

## Written Comments for the Pennsylvania House Tourism & Recreational Development Committee

Sept. 15, 2022

Chairman Millard, Chairwoman Daley and members of the House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee, please accept the following comments for the hearing record.

VisitPITTSBURGH, the official tourism development organization for Allegheny County, is dedicated to growing the tourism economy of our region by attracting business events, sports events and leisure tourism to the Pittsburgh region. VisitPITTSBURGH delivers on our mission together with our nearly 700 business and organizational partners.

Travel and tourism in Allegheny County rode a strong upward trajectory over the last decade. Data released by the PA Department of Community & Economic Development in February 2021 showed that travel and tourism grew to a **\$6.57 billion industry** in Allegheny County in 2019, with nearly **44,000 residents** making a living in tourism. Total visitor spending grew by 3.0%, while employment grew by 1.7% over the previous year.

This impressive growth predates the incredible havoc caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Since then, our region has seen the cancellation or postponement of more than 550 business and sports events, representing more than \$400 million of direct visitor spend. The estimated economic loss to Allegheny County's tourism economy in 2020 was \$3.6 billion. Industry employment also took a direct hit, with the Pittsburgh metro area losing 41,400 hospitality jobs in 2020, a decrease of about 34.1%. Moreover, since March 2020, Allegheny County has had approximately 4.1 million fewer hotel rooms occupied compared to 2019 levels, which translates to an estimated \$550 million less in hotel revenues.

The good news is that traveling remains an option and desire for many. In fact, according to a recent *Destination Analysts American Traveler Sentiment Study* (July 2022), 76% of American travelers express high levels of enthusiasm toward travel, with a similar percentage planning at least one leisure trip in the next 18 months.

As we continue to build travel across Allegheny County back to the incredible pre-pandemic heights, we must amplify and highlight all that makes our region unique and special, including our many public gardens, which serve as key recreational destinations for our many residents and visitors. Many of these gardens reside on reclaimed and repaired land, left behind throughout our region following the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These gardens and public spaces serve as stewards for our region and are responsible for much of our natural beauty, which we know is an indispensable asset when attracting visitors to Allegheny County and across Pennsylvania.

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VisitPITTSBURGH urges the continued growth of our public gardens, especially during a time when our region is on the world's pedestal thanks to the upcoming Global Clean Energy Action Forum, to be held in Pittsburgh later this month.

The Pittsburgh Botanic Garden and the Phipps Conservatory, and many other treasured gardens across the Commonwealth are excellent examples of what can be accomplished through regional and state-wide collaboration. Through these facilities, gardens and woodlands, and programs, our public gardens strive to increase the number of individuals exposed to the natural beauty of the state and region. The Pittsburgh Botanic Garden alone provides 65 acres of cultivated gardens and woodlands for the public to connect to the environment, engage with each other, be inspired, and gain a sense of calm.

Since opening to the public in 2015, more than 200,000 individuals have visited to explore, learn or celebrate at the Botanic Garden. While primary, daily admission visitors are from southwest Pennsylvania, the recent expansion of features and facilities has resulted in a growing representation from neighboring states and further north and east in Pennsylvania. In short, there is no limit to the Garden's growth potential.

Now is the time to amplify Southwest Pennsylvania's unique attractions and experiences, like the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden. These efforts would be greatly aided by the passing of an Allegheny County Tourism Improvement District (TID) following the successful passing of SB 797 (Robinson). The TID would establish a funding mechanism for expanded tourism promotion which would have a direct, positive impact on our region's tourism industry, including the promotion of our amazing public gardens.

I thank you for your consideration and time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerad Bachar".

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