

Governor's Tourism Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
Wednesday & Thursday, October 7-8, 2026
Wednesday Abbey of the HillsTour
Thursday – Board meeting at The Abbey of the Hills Inn & Retreat Center, 46561 147th St, Marvin SD 57251

Board Members	Tourism Staff	Other
Ann Lesch	James Hagen	Christopher Gromis
Julie Ranum	Wanda Goodman	Mike Grave
Carmen Schramm	Mike Gussiaas	Kecia Beranek
Ivan Sorbel	Katlyn Svendsen	Sara Tvedt
Becky DeWitz	Kirk Hulstein	Jamie Fiedler
John Brockelsby	Shawntae Moran	Cassi Severson
Val Rauch	Ashley Worth	Susan Richardson
Gwyn Wathen	Alexa Dorn	Lauren Novo
	Bailey Tysdal	Micah Aberson

Vice President Val Rausch called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone to The Abbey

Secretary Hagen welcomed the board and attendees to The Abbey. He also thanked the marketing agencies for trekking to the northeast corner of the state. He thanked Vice President Rausch for hosting the board at the Inn. The secretary stated that we had been trying to conduct a meeting at The Abbey for several years and it was worth the wait. He commented on what a beautiful building the former monastery is and what a beautiful setting next to the lakes and abundant trees. The secretary also gave a quick update on several team members: Hallie Willey and her new baby, Hudson; Teresa's motorcycle accident in August and her recovery ; Michele Ganshow's retirement after 44 years in the department.

Becky Dewitz - was introduced as a new board member; Becky gave quick background and how things are progressing at the Zoo

Christopher Gromis- ED of the Abbey - welcomed the group

Kecia Beranek - new Glacial Lakes & Prairies regional director, welcomed board, gave updates and background

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

Carmen Schramm – Yankton

- GFP numbers - down across the state (Labor Day was in Sept. this year)
    - L&C Rec Area down 18% for August; YTD down 5%-ish; however, day-use is up
- August retail in Yankton was great; Riverboat Days spending up 9%
- BBB up 13%
- Sioux Falls sales tax up 7%; Tea up in their sales tax (August)
- Mead Museum opened new exhibit

Val Rausch – Big Stone City /Abbey of the Hills

- New ED for GLP; excited for future of the region

Ivan Sorbel – Pine Ridge

- Lakota Dreams - hunting and tour guiding; working with Carrie Gerlach on tours, doing some step-on guiding
- Pine Ridge - three years of road construction on Hwy 18
- Able to have the fair this year; people were ready to get out and have fun
- Red Cloud school opened new art center; hearing really good things
- Martin, SD - Indian National Finals Rodeo Association - had a standalone event of just bull riding and breakaway roping; won standalone event of the year in their first year doing this
- Gearing up for hunting season; antelope now, not a lot of pheasants
- BH Powwow happening this weekend; one of the largest powwows in the nation
- Oglala Sioux Tribe is creating a tourism office

John Brockelsby – Rapid City/Reptile Gardens

- Visitor numbers will be down over the summer, but have had a really good September - numbers up, weather has been great
- Constructing new tortoise enclosure; walls up now; scheduled to open in spring, 2027
- Hwy 85 scheduled for construction - from Cheyenne Crossing to the WY border; held public comment, had 500 people respond; most want it to remain a scenic drive

Gwyn Wathen - Hill City

- Summer's high gas prices hurt us; started to come back in July
- RC property down 3%
- Palmer Gulch up 1%
- Museum down 6.5% in admissions, but gift shop revenue up
- Great September, great Buffalo Roundup
- Big decline in families this year, which was shocking; decline in Canadian travel, not surprisingly
- KOA reported, as a system, Canadian traveler down 35% from last year; likely down 60% in two years

Julie Ranum – Watertown

- Seeing more families - think it's because they're a free attraction
- Attendance is ahead of last year; revenue is flat
- No motorcoaches booked for the fall; really missing the Canadian traveler
- Watertown's sales tax and BBB are up and doing well
- New downtown coalition promoting events and activities downtown
- Doing a holiday art class in December

Ann Lesch – Ingalls Homestead, DeSmet

- Interesting summer in DeSmet; June way up, July down, Aug. leveled out, Sept. rain affected campers
- Strong sales tax numbers in DeSmet
- New Main Street looks great; getting nice visitor feedback regarding the updates and upgrades in the downtown area
- Hunting season looks good; one of the B&Bs said fullest they've ever been for hunting season; hotel numbers look good for shoulder hunting season

Becky DeWitz – Great Plains Zoo, Sioux Falls

- July was hard; down significantly at the zoo; if over 87 degrees, lost people
- Zoo for All and Aquarium for All programs are doing really well; 90% of the people utilizing those programs are from Minnehaha Co.
- The K economy is real; those with money are looking for luxury retail, those without are pinching pennies
- August not great but started to bounce back; Sept. soft; October starting strong, trying to maximize shoulder season
- ZooBoo this weekend; doing Adult Boo for first time
- 50/50 between local and out-of-town traffic
- People still choosing top membership program ($250) over others
- Butterfly House down 25%; think people are waiting for the new experience, new garden facility to open
- Doing a pricing survey for the garden to figure out what will work for people
- Doing a lot around ADA accessibility at the property

Carmen Schramm-Update on Tourism Coalition of South Dakota

- Busy summer; lots of BID legislation meetings; starting to meet with legislators re: BID
- Golf tournament fundraiser went well; raised $16k, some of which will go toward PAC funds
- Annual meeting coming up; Tiffany Galagher with Civitas featured speaker Membership has grown

Kirk Hulstein

- Both promotion tax revenue and gaming revenue are showing positive growth this year. Cautioned board not to put too much emphasis on the month over month changes as can be impacted by late or adjusted returns.
- Estimated visitor spending is up 5.5%, visitation flat and tax revenue up.
- State and national park visitation is down but we know household finances and gas prices are impacting this for the many who have decided not to pull camper trailers or driving their RVs. Mt Rushmore down -6.8% and Badlands is down around -5%.
- Lodging performance remains relatively flat for the year.
- Hotels performing the best are Luxury and Upscale level properties which correlates with reports that the higher income households are still traveling and not adjusting as much as those with less discretionary income.
- Shared the breakdown of inflation for travel related categories and compared both YOY and % change to 2019.
- Financial constraints is the main headwind faced this year.

- Shared updates on the Destination Development plans for Ft. Pierre, Vermillion and Yankton

Bailey Tysdal

Insider Sessions:

- Are there any topics you'd like to hear about?

Great Face / Great Place Programs

- 18 businesses participated in the Great Face Program and submitted 56 nominations
- 32 businesses submitted applications for the Great Place program
- 2 days after the deadline, we sent our a Great Place survey
    - Since Friday we have received 16 full responses.
- 8 having said they participate every year, and 8 who either don't participate or weren't sure.
- We will send this out one or 2 more times to get more responses,
- But so far this is what the current results tell us.
- The program is viewed as valuable, but some of its existing benefits may not be fully understood.
- Supporting documentation remains the clearest friction point.
- Recognition already exists in several forms, but respondents may want it to feel more visible or meaningful.
- And with that, I look forward to receiving some more responses and looking at a fuller picture of areas of improvement we may be able to work on going into next year.

TC27

- **ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING ON TUESDAY AFTERNOON**
    - Choose from six breakout sessions during two 45-minute slots
- **TWO NEW REGISTRATION OPTIONS**
    - Tuesday Only $75
    - State Employee $150
- **ONCE FILM APP**
    - Digital disposable camera
- **TOURISM DAY AT THE CAPITOL**
    - Wear RED on Tuesday
    - Group Photo
    - Informational Video coming
    - New:
        - Legislator Invite: Email Template

- **BOARD MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES**
    - Wednesday Apparel Day: Given to you at the December Board Meeting in Pierre
    - Hotel room at Ramkota (Jan 18-22)
    - Board member session responsibilities will be emailed to you in December
    - I'll also email with you with instructions on how to register, please be on the lookout for those.
- **FINALLY – A Full Wall LED Screen Board!**

Cole Irwin-Global Travel and Trade

- Presented updates from the 2026 Great American West TRIP Report and FY27 marketing plans for each market.
- Gave updates on Brand USA Travel Week held in Amsterdam, including number of appointments, taxi wrap promotion, and takeaways for 2027 international inbound travel.
- Let the board know Cole would be joining a mission to Australia with South Dakota Trade, GOED, and other South Dakota entities.
- Shared upcoming events for the Travel & Trade team.
- Shared promotion with German plush toy maker Sigikid and asked for potential name ideas for the bison plush being developed to represent South Dakota and Wyoming.
- Let the board know we are planning for a panel on international marketing and promotion for the upcoming tourism conference, including our reps from France, the UK, Rocky Mountain International and Brand USA.

Katlyn Svendsen-PR and Content Services

- **Women's Only Pheasant Hunt**
  Travel South Dakota successfully hosted a women's-only "never have I ever" pheasant hunt experience, partnering with Shoot Like a Girl for firearms training and hunter safety. Six journalists participated, staying at A1 Al's in Emery, with at least one resulting story already published.
- **Buffalo Roundup Hosting & Media Engagement**
  The PR team hosted multiple journalists for the Buffalo Roundup, including domestic and international media. All reported strong experiences, and resulting coverage is anticipated. Additionally, Travel South Dakota's Buffalo Roundup reel on Facebook performed exceptionally well, earning over 1.1M views and high engagement.
- **Indigenous Press Trip for Trade Media**
  An Indigenous-focused press trip was conducted for trade media as part of broader PR hosting efforts. The Global Public Relations & Content Services team reported hosting several groups throughout the month, including those tied to cultural and heritage storytelling.

- **Upcoming Podcasts (Week of October 19)**
  Upcoming podcast episodes are scheduled for release the week of October 19, aligning with ongoing PR and storytelling initiatives.
- **Rooster Rush Updates**
  The Rooster Rush initiative continues to equip South Dakota communities with materials and support to welcome pheasant hunters this fall. The industry grant program remains active, providing promotional resources statewide. All $15,000 has been allocated. Award nominations are due 11/12.
- **Rally Rush Updates**
  Rally Rush momentum continues ahead of the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, with communities across South Dakota preparing welcome signage, rider perks, and hospitality elements to enhance visitor experience. We received 9 award nominations for Rally Rush communities.
- **Revised SDVisit.com (Expected Early 2027)**
  The revised SDVisit.com remains on track for an early 2027 launch. Travel South Dakota continues updating site content—including key pages tied to major events and trip inspiration—as part of the broader rebuild process.

Mike Gussiaas – Chief Marketing & Creative Officer

- Gussiaas quickly reported on some of the strategy workshops the team has completed with Miles Partnerships as they work on strategy for brand and storytelling efforts for the years ahead. Gussiaas introduced the Susan Richardson and Jamie Fielder from the Miles team to do an abbreviated storytelling workshop with the board.
- Gussiaas shared the department was just recently with three prestigious gold Magellan Awards awards from Travel Weekly's 2026. The awards were for:
  - "Free to Roam" campaign won the Gold Award for Advertising/Marketing for Destinations category
  - "Hunt the Greatest" campaign won the Gold Award in the Advertising/Marketing for Destinations category
  - "Into the Roundup" campaign won the Gold Award for Social Media Campaign

Reset Meetings – Wanda

- Shared high level notes from our internal reset meetings held with Jim, Wanda, and the department's leadership team.

Secreaety Hagen shared that the team would embark upon a new three-year strategic plan next spring and that the board will be intimately involved in helping draft that plan

Secretary Hagen thanked the board for a great meeting and Vice President Rausch for hosting at The Abbey. He reminded that board that the next meeting will be on December 9 (moved from December 2-3) in Pierre where they will vote on the annual tourism awards.

Meeting adjourned around 12:00 PM