

## Pennsylvania Tourism Office Update House Testimony

### Intro

Good morning.

Thank you, Chair Daley, Chair Oberlander, and other distinguished members of the House Tourism and Economic and Recreational Development Committee, for inviting me here today to talk about the accomplishments of the Pennsylvania Tourism Office, the many ways we are inspiring *happy travelers* to Pursue Their Happiness in Pennsylvania, the continued economic impact we have on every community across the state, and the bright future we have as an industry as we continue to recover from the past few years.

I am Carrie Fischer Lepore, Deputy Secretary for Marketing, Tourism, and Film at the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, and I am proud to continue on in this role in the Shapiro – Davis Administration.

I grew up in the Philadelphia area, I have a lot of family from the surrounding countryside, I married someone from the southwestern part of the commonwealth who bleeds blue and white, and I have lived-in south-central PA for twenty years. Ask any of my family and friends, and they will tell you that my favorite day of the year is February 2nd, also known as Groundhog Day.

I want to congratulate those of you who are new to this committee for being named as a member of what is one of the best committees in the entire House. The Tourism industry is one of great importance, especially in this Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Tourism, sometimes, is seen as “fun,” which it is, or maybe even a bit frivolous. But we are a powerful engine for progress, economic development, and even diplomacy. Through our work, we have a platform to drive economic growth and job creation, support small businesses, build community, and present the people and places of Pennsylvania to the world.

While we have yet to fully recover to 2019 levels, according to the most recent available economic impact reports from 2021, we continue to have one of the largest tourism economies in the nation, welcoming nearly 180 million travelers to the Keystone State. These visitors generate more than \$66.3 billion for the state’s economy, which in return helps fund transportation, infrastructure, education, and public safety programs. The industry also helped sustain more than 450,000 jobs and generated \$4.2 billion in state and local tax revenues in 2021. In other words, each household in Pennsylvania would need to be taxed an additional \$802 to replace the visitor-generated taxes generated by visitor activity in Pennsylvania and received by state and local governments in 2021. With this kind of return, a strong marketing budget to attract visitors (and their money!) to the state is not an expense — it is an investment in Pennsylvania and its people, culture, and history for years to come.

We are confident that the 2022 economic impact numbers will continue to show a strong rebound and growth. For many facets of the Pennsylvania travel industry, 2022 was a bounce-back year marking a return to many 2019 benchmarks. The Pennsylvania Tourism Office captured much of this bounce-back in our media ecosystems and measurement analytics, leading to positive growth across much of the landscape. Paid media campaigns eclipsed pre-pandemic levels in terms of gross media weight and performance analytics. Traffic to visitPA.com reached a new performance high as 2022 saw growth from new users and out-of-state markets, including visitor guide requests and email newsletter subscriptions. Earned and social media efforts amplified visibility and reach by showcasing everything Pennsylvania offers travelers. Social media channels for visitPA attracted new followers, with high engagement on live events. And most important, hotel room demand continues to recover and surpass 2021 levels, with hotel occupancy recovering and trending toward 2023 incremental growth.

### **Co-Op**

Many lessons have been learned over the past few years, and some old adages remain true. We believe that a rising tide lifts all ships. We prioritize having a close partnership with the state's 50 destination marketing organizations, or DMOs, that help inform our content development, relay tourism trends, and support our state assets through advertising.

We are so proud of the cooperative advertising program launched in 2021, where we leverage the state's media buying power while providing more than a dollar-for-dollar match to those DMOs and industry associations that invest in advertising through us.

While we have always believed in the value of cooperative advertising, the matching funds powering this advertising have primarily been made possible with funds provided via the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) through the American Rescue Plan. We committed \$10 million of the \$17 million awarded to invite the traveling public back to exploring the Commonwealth, which is delivering an immediate infusion of investment the tourism economy needed.

Since the program launched in 2021, 25 Destination Marketing Organizations and Industry Associations have embarked on more than 30 campaigns. By June 2023, more than \$5.8 million in paid media will have been deployed as part of the co-op program. Media has run in 14 unique DMAs, covering six states and the District of Columbia, and partner investments all matched to at least 100% by the Tourism Office, and up to 300% in some cases.

As a result of this funding, Pennsylvania will have invested more in paid advertising this summer than in the past 15 years.

### **EDA**

As I reviewed with the committee last year, we are investing \$6.8 million from the EDA grant in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in addition to the cooperative advertising program.

The decision to use our funding for these initiatives is based on research showing that diversifying our audience will significantly impact Pennsylvania's economy by boosting the tourism industry, attracting families and workers to call PA home, and attracting new businesses.

Our DEI initiatives focus on three areas. The first area is a partnership with Lincoln University and the nonprofit Voices Underground to build out partnerships, identify and map existing assets, and develop new products to help build Pennsylvania's catalog of experiences surrounding Black history and culture. We have selected history, the Underground Railroad, foodways, sports, and arts and culture as the areas of focus. We finalized the agreement with Lincoln in mid-March, and their work started. We are incredibly excited to see what content they will uncover – we all are hoping to learn something new from this project.

The second area is a marketing initiative. While we have strived to represent all people in our advertising and marketing for the past eight years, we recognize that to reach specific diverse audiences, we will need to create tailored, authentic marketing campaigns created by the audiences we are reaching out to.

We will select creative agencies who specialize in these diverse audiences to create four campaigns: Two tailored to Black and African American travelers and one each speaking to Hispanic and LGBTQ populations. We anticipate issuing the Request for Proposal for the vendors soon, with the work to begin early next calendar year.

The third and final area is DEI training for tourism industry workers, including frontline workers, to ensure travelers of all backgrounds feel welcome and included in Pennsylvania. We are looking to partner with a state or a state-related university to create and deploy this training.

### **Other DEI Work**

Of course, our commitment to diversity extends beyond the EDA grant. We launched a new Pennsylvania scenic byway honoring Harriet Tubman at the end of 2022 –the 200<sup>th</sup> year since her birth. Our Pennsylvania byway links to portions of Delaware and Maryland, inviting visitors north into Pennsylvania.

Working with our partner Voices Underground, we recently announced our Juneteenth festival grant program for 2023. We are hoping to announce our Pride celebration grants soon as well, and both these programs will build off of the momentum established last year.

And, I want to note that activities for America's 250th birthday celebration are ramping up. Cassandra Coleman and the America 250 PA commission continue to lead the Commonwealth's activities. We are honored to work alongside to ensure Pennsylvania is ready and prepared to welcome millions of celebrants worldwide.

## New Products

While I am very proud of all this work, we have another new product to share. Last summer, we debuted *Stuffed with Steve Ford*, a new video series that sends the Pittsburgh native and [HGTV star](#) on the road to explore Pennsylvania's culinary trails. We premiered two additional episodes at this year's Farm Show and are getting ready to drop the following two shows.

Also on our agenda for the next few weeks is a road trip celebrating one of Pennsylvania's premier stars: Taylor Swift. This tour will take Swifties from her hometown near Reading to Philadelphia, where she is slated to perform in May. We realized that Swift is not having a concert in Maryland or Washington DC, which gives us the opportunity to capitalize on the influx of concertgoers from those areas encouraging them to extend their stay in Pennsylvania. Or, I could say that we hope this road trip will encourage them to make their visit to Pennsylvania little less *Swift*.

Always looking for the next big travel trend to highlight, our research indicated that a hot topic for travelers right now is the concept of wellness. Wellness does not mean the same for everyone, and it extends beyond just spas and yoga retreats, which we have plentiful. We view wellness as a state of mind, an active pursuit of health and happiness. In Pennsylvania, wellness can be practiced along our rivers and streams, our hiking and biking trails, through culinary indulgences, or a moment shared with family and friends under a blanket of star found in our dark skies. This inspired a new campaign we launched in early Spring titled "Well, Well, Well: Unexpected Ways to Wellness in PA," where we combined beautiful video with beautiful influencers to demonstrate how PA is meeting the moment and need for your wellness journey. In fact, the cover and feature story of the 2023 Happy Traveler state travel guide is focused on wellness.

## 2022 Travel Guide

Our annual Happy Traveler state travel guide continues to be in-demand with travelers. In 2022, there were 250,000 printed copies distributed and the digital guide received more than 300,000 page views for a total guide readership of 800,000. We saw a 7 percent increase in online orders compared to the previous year. And, for those new to the committee, this publication is 100 percent funded through advertising sales, so it continues to be an effective tool to attract visitors.

As I just mentioned, this year's guide features wellness retreats and stays as well as must-see attractions, iconic locations, hidden gems, and one-of-a-kind events and cultural experiences. The guide has been very popular so far, and we are always more than happy to provide you and your colleagues a few cases to share with your constituents.

## Social and Traditional Media

Our continued focus on lifestyle content and inspiration was amplified on social media with a voice that reminds our happy travelers every day that Pennsylvania is authentic, quirky, unexpected, and welcoming. We have spent the year focused on two primary social media channels to deliver that message while actively managing and exploring several other channels. If you are not following us, please do! And if you already follow us, go on and engage with us today.

This past fall, we hosted an invitation-only event for travel journalists at Laser Wolf in Brooklyn, a restaurant from Pennsylvania's James Beard-winning chef Michael Solomonov, where we, along with our partners representing every corner of the state, rubbed elbows with leading journalists from outlets including *Fodor's Travel*, *New York Times*, and *Forbes*. We have also met with journalists in Washington D.C. and attended multiple media marketplaces for domestic and international journalists during U.S. Travel Association trade show. And, we also regularly appeared on *Let's Visit PA with Sandy Fenton*, an iHeart Radio travel show that airs Saturday mornings across the Commonwealth. We saw Pennsylvania grace the headlines in top-tier publications like *USA Today*, *Travel + Leisure*, and *Food and Wine*, reminding travelers across the world that there's always more to do and discover in Pennsylvania.

### Other Owned Assets:

We have continued to publish content via our PA Happy Thoughts monthly newsletter dedicated to showcasing events, attractions, and other dynamic content that appeal to our 180,000 subscribers. And I am pleased to report that we saw an impressive 58 percent increase in signups year over year from 2021 to 2022.

The award-winning visitPA.com – our office proudly received a Mercury Award from U.S. Travel this year that named our website as the best among states – continues to be one of the main tools we use to inspire visitation. We saw an 8 percent increase in new users year over year and a 5 percent increase in unique pageviews.

But even an award-winning website needs to continue to evolve and change. This past year we launched a Search Engine Optimization – or SEO – audit of our website. Google, Bing and other search engines use certain factors, such as keywords, to determine what is served at the top of your search results. Understanding and investing in SEO research and maintenance is key to keeping our content at the top of the page for potential visitors. When you're at the top of the search results, more people see you. And we have a lot to show and share. This has been a fantastic exercise that we helped lay the foundation for ongoing SEO strategy. We will conduct a similar review of our social media presence as well.

## Research

Identifying new marketing and positioning opportunities for the Pennsylvania Tourism brand to increase travel within the Commonwealth is paramount to our future success.

In 2014, a multi-phase research study was conducted to identify Pennsylvania's core overnight travel audiences, their essential travel motivations, and the core product pillars of the Commonwealth's travel offering. The results of that research, and the subsequent brand positioning strategy, formed the backbone of the current brand: *Pursue Your Happiness*.

As the travel industry emerged from the pandemic, we sought to refresh our understanding of our core travel audiences, motivations, and potential future opportunities for Pennsylvania travel promotion.

Last summer we launched phase one of the research, which was a competitive brand audit where we looked at eleven neighboring states' tourism brands, exploring how they position themselves and what they tout as their key reasons to visit. Next, we surveyed approximately 1,600 travelers to identify and profile traveler segments and better understand their preferences, behaviors, and attitudes with respect to travel. Finally, we held three virtual focus groups representing the target segments to identify opportunities to increase travel to PA.

So, what did it all show? The first big takeaway was that most competitor states need a clearer brand voice/personality that creates an emotional resonance. This is a great opportunity for the PA brand to shine as the research showed that Pennsylvania's branding on the **visitPA** website and in recent ad spots conveys a consistent brand personality (quirky, playful, slightly nerdy) and consistent message that PA is an expectedly delightful, off-the-beaten-path destination. Next, while Pennsylvania's fundamental travel product has not changed substantially since 2014, the way in which it's considered and experienced is shifting. As Gen Z and Millennial generations have matured, their tastes and travel habits have become more important to overnight travel in Pennsylvania. Activity level and the make-up of travel groups have fundamentally changed. Pennsylvania's culture and unique place in American history and or popular culture is an important factor in overnight travel's where and what. And finally, outdoor recreation and amenities are central to nearly every audience (core or secondary) we hope to reach.

## Next Steps

So, what's next? With this fresh data in our hands, we now want to pressure test the brand strategy we have created. The 2015 brand position was born from our core product attributes, audience motivators, and competitive whitespace. Over the next few months, we will test the foundation that led to the position to see if it still holds up, needs a tune-up, or a complete redo.

**Closing**

While I am incredibly proud of our accomplishments so far, I am on the edge of my seat with excitement thinking through all the possibilities before us, armed with fresh data and research, with this new administration and your leadership.

We have so much to share about Pennsylvania, and I'm proud to continue to have the opportunity to tell this state's story.

Thank you for your time and for your support of Pennsylvania tourism.

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