



Governor's Tourism Advisory Board Meeting Minutes

Wednesday & Thursday, July 15-16, 2026

Wednesday -Ellsworth AFB Tours

Thursday – Board meeting at THE BOX, 631 Watiki Way, Box Elder SD 57719

Board Members

Ann Lesch
Julie Ranum
Carmen Schramm
Kristie Wagner
Frank Smith
John Brockelsby
Caleb Arceneaux
Val Rauch
Gwyn Wathen
Tom Biegler

Tourism Staff

James Hagen
Elly Broers
Mike Gussiaas
Katlyn Svendsen
Austin Kaus
Teresa Tople
Calvin Bloemendaal
Ashley Worth
Ciara Forest
Alexa Dorn
Bailey Tysdal

Other

Kasi Haberman
Michele Thomson
Mike Grave
Larry Larson
Sara Tvedt
Kyrie Bussler
Kelsey Waite
Cassi Severson
Susan Schuldt
Whitney Smith
Susan Richardson
Danielle Amos
Lauren Novo
Jessica Forman
Micah Aberson
Laura Mitchell
Mike Helland
Harleigh Deville

President Caleb Arceneaux called the meeting to order and thanked everyone for coming to the meeting in Box Elder.

Secretary Hagen welcomed the board to THE BOX, thanked the marketing agencies for attending, thanked the mayor for joining the meeting and, finally, shared we have a great meeting ahead of us with an engaging agenda.

Mayor Larry Larson was excited about everyone that was able to visit Ellsworth Air Force Base and the Air and Space Museum. He welcomed everyone to the west side of the state. The growth in Box Elder is up and coming and is great for the area.

Michelle Thomson with Black Hills & Badlands Tourism Association reported that all the National Parks in the area were up in attendance except for the Badlands. Michelle was excited to report that they have published two new vacation guides, two maps, calendar of events, running ads for members and Mindtrip AI, which will plan a trip itinerary for the vacationer. Challenges for the area include fuel prices, short booking windows, less international travel, work force and AI search vs traditional search.

President Arceneaux asked each board member to give a brief report from their area.

Carmen Schramm – Yankton

- State Park numbers are up
- Warmer weather has helped with numbers being higher
- Numbers seem to be up across the state
- Canadians are returning to the Sioux Falls area

Tom Biegler-Sioux Falls

- Good year across the board
- Setting rates has been difficult
- Overall, the year so far has been good
- June was phenomenal - hoping the trend continues in July and August

Frank Smith – Gettysburg

- Room rental is down
- Campsite rental is up
- Added more campsites and boat storage
- Fishing is good
- Heat is pushing the fish deeper so hopefully the fishing continues to be good
- Decent year overall so far

Kristi Wagner - Whitewood

- Rural communities really appreciate tourism supporting them
- GOED Commissioner Bill Even mentioned the power of tourism in a recent presentation. He noted it as one of South Dakota's strengths.

Val Rausch – Big Stone City /Abbey of the Hills

- Abby of the Hills has been steady and busy
- Glacial Lakes and Prairies Tourism association is looking for a new exec director - there will be five interviews conducted out of the 11 applications
- Abby of the Hills has a new director

Caleb Arceneaux – Black Hills / LIV Hospitality

- The first quarter was down
- Hoping the third quarter is up
- Bookings are up over last year's Sturgis Rally

John Brockelsby – Rapid City/Reptile Gardens

- May numbers were up, June was down 8%,
- July is down 12-15% for many attractions in the area
- Groundbreaking as started for the new tortoise enclosure at Reptile Gardens

Gwyn Wathen - Hill City

- Had to pivot on marketing
- Rapid City KOA open year-round
- Palmer Gulch is up
- Wax museum numbers are down almost 15% - Gift shop is up 10%
- The Dude Ranch is becoming more of a reunion and wedding destination
- Camping reservations are cancelling and making lodge room reservations because of high fuel prices

Julie Ranum – Watertown

- The unfinished art exhibit is going great
- Redlin Art Center numbers are up
- The Milbank Art teacher is running the Redlin Art class
- The art class starts with a sketch of Terry Redlin's art
- The range of students is from 'never painted' to 'very accomplished artists'
- Watertown is excited to the community involved and is growing and evolving all the time
- The area is still not seeing Canadian busses

Ann Lesch – Ingalls Homestead, DeSmet

- The Welcome Center takeover was a great way to meet people
- Little House on the Prairie was released on Netflix
- June was up over 25%
- Revenue is up
- RV sites are cancelling due to fuel prices
- Booking window is short
- Main street is continuing to improve
- Pageant opening was good and received good feedback

- New pizza and craft beer restaurant opened on main street

Carmen Schramm-Update on Tourism Coalition of South Dakota

- 22 counties have BID tax
- BID tax is \$2 it would move up to \$4 or 4%-receiving good vibes about potential legislation to address
- The BID tax will be used for marketing and promotional purposes
- TCSD board members are having one-on-one meetings with legislators
- TCSD is endorsing Governor Rhoden in the election

Calvin Bloemendaal - Budget and Revenue updates

Promotion Tax:

- The last we reported was for April's receipts, so we have had 2 months of receipts since our last board meeting.
- In May (March Activity) we receipted in \$1,171,933 and this was 9.85% higher than May 2025
- June, we saw an increase when looking at June 2025, an increase of 10.55% and we receipted in \$1,038,281.
- This means we are 3.12% ahead of FY25 for the same time period so still looking strong.

Gaming Tax

- For the gaming tax, we will also have 2 more months of receipts that we have not reported on.
- In May, we received \$402,877, which was a 3.04% increase over last May
- In June, we received \$417,192, which was another increase of 11.58% over last June.
- We are up 5.21% so far this year compared to last year at this time.

Ciara Forest

- Update on community development progress in pilot communities of Lead and Wessington Springs
- Announced that a community development playbook is being produced
- Update on applications for next round and looking forward to announcing selected communities soon

Bailey Tysdal

SCSS Recap

- Historically we've done 7 communities for our SCSS tour, this year we bumped it down to 5 and reached 429 people.
- We had AMAZING feedback. Many people commented that James was the best speaker yet.
- Next year we are bumping it down again, doing 4 communities

- In 2027 we will go to Rapid City and Chamberlain on Tuesday, May 4
- And Sioux Falls and Watertown on Wednesday, May 5

Great Face & Great Place Update

- In June we hosted an Insider Session on the Great Face Program.
 - The hope was that this would help folks better understand the requirements of the program (things have changed in the last few years), the ease of those requirements and gain some helpful tips one ways to gather the required comments/feedback and get their staff excited about it!
 - Carrie with Black Hills Adventure Tours and Lisa with McCrory Gardens joined me to give their perspective and pointers as two businesses who have participated for a number of years and always submit great nominations!
- Main takeaway with regards to Grate Face Program is that it's a very simple and easy nomination form, you just need to have a good system in place to gather the visitor feedback.
 - Constantly push it to visitors, tell them why you need the feedback, let your staff know you're doing it and why (they will push it too then)
- As for the Great Place program, we will do a survey or focus group in the Fall after folks have submitted and it's fresh in their head, to see what sort of changes we may want to make and implement for the following year.

Online Hospitality Training

- Kirk moderated a Focus Group for me with industry members on the overall user experience.
 - Several entities were invited to participate, but the people who were able to join were:
 - Kevin (Rush Mountain Adventure / Sprockets Fun Foundry)
 - Tabitha (Wylie Park / Storybook Land / Thunder Road, Aberdeen)
 - Carrie (Black Hills Adventure Tours)
 - Sarah (My Place Hotel, Watertown)
 - Katie (LIV Hospitality)
- We are meeting with L&S next week to discuss all the changes. They will be moving the training to a whole new platform, so this is a great opportunity for us to really get some new features we've been wanting and needing for a while.
 - In the focus group people said overall they like the content we currently have.
 - The main point of the focus group was to discuss the user experience, not the content.

2027 Governor's Conference on Tourism

- Team leaders and I will meet next week to select keynotes and breakout session topics
 - What we know so far:
 - David Reichbach will be back as a keynote and breakout session speaker
 - Mike will give his annual marketing plans update
 - Regional directors will do a session again

- Kelsey Waite will talk about resident sentiment and ROI/image & perception study
- Marissa Marshall will discuss dark skies

Calvin Bloemendaal and Kelsey Waite

- Phase three of four focus groups completed. Studied 30 second ad placements. For this one we did a mixed method. Next and final phase will be studying streaming audio placements.
- Return on ad spend and image and perception studies completed in 2025 and delivered early 2026. Results show efficient spend on ads and reception by audiences.

Katlyn Svendsen-PR and Content Services

Freedom 250 at Mount Rushmore was a success. Safe and secure event attended by thousands with great programming. It was a very collaborative and team-oriented event with great partners at the federal level. Highlights for broadcast include:

Broadcast & Digital Articles

- **53.7B total** audience size
- **\$50.7 million** publicity value

Website

- Site traffic jumped roughly two-thirds over the prior week (146,535 sessions, ▲66%).
- The livestream player itself saw heavy interaction, playing 105,000+ times.

Secretary Hagen shared that the department is looking at beginning work on a new strategic plan this fall and the hope to engage the board more intimately in the construction of the plan.

President Arceneaux asked if there were any other questions or comments. He thanked everyone for making the trip to Box Elder and is looking forward to the meeting in October at Milbank.

Secretary Hagen thanked the board for their great input during the meeting and thanked President Arceneaux for hosting the board. He also acknowledged Tom Biegler's incredible service on the board over the years and relayed how much the entire Travel South Dakota team will miss his service on the board. Finally, he thanked Laura Mitchell for all her years assisting the Travel South Dakota team. He also shared how much the team and the industry will miss Laura's strategic work at Lawrence & Schiller.

Meeting adjourned around 12:00 PM