

Explore Minnesota Tourism Council Meeting
Tuesday, March 4, 2025
Virtual Meeting

Attendees

Council Members: Bob Bierscheid, Dan Hartman, Marianna Khauv, Paul Larsen, Molly Luther, Rep. Joe McDonald, Laura Mullen, Beth Pierce, Xinyi Qian, Courtney Ries, Stephanie Shimp, Colleen Smith, Sara Soli, Frank Soukup, Laurie Staiger, Cheyanne St. John, Rachel Thompson

Explore Minnesota Staff: Melodie Bahan, Marya Barsanti, Lauren Bennett McGinty, Dawn Blanchard, Randolph Briley, Kari Brumback, Devon Cox, Frances Fyten, Lyndsey Hanson, Lisa Havelka, Beth Helle, Michael Hernandez, Karina Hill, Nicole Lalum, Roxanne Lane, Shannon Lukes Hauser, Sean Lydon, Brenda Maas, Mike Meyer, Chris Morgan, Gretchen Nussbaum, Julie Ramer, Derek Ramthun, B Schneider, Kat Sutton, Glori Woolley

Approval of Minutes:

- The Council voted to approve the minutes from the December 10, 2024 Council meeting.

Updates from Council Committees:

- Education and Industry Resources Committee:
 - The committee discussed the creation of a centralized educational resource portal for the industry that would be housed on Explore MN's industry website.
 - The July 2024 industry survey found that people wanted education, but many were not specific about what they were looking for.
 - The portal will include accredited educational, tuition based, and free programs, and will be reviewed to assess whether it meets the needs of the industry.
 - During the last quarter, the Explore MN team reviewed educational programs and portals offered by other states and presented the findings to the committee (not all states have portals).
 - Committee members were asked to share information from their sector of the industry and their contacts about programs that can be included in the portal.
 - In March, Explore MN is launching a continuing education series, which will feature a series of webinars in the spring and fall on different topics (everyone in the industry can join).
 - Committee members were asked to help identify future continuing education topics.
- Outdoor Recreation Committee:
 - The committee focused on potential sources for sustainable funding for outdoor recreation.
 - One goal for the committee is to develop a comprehensive list of what would be needed to make MN's support for outdoor recreation equivalent to leading states like CO (if funding was available).

Explore MN Team Updates

Destination Marketing:

- The spring and summer campaign will run March 10 through June 30.
 - Prince is featured in the campaign due to the pre-Broadway run of the Purple Rain musical in fall 2025.
 - Bob Dylan is featured in the campaign due to publicity around the recent film *A Complete Unknown*.
 - The summer campaign will feature the 50th anniversary of Voyageurs National Park.
 - Custom content packages have been developed with AFAR and Nativo.
 - There will be programmatic video, native and display ads with many media partners, and programmatic interactive display, TV, video, and CTV.
 - Video completion rate throughout the campaign has been 99%, which is above average performance.
 - The campaign will include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube (skippable and non-skippable) ads.
 - There will be a continuing flight market campaign for Dallas, Texas (including TripAdvisor/Kayak Mobile rich media buy).
 - Explore MN is considering adding another flight market campaign through the diversity budget, as diversity targets continually perform well.
- Niche campaigns will debut on April 14th and will run through June 30th (lake life, music and live events, food and drink, and national and state parks).
 - Campaigns will include unique content packages including sponsored content in publications including Rolling Stone, National Geographic, Smithsonian, and Travel + Leisure.
- Explore MN is working to align its communications strategy with the campaign.
 - In April, Explore MN will host an independent press trip (IPT) around the Charli XCX concert (Minneapolis is one of four US stops on her tour).
 - The entertainment editor of Elite Daily is coming to cover the story and to cover MN as a great place for live music and events.
 - Kendrick Lamar and SZA are debuting their world tour at US Bank Stadium, and the communications team is working to develop a strategy around that.
 - The communications team has begun pitching stories around the Voyageurs National Park anniversary.
 - Explore MN is seeking to engage with local morning news programs in places including Chicago, Des Moines, Denver and Dallas to interest those markets in what MN has to offer this summer.
 - The morning show strategy has already been initiated locally, with regular segments on Fox 9 and MN Live highlighting experiences around MN.
 - A communications strategy is being developed for the Purple Rain musical premiere.
- The Explore MN website facelift program is ongoing and will be completed by June 30th.
 - The code base for the website is aging, which can have an impact on website performance.
 - The design of the website is also being updated to be more user friendly, so that things are easier to find and make sense from the user's perspective.
 - Within the design element, one focus was making things modular, so that when Explore MN wants to highlight a video plus other content, we can put different frameworks together on the web and not rely on having to create something new each time there is a new feature.

- This strategy will make Explore MN a lot nimbler in its web strategy in the future.
- The website will now include a breadcrumb pathway structure for ease of use.
- The website design was done internally by Explore MN staff, which ensures that the website is well-aligned with all other marketing elements.
- Explore MN has conducted a content audit of the website to ensure website content is optimized based on what people want to find and learn about MN.
 - Part of this audit is intended to detect and remove duplicative content.
- Another goal of the website project is to ensure that Explore MN's content can be the authoritative voice in AI search results.
 - This requires content that is in-depth, authoritative and scannable.
- Explore MN is planning to conduct an update to our brand sentiment research study.
 - Many organizations do this every five years to assess what people are thinking about their brands, and to detect trends that can be moved forward.
 - The last Explore MN brand sentiment research study was done in 2021.
- Explore MN is also conducting research on niche markets, to help focus future niche campaign dollars effectively by featuring specific experiences in MN.
 - The research will focus on questions such as what MN is already known for, and what we could better establish MN as being known for.
- The 2026 winter campaign will feature a Star of the North episode with a local resident inviting two out-of-state friends to MN for a winter MN weekend.
 - This campaign will capitalize on the fact that many people take trips to MN because they know someone in MN, and it will include livability messaging because one of the people in the video plans to move to MN.
 - The episode features activities in Central MN including ice fishing, fat tire biking, and a meat raffle, plus saunas, dining and whiskey tasting in the Metro.

Livability Marketing:

- The livability marketing paid campaign will continue through June 30.
 - The campaign is performing very well and continuing to outperform benchmarks.
 - Sponsored content with the Atlantic and Wired have been extremely successful.
 - Explore MN continues to evaluate what messages about MN resonate the most, even from a travel perspective (including MN being the least stressed state).
 - Explore MN is considering conducting more audience creative testing before June 30th.
 - No additional funds for Explore MN for Business were included in the current budget proposal, but the budget will not be finalized until the end of the legislative session.
 - The livability campaign will continue with assets that have already been developed, which will be refreshed on an ongoing basis.
 - The form of the ongoing campaign in the next fiscal year is still being considered, and Explore MN is considering developing collateral with this messaging for other state agencies to use as they attend trade shows or other events.
- Explore MN has recently refreshed newsletters agency-wide.
 - As part of the process of refreshing newsletters, Explore MN drew inspiration from a variety of sources in different industries.
 - Newsletters result in increased engagement with subscribers, and many utilize adaptable and fluid cadences and longer content.

- Newsletters 2.0 for Explore MN include:
 - Minnesota Explorer (a traditional combination of different MN topics and activities)
 - Minnesota Outdoors (focused on outdoor activities)
 - Festivals & Events (a listing of events)
 - Life in Minnesota (people can sign up through exploreminnesota.com/live).
 - People receive 12 welcome emails to introduce them to MN.
 - Subsequent emails are sent bimonthly or as relevant.
 - This newsletter borrows from tourism content but is packaged in a way to make it more relevant to people considering relocation to MN.
 - 4 new serialized newsletters are sent at less frequent/regular intervals:
 - Seasonal
 - Stars of the North
 - On Our Minds (reacting to current events)
 - Partner
- The Explore MN for Business resident retention and recovery campaign was developed with feedback from stakeholders including state agencies (State Demographer, DEED, DLI, OHE, MDE), the Tourism Council Livability Committee, colleges and universities, and Greater MSP.
 - Part of the resident retention problem in MN is because people between the ages of 16 and 25 are more likely to move regardless of where they live.
 - A central question of the campaign is how to target people who already have good perceptions of MN for retention or recovery to MN.
 - People who have familiarity with MN are much more likely to move to MN, and targeting people who are already familiar with MN makes the campaign more cost effective.
 - The resident retention and recovery campaign will have a 6-8 week pilot starting in May, which will allow Explore MN to learn more about the most effective messaging for the target audience.
 - The first part of the pilot will focus on in-state young college attendees and graduates to convince them to stay in MN to pursue careers and postgraduate endeavors.
 - The second part of the pilot will target out-of-state boomerangs to persuade them to return and build careers in MN.

Destination Development:

- The Explore MN Tourism Conference was held February 18th and 19th in the Minneapolis Convention Center.
 - 393 people attended in person; 172 people registered to attend virtually.
 - Almost all keynote and breakout sessions were recorded and posted on the Explore MN Industry site.
 - Explore MN is working to confirm dates and location for the 2026 conference, which will be in Greater MN in the northern part of the state.
- Visitor Services and Welcome Centers:
 - The opening of the new St. Croix Welcome Center is estimated to occur in April.
 - Welcome Centers are looking at AI tools to improve accessibility, create

efficiencies and better serve the traveling public.

- Industry Relations has the following meetings scheduled during the next quarter:
 - 3/5 Excelsior Rotary Club presentation
 - 3/5-7 Minnesota Festival & Events Association annual meeting
 - 3/19 Visit Lakeville board presentation
 - 5/7 Visit Lakeville annual meeting presentation
 - 5/9-10 Minnesota Governor's Fishing Opener in Crosslake (hosted by Explore MN and DNR)
 - 2026 GFO RFP is posted; proposals are due May 2.
 - 2027 GFO RFP will be posed in Fall 2025.
 - Anyone who would like to request for Industry Relations to speak to their group can contact Beth Helle or Nicole Lalum.
- Market Development updates:
 - Brand USA is working on its first optimized marketing campaign in India after the first ever trade mission to India in January.
 - The campaign has Expedia as a transactional partner, and bookings from the campaign can be tracked (campaign runs through April).
 - Jen Schak will attend Mississippi River Country's board meeting in Chicago on March 6.
 - Lauren Bennett McGinty will attend the Great Lakes USA Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors and Partners March 17-19 in Milwaukee.
 - Lauren is the Board Chair of Great Lakes USA.
 - Brenda Maas will attend the Circle Wisconsin Midwest Marketplace April 6-8 in Dubuque, IA.
 - Paid social media campaigns in Europe were paused due to rising negative sentiment about travel to the US.
 - Explore MN is closely monitoring international markets and communicating regularly with national partners regarding changing conditions.
 - There are several new and resuming nonstop routes into MSP Airport this year (Ireland, Frankfurt, Rome and Copenhagen).
 - There are several upcoming international articles and events related to MN travel (Bob Dylan and Prince article in German publication, UK National Geographic Traveler magazine feature, France marketing campaign in partnership with tour operator, Icelandair campaign, FDM (Denmark tour operator) campaign, Swanson's (Sweden tour operator) consumer travel show).

Outdoor Recreation:

- First annual Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership (ORIP) Summit will be held June 26th with approximately 120 attendees.
 - The focus will be on the economic impact of outdoor recreation in MN.
 - Attendance will be by invitation only; invitations will be sent in March.
- Minnesota's first Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Economic Impact Report is on track to be released at the June 26th Summit.
 - The Bureau of Economic Analysis has issued economic impact reports for MN since 2017, but this is a federal report which has several gaps, and the new report will break down data by regions and counties.
 - Explore MN will receive a draft of the report in April.
- ORIP is required to form an Outdoor Industry Advisory Group to inform ORIP's work.

- The group will be similar in size and scope to the Tourism Council and will have members from each region and industry segment.
 - The Partnership is working to develop the charter for the advisory group and will begin seeking members in fall 2025.
- The biannual ORIP outreach campaign will begin July 1st.
 - ORIP will host mini-summits with stakeholders throughout the state and will organize meetings with local businesses and civic leaders to highlight the importance of outdoor recreation in each region.
- The Explore Minnesota More podcast has released 20 episodes and has hired a producer and invested in equipment to improve the quality of the production.
 - The team is working to vary the format, content and storytelling of the episodes.
 - A recent episode focused on an initiative to get 10,000 K-5 students to participate in ice fishing, and an upcoming episode will focus on the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights.
- ORIP is developing several toolkits for industry stakeholders on topics including outdoor recreation business development and community development.
 - Toolkits will include best practices and resources available for Minnesota communities developing businesses and infrastructure for outdoor recreation.

Tribal Relations:

- Explore MN is beginning the process of engaging in Tribal Consultations and is finalizing a Tribal Consultation policy with feedback from Tribal leadership.
 - The goal is to start Tribal Consultations in June 2025.
- After requesting and receiving positive feedback from Tribal leadership about adding Indigenous film to a sizzle reel for Explore MN Film, this content was added to the reel.
- For FY25, 13 Explore MN employees have attended Tribal State Relations Training.
- There were 6 applicants for FY25 Tribal Nations grants (Bois Forte, Red Lake, Lower Sioux, Grand Portage, Mille Lacs, and Fond du Lac).
 - There will be a grantee meeting in March to discuss details of the grants and the status of projects and reimbursements.
- Dawn Blanchard is working on messaging to Explore MN staff to ensure Tribes are given enough lead time to weigh in on media regarding their history, issues, culture, lands, and activities.

Film:

- The Explore MN Film sizzle reel should be finalized before the next Council meeting.
- The Intimacy Directors and Coordinators organization will hold their 2025 Intimacy Professionals Summit in Minneapolis in April.
- Explore MN Film launched the Film Ready Communities initiative at the 2025 Tourism Conference.
 - This initiative is intended to elevate tourism and economic growth in participating communities.
 - Sarah Gebeke is conducting outreach looking for film ambassadors in participating communities and will provide training to those individuals.
 - This initiative will provide information to help make communities film ready.
 - Additional information is available at exploreminnesota.com/film.
- Explore MN Film recently joined the SetJetters app, which highlights Minnesota's long history as a filming location to promote film tourism in MN.

Legislative/Administrative:

- Explore MN has completed its two required reports to the legislature for the current legislative session (House and Senate).
- The February forecast is scheduled to be released on March 6.
- The Governor & Lieutenant Governor's budget recommendation included an increase in its budget to cover operating costs; a base budget increase was previously approved for FY26 and FY27.
- Most funding Explore MN received in the last session was one-time or pass-through.
- Explore MN Film has its own budget and is not part of the Explore MN base budget.
- Funding requests could change, and the Governor may submit a revised budget.
- Explore MN will meet with the legislature to discuss its budget and policy bills.
 - The policy bill includes only minor statutory language revisions.
- Reps. Joe McDonald and Liish Kozlowski are the new House representatives to the Tourism Council.

Upcoming Council meeting dates:

- Tuesday, Sep. 16 (virtual – 10am)
- Tuesday, Dec. 9 (virtual – 10am)