION: Nathan Rafferty motioned to approve the Feb. 5, 2026, board meeting minutes. All board members were in favor.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Natalie Randall, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Recognize industry members recent awards and accomplishments
 - Vice chair Lesha Coltharp, Uintah County tourism director, received the "Total Citizen of the Year" award from Vernal Area Chamber of Commerce.
 - Board member and Discover Davis tourism director Jessica Merrill received the "Top 50 Women Leaders of Utah" award from Women We Admire.
 - Maria Twitchell, Visit Cedar City-Brian Head Tourism Bureau executive director received "Woman of the Year" award from the Cedar City Area Chamber of Commerce.
- Joan Hammer commented that Natalie Randall was recently named "Forty Under 40" by Utah Business Magazine.
- Special thank you to the industry for the hard work during the legislative session. It takes a lot of time and people to advocate for the industry and it is important to have a collective voice. Truly saw that during this year's session.
- At the beginning of the session, legislators asked all state agencies to cut 5% across the board. We ended up not having to go as deep into state programs as the estimate was better than expected.
- The state budget landed at \$31B for the 2026 fiscal year. Still conservative but robust. Includes 5.1% increase in public education funding, \$101M income tax cut for the sixth consecutive year (lowering to 4.45%).

- TMPF remained at \$20.3M after previous few years of cuts and this is a huge win for the industry. Have shown the ROI to legislative fiscal analysts (LFA) and worked hard at educating them.
- Early in the session the LFA recommended cutting the entire film program. Lean in and educate them on the rural programs but it was cut from \$12M to \$3M ongoing. Means more selective with rural film incentive and less funds available.
- The Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity has changed its name back to the Governor's Office of Economic Development (GOED).
- Housing division created under GOED. Many housing programs were spread across state agencies but now will be consolidated. Steve Waldrip will lead this division and it includes community development block grant (CDBG) and community impact fund board (CIB).
- HB 481 transportation modifications are specific to license plates. Can have four standard plates and currently three are active—*Greatest Snow on Earth*, *Life Elevated* and *In God We Trust*. The original proposal would have only one of the standard plates available at a time but convinced bill sponsor to keep all standard plates available. The fourth standard plate is being discussed.
- Also slight change in language as GOED identified as agency to confer with license plate design board and tax commission on designs for future standard plates. The Utah that is used at the top of every plate is the *Life Elevated* branded Utah.
- An additional piece we followed was alcohol policy and the 100% ID requirement that was reversed. If you are 35 years or older or appear to be 35 years or older, no longer required to show ID. Also international visitors don't have to show passports. They can use an international drivers license.
- Graydon Pearson emailed this week asking how we are navigating international visitation with the escalating conflicts in the Middle East specific to increased fuel prices.
 - Strategy continues to be focused on the economic and behavioral data on the traveler. We listen to the "ground truths" and feedback from our industry partners. Responding to the quarterly industry survey is very important.
 - Recent 2026 data indicates that safety is the number one criteria for 50% of global travelers when they come to the U.S. As international unpredictability rises, Utah remains a safe and secure place and a domestic alternative for those seeking an awe-inspiring experience.
 - Concerns of the cost of travel and looking back at previous economic volatility in 2008 and the pandemic, Utah remains strong and quickly recovering. We are high-value and remain in-market.
 - Focused on shoulder season optimization and the 40% of travelers who travel during the offseason time frame. They want the red rock experience in late autumn to early spring. This allows travelers to visit with lower lodging rates, manageable temperatures and still have that great Utah experience.
 - Talk about experiential wellness and leveraging slow-travel trends. Utah's geography is a natural sanctuary and a place for stress reduction and mental well-being.
 - Also astrotourism and dark sky tourism and leaning into that as it is a low barrier for visitors to experience. We say we are the dark sky capitol of the world. Encourages visitors to spend a little more time in communities.
 - Finally the ongoing exploration of film tourism and agritourism. Built a diverse and dynamic visitor product that is low cost.
 - Longhaul international travel may show signs of cautious sentiment but 65% of U.S. travelers still rank travel as top discretionary priority. Utah remains uniquely positioned to capture those visitors with infrastructure and predictable, nature-based experiences.
- Traveling to Washington, DC, next month with other industry partners for U.S. Travel's Destination Capitol Hill and meeting with federal delegation. Extending meetings to the energy and natural resources committee and department of the interior. Want to remain top of mind for them as a core partner.
- The more information we can receive from the industry about trends and observation helps us in that advocacy conversation.

UTAH FILM COMMISSION

Carly Mahas, Production Coordinator, Utah Film Commission

- The film incentive program was allocated \$20M for FY26 and as Natalie mentioned in FY27 we will be working with less.
- We have approved 25 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.
- Have allocated almost \$35M, which spans into a couple of future fiscal years, which has resulted in almost \$99M in economic impact.
- Reviewing 7 projects this month.
- *Creation: Rita Dean Abbey* is a documentary and is going to show off the state beautifully. It is going to film in Emery, Grand, Kane and Washington counties. It will explore the life and artistic legacy of pioneering American artist Rita Deanin and Abbey. Primarily filming in Utah with a small amount filming in Las Vegas, which has a museum for the artist. Have begun prep and will start shooting in March and early April.
- *Miracles in Motion* is an original series of cinematic, modern-day storytelling that brings moments of hope, courage and redemption to life. It is a feel-good project of people doing good deeds for fellow citizens. Michelle Moore, a friend of the Utah film community, is the producer. Filming will begin soon.
- *Noah's Big Adventure* is coming to us from Park City resident Britt Sady. She wrote the script and will produce and direct it. Casting her own son, Noah who has down syndrome, in the main role. Filming will start at the end of March.

Derek Mellus, Production Manager, Utah Film Commission

- *Lulubug's Garden Season 2* is a weekly YouTube show that focuses on building emotional resilience and strong mental health in children aged 3 to 5 years old. Approved season one for an incentive in the fall and excitedly jumped into season two right away. It has the support of the Huntsman Mental Health Institute and comes from an all Utah team out of Utah County. Currently in pre-production and production will run through November.
- *One Beautiful Life* is based on the true story of Jenny Phillips and follows her journey from fractured childhood in California to Utah. She is a Utah based musician and entrepreneur. Also studied film prior to musical career.
- A new project from Warner Brothers that is planning a Utah filming in this project. This will bring a lot of attention to the state when it premieres in spring of 2027 and plans a \$4.6M spend and more than 175 jobs.
- *Salt & Honey* is filming in Helper and the movie is set in Helper, as well. Being directed by Amy Redford and Jenny Morris, and written by Sky Emerson who is an adjunct professor at UVU. The film will have worldwide distribution by Angel Studios. Production dates are now through June.

Lauren Call, Salt & Honey line producer

- Feel very passionate and inspired by Helper and being able to work here.
- Been embraced by the community in Helper and Tina Grange from the Carbon County tourism office has been incredible. The residents truly care about their community.
- Film has an all Utah crew, most of the cast is local and all the extras are from Helper. Working with locals to cater for our cast and crew and see this project as a collaboration with the town.
- Featuring Helpers businesses in the film and all locations shooting at are Helper locations.
- Rural incentive is making this project possible and has benefitted from it with other projects as well.
- Started scouting summer of 2025 and the rest of the producing team has scouted even longer.
- Film tourism brings so much to communities and we are sharing this town and the many things to do in this town with others and hope it will bring visitors.

MOTION: Graydon Pearson motioned to approve \$3,126,878 for incentives for the following productions which have 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>Creation: Rita Deanin Abbey</i>	\$150,000	\$30,000 - 20%	Emery, Grand, Kane, Washington
<i>Miracles in Motion</i>	\$164,400	\$32,880 - 20%	Davis, Salt Lake, Utah, Wasatch
<i>Noah's Big Adventure</i>	\$230,000	\$46,000 - 20%	Summit
<i>Lulubug's Garden S2</i>	\$1,798,572	\$449,643 - 25%	Utah
<i>Salt & Honey</i>	\$2,154,553	\$538,638 - 25%	Carbon, Sevier
<i>One Beautiful Life</i>	\$3,500,000	\$875,000 - 25%	Davis, Salt Lake, Summit, Wasatch
<i>Untitled Warner Brothers Production</i>	\$4,618,869	\$1,154,717 - 25%	TBD
	\$12,616,394 TOTAL Spend	\$3,126,878 TOTAL Incentive	

BOARD MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Joanie Hammer reminded everyone about UTIA's legislative debrief on March 17 and please register for that. Planning for the tourism conference is starting and nominates for the Tourism Hall of Fame will open soon.
- The tourism conference will be Oct. 13-16 in Heber Valley at the Grand Hyatt.
- Ralene Davis of Ski Utah asked about co-op marketing grant details and when those details will be available.
- The next board meeting is being held in Kanab in conjunction with the Tourism Business Development workshop on Friday, April 24. Also showcasing Elev8 Utah and Kane County is one of the three counties in the pilot program.

MEETING ADJOURNED