

Explore Minnesota Tourism Council Meeting
Tuesday, June 18, 2024
In-Person Meeting at Explore MN Office

Attendees (In-Person and Virtual)

Council Members: Rep. Dave Baker, Bob Bierscheid, Justin Graddy, Dan Hartman, Ed Hoffman, Nort Johnson, Marianna Khauv, Paul Larsen, Nick Leonard, Molly Luther, Shannon McKeeth, Laura Mullen, Beth Pierce, Xinyi Qian, Courtney Ries, Erika Rivers, Mike Schwieters, Kate Setley, Stephanie Shimp, Colleen Smith, Sara Soli, Frank Soukup, Laurie Staiger, Cheyanne St. John, Heidi Swank, Rachel Thompson, Danyl Vavreck, Cindy Wannarka, Jana Webster

Explore Minnesota Staff: Randolph Briley, Devon Cox, Frances Fyten, Lisa Havelka, Beth Helle, Karina Hill, Jared Laabs, Nicole Lalum, Shannon Lukes Hauser, Sean Lydon, Lauren Bennett McGinty, Michael Meyer, Chris Morgan, Gretchen Nussbaum, Julie Ramer, Derek Ramthun, Jen Schak, Kathryn Sutton

Agenda

Welcome

Approval of Minutes:

- The Council voted to approve the minutes from the December 5, 2023 and March 12, 2024 Council meetings.

Council Business

New Council Members:

- Shannon McKeeth was introduced as a new Council member representing the Bed and Breakfast seat.

Review Quarterly Council Reports / Q&A:

- We received about 15 reports from Council members this quarter.
- We ask each Council member to submit a quarterly sector report by the first day of the month of the Council meeting.
- Council members may share anything from their perspectives and perspectives of other people who are represented by the member's designated Council seats.
- There is a box for members to check to state whether their report can be shared with the full council (in case it includes any sensitive information).
- The reports will help Explore MN find ways to support the industry better based on the information shared about what is going on in the industry.
- Some issues raised in the reports may be brought to the full Council for discussion.
- The Industry Relations team can assist Council members with developing outreach strategies to connect with people in their sectors.

Council Committee Sign Up:

- Information about signing up for Council Committees will be shared with members who have not yet joined a Committee.
- The Committees are opportunities for Explore MN staff and Council members to have more in depth discussions focused on specific topics: Education / Industry Resources, Legislative, Livability, Marketing and Outdoor Recreation.
- It is not mandatory for Council members to join a Committee.
- The time commitment for each Committee may vary, and members can inform Explore MN if they are unable to continue serving on a Committee.

Updates from Council Committees:

- Outdoor Recreation
 - The Committee met once and discussed the Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership (ORIP), a partnership between Explore MN, DEED, DNR, and IRRR.
 - The Committee began the conversation around what the group would focus on.
 - Future discussions topics will include the overlap between ORIP's and Explore MN's expertise and goals, and how to address winters where the weather is not conducive to traditional winter outdoor recreation.
- Marketing
 - The Committee met once and discussed their individual marketing expertise and the roles of Committee members.
 - The Committee discussed the coming spring and summer niche campaigns.
 - The Committee discussed the fall marketing and niche campaigns (hiking and mountain biking).
 - The Committee discussed how multigenerational families matter to resorts, how the food and beverage industry can target marketing during times when there is unseasonable weather.
- Legislative
 - The Committee discussed their roles as Committee members, and how they can support the Explore MN strategy in the legislative session.
 - The Committee discussed how Explore MN can lead legislative initiatives, where the industry needs to have a louder voice, and how to make their advocacy most effective.
 - The Committee discussed the goals for the 2025 legislative session and merging accounts into a general fund instead of specific initiatives.
 - The Committee discussed sustainable funding possibilities for Explore MN if there are budget deficits in coming years.
 - It will be very important for Explore MN to demonstrate value to the state to counter potential budget cuts in the future.
 - Staff explained how the state system works and what can and cannot be done by agencies to change budgets and policies.
- Education / Industry Resources
 - The initial meeting of this Committee was scheduled on June 18, 2024.
 - The Committee plans to discuss the role of Explore MN, what is going on in the industry, where there are industry and educational resources already available.
 - There are always requests for more education in industry surveys, and the Committee will discuss additional educational opportunities.
 - Explore MN provides education and resources through the annual conference

and Industry News weekly newsletter.

- Livability
 - The Committee discussed Explore MN for Business activities to date.
 - Committee members shared how they are leveraging their own organizations' marketing efforts to attract talent long-term.
 - The Committee discussed ideas Explore MN should consider to further drive talent attraction and lead generation.
 - The Committee discussed collaboration with business partners to further talent attraction, noting that solutions will look different in different parts of the state.
 - For many people in greater MN, jobs are not among the top reasons they return or relocate to MN.
 - More people may start moving to MN because of climate change.
 - Target markets for the talent attraction campaign are based on the Governor's chosen key industries (manufacturing, technology, health & wellness, and education).

Explore MN Team Updates

Destination Marketing:

- The hiking and mountain biking niche campaigns will run from 8/12 to 10/31.
- Explore MN media partners include Outside Magazine and AllTrails.
- The Travel Guide is being revamped and will be published in November or December.
- The Star of the North winter campaign will debut in November and continues the focus on authentic experiences of MN, whether for travel or livability, and follows real visitors to MN to document a range of experiences in different parts of the state.
- The website is Explore MN's key app, and there will be a new Stars of the North content piece featuring conversations with people who are potential boomerangs or transplants about why they are interested in MN.
- After the BringYaA** campaign based on the quote from Anthony Edwards, there was outreach from Vikings players who may be interested in involvement with Explore MN.
- Next year will be the 50th anniversary of Voyageurs National Park, and Explore MN has commissioned a piece featuring the uniqueness of Voyageurs as a national park.
- Explore MN is doing niche content optimization to make sure the campaigns are using the highest quality content.
- Explore MN is focused on improving social media presence through robust influencer content (e.g., with Dallas Dads, who will attend MN Pride).
 - A goal of this program is to demonstrate that MN is a welcoming place for all.
 - Influencers are chosen based on social media presence or sometimes through open calls on sites like LinkedIn, and background research is done before moving forward with specific people.
- Significant web work will be required on the livability side to launch phase 2 of the Explore MN for Business campaign.
 - Content from DEED's JoinUsMn website will migrate to Explore MN's website.
 - The goal is to ensure that people can find information about visiting and living in MN in the same place.
 - Explore MN will hand off leads to DEED when contact is received from people who want to start businesses in MN.

- Since April, Explore MN has improved our website lighthouse performance score (speed of website) from 22 to 59, and code-based improvements are ongoing.
- Explore MN is shifting web analytics in-house to improve the efficiency of addressing any issues.
- Google has moved to AI assisted search with Gemini, and is Explore MN is monitoring any impacts on traffic; Explore MN will move to more in-depth content on the website which can't be easily reproduced in a brief Q&A style search result.
- The Communications Team will host a media trip in July with writers for Forbes, USA Today and Travel + Leisure.
 - The trip will be food-focused, will highlight interesting experiences around the Metro and will go to Lumberjack Days in Stillwater.
 - Writers who joined the last media trip continue to produce content about MN.
- Communications is engaged in internal planning for FY25 (starting July 2024).
 - The national strategy will focus on optimizing the Media Room and growing a contact list.
 - The local strategy will focus on improving relationships with local media to increase coverage of MN.
 - The team will streamline reporting and improve graphic design resources.

Livability Marketing:

- The goal is to integrate livability and business attraction marketing within the larger marketing program to ensure it is fully embedded.
 - This will help the ongoing effort to target the best ways to use resources.
- Destination marketing will always be an ongoing effort to sell the state as a desirable place for new businesses and residences.
- The Explore MN for Business Council will hold it's first meeting on June 26, 2024.
 - The Council is co-chaired by Explore MN and DEED and includes 14 members.
 - Council members include marketing / HR professionals from different types of organizations throughout the states.
- Phase 2 of the livability marketing campaign is about business attraction and will include interviews with people who have really invested in their companies in MN.
 - The conversation includes discussions of why the people of MN are a great attraction for businesses to relocate to the state.
 - The videos for this phase of the campaign will launch in September.
- Explore MN recently attended the BIO conference and highlighted the Star of the North campaign for a largely international group of attendees.
- Explore MN is working closely with regional development organizations and hearing about how different cities and counties are welcoming people.
- College age resident recruitment is phase 3 of the livability marketing campaign and will shift to start in FY26 (Fall 2025).
 - The reason for this shift is to allow more time for Explore MN to do more research about this group.
 - To be more effective, the campaign must launch in the fall, as individuals are making decisions about college and careers.
- A part of the campaign will focus on retirees and retaining residents in MN permanently.
- More of this work will be brought in-house to leverage the expertise of Explore MN employees and make better use of agency spending.
- Explore MN is shifting the Explore MN for Business PR strategy by capitalizing on the

state's great performance in national rankings in different areas, rather than simply focusing on the fact that Explore MN for Business exists.

Destination Development:

- Industry Relations is closing out the recovery grant program, a 2-year \$2 million appropriation for the industry.
 - In the FY2024 program, there were 111 grantees with grant amounts from \$5,000-40,000, depending on organizational budget.
 - The FY2025 program will launch soon using the remaining funds, with grants ranging from \$4,000 to \$20,000.
 - The tourism marketing grant program will launch with a webinar on June 27, 2024, which will be recorded and will review what types of costs are eligible for the grant program.
 - Applications will open July 10, 2024 and will close when all funds have been awarded.
 - Nonprofit organizations with the primary mission of tourism promotion are eligible, and only one entity per community can receive funds.
 - The co-op program for FY25 has a \$750,000 budget, and all funds have been committed.
 - Explore MN will monitor this throughout the year and if opportunities are needed for the industry later in the year it could be reopened.
 - This program is open to any tourism related businesses.
- The RFP for the 2025 Governor's Pheasant opener will close August 15, 2024.
- The Tourism Conference RFP was reissued with a new close date of June 27, 2024 after no responses were received in the first round.
 - The conference will be held within the Twin Cities Metro area in February 2025, with the idea that attendees may want to meet with legislators while they are in town during the legislative session.
 - The Tourism Conference must accommodate 500 attendees for general sessions, four simultaneous breakout sessions of 125 people each, and a marketplace area for vendors.
 - The Tourism Conference will be held in Greater MN in 2026.
 - Tourism Council members can attend the Conference for no charge – more information will be shared for Council in the coming months.
- The recap report from the 2024 Governor's Fishing Opener is still being completed.
 - The RFP for the 2025 Governor's Fishing Opener will open soon, and it is open to any community in the state.
- There are new nonstop international flights to MSP Airport, including a Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt.
 - Recent successful MN familiarization tours for tour operators and media from Germany included the Lufthansa communications director as well as trade and media representatives.
 - There will likely be additional growth opportunities due to these new flights.
- Explore MN had a booth at IPW, the largest international inbound trade show in the USA, and took 125 meetings with trade, marketing, technology and media representatives.
- Market Development is currently working to set strategy for 2025 based on the opportunities available, challenges, and return on investment.
 - One current challenge is the exchange rate, which makes traveling to the US

- expensive for international travelers.
 - The team is focusing on ways to create itineraries to encourage travelers flying through MSP Airport to spend time in MN before leaving for other states.
 - Great Lakes USA state tourism directors are engaged in strategic conversations around how to promote our states in the current environment.
 - India is currently the leading country for arrivals at MSP Airport.
- Market Development is working on the FY25 contract with Explore MN's agency of record (RMI) to ensure strategic priorities are covered.
- Market Development will host additional familiarization tours in Fall 2025, including a tour with German media and two Brand USA hosted tours.
- IPW 2025 will be in June in Chicago, and there may be opportunities for international travel trade and media to Minnesota due to the number of international representatives who will be in the Midwest.

Outdoor Recreation:

- The Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership (ORIP) is a partnership between Explore MN, DEED, DNR and IRRR.
 - 22 other states have similar programs.
 - Mission: sustainably and equitably grow Minnesota's outdoor recreation economy.
 - Goal: sustain 100,000 outdoor recreation industry jobs by November 2026 (currently 93,000 jobs, up from 91,000 year over year).
 - Outdoor recreation is one of the most robust industries in the country and is significantly outpacing GDP growth year over year.
- ORIP has three strategic approaches to achieve its mission:
 - Create innovative policy tools for supporting and encouraging economic development that leverages outdoor recreation.
 - Convene stakeholders from across the outdoor recreation spectrum to build community and industry cohesion.
 - This has traditionally been difficult due to silos between different types of outdoor activities.
 - Communicate the benefits of the outdoor recreation industry and economy to civic leaders and policymakers who can base their investment decisions upon these (data-supported) benefits.
- MN has a robust outdoor recreation industry but faces significant competition from other states with more established programs.
- ORIP has several ongoing projects:
 - Economic Impact Report (a vendor will be engaged to establish consistent and complete metrics to measure the annual impact of the industry in MN).
 - Outdoor Equity Grant Program (to increase participation in outdoor recreation by under-represented populations).
 - State Outdoor Business Alliance (26 states already have this, and MN would like to create a group to work on shared priorities, which will include members from large companies and small local businesses).
 - Annual Industry Summit (similar to the Tourism Conference).
 - Podcast (the new Explore Minnesota More podcast is hosted by Lauren Bennett McGinty and DNR Commissioner Strommen and will feature different MN destinations and conversations with leaders in MN outdoor recreation).

- Confluence of States (MN recently joined this national group of states who have agreed to work together to grow the national outdoor recreation economy).

Legislative / Administrative:

- No Explore MN funding proposals were included in the Governor's funding package in the 2024 legislative session.
 - Proposals by most other agencies were also not included in the funding package.
- The funding for Explore MN Film (\$825,000 per year) is being transferred from the nonprofit organization MN Film and TV to Explore MN as of July 1, 2024.
 - All other states already have film programs within state government.
 - Explore MN will hire 2-3 permanent staff members to support this program.
 - Film projects can attract tourists who want to travel to filming locations.
- Explore MN received several blocks of pass-through funding in the 2024 session (minus a 5% operational fee that is retained by Explore MN):
 - \$400k for Ka Joog cultural events in greater MN
 - \$2 million for Special Olympics USA in 2026
 - \$1.847 million to Taste of MN
 - \$100k for a film festival
- Explore MN is considering legislative priorities for the 2025 legislative session.
 - Increase overall budget to include permanent funding for all onetime programs. (All funding to be placed in one larger budget rather than divided by function.)
 - Considering sustainable funding options; seeking consultation.
 - Sports betting bill.
 - Industry support & advocacy (Council members should share ideas with Explore MN, and the new Council Legislative Committee will work on this).

Future Council meeting dates:

- Tuesday, September 10 (virtual)
- Tuesday, December 10 (virtual)