

**Explore Minnesota Tourism Council Meeting**  
**Tuesday, June 3, 2025**  
**Virtual Meeting**

**Attendees**

**Council Members:** Ashlee Ciora, Ed Hoffman, Marianna Khauv, Paul Larsen, Molly Luther, Rep. Joe McDonald, Shannon McKeeth, Laura Mullen, Beth Pierce, Xinyi Qian, Courtney Ries, Erika Rivers, Mike Schwieters, Kate Setley, Colleen Smith, Sara Soli, Frank Soukup, Laurie Staiger, Heidi Swank, Rachel Thompson, Danyl Vavreck, Jana Webster

**Explore Minnesota Staff:** Nell Augustin, 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, Shannon Lukes Hauser, Brenda Maas, Mike Meyer, Chris Morgan, Julie Ramer, Derek Ramthun, Kat Sutton

**Approval of Minutes:**

- The Council voted to approve the minutes from the March 4, 2025, Council meeting.

**Updates from Council Committees:**

- Education and Industry Resources Committee:
  - The Industry Relations team and Committee members continue to gather available education resources for our tourism industry educational library.
  - The Committee plans to share the outline and structure of the educational library during a fourth quarter Tourism Council meeting.
  - Explore MN's annual industry relations stakeholder survey will be distributed in July and will include more questions focused on education (engagement, format and content).
  - Explore MN's Continuing Education series has wrapped for the season and will begin again in September.
    - This series is intended to cover timely topics similar to Tourism Conference breakout sessions.
    - Tourism Committee members are encouraged to share any ideas for topics.
  - U of MN Tourism Center updates:
    - The U of MN Customer Service Portal was funded by the legislature in the last biennium (in partnership with DEED).
    - The bill currently removes the requirement, and barrier, for participants to input their social security number to take the course.
    - The Festivals and Events management course is being redesigned.
- Legislative Committee:
  - The legislature has agreed on the policy and budget bills for Explore MN, but they will not pass until a special session is called.
  - Explore MN is engaged in planning potential policy changes for the next legislative session, particularly around the film incentive language.
  - Explore MN is discussing and researching sustainable funding options for the agency; Council members are welcome to contact Lauren with any ideas.

- The legislature approved agencies carrying forward unspent funding into the next several biennia for the first time (excluding unspent funding from grants).
- Marketing and Livability Committee:
  - Performance across different industry sectors was good though winter, but concerns exist moving into summer due to some economic uncertainty.
- Outdoor Recreation Committee:
  - The Committee discussed the workplan for the next biennium, gathering feedback on prioritization, and how to fund different activities.

## **Explore MN Team Updates**

### **Destination Marketing:**

- Concerns about the inbound Canadian travel market are ongoing.
  - Winnipeg and Thunder Bay social media posts were paused during the spring campaign due to negative responses to posts, but banner and other ads continued throughout the season.
  - Explore MN conducted a survey of the industry to ask what people are seeing and expecting with regard to Canadian visitation.
    - Over 60% of survey respondents expect Canadian visitation to be down this year.
    - Many respondents said Canadian travelers represent a small percentage of their business (dependent on the respondents' locations).
    - Explore MN reengaged broadcast ads in Winnipeg and Thunder Bay in June.
    - Explore MN will conduct industry surveys in July and September to assess how much Canadian inbound travel was down over the summer.
- The 2025 summer marketing campaign started March 10 and runs through June 30.
  - The campaign highlights the 50th anniversary of Voyageurs National Park and the Purple Rain musical (scheduled in fall 2025).
  - Niche campaigns focused on lake life, music/live events, food and drink and national and state parks.
  - Explore MN is reviewing YouTube strategy to improve performance.
  - Explore MN recently published partnership articles in conjunction with National Geographic, Travel + Leisure, Smithsonian, Food and Wine, and has seen strong performance in Rolling Stone due to the Prince connection.
- Explore MN ran a brand sentiment survey in 2021 and re-ran a brand sentiment survey in 2025 in targeted geographic areas to measure changes in the past four years.
  - 6 of 10 prospective travelers surveyed in targeted markets said they were familiar with MN and overall awareness has risen.
  - Targeted markets included Chicago, Denver, Detroit, and Dallas, in addition to markets in states bordering MN.
  - Significant majorities of survey respondents who have traveled to MN reported positive experiences.
  - Survey results will be posted on Explore MN's industry site in June 2025.
- Explore MN commissioned research on niche campaign planning.
  - Niche categories identified include lake life, winter outdoor recreation, fishing/ice fishing, performing arts, shopping (MOA), biking, food culture, state & national parks, live sporting and other events.

- Explore MN will review these categories on an ongoing basis to ensure seasonal niche campaigns focus on what makes the most sense for the time of year, location and targeted markets.
- Update on special communications projects:
  - Explore MN hosted an IPT (independent press trip) in April, welcoming the entertainment editor from *Elite Daily* to Minneapolis for the Charli XCX concert to feature MN as a music and weekend travel destination.
    - *Elite Daily* is a publication that is more targeted toward Generation Z.
  - Explore MN will host a June IPT with a Freelance Journalist (*Nat Geo*, *AFAR*) on Voyageurs National Park anniversary, with a visit to Duluth.
  - Explore MN is planning a series of appearances on local morning shows in cities across the country to discuss summer travel in MN (Dallas (virtual), Chicago, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and Denver).
  - Explore MN and Meet Minneapolis will host a Purple Rain Musical press trip in the fall.
- Website facelift update:
  - The back-end components are mostly completed; website speed has improved.
  - The visual component of the project is ongoing with a goal of completing the project before August.
  - The facelift is intended to improve user experience and increase engagement.
  - The recent redesign and strategy shift for Explore MN newsletters has resulted in increased engagement.
- FY26 planning:
  - Explore MN will have a new media partner on July 1: Rise and Shine and Partners (Explore MN's current agency of record).
    - This will help ensure complete alignment, build stronger systems and help us keep a stronger strategic focus.
  - In the immediate term, the team is focused on developing the new niche strategy and SEM strategy to optimize spending.
  - The team will develop more content for the website that is built around specific areas in MN and Tribal Nations in order to provide prospective visitors with a fuller view of all the experiences they could have in MN.
    - Tribal Nations content will be informed by Explore MN Tribal consultations.
  - An RFP will be issued for a PR and Media Relations partner this summer (this is required by the state every five years).
  - Explore MN will increase its investment in YouTube to better leverage the impact of campaign videos; new content will also be developed as part of this process.
  - The Explore Minnesota More podcast will be revamped with the goal of expanding to other audiences.
  - There are a number of significant events occurring in MN over the next year, which Explore MN will explore as opportunities to specifically target visitors:
    - State Fair Aug 21 - Sept 1
    - Farm Aid Sept 20
    - Purple Rain Pre-Broadway World Premiere Oct 16 - Nov 16, 2025
    - World Junior Hockey Championships Dec 26, 2025 - Jan 5, 2026
    - Special Olympics June 20-26, 2026
    - 2026 KPMG Women's PGA Championship June 25-28 (Hazeltine)

- 2026 WWE Summer Slam August 01 - 02, 2026

### **Livability Marketing:**

- Livability marketing campaigns have demonstrated that the halo effect of tourism on the state also works in the reverse, with livability marketing positively impacting tourism.
  - Specific areas targeted by livability marketing have shown increased engagement with tourism niche campaigns.
- The resident retention campaign pilot started May 5 and will run through June 30.
  - The campaign targets MN residents ages 20-25 who are college graduates.
  - The campaign used channels that Generation Z is more focused on, including specific publications and social media.
  - The campaign leveraged short videos and an article listing 5 reasons they should build their lives in MN.
  - The goal of the campaign was to better understand what type of messaging appeals to this audience.
  - The campaign combined existing assets with new messaging around cost of living and other advantages of living in MN.
  - Findings from the pilot suggest the messaging has been very effective.
  - There have been over 13,000 users with an average of 2 minutes onsite.
  - Full results will be available in August.
  - Messaging from the pilot will be worked into the organic content strategy for people in this age group.
  - Explore MN has been meeting with colleges and universities about how to move this work forward through nonpaid content in order to attract people in this group to stay in MN.
- The paid livability and business campaigns will end June 30 due to the funding for these campaigns not being renewed.
  - Throughout this campaign, which has been very successful, Explore MN has invested in assets that can be used across various campaigns.
  - Moving forward, there will be a lights on strategy for this campaign through use of these assets, maintaining organic web content, and sustaining the campaign's momentum through earned media and other channels.
  - Explore MN is working with our PR agency to develop outreach toolkits, which will roll out in the summer and fall, in order to drive awareness about why MN is a great place to live, work and do business.
  - Explore MN will continue to work with other agencies to provide support and materials for their outreach efforts.

### **Destination Development:**

- Industry Relations update:
  - The team leads and joins various meetings in each region of the state.
  - The annual Industry Relations Stakeholder survey will be distributed in July and will assess awareness of industry programs and engagement with Explore MN.
    - Survey findings will be shared at the September 2025 Tourism Council meeting.
  - A save the date for the February 11-12, 2026, Tourism Conference will be sent on June 12, 2025.
- Market Development update:

- Explore MN will participate in IPW June 15-19.
  - The MN delegation for IPW also includes Meet Minneapolis, Bloomington, and the Mall of America.
  - IPW is the largest inbound international trade show in the US with over 6000 participants from 70 countries.
  - Explore MN will conduct over 100 prescheduled 1-1 appointments with travel trade media and travel technology.
  - The purpose is to create, promote and distribute MN travel product to a global marketplace and learn more about overall sentiment and the forecast for inbound travel in 2026 and beyond.
  - 2025 international inbound travel has not significantly declined.
  - After IPW, there is a post familiarization tour which includes MN (Twin Cities and south along the Mississippi River) organized by the cooperative marketing organization Mississippi River Country.
- Market Development staff are currently hosting international media familiarization tours; these have been successful despite current international tourism headwinds.
  - Coverage will include print, digital and broadcast.
- Work is reviewing tactics for FY26 with RMI, Explore MN's agency of record.
- Explore MN is working with Leisure Group Travel magazine on a special MN section for October, which will have industry buy-in opportunities (further details will be shared in Industry News).
- On July 30 from 2-3:30, Explore MN will host industry members for its annual market development strategy plan review for FY26.
  - All industry stakeholders are invited to join; additional information about the session will be shared through an invitation and Industry News).
- Welcome Centers and Visitor Services update:
  - The St. Croix Welcome Center has been under construction by MNDOT for 18 months; reopening is currently targeted for June 18, 2025.
    - This is traditionally the most visited welcome center.
  - Partnership centers are operated in Worthington, St. Cloud and Grand Portage; these partnership contracts will be renewed on July 1, 2025.
    - Partnership centers are high visitation facilities in key areas which are not staffed by Explore MN.
    - St. Cloud State University ran the St. Cloud Visitor Center for many years, but they opted to end their contract at the end of 2024 due to changes in their tourism program.
      - Brochures will still be distributed at this Visitor Center.
  - Welcome Center teams are leveraging AI to improve efficiency and detail of responses, particularly to specialized and complex customer queries.

### **Outdoor Recreation:**

- The first annual Outdoor Recreation Industry Summit was scheduled on June 27, 2025.
  - Attendance was invitation only; approximately 80 registered for the summit.
  - The summit featured sessions with ORIP, MNSOBA, and RRC Associates.
  - The first annual Outdoor Recreation Economic Impact Report will be shared at the summit.
    - The report includes gross output for the state and economic numbers

- broken down by county.
  - ORIP is developing a communications plan for rolling out the report.
- There will be an Outdoor Recreation outreach campaign with mini-summits in ten cities in ten months across every region of the state (August 2025 – May 2026).
  - The purpose of the summits is to share findings of the report, promote ORIP, gather feedback on ORIP's strategic roadmap for the next five years, and identify ways to support each region to achieve their goals in leveraging outdoor recreation for economic development.
- The Explore Minnesota More podcast has released 26 episodes with approximately 8,000 total downloads.
  - Upcoming topics include camping tips/tricks, the value of public lands; the invention of waterskiing; a profile of Wilderness Inquiry; Detroit Lakes trolls; and RAGBRAI coming to MN for the first time.
  - Additional video content will be created for the podcast beginning in fall 2025.
- MN is a member of the Confluence of States (states with offices of outdoor recreation).
  - The Confluence of States' current campaign, 25 for 25, has the goal of getting a 25th state to join the Confluence in 2025.
- The Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights is being coordinated by the Governor's Children's Cabinet; Explore MN is working with them on promotional materials for schools, libraries and hospitals.
- Explore MN is closely monitoring the BWCAW permit issuance issue for summer.
  - The federal government is not currently issuing permits; this process has been delegated to private outfitters, which will increase significantly the number of permits they issue.
  - Private outfitters may benefit from this due to increased customer traffic, but they could also potentially become overwhelmed due to the increased activity.
- Explore MN is working with DEED to develop a business development toolkit with resources for entrepreneurs who plan to work in the outdoor recreation space.
- The North American Outdoor Recreation Conference will be in Duluth in spring 2026.
  - This is one of the biggest annual outdoor recreation industry conferences.
  - Randolph is on the steering committee which is planning the conference.
- The Gravel Bike National Championship will be in La Crescent, MN September 20, 2025, and will also be held there in 2026.

#### **Tribal Relations:**

- Explore MN has scheduled its first formal Tribal Consultations in the summer and will schedule additional Consultations in the fall.
  - Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community has declined Consultation this year.
- Explore MN is continuing to add Indigenous film professionals and creatives to the MN film directory after receiving insights from the Navajo and Cherokee film offices.
- Dawn has been reviewing and approving additional content internally for public facing teams, adding Native events to the Explore MN website calendar, and confirming historically accurate details with Tribes as needed.

#### **Film:**

- There are four film productions currently in the certification pipeline.
- The Film Ready Communities program will launch in July 2025.
- The team has been building out content in the SetJetters app and promoting film

tourism across MN.

- The updated Crew Database will launch in Winter 2026; the film team is working with film professionals to enhance information available to people looking to hire people to work on productions in MN.
- The team is pitching MN as a filming location at major film festivals and talent marketplaces including Cannes, the Tribeca Festival, and Gotham Week.
- The team is connecting with Film Commissioners across the nation to learn best practices and promote MN's competitive tax credit program.

#### **Legislative/Administrative:**

- Explore MN's role in state government:
  - Explore MN is a small non-cabinet agency, which is independent from other state agencies (Lauren has a reporting dotted line to the DEED Commissioner).
  - Explore MN's mission is to work on statewide marketing programs, including tourism, film, outdoor recreation, and other areas as assigned by the Governor's Office.
  - Explore MN provides research, technical assistance and training to communities and stakeholders across the state (through the Tourism Conference, webinars and other programs).
    - This role is assigned to the agency by statute.
  - Explore MN can aid local communities in improving their travel, tourism and livability marketing.
    - This is largely done through grants and co-ops.
  - Explore MN provides statistical information, data and research to the industry and entities throughout the state.
  - Explore MN collaborates with and disseminates information to other state agencies, the legislature and the administration.
    - This includes statistical and economic data and information received from industry stakeholders.
  - Explore MN creates statewide marketing campaigns and programs, including seasonal and niche campaigns which cover as much of the state as possible.
    - Campaigns are supplemented with social media marketing and newsletters that reach hundreds of thousands of viewers.
    - Explore MN has increased photography and videography resources with a designated staff member to cover areas when gaps are identified.
  - Explore MN provides free webinars and records all Tourism Conference sessions and offers free access to those recordings after the conference.
  - Communities have access to Explore MN's marketing resources, including logos, photos and other assets.
  - Explore MN surveys industry stakeholders on the state of travel, tourism and other related areas, and shares findings with the industry and Governor's Office.
- What Explore MN cannot do as a state agency:
  - Influence or comment on municipal legislation, rules or regulations.
  - Influence or comment on state policy outside of our statutory responsibilities.
    - In rare circumstances, with express approval from the administration, Explore MN has provided testimony in other legislative committees on topics which would impact Explore MN and our stakeholders.
    - An important role for the Council and other industry stakeholders is to

- engage in advocacy with legislators and share issues with Explore MN to help inform the administration of what is going on in the industry.
- Market individual businesses (outside of providing funding and co-op opportunities for businesses to supplement their own marketing).
  - Explore MN markets more broadly but may highlight businesses in listicles about various topics that are intended to foster conversation.
- Provide additional funding or incentives to DMOs outside of grants, co-ops or other preapproved (statutory) support programs.
- Increase in-state marketing to exclusively target Minnesotans.
  - Explore MN's role is to attract new travelers to grow revenue and increase the impact of travel and tourism in the state.
  - Around 10% of Explore MN's marketing efforts focus on Minnesotans, and agency social media channels have significant instate audiences.
- What Explore MN provides to the industry:
  - Free featured content on the Explore MN website (event and business listings).
  - Grant and co-op opportunities (this funding varies depending on the legislature).
    - DMOs are expected to use funding to increase travel to their destinations.
    - Explore MN works to identify the best vendors for co-op opportunities.
  - Free data, research and feedback opportunities.
  - Promotions which continue to focus on bringing new money to destinations, and to drive traffic to places and industries that need it most.
    - The focus of these efforts is affordability, ease of access, outdoor recreation, and supporting local businesses.
- How can Council members help?
  - Statewide associations can work with Explore MN to set up regular meetings to inform the agency of critical issues they face in their market segments, particularly during the legislative session.
    - Statewide associations can help by supporting Explore MN budget proposals with the legislature and by sharing information from Council meetings with other association members.
    - Statewide associations are encouraged to request guest speakers from Explore MN for their meetings.
  - Ask questions both during and between Council meetings.
  - Participate in educational sessions, monthly Industry Relations calls, and Executive Director's forums (which are held at least 3 times annually).

**Upcoming Council meeting dates:**

- Tuesday, September 16 (virtual – 10am)
- Tuesday, December 9 (virtual – 10am)