

Utah Board of Tourism Development

Meeting Minutes

Friday, April 24, 2026

Kanab Center, 20 N. 100 East, Kanab

Board Members Present	Lesha Coltharp, Joanie Hammer, Victor Iverson, Jessica Merrill, Jason Murray, Graydon Pearson, Nathan Rafferty, Kevin Smith, Jennifer Wesselhoff
Board Members Virtual	Harold Simpson, CJ Wade, Shayne Wittwer
Board Members Excused	Kaitlin Eskelson, Jordan Smith, Melva Sine
Tourism & Film Staff	Jenica Barber, Rachel Bremer, Ben Cook, Rachel Creer, Lorraine Daly, Sorrel Grow, Melissa Jackson, Camille Johnson, Becky Keeney, Emma Kwanin, Anna Loughridge, Carli Mahas, Christina Martin, Josh Paluh, Virginia Pearce, Natalie Randall, Laici Shumway, Dave Williams, Heather Zang
Public	Chloe Anderson, Megan Christensen, Elliott Clark, Jason Curry, Machel Devin, Will Driggs, Chris Eggleton, Megan Fop, Paul Gagner, Terra Girvin, Patty Kubeja, Ryan Lundstrom, Brittany McMichaels, Jeanette Peatross, Angie Rothen, Bridget Siebert, Celina Sinclair, Mick Solenta, Sara Toliver

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

Board Chair Nathan Rafferty called the meeting to order, welcomed everyone and asked for board members and audience introductions.

Kane county tourism director **Jeanette Peatross** welcomed everyone to Kanab.

- They were worried about international travel after the fires at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon.
- But tour companies adapted and county and Kanab were pleasantly surprised as saw a 9% increase in the transient room tax (TRT).
- It was the first full year with a new hotel—SpringHill Suites and they were very busy.
- Also hopeful for a very strong spring this year but international bookings for the fall are not looking strong yet.
- Getting a new visitor center and it is currently under construction. Hope it will be completed by the end of 2026. Excited about the creative entryway plan.

Kane county commissioner **Patty Kabeja** thanked the board and the Utah Office of Tourism for coming to Kanab.

- The biggest issue the county wrestles with is public land as most of the county land belongs to the federal government. So have a very small tax base. Why rely on the tourism economy so much.

MEETING MINUTES

MOTION: Nathan Rafferty motioned to approve the February 6, 2006 board meeting minutes. All board members were in favor.

MANAGING DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Natalie Randall, Managing Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Time in Kanab for the Tourism Business Development (TBD) workshop and this board meeting has been great. Experienced first hand the results of the Elev8 program with stargazing with local business Kanab Tour Company.
- First hand experience of understanding the Utah visitor while returning from D.C. recently.

- Sat next to Jody (a retired Park Service employee) and Bill (a Navy veteran), a couple fulfilling a bucket-list trip to the American Southwest.
- Bill, who hadn't flown through the Utah airport since the 1960s, was stunned by the new airport and the mountain landscape.
- The couple spent two weeks traveling across the entire state—from Brigham City in the north down to Kane County and St. George in the south.
- Inspired by **visitutah.com**, they used a detailed, handwritten list to visit local restaurants and hotels, spreading economic impact across multiple communities.
- Ultimately, their journey highlights the real-world value of tourism work, showcasing visitors who come to Utah to step away and be inspired.
- Natalie was part of the Utah delegation, organized by UTIA, to attend Destination Capitol Hill in D.C., April 12-15. Joined by many people from our board and industry.
- Confirmed that Utah's state leadership and industry partners stand united on key advocacy priorities in the current federal climate.
- Three core focus areas:
 - Utah is entering an era of "mega events" (e.g., Temple Square reopening, the Olympics, major sporting events). Discussions focused on ensuring equitable GSA (General Services Administration) per diem rates to protect hoteliers and elevate Utah's international message via Brand USA.
 - Workforce advocacy and continued advocacy with the federal delegation regarding recurring seasonal labor challenges, specifically targeting H-2A, H-2B, and J-1 visa programs.
 - For public lands and national parks conversations, prioritized tangible solutions for regional and industry concerns (e.g., bulk purchasing for the America the Beautiful pass). Specific directives were taken to the Department of the Interior (DOI), the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and the federal delegation to improve the visitor experience.
- Always Adventure Safe is a new campaign launching. This is part of the Utah Forever framework and uses the EDA funding. It targets both residents and visitors to promote safe outdoor recreation ahead of the summer season.
- Set for May 16th, Always Adventure Safe Day. Features statewide mini-activations at high-traffic Utah state parks. Partnered with many DMOs and Division of Outdoor Recreation and will be giving out branded water bottles, children's coloring books, etc., at these pop ups.
- The campaign also features two unique characters – Frank and Morris – to drive the narrative.
- Following inspiration from Utah's state-level Dark Sky Month, Senator Curtis's team introduced a resolution to the Senate floor designating April 20th–April 26th as National Dark Sky Week.
- The resolution formally recognizes the economic, cultural, and recreational value of astrotourism, noting its power to drive nature tourism to national parks and rural communities.
- Leaning into astrotourism as a state and industry. It helps diversify and build a dynamic economy across the state. It's not just in southern Utah or by national parks. Also in northern Utah and throughout public lands.
- Our team continues to focus on the priority and importance of a dynamic visitor economy. Leisure and outdoor recreation are identifiers but the visitor economy is broadening and meetings, conventions and large sporting events are helping it expand.
- All of these are ultimately building a resilient visitor economy that will support the state for generations to come.

UTAH FILM COMMISSION

Virginia Pearce, Director, Utah Film Commission

- Seeking Persephone is a recent project that was shot partially in Utah. They did not actually apply for an incentive but it is the number one streamed series on Prime currently. It was produced by local Utahns.
- Horror project *Rabisu: Curse of the Demon* did receive an incentive and was shot in Salt Lake City. Also found on Prime.
- *By His Hand* is another incentive project. It was filmed in Davis, Morgan, Weber and Salt Lake counties. Also currently available on Prime.

- Lastly, *Omaha* which was a 2025 Sundance favorite is getting its theatrical release. It is a devastatingly, gorgeous film and recommend everyone watch it.
- Sharing a promotional video that was created by Joyce Kelly of Washington County. It shows the film making experience and benefits in their county. Co-op marketing funds were used to do this.
- The film incentive program was allocated \$20M for FY26. Received a funding cut during the legislative session so beginning in July, FY27, we will have \$11m.
- The cash amount will be \$1.4M and the remainder in tax credit.
- This has been a very big year with 32 projects that have filmed in 17 counties.
- The counties include: Carbon, Davis, Emery, Grand, Juab, Kane, Morgan, Salt Lake, Sevier, Summit, Tooele, Utah, Uintah, Wasatch, Washington, Wayne and Weber.
- These projects have had an economic impact of more than \$111M. The smaller projects really add up to have a large impact by year end.
- This month we have six projects to review.
 - *"Untitled BBQ Competition"* from Food Network. It is an unscripted reality competition series that features nine teams and three celebrity chefs and 18 expert pitmasters. It is currently filming in St. George but expanding its production outside of the film studios. Brooke Redmon is a Utah producer.
 - *Floating* is an independent drama, narrative feature. A small town cowgirl's world is upended when husband is incarcerated and receives help from an estranged twin brother. Also produced by Utahn, Jen Bergere who is partnering with independent talent and producers from California. It is in preproduction and filming will run through the summer in Salt Lake, Summit and Wasatch counties.
 - *Brotherhood: A Cinematic Musical* is a heartfelt story tracing two families—one from the U.S. and one from Mexico. They navigate the complexities of 2025 and explore themes of immigration, identity and community. Filming in Salt Lake county and hopes to perform well on the festival circuit.
 - *No Screens Christmas* is a Hallmark Channel production and is a made-for-television movie featuring time-travel. It will be filmed in Salt Lake and Utah counties. Hallmark continues to be a good fit for Utah.
 - *Las Vegas Therapy* was brought to us by David Wulf, who also does a lot of Hallmark, ironically. This is a co-production with France about a French couple that travel to Las Vegas to renew their wedding vows but the trip quickly deteriorates. Result of good relationship building with international film commissions.
 - *Marshals* Season 2 looks to return to film in Utah. The first season is currently running and is the most watched broadcast series on television. It is a Paramount production which continues the story of *Yellowstone* following character Casey Dutton joining the U.S. Marshals. This shoots in Morgan and Summit counties and really benefits some of the small communities in these counties. The incentive for this project is \$15M, which is a 25% tax credit and it will be paid out over three years.
 - **Jennifer Wesselhoff** added this is an important project for the region. It spends \$4M alone in lodging and then there is the trickle down effect to local caterers, restaurants, and transportation businesses.
 - Also more than 2200 Utahns get to participate as extras.
 - Adds excitement back to Park City around the film industry after losing Sundance. This generates \$60M in economic impact over an extended period.
- Commissioner **Victor Iverson** commented Utah was starting to make gains in the film industry and concerned productions will draw back with the incentive cut of \$9M.
- In FY27, face tough choices of what projects we can support. Still dedicated to spreading the productions to rural areas.
- Iverson asked if other states are drawing back on funding. Most states are actually increasing.
- Had a lot of support in the legislature but at the end of the day, they couldn't find funding to support everything they wanted.
- Continuing to talk about strategy and going to ask the legislature to reinstate it to the \$20M level.
- Did receive the \$3M rural for ongoing. In the past, we had to fight for the complete \$12M yearly.
- **Jason Murray** asked what fiscal year this money is coming out of. A lot of it will come out of FY27.

- Murray also asked for the Marshals \$15M incentive when it starts. Explained \$5M will come out of FY26, FY27 and FY28.

Production	Estimated Utah Spend	Incentive Amount Per Production	Locations (Counties)
<i>Untitled BBQ Competition</i>	\$1,700,000	\$340,000 - 20%	Washington
<i>Floating</i>	\$1,800,000	\$450,000 - 25%	Salt Lake
<i>Brotherhood: A Cinematic Musical</i>	\$1,941,984	\$485,496 - 25%	Salt Lake & Tooele
<i>No Screens Christmas</i>	\$2,150,000	\$537,500 - 20%	Salt Lake & Utah
<i>Las Vegas Therapy</i>	\$3,600,000	\$900,000 - 25%	Salt Lake, Tooele & Washington
<i>Marshals Season 2</i>	\$60,095,232	\$15,000,000 - 25%	Morgan & Summit
	\$71,287,216 TOTAL Spend	\$17,736,804 TOTAL Incentive	

MOTION: Lesha Coltharp motioned to approve \$17,736,804 for incentives for the three productions presented which have met the criteria defined by statute. Graydon Pearson seconded the motion. The motion was approved.

COMMUNITY & PARTNER RELATIONS REPORT

Camille Johnson, Director of Community & Partner Relations, Utah Office of Tourism

- Department's strategic priorities for FY 26 include business communication and development; strategic destination development; greater outreach and communications; and internal development.
- Two key business communication and development projects – executing ELEV8 round one and plan for round two, and the TBD workshop.
- Hosted TBD workshop two previous days in Kanab. Had 200 participants which included businesses, state and local governments and educators.
- Three focus areas of agritourism, astrotourism and the creative economy. Included 53 speakers, 18 breakout sessions and one hands-on experience.
- The ELEV8 Utah initiative focuses on community-led destination development. First round partnered with three DMOs and counties – Iron, Kane and Sevier.
- Each county then selected four local businesses which resulted in a cross-section of 12 distinct partners. These partners all went through an eight step experience design process.
- Deliverables at the end of the first year include training for two team members, three DMOs involved and creation of 12 visitor-ready products.
- **Jennifer Wesselhoff** asked where the secret shopper portion of the program fit into the process. That was phase one so before the eight step design phase. Joe Veneto came in and did an assessment of the the area to to determine what product or experiences already existed.
- Wesselhoff also thanked the CaPR team for the product development work. It's hard for communities to think about their community as a product or the product and amenities that make up the visitor experience.
- Product development allows for a strategic approach of “this is the visitor we want, this is when we want them to come and this is the product we need.”
- **Lesha Coltharp** explained that developing the via ferrata opened her eyes to a whole new product development process. The workshop and seeing the finished ELEV8 product was inspiring.

- Through engagement with our tribes, a powerful component of cultural preservation in experience development.

MARKETING COMMITTEE REPORT

Ben Cook, Director of Marketing, Utah Office of Tourism

- The customer journey begins at the awareness level and it works its way around to get the powerful loyalty loop. If you do it right, people will keep coming back and back and back. The tourism industry leans in on the loyalty loop in different places and everyone has a role to play. The office is at the beginning of the customer journey and storytelling. Where it has the most influence.
- Reminder of the three campaigns this year and the creative has been redone on all of them. This gives unified creative across all three.
- Parks & Beyond is in the market currently. It is primarily national and state park messaging.
- Ski & Winter has wrapped up. In spite of the tough winter, pleased with the results.
- The Urban & Outdoor focuses on unique, hybrid experiences of urban offerings and outdoor adventures. Geographically it is focused primarily along Wasatch front and back.
 - Campaign goals remain data driven focusing on:
 - Awareness–Inspiring interest in the dual urban and outdoors.
 - Visitor behavior–increase the average length of stay and overall visitor spend.
 - Educate–promoting responsible and prepared travel habits.
 - Campaign KPIs will follow closely to maintain benchmarks from last year including maintaining the 42% ad awareness.
 - Our primary audiences are adventurers, families, and venturistas: a mix of outdoor lovers, families, and thrill seekers looking for a great time; trend followers at heart sharing a sense of taste, style and happy life.
- Considerations for the upcoming year:
 - Religious tourism with the Salt Lake Temple, open house in April-October 2027 is expected to bring 3-5 million visitors to the area.
 - Access to the urban core continues to increase with the Salt Lake City International Airport adding new direct international routes.
 - Sports tourism with Utah’s growing sports scene. The NHL Utah Mammoth, possible MLB expansion team and future Olympic hosting.
- **Nathan Rafferty** asked if we have any data on the type of visitor that will travel to Salt Lake for the temple open house. Anticipating international travelers and those with family ties to Utah.
- **Emma Kwanin** shared that the church has been very active attending trade shows with the Global Markets team. Have been planning group tours, bus tours and setting aside tickets for the large visitor groups.
- **Rachel Bremer** commented they have been very active internationally focusing on South America, Latin America, Pacific Islands and Australia.
- **Jason Murray** shared that Washington DC temple opening is the best comparison. It had to extend open house days because of the demand.
- **Lesha Coltharp** reminded the group that Temple Square, before it closed, was the number one visited tourist destination in the state. The interest in the open house will be very impactful. Asked if you can have a pop-up visitors center during the open house.
- Planning content for [VisitUtah.com](https://www.visitutah.com) to inspire people visiting the Temple open house to visit other places throughout the state.
- Visit Salt Lake is and other Salt Lake organizations are looking at pop-up style visitors centers and ways to spread the bigger travel message.
- Campaign runs 4/15-6/30/2026, and focuses on heavy regional targeting. Custom audiences built off past travel behaviors to competitive destinations.
- This is a fully digital campaign across all channels.
- **Jennifer Wesselhoff** asked how the timing of the campaign is determined since it is a year-round concept.

- Love Communications analyzed data from other platforms like TripAdvisor to pinpoint the exact window of when prospective travelers are planning trips. Also worked with regional partners and their ad flights to make sure campaign complements with others' efforts.
- **Jessica Merrill** asked if seeing any data on people driving to destinations instead of flying due to gas prices.
 - Challenging as prices continue to fluctuate but will review new travel trends in the next marketing committee.

GLOBAL MARKETS REPORT

Rachel Bremer, Global Market Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- The international travel industry is facing significant challenges including geopolitical tensions, travel visa restrictions and rising costs.
- The United States is one of the the only major global markets seeing a decline in incoming international travel.
- Many travel partners and guide operators are reporting year-over-year declines with international visitors. Business is being sustained by short-term domestic travelers but it is a loss of the higher spending international client.
- Travelers are facing a "crisis of confidence" due to confusion over fees, entry requirements and mixed media reporting.
- Monitoring the electronic system for travel authorization (ESTA) visa waiver program. As the proposal would require social media data collection for these travelers. It would impact 42 countries including the UK, Germany, Japan and France.
- National Park fee structure changes continue to be a pain point for international groups and tours. The process is time consuming, tedious and confusing.
- Utah continues to show resilience with our response to government shutdown; strong statewide collaboration; outdoor recreational activities; travelers find the unique, immersive experiences in Utah; and, entering the "golden age" of travel.
- Utah is perceived as a safe destination and data shows that safety is the number one deterrent for Canadians. Lean in on safety, wellness and outdoor recreation.
- Continue working with western state partners to promote regional travel.
- Work closely with Visit Salt Lake and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to leverage the Temple Square open house.
- The 2034 Utah Games provides a boost to global brand awareness and connection of 2028 LA Games and 2030 in France on the road to our Olympics.
- With forecasting, expecting some incremental growth. Previously forecasted to hit \$1B in international visitor spending in 2025 but has moved to 2027.
- International arrivals are pacing above the 2029 National Travel and Tourism Office (NTTO) baseline, outperforming our competitive states.
- Visitors with discretionary income are still traveling and those are the higher spend per visit travelers and it helps to fill the non-stop, long haul flights.
- Have recovered from COVID-19 numbers but have been a slow, difficult recovery.
- Rethinking tactics and strategy and how we can prioritize what we are doing internationally. Used prioritization modeling with visitor spend and extended visits but now looking at access. What percentage of the population can travel to the United States.
- This model provides a data-driven, statewide strategy to identify and prioritize sustainable, high-yield international markets. It serves as an operational tool for regional partners to understand exactly where and why resources are being allocated.

Jenica Barber, Research Analyst, Utah Office of Tourism

- An index is a guide or indicator. It is a compound measure that often uses component scores to aggregate data and come up with a final score.
- It is a highly structured process and it enables a comparison

- A helpful analogy is figure skating. There is a final score, but judged on multiple components. The system takes a lot of different elements, weights them, and then comes up with a score.
- Evaluating global markets and starting with data from 49 countries and combining some into markets. Use metrics valuable to our needs. It allows us to compare markets within each year and over time and this system is tailored specifically for us.
- Ranking at the end of the day is important, and knowing your top 5 or 10 year-to-year is very informative.
- The index relies heavily on data from Tourism Economics. The general categories include previous year visitation (which looks at overnight visitors), spending, and spend per overnight visit. Have component scores for same metrics forecasted five years into the future.
- Use Tourism Economics data for our competitor set states. Rank all markets for our competitor set states for both visitation and ranking, and there are component scores for that too.
- Component score for flights and airports, which takes into consideration direct flights, connections through hubs, and future planned flights that are going to open up into Salt Lake City.
- Component that considers the demographic characteristics for each market. This includes not just population, but the economic ability of that population to travel to the U.S. and Utah.
- Important because there are markets, like China and India, that have large populations, but not all of their population has the economic ability to travel to Utah.
- Consider the U.S. international market ranking to the U.S. within this index and visa access (how easy it is for people to legally visit the United States).
- All data sources are listed. Some take into consideration a large amount of public data, combined with our office's analysis of those data sources.
- Finally, there is one component for geopolitical context considerations, and that is the only thing that is not weighted. This allows quickly removing or reinserting markets based on the international political landscape and re-evaluate the index.

Rachel Bremer, Global Market Director, Utah Office of Tourism

- Team priorities and goals for FY27 are to enhance the economic impact of international travel by focusing on high-yield markets.
- Use market indexing to prioritize and streamline a plan with statewide marketing framework that streamlines efforts, reduces overland and maximizes reach.
- Canada ranked number one in every indexing model and Utah sees most Canadian visitors by far.
- The European markets are next. Look at the UK market on its own and including Ireland. Indicates opportunities in Europe.
- France is interesting and looking at how we can fill the Delta flight from Paris to Salt Lake City in January, February and March. Overall France is a powerhouse and shows year over year resiliency.
- China is back to the 2nd highest inbound market for total spending but indexing is at number six. Air access out of China is only at 30% of where it was in 2019.
- Korea surprisingly is above Australia with indexing. Shows high growth potential in Australia but not indexing as strong due to access and other factors.
- This data is used to inform us and need to be more thoughtful about resources to produce sustainable, long-term, high yield results.
- Nordics were a surprise as Utah doesn't typically see a lot of visitors. (Does not include Iceland). Nordic travelers are adventurous, spend time and money at destinations.
- When evaluating flights, including one-stop connections through major gateways and Las Vegas is important to Southern Utah.
- Hearing a lot about Italy from partners. It is a resilient market that has increased year-over-year.
- Devote more budget and resources to primary markets—European markets, Canada and China but still consider Australia and Korea as high-growth markets.
- Still working in India but reduced the scope as it did not index well.

- **Nathan Rafferty** asked how the gulf states figure into our international visitation. Not much and haven't seen an impact on long haul flights to Salt Lake City. It might help get more Europeans to American with the ongoing war.
- **Jason Murray** asked about China's visitor spending. It is total spend rather than per person average. But China is high, too, on per person spending.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **Joanie Hammer** reminded everyone that registration for the Utah Tourism Conference is open. Hall of Fame nominations also are open and due May 1.
- **Nathan Rafferty** shared that four ski resorts are still open – Alta, Snowbird, Brighton and Brian Head.
- **Jessica Merrill** shared the Great Salt Lake Bird Festival the second weekend of May and incorporating Adventure Safe.
- **Lesha Coltharp** shared the ribbon cutting for the Ashley Gorge Via Ferrata on May 15. Free but recommend hiring a guide and will have Adventure Safe pop-up that day. Also June 19-20 is the annual legislative rodeo and rafting.
- Jessica also shared for **Sara Toliver** that the World Curling Championships went very well and positive reviews from the teams and international organizers.
- Nathan announced will not hold a board meeting in May.

MEETING ADJOURNED