

Explore Minnesota Tourism Council

Tuesday September 15, 2026

Hybrid Meeting

Attendees: Ed Hoffman, Heidi Swank, Xinyi Qian, Courtney Reese, Sarah Setley, Nick Leonard, Beth Fisher, LaTasha Reed

Online: Molly Luther, Colleen Smith, Beth Pierce, Frank Soukup, Mike Schwieters, Kate Setley, Josh Peterson, Curt Van Asten, Shannon McKeeth

Explore Minnesota Staff: Jen Schak, Lydia Hollingsworth, Randolph Briley, Devon Cox, Kat Sutton, Lauren Bennett McGinty, Lyndsey Hanson, Karin Hill, Ben Johnson, Beth Helle, Nicole Lalum, Lisa Havelka, Gretchen Nussbaum, Derek Ramthun

Welcome and Intro

- Many seats are expiring in Jan. 2027.
- Members whose seats are expiring will stay active until a new appointment is made.
- Beth will send out info on how to apply but the process will likely take longer due to the new governor.
- Members are welcome to continue to serve or apply again until a new appointment has been made.

Next quarter look ahead

- Travel + Livability (Marketing)
 - Fall campaign is now live through Oct. 30
 - Regional targeting, which focuses on surrounding drive markets as opposed to national, due to budget.
 - Outdoor and culture niches.
 - Implemented state-specific messaging for anything deployed in Minnesota, less broad than regional messaging.
 - Continuing Atlantic partnership, featuring Sean Sherman and Kate Bean. Articles will also include how to experience Minnesota through literature.
 - New strategy this fall is regional billboards along I-90, showing NE and SW MN. Given the wildfires over the summer, focused more on

NE than before as we're trying to get more people to that area to account for the wildfires.

- Production in SW MN, Star of the North filming starting in Oct., highlights include SPAM Museum, the nutcracker in Luverne, Blue Mounds State Park.
- Winter 2027 campaign
 - Paused winter campaign in FY2026 due to metro surge so to save resources we are refreshing the creative from last year.
 - Debuting Nov. 2 – Feb. 8.
 - Pushing out organic content in Q2.
 - Build out more strategy, focusing on indoor and outdoor activities within the campaign and focusing in MN coziness.
 - We have an opportunity to bring people in when it's not as cold.
- Education + Industry Engagement + International Marketing (Destination Development)
 - Industry Relations is working on the annual tourism conference (Jan. 27-28, 2007 to be held at Saint Paul RiverCentre).
 - New registration system this year will allow for more in-depth information of registrants, as well as an on-site attendee app.
 - Tourism awards and nominations open Sept. 24. Awards finalists will be asked to present on their initiative/program through a short video. Finalists will be notified with specific instructions.
 - We are looking for industry mentors for the scholarship/mentor program. Please reach out to anyone on the team if you're interested. Look for the mentorship application in the registration link.
 - Council will receive a unique registration code for the conference. Conference fees are waived for all council members.
 - Market Development
 - Brand USA travel week in Amsterdam (Sept. 28 – Oct 1) bringing together U.S. destinations with travel trade and media from western Europe – many of our target markets. Taking media appointments, trade appointments and educational tracks focused on international marketing, data and tourism development.
 - All leads from this show – and all other shows attended by market development – are available free to the industry. Contact Jen Schak to receive.
 - Hiring Destination Experience Manager

- Position will oversee five state-run welcome centers, help expand and enhance programs and develop industry education programs.
- External relations
 - Combined public relations with legislative to form External Relations team
 - Local Media Strategy
 - Implemented local media strategy on a weekly basis, focusing on seasonal events.
 - Launched a Substack to include first-person itineraries. Pitched to relevant local media and time announcements and events around Film and Outdoor Rec. schedules.
 - National Media Strategy
 - Work with agency of record BVK to pitch stories.
 - Building out subject matter expert database to help with media opportunities.
 - Monthly/weekly pitching strategy with BVK and continuing relationships with travel writers across the industry. This includes outreach to major news outlets such as NYTimes, Now York Post, and Washington Post.
 - Focusing on Midwest core markets, drive markets, events, flight markets with direct access to MN
 - Subject Matter Expert database:
 - To be prepped for reactive media outreach to quickly tap on specific writers/experts.
 - These experts have a reach and credibility that EMN may not have on its own.
 - Currently reaching out to hundreds of candidates and will hopefully have a solid cohort to work with soon.
- Outdoor Recreation
 - Looking Ahead
 - Outdoor Industry Summit
 - Hosted in Hyland Hills where we'll start with hike and educational panels.
 - Outdoor Retailer
 - Announced plans for 2027: they'll be in Minneapolis for the foreseeable future (Aug. 18-20).
 - We already blew past goals in terms of numbers and media.
 - The theme was community and discovery.
 - Outdoor industry has been in transition:

- The event was previously held in CO and UT, which used to make sense for core participants but the Midwest is epicenter for the outdoor participant.
 - Outdoor Recreation Industry Partnership Roadmap
 - Working on the strategic plan for the next four years.
 - Plan to share the draft at the summit and call for feedback.
 - Goal is to finalize in early December to be ready for the next administration.
 - Explore MN More
 - 50 episodes
 - Many exciting shows coming up!
- Tribal Liaison
 - FY2027 Consultations have begun
 - Native film guide is complete and up on the website.
 - Tribal Tourism Office discussions continue on a quarterly basis.
 - Tribes have shown interest in establishing individual, tribe-specific tourism offices or potentially a conglomerate office of several tribes.
 - Tribal Liaison Governor Transition planning
 - Beginning to develop materials for the transition.
 - Tribal Nation Content Project
 - To build out Tribal Nation content on EMN website through one landing page.
 - It will include individual Tribe's tourism pages.
 - Slated to launch in winter of 2026 or early 2027.
- Film
 - Reporting a 5x increase in projects and 13x increase in potential economic impact from FY2025 to 26.
 - Announced 10,000 Stories Fund Project.
 - Partnering with Film North, they were able to provide grants to bring projects to life.
 - 8 new productions since June
 - Productions are spending \$37.7M within MN (hotels, food, hiring local crew members, etc.).
 - 15 active productions across the state
 - From commercials to major productions across the state.
 - There's a Nicolas Cage movie filming in Stillwater.

- Need more crew to make the productions happen, workshops are happening with existing film education opportunities to grow the crew.
- Legislative & administrative
 - There are lots of unknowns, the process is still moving forward as usual, but the final decisions will be made by the new admin.
 - We will submit proposals for updates to the film statutory language to put the film office in a more competitive space and resubmitted the language around the Councils that was at the legislature during the last session.
 - We're putting together a robust budget request ensuring that we are mindful of the current budget reality at the state.
 - The day after the election, an office is erected dedicated to the transition. Budget proposals from the Governor's office will be due to the legislature in February.

EMN Strategic Pillars: Break out discussions

- Strategic planning is challenging under an ever-changing political environment.
- Previous Strategic Plan had five, but now we've consolidated to three pillars:
 - Strengthen Minnesota's competitiveness
 - Boos Minnesota's national and global visibility
 - Champion Minnesota's future together

Topic 1: Strengthen Minnesota's competitiveness

- What key strengths or unique assets should Minnesota elevate to better compete with other states?
- What is one way your organization or association could more intentionally support
 - Main room discussion:
 - Discussions around Explore Minnesota's role at the legislature and ability to advocate for only the Governor's proposals.
 - Others were interested in engaging with associations outside of the state who may be able to help support Explore Minnesota's requests.
 - There was discussion around the development of a "tourism caucus" at the state.
 - Funding models were discussed and it was noted that most states are still funded through general fund rather than a sustainable funding model.

- Lodging tax, several states receive a portion of lodging tax, other states are a performance-based model. WA and CA are the only two states that currently support a TID.
- Room 1 takeaways:
 - Focus on the resort industry, the lakes, water, people love to go north. We do not talk enough about accessibility and how visitors can engage in MN activities.
 - Shopping – there’s no sales tax on clothing. We can elevate MN as a retail getaway and continue to market MOA and elevate the state as a retail destination.
- Room 2 takeaways:
 - Focused on how MN is blessed to have four seasons. This is rare across the country.
 - Minnesotans are very active throughout the year, so we can expose people to a diversity of options for activities
 - You can try things in MN very easily, such as guided snowshoe hikes, learn to kayak, there’s no need to be intimidated. For families or those who want to try new things, there are lots of great things for first-timers.
 - Core to casual: MN is home to community and casual outdoors, capture those two things and you can only go uphill from there.

Topic 2: Boost Minnesota’s National and Global Visibility

- What barriers do you see that limit Minnesota’s visibility nationally or globally?
- How could your organization better align or collaborate with statewide marketing efforts to amplify Minnesota’s brand?
 - Main room discussion
 - Whether the exposure is good or bad, under Metro Surge, there was more awareness of MN.
 - European friends never really heard of the state before. They learned to understand that the US isn’t just one but functions as individual states. There are individual Identities, values, ethics. The awareness was not there before and from it came a lot of sympathy. This is an opportunity for marketing, to separate the state from the nation.
 - Focus on direct flights: don’t come to the US, come to MN. Can tie into the coziness idea. This is a moment we should lean into.
 - Through marketing/campaigns, EMN focused on high ROI areas within the nation and Canada.

- Opportunities:
 - NFL Draft (April 2028)
 - Heritage tourism spends more, stays longer and brings more people.
 - Special Olympics/USA cup – images post event showing people will have a safe experience was really important.
 - Lots of offerings for niche people, more money, more time, mini campaigns for specific people with specific interests.
 - In April Michelin will announce cities for culinary awards.
- Room 1:
 - Barriers: for national, there limited money to spend for destinations to draw people in and international messaging is hard.
 - Collaborate or align: touched upon on MN coop and grant program. We need to make sure organizations are educated and know where EMN is going with their marketing—the high tide can rise all ships, so let's focus on representing all areas of MN as best we can.
 - Leveraging the conference location: when people are going to a conference they usually ask, where is this? Where am I going? How can we leverage the messaging around that.
- Room 2:
 - There is an unfortunate stereotype of MN as a flyover state. We need to increase the familiarity of what's here.
 - We talked about winter and how not many people are willing to be cold but we should celebrate those who are.
 - Show diversity and activities of MN.
 - Social media: DMOs and destinations need to get on the events calendar, we should do a better job of engaging with EMN social media.

Topic 3: Champion Minnesota's Future Together (10 min)

- Opportunities:
 - Intra-regional planning through more roundtables etc.
 - Highlighting rural or greater Minnesota development opportunities.
 - Collaborative certifications e.g. MOA is a certified sensory autism-friendly destination. Think of other areas to support accessibility.
 - Working with MN colleges and universities and finding more natural collaborations such as outdoor rec and tourism and film and travel.
 - Sports events conference and branded booster materials.