



## **Tourism Advisory Board**

**May 8, 2025 9:30 am**

**Caucus Room, City Hall, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor**

**9:30 am Call to order, approval of past meeting minutes**

**9:35 am Pamela Mason Wagner, Arcadia Project**

**9:50 am Samantha Johnson – Monthly Tourism Report**

**10:00 am Sector Reports**

- Lodging
- Restaurants
- Retail
- Attractions/Arts

**10:15 am Staunton Shout-Outs**

**10:20 am Old Business**

**10:25 am New Business**

**10:30 am Adjourn**

# Tourism Advisory Board Meeting

April 10, 2025 9:30 am

Caucus Room, City Hall, First Floor

## Members/City Staff Participating:

Stephanie Cabacoy – American Shakespeare Center  
Sandi Carraro – Book Dragon  
Michelle Davis – Hotel 24 South (Zoom)  
Brian Gearhart – Heritage Hospitality  
Andrew Greene - Heifetz Institute (Zoom)  
Samantha Johnson – Director of Tourism (Zoom)  
Sarah Lynch – Baja Bean  
Ross Williams – Frederick House

## Members/City Staff Absent:

Camille Dierksheide – Staunton Music Festival  
Paige Hildebrand – Frontier Culture Museum  
Robert Higgs – Barren Ridge Vineyards, Accordia  
Corrie Park – City Council Liaison  
Jeff Ramsey – Gibson’s Warehouse, Byers Street Bistro  
Robin von Seldeneck – Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library  
Keith Taylor - Mary Baldwin University  
Jessica Williams – Sales and Marketing Manager

## Others Participating:

Adrian – Remedy Burger and Green Room  
Jessica Blythe – Asst. Director of Economic Development  
Lowell Brown - Citizen  
June Collmer – Heifetz Retail Shop  
Breanna Decker – Juniper Lane  
Heather Hopkins – Studi Broad  
Susanna Larner – Barren Ridge Vineyards  
Heather Leonard – Well Balanced Paw  
Molly Murphy – Staunton Jams  
Megan Owen - WHSV  
Kathleen Roth – Blackburn Inn  
Darren Smith - SDDA  
Annette Spencer – Heritage Hospitality  
Christian Vames – Frontline Models and Hobbies  
Pamela Wagner – Arcadia Project

## Call To Order and Approval of Minutes

The meeting was called to order. Introductions were made. Sarah made a motion to approve the previous meeting minutes, and Ross seconded the motion.

## Jessica Blythe – Business Retention Survey

The deadline has been extended to April 18, so please complete the survey if you have not already. With both Jessica and Amanda DiMeo both being in fairly new roles, your feedback helps us to set direction and strategic goals for our department. 31 businesses have participated out of 900 business license holders. There were nine retail businesses, five manufacturing, five office, five service providers, three in the hospitality or food service and three that are extraneous. The majority say they're happy with being

in Staunton, and that they would choose Staunton again. We've seen a lot of folks saying that they expect steady or increased sales (57%) and 97% plan to maintain or increase employment levels in the coming year. A common challenge across respondents was workforce, and finding qualified workers remains difficult. The highest rated public services were fire protection, EMS, police protection, and Parks and Rec. There were some concerns centered around utility costs. The lowest ratings were around solid waste disposal costs, sewage disposal costs and water costs. A big push for us over the next six months is going to be the Enterprise Zone (EZ). There were some questions about familiarity with the EZ. We will be amending the incentives, as we found that our local incentives are not being utilized. 50% of respondents were familiar with the enterprise zone. Only 10% had utilized the EZ out of the 31 respondents. 90% of those expressed interest in participating in a stakeholder group. Regarding SDDA, there seemed to be a need for greater clarification between SDDA and the ED department. The last question on the survey is just open ended; please be as honest as you feel comfortable being. If you have technical issues we can provide a printed survey. Samantha is looking into the possibility of Tourism Opportunity Zones within the city. Jessica noted that state level EZ incentives are funded by the state (DHCD) and local incentives by the City budget allotted amount.

### Monthly Tourism Report – Samantha Johnson

Samantha said the podcasts are going well and the blogs are tracking well. She thanked all for submitting their photo assets via the link that was sent out. We hosted a content creator targeting the Charlotte market. We are also hosting another content creator who is targeting the female, fun, millennial vibe and our DC market. There are obviously issues with the international market right now, and we ask that you keep us informed of what you see and hear, as well as visitors you are seeing. We are talking with our legislators as we head into what is being called the Mega Decade of upcoming events, including the VA250, the World Cup, the Olympics, etc. More people than ever are set to visit our National Parks, and Staunton is considered a gateway community to the Shenandoah National Park. We are requesting that funding be reinstated (The Great American Outdoors Act). It is estimated that people who travel for the World Cup average 10-14 days of travel. There is a backlog on Visas of 400-700 days in some cases. We have host cities in New York and Philadelphia that also happen to be two of our top six visitor markets. Our new marketing campaign (Staunton - Made of Magic) is set to launch soon and kicks off with a media blitz in Charlotte the end of April. Charlotte tracks higher as being more likely to spend more on hotel stays. There is a direct flight to and from Charlotte through SHD. We will also be sending out a link from Virginia Tourism for partnerships. VRLTA will be hosting a human trafficking seminar in May in Virginia Beach for hotels and their staff as well as other sectors.

#### **Activities:**

Visit Staunton staff took part in the following promotional, networking, or administrative activities in March:

- Staunton blog promotions featured [Where Girlfriends Gather: Your Guide to the Ultimate Women's Weekend in Staunton](#), [Staunton's Craft Cocktails](#), [Shop and Dine Out Downtown \(and Beyond\) in Staunton](#)
- Podcast Episodes Released: [The U is Silent; We Aren't – Episode 2: Where Passion Meets Precision: The Heifetz Experience](#), Episode 3: [A Radical Act of Community: Shakespeare in Staunton](#)
- Staunton awarded the 2024 Brochure of the Year by Virginia Tourism
- Virginia Tourism Corporation Marketing, Communications, & Research Retreat hosted in Staunton
- Met with 40 travel writers at the STS Media Marketplace
- Visitor Center staff attended the Virginia Tourism Visitor Center Seminar
- Hosted Content Creator @Shiondarell
- Strategic Planning with MBU faculty and students for collaborative events

- Samantha Johnson, Jessica Williams, Jessica Blythe, and Darren Smith participated in a panel discussion with Valley Women’s Weekend
- Attended Virginia Tourism International Planning Meeting
- Attended SGMP Old Dominion Education Conference
- Presented to Virginia Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives for Media & PR best practices
- Attended Blue Ridge Parkway Association Forum
- Meetings Attended: GART, VA 250, HBA, SVTP, Virginia by Rail, Beerwerks, VRLTA, MATPRA, Creative Mornings

**Public Relations**

The Following is a list of newspapers, websites, magazines, and television stations that published articles about Staunton:

Date	Headline	Source	Reach
Mar. 14	<a href="#">10 Best Places To Live In Virginia</a>	Travel + Leisure	9,876,963
Mar. 2	<a href="#">The 9 Best Towns In Virginia For Antiquing</a>	Southern Living	11,524,249
Mar. 1	<a href="#">Virginia's 10 Best Retirement Towns Ranked</a>	World Atlas	5,704,883
Mar. 29	<a href="#">11 Best Places To Live In Virginia In 2025</a>	World Atlas	5,439,218
Mar. 13	<a href="#">9 Most Eccentric Towns In Virginia</a>	World Atlas	5,439,218
Mar. 27	<a href="#">Staunton: Sixth Season Of Shop &amp; Dine Out Downtown Kicks Off April 4</a>	The Augusta Free Press	1,235,992
Mar. 23	<a href="#">Visit Staunton Wins State Tourism Award For City’s 2024 Visitor Guide</a>	The Augusta Free Press	1,235,992
Mar. 17	<a href="#">Spring Has Nearly Sprung: Tickets Available For Virginia Scenic Railway</a>	The Augusta Free Press	1,235,992
Mar. 14	<a href="#">This Homey Restaurant In Virginia Has Mouth-Watering Meatloaf Known Throughout The State</a>	Family Destinations Guide	995,394
Mar. 26	<a href="#">Staunton Church Awarded Virginia 250 Preservation Fund Grant</a>	WHSV-TV	362,767
Mar. 31	<a href="#">Shop &amp; Dine Out, Farmers' Market, Frontier Culture Museum, Shakespeare Festival: The Digest</a>	News Leader	81,881
Mar. 24	<a href="#">Staunton Makes List Of Virginia's Most Eccentric Towns. Here's Why</a>	News Leader	81,881
Mar. 7	<a href="#">8 Best Ice Cream Parlors In The State Of Virginia</a>	PhillyBite	32,068
Mar. 27	<a href="#">Frontier Culture Museum Of Virginia Awarded Preserving America Grant From Americana Corner</a>	Rocktown Now	28,152
Mar. 28	<a href="#">Three Trips To Savor Spring</a>	Bethesda Magazine	7,293
Mar. 27	<a href="#">Escape To This Stunning 1893 Mansion In Staunton, VA</a>	Arlington Magazine	30,768
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>43,312,711</b>

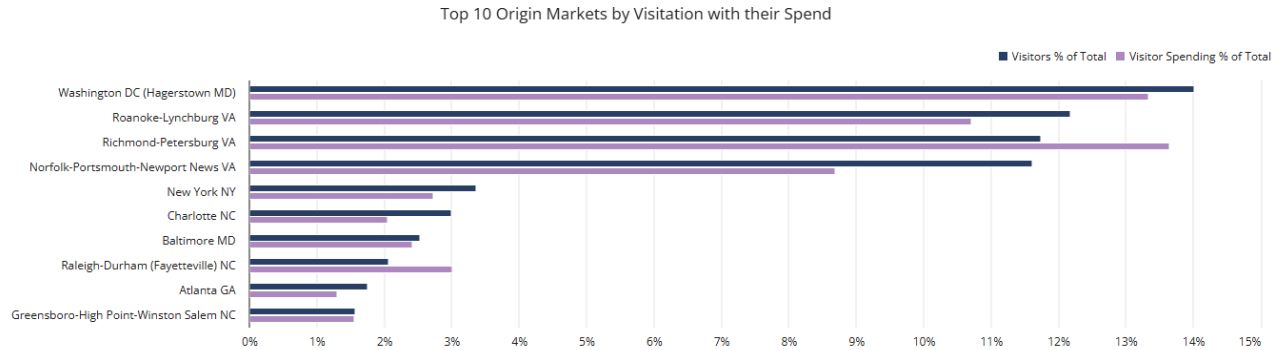
**Website Visitation**

Website Traffic		
March 2024	March 2025	% Change

37,703 visitors	29,371 visitors	-22.1 %
180 guide requests	176 visitor's guide requests	-2.2%

### Top 10 Origin Markets and Visitor Spending

\*data not fully updated until 18<sup>th</sup>



7,086 Sample Size



13% of Overall Restaurant Spend - \$78



Increase in spending/visitation by Atlanta, NYC, & Raleigh



10% of Overall Retail Spend - \$88



11% of Attraction Spend - \$58



52% Ages 25-54  
48% Household \$100k+  
38% Have Children

### Sector Reports – Lodging

Samantha: From STR report for February, we are seeing a .6 % decrease from year over year.

Michelle: Occupancy was extremely flat in February, but we've had a stronger ADR, so we were able to have a year over year increase. In March, we saw that completely flip, and we've seen really strong occupancies as well as a good rate. Moving forward, we do see that April is strong. We've seen really strong weekends in March and in April, which in February was not the case. We're up in occupancy and ADR as well in June. Graduation weekend is actually really slow. We're assuming that will turn around. In the fall right now, other QCMM, we're not really seeing a lot - it's kind of outside of our booking window.

Ross: We're primarily a weekend business, so February was pretty ugly for us. Struggling in March as well, down about 20%. 2024 was a really good year for us, so it's hard to measure up. February and March have been pretty slow for the quarter as a whole. April is looking good, and we do have our Heifetz and Staunton Music Festival bookings. Currently have eight bookings for QCMM. We have some bookings staying all 10 days for the Staunton Music Festival.

### Sector Reports – Restaurants

Sarah: Restaurants that reported via the Google Doc. say they are up month over month and year over year. Marino's reported MBU Student nights are successful. Noted increase in sales in correlation to additional events, weddings, performances. For Baja, every single time we have a band, every time we have a DJ, every time we have a tribute, people come. We are also enjoying a new menu and that push which has been fun. Several other restaurants have seasonal menus that just started as well, and then Helios is having a grand opening soon.

### Sector Reports - Retail

Sandy: Up for the year, with a lot of upcoming events. Partnering with Yelping Dog on events in May, June and July. The Silent Book Club is held there as well. Partnering with Medieval Fantasies in June centered around *How To Train Your Dragon*. Partnering with a comic book shop in Harrisonburg, as well as with Sandy's son's store *The Secret Lair*. Sandy was chosen to work with some marketing students from Bridgewater College through the end of April. They have assisted with social media posting, posting times, re-arranging her shop, etc. Sandy said MBU has done this in the past as well.

Samantha: For the retail that submitted via Google Doc, the majority of businesses saw an increase in March. There were several conferences in town that may have helped. Shop and Dine Out had great turnout. Bach Around The Clock had great attendance, and sales were up.

### Sector Reports – Attractions

Sarah: Via Google Docs, increase month over month and year over year. Visitation from NoVa, Richmond, WV, NC and SC. SMF's Baroque Fest coming up April 25-27. Shakespeare Birthday Festival coming up April 21-27 with activities, events and fundraisers. Robin had an urgent call but noted it's a tough time for museums and libraries right now, but she was happy to report that visitation was up 32% over last March.

Andrew: Preparing for summer festival, and starting our marketing in earnest with statewide radio promotion and doubling down in Charlotte market. Will be rolling out concert sponsorship opportunities soon. Their goal is to have each concert sponsored through local donors and businesses.

### Staunton Shout-Outs

Susanna would like to thank the City for all the work they have done to get cars and people in the Wharf area, especially for the Farmers' Market.

Pamela: shouted out the Staunton Junction and Heather Hopkins at Studio Broad for making it look so gorgeous. They are open Thursday through Saturday, serving cocktails and Depot food.

Adrian: shouted out the staff of all the Shop and Dine Out restaurants. The city has worked hard to make it as smooth as possible. Remember the retail workers and restaurant workers, especially the shifts are hot and long and sometimes wet. Sometimes it's both and everyone wants to sit outside. If you see someone being rude to like customer service people, please tell them to be kinder. There is limited outdoor seating.

### Old Business

[Link for TAB members to upload their photos to our database](#) for use in emails, social and other promotions. Please upload your own photos, or gets rights permissions to pass along to us.

[Please use this link to list your events](#) on VisitStaunton.com. Here is the [page of events that have been submitted](#). They will also be included in [Staunton on Tap](#).

## New Business

Molly reminded everyone about Staunton Jams coming May 2-4. She will distribute posters, flyers and there is a digital marketing campaign. There are nine participating venues with a main stage on Beverley Street. Thanks for everyone's support. Sarah noted that Molly's organization of Staunton Jams would be a great model to anyone who was looking to start their own event or festival.

Party In The Park celebrates Staunton student musicians in GHP on May 4.

Samantha sent via text: businesses that are used to a strong DC customer base may want to consider increasing their targeted market in Baltimore, New York and Charlotte, as the DC market continues to see challenges in workforce changes.

Heather Leonard: Appreciates the new entrance to the Wharf being right in front of her business, and also attributed her store having great Saturdays with the Farmers' Market being there. Will hold a Pet Fest in July in the Sunspots Pavilion Parking Lot. She invited anyone who would like to partner and promote their business. Will have adoptable dogs, wellness speakers, trainers, some music and other pet related businesses. The Central Virginia Blues Society will also be doing a Mosby Foundation fundraiser there sometime this summer. Discussed having a dog decal on windows for pet friendly venues.

Pamela: Arcadia is applying for a grant from a foundation based in Charlottesville, and we need data about visitation to Staunton from Charlottesville. Zartico data from Tourism only shows visitors from 50 miles plus. Sarah also suggested reaching out to Kelli Walker from VTC for their statewide data. Darren also talked about Virginia Main Street having a contract with another data company, Placer AI.

Jessica: Update tonight at City Council meeting on infrastructure update and concerns in the Wharf. There will also be an upcoming meeting for Wharf residents, owners and businesses.

Megan: Does marketing through WHSV and is very passionate about helping Stauntonians, but also does a lot of freelance work. She said she is really good at social media and analytics and such, and she also barter and has inexpensive rates. If you ever want to talk, reach out to her. She has a master's in research, and is good with media. Sarah added she has lived downtown since she was young.

Darren: The SDDA is hiring for a Creative Marketing and Events Coordinator.

Sarah: Please put us into contact with your building owners to answer required questions from Virginia Main Street. Darren said there would be more info coming on this.

Heather Hopkins: Studio Broad is an architectural and interior designer firm, as well as having the retail shop across the street. She offered to be a resource for any of the downtown businesses that need consultations for any interiors, as well as architectural work. They can help with events or vignettes, and would do a free consultation. They want to offer their services to the to the community.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:50 am. Minutes: Kim Cormier