

Explore Minnesota Tourism Council Meeting
Tuesday, September 16, 2025
Virtual Meeting

Attendees

Council Members: Ashlee Ciora, Beth Fischer, Dan Hartman, Ed Hoffman, Marianna Khauv, Paul Larsen, Molly Luther, Rep. Joe McDonald, Shannon McKeeth, Joshua Peterson, Beth Pierce, Mike Schwieters, Frank Soukup, Laurie Staiger, Cheyanne St. John, Heidi Swank, Jana Webster

Explore Minnesota Staff: Marya Barsanti, Lauren Bennett McGinty, Dawn Blanchard, Kari Brumback, Devon Cox, Chelsea Fey, Sarah Gebeke, Lyndsey Hanson, Lisa Havelka, Beth Helle, Karina Hill, Nicole Lalum, Shannon Lukes Hauser, Mike Meyer, Gretchen Nussbaum, Derek Ramthun, Jen Schak, Kat Sutton, Glori Woolley

Approval of Minutes:

- The Council voted to approve the minutes from the June 3, 2025, Council meeting.
- Beth Fischer and Josh Peterson were introduced as new Council members.

Explore Minnesota Q2 look forward:

Travel + Livability Marketing (Destination Marketing)

- Marketing Committee meeting notes:
 - There was a post-summer debrief and discussion looking ahead to fall.
 - There is significant uncertainty about the impact of the economy on MN.
 - Travel intent remains high across the nation, and MN is positioned well as a value travel destination.
 - The “COVID hangover” has continued into the summer due to a lack of planning major events during COVID, which has particularly impacted Minneapolis. St. Paul did not feel this, however, as their convention target is different from Minneapolis’.
 - Explore MN will release additional data collected from people across the industry regarding summer tourism activity.
- Marketing updates:
 - Every five years, Explore MN is required to review large, agency-of-record contracts, including our public relations agency of record.
 - The public relations agency of record partners with Explore MN on strategy and pitching stories about MN at the national level.
 - Council members are invited to contact Explore MN staff about any stories they think should be pitched nationally.
 - Explore MN issued an RFP and will engage in a two-phase process to select a new agency of record.
 - Explore MN is seeking a partner who will talk about why MN is the best state to visit, as well as quality of life for people living and working in MN.
 - The agency will also need to focus on outdoor recreation, cultural experiences, family adventures, and the Tribal Nations that share geography with MN.
 - During this process, Explore MN is evaluating how to position MN as a state

- moving into the future.
- The goal is to announce the new public relations partner in November and to begin working with the new agency in November or December.
- Explore MN will collaborate with Meet Minneapolis on a familiarization tour for journalists in connection with the premiere of the Purple Rain musical.
- Writers from Ebony, the New York Times, The Root, Range, The Grio, the Washington Post and Lonely Planet will join the tour to see the musical and tour musical and culinary sites in the Metro area.
- Explore MN has partnered with several high-profile events in the coming months, including Farm Aid 40, the National Gravel Bike Championship, and the PGA 2026 KPMG Women's Championship Cup at Hazeltine.
- Additional sports partnerships include the World Junior Hockey Championship, Badger Sports, UND Fighting Hawks Men's Hockey, and the Chicago Bears.
- Edutainment content has been performing well with Explore MN followers, who see Explore MN as a trusted source for learning about MN; this is a potential area to lean into moving forward.
- Canada travel update:
 - YTD Canadian arrivals are down around 18% relative to 2024.
 - Explore MN is continuing paid campaigns in Thunder Bay and Winnipeg.
 - The Governor's Office created a welcome statement to Canadians in July.
 - The summer sentiment survey results will include information about Canadian visitation and business, the impact on tourism across the state, and what adjustments businesses may be making to address this issue.
- Explore MN has shifted some media buys going into the winter campaign.
 - These shifts were driven by research Explore MN has conducted around ROI and effectiveness of marketing efforts, with the goal of maximizing spending efficiency to attract Minnesotans and tourism dollars.
 - Explore MN has developed a new niche strategy focusing broadly on outdoor and culture-based interests alongside traditional regional brand strategies.
 - Data reflects that many people who are interested in one outdoor activity are interested in other outdoor activities; many people who are interested in one cultural activity are interested in other cultural activities.
 - The new niche campaigns will "bundle" messaging around these categories of activities.
 - Geographic targeting will focus on regional markets closer to home, given the economy and increased potential for repeat visitors from this region.
 - This new strategy begins in November with the launch of our winter campaign Nov. 11.
- Livability marketing updates:
 - Explore MN did not receive additional funding for Explore MN for Business this fiscal year.
 - The team is developing a plan to ensure the campaign lives on due to the connectedness between travel and livability marketing.
 - Assets will remain live and will continue to be optimized, and the newsletter program will stay active.
 - The search engine livability marketing campaign remains live.
 - Explore MN is building messaging toolkits that can be distributed to DMOs or parties that are interested in building up the livability message.

- Explore MN has met with several MN colleges and universities to discuss effective retention messaging to young people to remain in MN.
- The team is working to finalize additional strategies by January 2026.

Education + Industry Engagement + International Marketing (Destination Development)

- Education Committee notes:
 - Explore MN will host a free continuing education series with three industry webinars each spring and three meetings each fall.
 - Information about continuing education webinars will be shared in Industry News; registration is required to obtain the link.
 - The September webinar will focus on road tripper trends.
 - Webinars are recorded and will be posted on the industry site.
 - The education resource bank project is temporary on hold, pending the onboarding of the new Metro Industry Relations representative.
 - Many resources have already been collected; the resources will be organized and added to the industry site.
 - This project includes a variety of resources, including formal education courses and webinars, and will be updated on an ongoing basis.
 - The 2026 Tourism Conference will be held at the DECC in Duluth on February 11 and 12.
 - Sponsorships went live in early September.
 - Registration will go live later in September, and a separate link will be provided for Council members to register to attend at no charge.
 - Council members are encouraged to sign up as mentors for students attending the conference.
 - Council members are encouraged to share any ideas they have for conference sessions with the Industry Relations team.
 - Council members are invited to contact Beth Helle if they want to join the Education Committee.
- Industry Relations updates:
 - The new Metro Regional Industry Relations representative, Chelsea Fey, joined Explore MN in early September 2025.
 - The annual industry survey was distributed in July and August 2025; 152 organizations participated (around 40% more responses than in 2024).
 - Responses will be summarized in a report and shared with the industry.
 - All Explore MN industry programs were perceived positively according to survey responses.
 - Top-rated programs were free business and event listings on ExploreMinnesota.com; grant programs, discounted co-op marketing programs, the continuing education series, and the marketing opportunities on ExploreMinnesota.com.
 - The FY25 grant program has been reconciled and the team is compiling a comprehensive report on grant usage (geographic spread and uses of funding), which will be shared with the industry.
 - All funding has been encumbered for the FY26 co-op program.
 - The program is available to destination marketing organizations and businesses throughout the state, and \$750,000 is available for FY26.
 - To request a speaker from Explore MN, Council members may reach out to the

Industry Relations team.

- Market Development updates:
 - Explore MN will attend Brand USA Travel Week in October 2025 and will meet with tour operators and companies primarily from Western Europe.
 - Explore MN will attend U.S. Travel's IPW in May 2026 (the largest inbound international travel show).
 - There may be industry participation opportunities available for IPW.
 - Explore MN started a new monthly international travel and media newsletter.
 - Explore MN will host another group tour meeting with the industry in November 2025; additional information will be shared in Industry News.
 - Explore MN placed a MN section/industry co-op in the October issue of Leisure Group Travel Magazine.
 - There were opportunities for industry to buy into this section.
 - Several items will soon be released in international media:
 - RonReizen (Netherlands television)
 - Wideoyster (Netherlands / Germany)
 - America Journal (Germany) will publish article in October.
 - The team is reviewing international marketing in two phases over the current fiscal year to identify the best marketing opportunities moving forward.
- Welcome Center updates:
 - The St. Croix Welcome Center reopened July 28, 2025.
 - August traffic counts to St. Croix were around 1,000 per day, which remains below pre-construction counts for August.
 - Security systems and traffic counters are being replaced at Welcome Centers.
 - Welcome Center teams will soon have resources on relocation to MN so they can better address inquiries they receive from people interested in moving to MN.
 - Welcome Center teams are participating in University of Minnesota customer service training (available for no cost to every MN resident).
 - There are part time job openings at the Thompson Hill and St. Croix Welcome Centers.

Outdoor Recreation

- Outdoor Recreation committee notes:
 - The committee discussed the recent outdoor recreation industry economic impact report.
- Randolph Briley has outdoor recreation outreach and engagement meetings scheduled in different locations in MN throughout the next year.
 - The first session was held in Bloomington with 20-25 participants, and the next session is scheduled in Rochester in October.
 - Any council members who would like to host a session in their region should contact Randolph.
- Explore MN is creating a road map of people in the outdoor recreation industry and working on a five-year strategic road map.
 - Goals of this process include creating a plan to bring everyone in the outdoor recreation space together in MN, and growing the industry, and supporting people who want to bring more outdoor recreation to their destination.
 - A draft plan should be ready in early 2026 for input from stakeholders and then released at the next Outdoor Recreation summit in fall 2026.

- Council members can contact Randolph if they are interested in participating in the outdoor recreation working group.
- Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership (ORIP) updates:
 - ORIP was launched in 2022 as an interagency working group of leadership from Explore MN, DNR, IRRR and DEED.
 - ORIP's goal is to elevate outdoor recreation and the economic impact it has on the state (around \$13 billion annually).
 - The process of updating the economic impact report will begin in November 2025 after new data are received from the federal government.
 - The report will also include county level data.
- Explore Minnesota More podcast updates:
 - CLN Media will continue as podcast producer through the current fiscal year.
 - Upcoming episodes include State Fair Listener Stories, Fishing for Native Fish on the Mississippi, Adult-Onset Pheasant Hunters, Importance of Public Lands.
 - The podcast will be transitioned to include more field and video content and to collaborate with other Explore MN divisions on content.
 - Council members with ideas for outdoor recreation experiences tied to tourism should contact Lauren or Randolph for potential inclusion in a future episode.

Tribal Liaison

- Explore MN is completing Tribal consultations for 2025.
 - Of the nine Tribes who wanted consultation, five have been completed (Upper Sioux, Lower Sioux, Mille Lacs, Grand Portage and White Earth).
 - Tribes have generally been excited for the meetings and the potential for future coordination with Explore MN.
 - Some Tribal leaders have expressed interest in coordinating with local DMOs.
 - Red Lake, Bois Forte, Leech Lake and Prairie Island are scheduled in 2025.
 - Shakopee and Fond du Lac declined consultation this year.
 - Ideas that have been raised during consultations include:
 - More educational, historical and language references for non-Indians visiting reservations for the first time.
 - Tribes establishing their own travel guides and tourism office.
 - Refining the film production guide.
 - Explore MN is assisting Tribes in finding the right agency to develop signage and materials specific to outdoor recreation and land preservation or conservation for the non-Indian community.
 - When non-Indians visit reservations, they are not allowed to visit some sacred spaces, and the Tribes want to make this messaging clear.

Film

- Explore MN Film is coordinating with a film that is currently in production in the Minneapolis area.
- Explore MN Film is working on tax incentive applications for additional productions.
- There are commercials and episodic documentary series moving into production in MN in fall 2025.
- Deputy Director Nell Lawrenz-Wareham is attending several national conferences to network with stakeholders from other states and countries to market MN as a filming destination.

- Nell is coordinating with the MN Film Alliance, which involves stakeholders including the Upper Midwest Film Office, crew members and unions in discussions about how to better serve the entire production community.
- Explore MN has certified 14 Film-Ready communities across MN and provides resources about permitting and preparing communities to promote their areas as filming locations.
- Explore MN attended the grand opening of Film North in St. Paul in July and has continued to collaborate with Film North on crew resources, training and workshops, and attracting filmmakers to bring projects to the area.
- Explore MN and the Upper Midwest Film Office will attend events during the Twin Cities Film Festival in St. Louis Park in October (industry night, pitch contest and filmmaker's brunch) and have conversations with stakeholders about the benefits of filming in MN.
- Explore MN is engaging in outreach with neighboring states to collaborate and promote the region through film tourism and the economic impact of filming in a state.
- Explore MN is planning in the next legislative session to request a reduction in the minimum spend required to qualify for tax incentives.
 - The current minimum spend is \$1 million, and many productions are not able to access the available funding because they don't meet the minimum.
 - Explore MN would also like to propose using some of the available funding for job creation and on the job training for the film production community.

Legislative/Administrative

- Explore MN plans to propose updates to the structure of our Councils during the next legislative session.
 - The Tourism Council proposal will include potential combination or elimination of seats to ensure the most effective representation across the industry and state.

Upcoming Council meeting dates:

- Tuesday, December 9, 2025 (virtual – 10am)
- Tuesday, March 10, 2026 (virtual – 10am)
- Tuesday, June 9, 2026 (virtual – 10am)
- Tuesday, September 15, 2026 (hybrid in person / virtual – 10:30am)
- Tuesday, December 8, 2026 (virtual – 10am)