

**Pennsylvania Tourism Office Testimony  
Public Hearing on the Role & Impact of Public Horticulture in  
Tourism in the State of Pennsylvania  
Longwood Gardens  
September 16, 2022**

Thank you all for giving me a little of your time today.

As most of you know, I'm Carrie Fischer Lepore, and for nearly eight years, I've overseen the Pennsylvania Tourism Office as Deputy Secretary of Marketing, Tourism and Film.

I know we're here today to talk about our public gardens and their impact on tourism and the economy in PA.

But first I want to share with you a brief overview on how our tourism economy is doing as a whole. You all know that I will never pass up an opportunity to provide good news.

A few weeks ago, we met with the Pennsylvania Restaurant and Lodging Association for our quarterly meeting, and I'm happy to say that our hotel revenue is up 6 percent from pre-pandemic rates.

That's really great news, and it confirms what we've been anecdotally noticing from the crowds at our amusement parks, museums, theaters, outdoor activities, and other attractions:

Tourism is back in Pennsylvania.

Of course, there are still some areas that continue to recover at a little slower pace, primarily business, international, and group motorcoach travel.

We anticipate that these industries will continue to recover and ultimately return to pre-pandemic levels in the future. However, it is important to note that the travel industry changed over the past few years – and not just because of the pandemic.

And, it is not just the travel industry. How people are communicating and where they are getting their information from continues to evolve rapidly. For example, nearly 40% of Gen Z members (born from 1997 to 2012) prefer TikTok for online searches. "Travel Tok" is growing rapidly as is other options to seek out travel planning information.

I recently attended U.S. Travel's Educational Seminar for Tourism Organization's (ESTO) conference and listened to many speakers who highlighted the increasing challenge with connecting to Gen Z. Their methods of communicating, identifying places to travel and how they travel are all vastly different from millennials. On the other end of the spectrum, baby boomers reached an average age of early 60s during the pandemic, which is peak retirement age. This means baby boomers are not just leaving the workforce, but they're also starting to move and travel in different ways. And PS, they also get their information differently from the other two generations.

With all this change afoot, the Pennsylvania Tourism Office has been engaging in research to look at how we can continue to craft our messaging to ensure we're staying at the forefront of the tourism industry and reaching all of our desired audiences.

As some of you know, our office proudly received a Mercury Award from U.S. Travel this year that named our website as the best among states. The Mercury Awards is a program created by the National Council of State Tourism Directors to recognize its members for excellence and creative accomplishment in state tourism marketing and promotion, and to inspire the continued development of truly imaginative and exciting destination marketing and promotion programs. And again, visitPA.com won in the best state tourism website category. To be honest, I am surprised you didn't hear our hootin' and hollering all the way from Michigan where the awards ceremony was held. We were and continue to be quite excited.

But there's always room to improve, to grow, and to spread the word about our beautiful, fun, adventurous, quirky commonwealth to new travelers, and we are full steam ahead on that mission.

That brings us to today, here, at Longwood Gardens – one of Pennsylvania's true gems.

During the pandemic, interest in outdoor activities exploded.

And while we've talked a lot about how we saw a huge uptick in attendance at our state parks, Pennsylvanians also very much threw themselves into all things plants.

Home gardening surged, and vegetable seeds suddenly became scarce.

Houseplants became a hot item as Americans sought to bring the outdoors into their homes.

And botanical gardens became areas of refuge for people who sought accessible outdoor activities.

The explosion in attendance at Pennsylvania's botanical gardens wasn't limited to our marquee names like Longwood and Phipps.

Across the board, gardens of all sizes reported growth – no pun intended – and this growth hasn't subsided even though we've resumed indoor activities.

As I mentioned, the Pennsylvania Tourism Office likes to stay at the forefront of industry trends.

We quickly took note of gardening as a trending hobby and we looked for ways we could support the public garden industry.

And we also noticed that hobbyist gardening fell under but was not owned by any one state department – it is a little bit agriculture, a little bit environment, a little bit education, and a little bit community.

But as we learned more about Pennsylvania's rich horticultural history, we really felt the need to step in and do something to link all the aspects of the gardening community together.

And so we developed Bulb and Bloom.

Bulb and Bloom is an initiative that brings together hobbyist gardeners, master gardeners, garden centers, community gardens, botanical gardens, and anyone else with a link to gardening.

We launched Bulb and Bloom last fall with a quarterly e-newsletter that offers tips from Pennsylvania gardening experts, highlights activities at public gardens, and suggests new gardening ideas linked to products that can be purchased from local garden centers.

It also links to our Best Buds trail, which takes travelers across Pennsylvania to see beautiful blooms at our cherished botanical gardens.

And we have plans to continue to build up this initiative with a print publication in the pipeline, as well as partnerships with Penn State Master Gardeners, the PA Garden Coalition, and others.

From growing interest in our public gardens and garden centers to beautifying communities and increasing access to fresh foods, we really have an opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of Pennsylvanians in so many different ways by supporting gardeners.

And this includes tourism.

Pennsylvania has the most botanical gardens on the East Coast, we have some of the oldest gardens in America, we're the birthplace of gardening cornerstones like Burpees, and we have an ever-changing growing season where many, many different plants thrive.

This creates an amazing experience that can only be found right here in the Keystone State.

The #PlantLife trend is truly an opportunity we can capitalize on, and I'd like to thank all our partners for their support – from our public gardens to the Destination Marketing Organizations that have made these destinations a top priority right now, and, of course, all of you for coming here today to learn more about gardening in Pennsylvania.

Thank you again for having me here today, and I look forward to seeing how we can “grow” our gardening industry together.

###