



EXPLORE
ASHEVILLE

POWERED BY

Buncombe County Tourism
Development Authority

ANNUAL REPORT

FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026

Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority Board Members

For more than four decades, the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority has had a long and proud legacy of investing in and building community. The authority was created to generate economic development through travel and hospitality, both of which play a vital role in Asheville and Buncombe County and carried our community's recovery and momentum this year.



HP Patel
CHAIR,
BCA Hotels
County Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Laundry Attendant



Lucious Wilson
VICE CHAIR,
Wedge Brewery
City Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Busboy



Tim Rosebrock
TREASURER,
Biltmore
Chamber Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Dishwasher



Himanshu Karvir
Virtelle Hospitality
County Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Front Desk Agent



Elizabeth Putnam
Mosaic Realty
County Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Sales Clerk



Dexter Hazel
The Restoration Hotel
County Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Front Desk Agent



Michael Lusick
FIRC Group Inc.
City Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Night Auditor



Amy Kelly
Hatteras Sky
City Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Concession Stand
Cashier



Kyle Highberg
Biltmore Farms
City Appointed

First Hospitality Job:
Public Area Attendant



Vice Mayor
Antanette Mosley
Asheville City Council



Commissioner
Terri Wells
Buncombe County
Commissioner

A Message from Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority

Dear Partners and Friends,

One year after Hurricane Helene, we carried a simple message to partners: rebound and propel. Fiscal Year 2026 was the year that mission became measurable, translating into record capital investment, renewed national attention, and a fuller comeback for the businesses and neighbors still rebuilding. This annual report reflects on those shared successes.

This work has been recognized well beyond our county borders. Explore Asheville earned dozens of national accolades this year, including the U.S. Travel Association's Bridging Communities Award, one of the industry's highest annual honors, validating the collective effort of our staff and every community partner who has worked hand in hand with us since the day of the storm.

We backed that recognition with action, holding our first capital investment cycle since Helene, greenlighting \$12.4 million for eight capital projects across Buncombe County, including some places hardest hit by the storm. We also launched a new workforce development program to inspire the next generation to carry forward Buncombe County's travel and hospitality legacy. The timing is significant, demonstrating our commitment to thoughtfully rebuilding tourism infrastructure and supporting community resilience through one of our region's most vital exports: the visitor experience.

We also leaned hard into something new this year: recruiting and hosting large-scale entertainment events like The Asheville Sessions, putting our heritage on full display, and Thomas Dambo's "Trolls: A Field Study," giving families across the region a reason to visit.

Despite a difficult year for travel and hospitality

nationwide, visitors to Buncombe County spent \$2.6 billion in 2025, maintaining the third-highest spending following Mecklenburg and Wake County. Our business development team booked a record 492 events, generating more than 108,000 roomnights and \$142.4 million in direct economic impact, and is on pace to beat that record again this year, confirming that Asheville and Buncombe County remain a competitive, resilient destination.

The community sees this progress too. This year's Resident Perspectives on Tourism survey found that 95% of residents believe travel and hospitality benefit their community, an all-time high and the fourth consecutive year of growth, up from 92% in 2025, 88% in 2024, and 84% in 2023.

Looking ahead, rebound and propel continues to be our mantra. We remain dedicated to our community's long-term recovery, with you and for you, powered by the resilience of our neighbors, business owners, artists, and hospitality professionals who continue to lead the way.

Always. **ASHEVILLE**



HP Patel
CHAIR,
BCA Hotels
County Appointed

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'HP'.



Victoria Isley
President & CEO
Explore Asheville
BCTDA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Victoria Isley'.

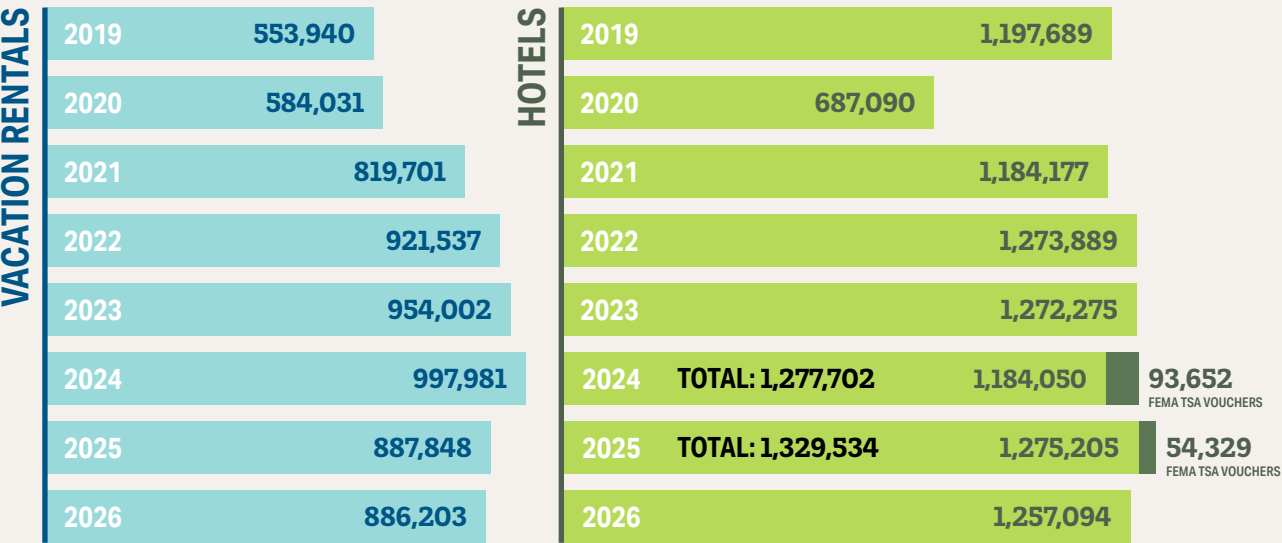
Destination Performance

Marketing and community investment helps inspire visitor spending, and that spending in turn funds the marketing and community investment that keeps the cycle going. The lodging tax paid by visitors, not Buncombe County households, shoulders 100% of that investment, a virtuous cycle that has powered this community’s recovery and growth.

FEMA TSA VOUCHERS ACCOUNTED FOR 6% OF BOTH 2024 AND 2025 HOTEL ROOMNIGHTS

After Hurricane Helene, FEMA's Transitional Sheltering Assistance program issued vouchers for displaced residents, supporting nearly 148,000 hotel roomnights in 2024 and 2025. This program helped prop up hotel demand during a crucial winter shoulder season and highlights ongoing recovery alongside increased visitation.

ANNUAL ROOMNIGHT DEMAND



\$2.6 BILLION
IN VISITOR SPENDING
DESPITE HURRICANE
HELENE’S CHALLENGES

Visitors spent \$7.1 million per day in Buncombe County, on average.



2025 VISITOR ECONOMIC IMPACT FOR BUNCOMBE COUNTY

\$909M

PERSONAL INCOME

The \$909 million in total income generated by the visitor economy is the equivalent of \$9,050 for every household in Asheville.

25,390 JOBS

This translates to about one-in-seven jobs in Asheville.

\$215M

STATE & LOCAL TAXES

Each household in Asheville would need to pay an additional \$2,145 in taxes to replace the visitor-generated taxes received by state and local governments in 2025.



70% OF VISITOR SPENDING HAPPENS OUTSIDE OF ACCOMMODATION

reaching restaurants, retail, recreation, and transportation businesses across the community and supporting local jobs for residents.

A Record Growing Meeting and Events Economy

One way Explore Asheville bolsters economic vitality is through business development and group sales efforts. In recent years, the authority has done this with more purpose and meaning, aligning proactive group sales with targeted business sectors. Retooling our hospitality partners' approach from leisure-first to business travel, positions meetings and groups as the front porch of traditional economic development.

RECRUITED GROUPS AND MEETINGS BREAK RECORD

492

EVENTS BOOKED IN FY26

108,189

ROOMNIGHTS BOOKED

\$142.4 MILLION

IN FUTURE DIRECT
SPENDING

489

EVENTS ARRIVED IN FY26

86,377

ROOMNIGHTS OCCURRED

\$75+ MILLION

DIRECT SPENDING SEEN
THIS FISCAL YEAR

37 MEETING PLANNERS

& 1 JOURNALIST

HOSTED ACROSS 3 FAM TOURS

**ATTENDED 47 TRADE SHOWS
& CONFERENCES**

IMPACT EVENTS THIS FISCAL YEAR



**NC DEPT. OF NATURAL &
CULTURAL RESOURCES**

Nov 10–16, 2025

Direct Spend: \$1 Million



**AFAR EMPLOYEE
RETREAT**

Mar 2–5, 2026

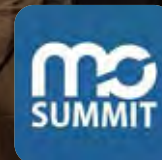
Direct Spend: \$87,000



**VISIT NC TOURISM
CONFERENCE**

Mar 16–18, 2026

Direct Spend: \$610,000



MO SUMMIT

Mar 16–18, 2026

Direct Spend: \$208,000



Homebrew CON 2026

Jun 15–21, 2026

Direct Spend: \$995,000



Asheville's Reputation as a Sports Destination Grows

TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT FUND (TPDF) INVESTMENTS PAVED THE WAY FOR NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SPORTING EVENTS

NAIA Men & Women's Outdoor Track & Field National Championships

The NAIA Championship debut welcomed 1,500 competing student-athletes and 3,000 visiting family and fans to Asheville and UNC Asheville's Karl Straus Track in the spring. A recent \$1.5 million TPDF investment upgraded the track to Olympic standards, enabling UNC Asheville to host the event. The NAIA championship featured a welcome celebration at Pack Square Park and has confirmed its return in 2027.

Big South Baseball Championship

Six conference teams competed while 750+ attendees watched the first annual Big South Baseball Championship at the newly renovated HomeTrust Park, a \$23 million TPDF project, generating an estimated \$750,000 in direct spending, with all games streamed on ESPN+. The championship returns to Asheville in 2027 as part of a multiyear agreement.

Southern Conference Basketball and Wrestling Championships

Last fall, the Southern Conference, along with the City of Asheville, Explore Asheville, and the Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission, signed a 10-year extension to keep the SoCon Basketball Championships in Asheville through 2035. This year's basketball championship generated \$9 million in direct visitor spending, and the second annual wrestling championship generated nearly \$200,000 in visitor spending. Nearly \$8 million in TPDF investments have contributed to the sustained recruitment of events at Harrah's Cherokee Center – Asheville.

Marquee Events Attracting Visitors this Year

Explore Asheville invests in signature experiences, cultural installations, and major sporting championships encouraging travelers to book now and beyond peak season. This year's slate of marquee moments carried this event strategy to its biggest scale yet.



THOMAS DAMBO TROLLS: A FIELD STUDY

This past winter, Explore Asheville presented the U.S. premiere of Thomas Dambo's twelve reclaimed wood troll sculptures at The North Carolina Arboretum. The exhibit tapped into Dambo's global "troll hunter" fan base, drawing visitors from across the country from November to February, bridging the holiday and shoulder season and amplifying the Arboretum's Winter Lights. Partners leaned in by building troll-themed lodging packages that encouraged travelers to stay overnight. Attendance topped 246,380, breaking nearly every visitation record in the Arboretum's 40-year history, a surge also supported by Explore Asheville's \$1.6 million TPDF investment in landscaping, lighting, and additional parking.



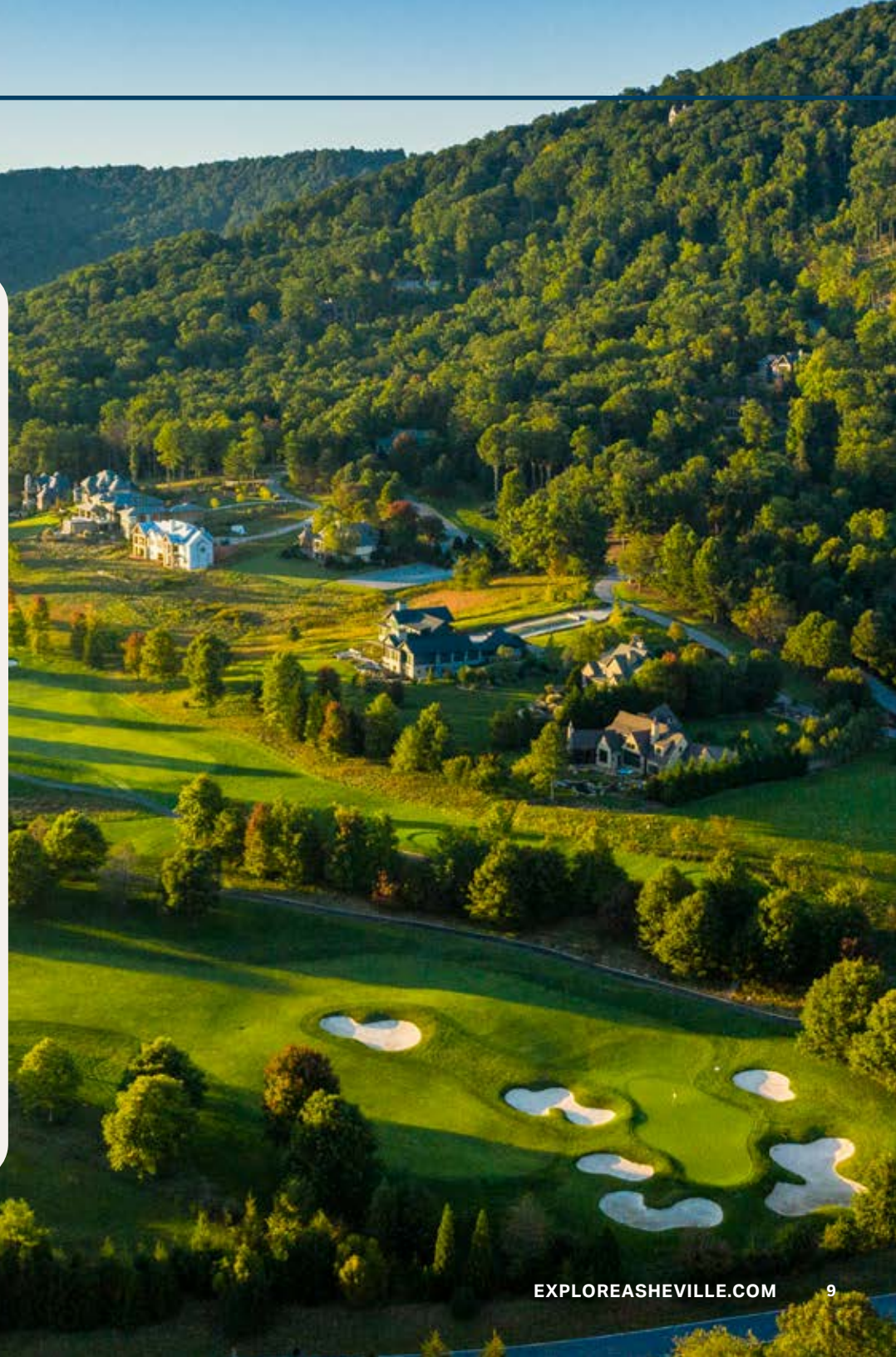
THE ASHEVILLE SESSIONS: CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF AMERICANA AND APPALACHIA

Explore Asheville partnered with AVL Sounds Fest producers, the Blue Ridge Music Center, North Carolina Arts Foundation, and Citizen Vinyl to mark 100 years since the first commercial recordings of Appalachian musicians atop the George Vanderbilt Hotel in 1925—an event that laid the groundwork for the Bristol Sessions and the evolution of Americana and country music. The centennial featured concerts, panels, and the remastered release of "Music from the Land of the Sky: The 1925 Asheville Sessions." A paid media mix across The Guardian, Rolling Stone, Garden & Gun, and Patrick Hicks Music elevated the celebration's reach and Asheville's reputation as the real birthplace of country music.



THE PGA TOUR'S BILTMORE CHAMPIONSHIP ASHEVILLE

The PGA TOUR returns to Asheville after an 80-year hiatus through Biltmore Championship Asheville, a new PGA TOUR event debuting Sept. 17–20, 2026, at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove. Presented by Biltmore Estate and Explore Asheville, the four-year tournament is estimated to generate \$15 to \$30 million in direct visitor spending, \$84 million in media coverage, and more than \$100,000 in philanthropic support for local nonprofits each year. The North Carolina Department of Commerce granted \$3.17 million from the Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund, making it one of only six grant recipients in the state and the only awardee in Western North Carolina to date.



Rebounding from Hurricane Helene

As the community approached the one-year milestone of Hurricane Helene, the Asheville area was open and ready, with roughly 90% of the region's businesses operating, and most of the Blue Ridge Parkway's scenic corridor reopened. Inspiring the return of guests and investing visitor dollars back into the community were critical. Marking one year of recovery set the stage for Explore Asheville to tell the story of our community's comeback while turning renewed national attention into bookings for the neighbors and partners still rebuilding.

SHARING ASHEVILLE'S RECOVERY

The Asheville area's comeback was told through a landing page, before-and-after visuals, and video storytelling, driving 2.67 billion in potential media reach and \$25.4 million in publicity value across 63 site visits and 718 PR placements.

- **Five-part video series** highlighted the area's resilience, creativity, and stories of renewal leading up to the one-year Helene milestone.
- **A cross-channel social series** of milestone videos and before-and-after photos.
- **The Open and Ready partner toolkit** equipped local businesses with ready-to-share content to invite travelers back for fall.

**2.67
BILLION
POTENTIAL
MEDIA REACH**

**\$25.4
MILLION
IN PUBLICITY
VALUE**



HEROES OF HELENE EVENT

On September 25, more than 1,000 community members gathered at Highland Brewing for a free event, hosted by Asheville Chamber of Commerce and Explore Asheville, honoring those who contributed to immediate response and first year of recovery.

DAY OF SERVICE

Explore Asheville partnered with Asheville GreenWorks, RiverLink, and Food Connection for a Day of Service where 60+ volunteers removed 2,500 lbs of river debris, packed 600 meals, and cleared invasive plants.

ALWAYS ASHEVILLE FUND

The Always Asheville Fund awarded **\$2.3 million through 544 grants** to independent travel and hospitality businesses recovering from Hurricane Helene. Grants were issued to every eligible applicant.



Explore Asheville joined calls for small business grants, not loans, following Hurricane Helene. When the City of Asheville dedicated more than \$15 million in CDBG-DR funds for small business grants, Explore Asheville stepped in as an engagement partner for the Asheville Recovers Together grant.

RECOGNIZED FOR ITS RECOVERY

Explore Asheville has the awesome role of shining a spotlight on and sharing stories about our deeply rooted and ever-evolving creative community emerging from the Blue Ridge Mountains. Any destination would be proud to earn this many accolades in a single year. For Asheville and Buncombe County, receiving this level of national recognition so soon after Hurricane Helene is nothing short of extraordinary. It is a testament to the strength, determination, and heart of this community — and a clear signal that travel and hospitality remain one of the most powerful forces propelling our recovery forward.

26 National Accolades Earned Throughout FY26

- **Travel + Leisure's** 15 Favorite Cities in the U.S. of 2025
- **USA Today's** The 29 Best Bars in America in 2025
- **Travel + Leisure's** Most Affordable Fall Foliage Destination in the U.S.
- **Southern Living's** Most Affordable Fall Foliage Destination in the U.S.
- **Reader's Digest's** 2025's Nicest Place in America
- **Frommer's** Best Places to Go in 2026
- **Fodor's** Go List 2026
- **Travel + Leisure's** 50 Best Places to Travel in 2026
- **Eater's** Best New Restaurants in America in 2025
- **Condé Nast Traveler's** Gold List 2026
- **The Points Guy's** 17 Best Places to Travel in 2026
- **USA Today's** 2026 Restaurants of the Year
- **Travel + Leisure's** Top Trending U.S. Destinations for Spring Break 2026
- **Wine Spectator's** Most Underrated U.S. Cities for Food and Wine
- **Women's Health's** 2026 Travel Awards
- **Men's Health's** 2026 Travel Awards
- **Southern Living's** The South's Best Cities
- **Food & Wine's** Top 10 Small U.S. Cities for Food and Drink
- **Food & Wine's** 210 Top Places to Eat, Drink, and Travel in 2026
- **Eating Well's** 2026 Best Wellness Town
- **Parade's** Top 10 Trending U.S. Summer Destinations
- **Resy's** Resy 100
- **Forbes'** 52 All-American Summer Getaways
- **Travel + Leisure's** Top Trending Domestic and International Summer Travel Destinations for 2026
- **Garden & Gun's** feature on the South's 2026 James Beard Award-Winning Chefs
- **Food & Wine's** recognition of Good Hot Fish as North Carolina's Most Unique Experience



BCTDA Investments Powered by Visitors

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority leverages visitor dollars, not resident tax dollars, to enhance Asheville's distinct character and quality of place, benefiting both residents and visitors through the Tourism Product Development Fund (TPDF) and the Legacy Investment from Tourism (LIFT) Fund.

Allocating a share of the lodging tax from overnight stays, the Authority funds strategic community projects in partnership with local government and nonprofits, focused on preserving historical assets, revitalizing cultural venues, creating new experiences, and enhancing natural attractions.

Since 2001, the Authority has committed nearly \$108 million to 53 community assets.

**\$12.4
MILLION
INVESTED
ACROSS NINE
MAJOR TOURISM
PROJECTS**

2025 TPDF GRANT CYCLE RECIPIENTS

ORGANIZATION	PROJECT	AWARD
Beacon Foundation	Beacon Park	\$4,500,000
Asheville Buncombe Youth Soccer Association	John B Lewis (JBL) Soccer Complex Restoration	\$2,155,000
Buncombe County Government	Enka Recreation Destination Phase II	\$1,975,920
Warren Wilson College	Warren Wilson College Aquatic Center	\$1,606,000
White Horse Stepstone	White Horse Community Patio	\$736,537
Enka Youth Sports Organization	Bob Lewis Ballpark Visitor Amenity Enhancements	\$720,000
UNC Asheville Foundation	UNC Asheville On-Campus Tennis Complex	\$500,000
Asheville Museum of Science	AMOS Museum Master Plan – Infrastructure Expansion	\$189,500



TPDF PROJECTS COMPLETED IN FY26



HomeTrust Park - Centennial
Restoration & Capital
Improvements Project



JBL - Soccer Complex
Restoration



WNC Nature Center -
Gateway to Southern
Appalachians

BEACON PARK: A CATALYST FOR RECOVERING SWANNANOVA

The authority helped fast-track Beacon Park, a **\$9 million** project in Swannanoa's Beacon Village, which was severely impacted by Hurricane Helene. Its **\$4.5 million** TPDF investment reduced a five-year build to under a year, transforming the former Beacon Blanket Mill into an 8.5-acre park with the largest all-wheel bike facility in the Americas, bouldering walls, a walking loop, and a 4,000-person event lawn. The facility is expected to attract global attention through potential partnerships with Red Bull, and Union Cyclist International, giving the community a year-round gathering space and the potential to draw new visitor spending to Buncombe County.



Supporting Local Culture & Events through Grants and Partnerships

FESTIVALS & CULTURAL EVENTS SUPPORT FUND & EVENT SPONSORSHIPS

Explore Asheville's investment in events, from first-year festivals to decades-old traditions, draws visitors, boosts lodging and local spending, and enhances quality of place for residents.

This year, **\$92,000** was invested in **26** festivals and cultural events through the Festival & Cultural Event Support Fund. An additional **37** local events received a total of **\$144,000** in event sponsorships this year.

Explore Asheville has invested over **\$1.5 million** in festivals and cultural events across Buncombe County since 2016.

ASAP Farm Tour
Appalachian Sustainable
Agriculture Project

**Surreal Sirkus
Arts Festival**
Arts 2 People

**Asheville Legacy
Neighborhood History
& Culture Festival**
Asheville Creative Arts

Holi 2026
Asheville Downtown
Association

Maker Faire Asheville
Asheville Makers Inc.

**Asheville Mardi Gras
Parade and Queen's Ball**
Asheville Mardi Gras, Inc.

**Black Mountain
Blues Festival**
Black Mountain
Blues Society

{Re}HAPPENING 14
Black Mountain College
Museum + Arts Center

GRINDfest
Black Wall Street AVL

**Lake Julian Festival
of Lights**
Buncombe County
Parks and Recreation

Shindig on the Green®
Community Betterment
Foundation of the Asheville

**Mountain Dance
and Folk Festival®**
Community Betterment
Foundation of the Asheville

**2026 Juneteenth
Celebration**
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Association of Asheville &
Buncombe County Inc.

Spring Fling!
Hood Huggers Foundation

**LEAF May 2026
"Rooted" Retreat**
LEAF Global Arts

**North Carolina Cider
Fest Asheville**
North Carolina Cider
Association

RADfest 2026
RADA Foundation, Inc.

**Sketch Crawl and Sketch
Club in the RAD**
RADA Foundation, Inc.

**RISE: A Fly-Fishing
Festival**
Riverlink

**Craft Fair of the
Southern Highlands**
Southern Highland
Craft Guild

Swannanoa Winterfest
Swannanoa Community
Council

Groovin' on Grovemont
Swannanoa Community
Council

**Black Storytelling
on The Block**
The Block Collaborative

A Dicken's Christmas
The Cathedral of All Souls

**Weaverville's
Music on Main**
Weaverville Business
Association, Inc.

Goombay Festival 2026
YMI Cultural Center





Explore Asheville's *Strategic Imperatives* emerged from extensive community listening sessions and broader community goals that frame and guide our work.

Strategic Imperative

Delivering Balanced & Sustainable Growth

RESIDENT SENTIMENT

Explore Asheville's 2026 Resident Perspectives on Tourism survey, conducted by MMGY Travel Intelligence, found

95% of residents believe travel and hospitality benefit their community — up from 92% in 2025, 88% in 2024, and 84% in 2023.

89% of residents are proud to live in Asheville and Buncombe County.

Asheville and Buncombe County lands in the

TOP 10–15%

of destinations nationally assessed for resident sentiment by MMGY.

88% believe visitors have had a positive impact on the community's post-Hurricane Helene economic recovery.

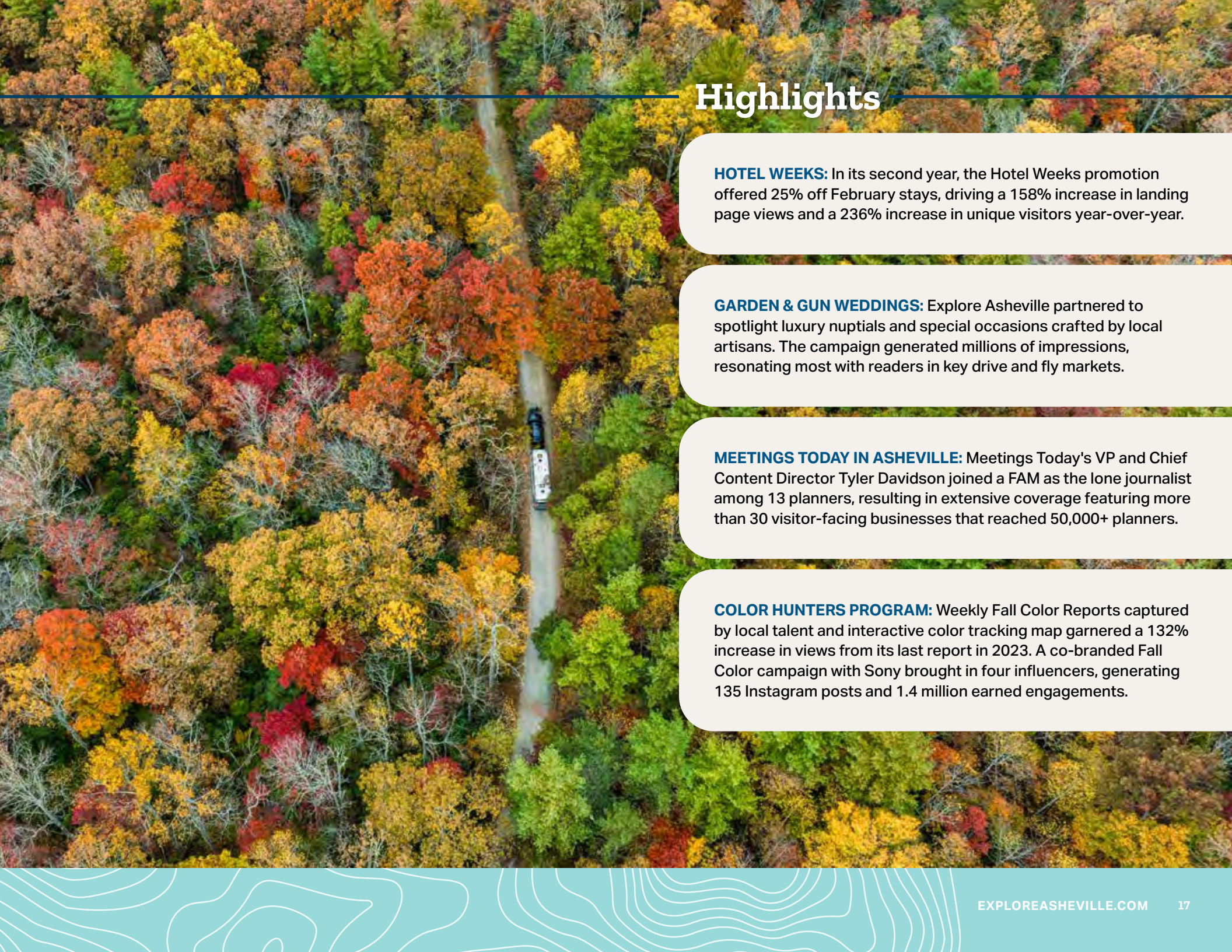
92% believe travel and hospitality are important economic drivers and community tax base.

FUTURE OF TRAVEL DISCOVERY: AI INFRASTRUCTURE

Explore Asheville is actively embracing the future of trip planning with the launch of the Mindtrip Trip Planner on ExploreAsheville.com. Since its debut, thousands of users have engaged in conversations about their travel plans. A comprehensive article audit led to the creation of 20 new trip itineraries, aimed at enhancing Asheville's visibility in AI searches.

AFAR EMPLOYEE RETREAT

The retreat brought 15 editors and writers to town for the brand's only global all-hands of the year with a YMI Cultural Center activation. It set the stage for immersive PR pitches resulting in multiple episodes of AFAR's "Unpacked" podcast recorded on location, an entire content refresh, and two new articles.



Highlights

HOTEL WEEKS: In its second year, the Hotel Weeks promotion offered 25% off February stays, driving a 158% increase in landing page views and a 236% increase in unique visitors year-over-year.

GARDEN & GUN WEDDINGS: Explore Asheville partnered to spotlight luxury nuptials and special occasions crafted by local artisans. The campaign generated millions of impressions, resonating most with readers in key drive and fly markets.

MEETINGS TODAY IN ASHEVILLE: Meetings Today's VP and Chief Content Director Tyler Davidson joined a FAM as the lone journalist among 13 planners, resulting in extensive coverage featuring more than 30 visitor-facing businesses that reached 50,000+ planners.

COLOR HUNTERS PROGRAM: Weekly Fall Color Reports captured by local talent and interactive color tracking map garnered a 132% increase in views from its last report in 2023. A co-branded Fall Color campaign with Sony brought in four influencers, generating 135 Instagram posts and 1.4 million earned engagements.



Strategic Imperative

Encouraging Safe & Responsible Travel

SUPPORTING THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY'S REOPENING AND MAINTENANCE

The reopening of Buncombe County's sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway was one of the year's most significant indicators of progress. Explore Asheville launched a feature guide and provided real-time social media updates as the 114 contiguous miles became accessible. This announcement was further amplified by a public relations campaign that reached nearly 800 journalists.

The positive momentum continued even through a federal shutdown in the second quarter, engaging more than 495 million people and generating \$6.2 million in publicity value. Visitation to the Parkway increased, surpassing the peak levels seen in October.

FRENCH BROAD RIVER COMMUNICATIONS WORKING GROUP

Now in its second year, Explore Asheville's French Broad River Communications Working Group unites riverkeepers, government leaders, tour guides, and outdoor advocates to advance the region's river economy. Convened each season, the 50+ member working group directly receives riverfront project updates and ideates messaging and programming that safely encourages visitors and residents back to the water. These meetings have grown into a trusted, collaborative space that sustains momentum for the French Broad's long-term recovery and the communities and businesses along its banks.



Highlights

ALLGEAR PARTNERSHIP

Explore Asheville partnered with *AllGear* to bring the destination's outdoor access, local makers, and culture to life through an authentic, adventure-driven lens. The campaign amplified reach across *AllGear*'s 60 million+ audience and positioned the area with adventurous outdoor travelers actively planning their next trip across platforms like *GearJunkie* and *AllTrails*. The partnership builds on the Outdoor Business Alliance's regional effort to Go With A Guide.

COMMUNITY ALIGNED MEETINGS HOSTED: 17

outdoor, wellness, climate, and cause-driven meetings, such as the National Forest Foundation Retreat and AmeriCares Airlift Donor Event were recruited.

MEANINGFUL TRAVEL SUMMIT: Hosted with travel nonprofit Tourism Cares, brought 150+ travel professionals to Asheville April 14–16, 2026, chosen in part for the region's resilience after Hurricane Helene, generating more than \$150k in direct spending.

LEAVE NO TRACE SIGNAGE UPDATE: Explore Asheville collaborated with design firm Uproar to refresh Leave No Trace messaging across wayfinding kiosks countywide. The panels reinforce responsible outdoor recreation messaging before visitors and residents ever set foot on the trail.

EARTH DAY CLEANUP: For the fourth year, Explore Asheville partnered with Asheville GreenWorks, MountainTrue, and RiverLink for an Earth Day Clean Up. More than 150 volunteers collected 2,570+ pounds of trash in the River Arts District, Biltmore Village, West Asheville, and along the Swannanoa River.





Strategic Imperative

Engaging & Inviting More Diverse Audiences

PATTIE GONIA

Last September, Explore Asheville brought Pattie Gonias, the nationally celebrated mustachioed environmentalist drag queen, to Asheville for a stop on her "SAVE HER!" tour, coinciding with Blue Ridge Pride and the one-year milestone of Hurricane Helene. Her show at Thomas Wolfe Auditorium drew more than 1,200 attendees and raised \$28,000+ for the Always Asheville Fund, while also boosting Blue Ridge Pride weekend attendance. Her "Parkway is Open" post further amplified the region's reopening message.

SECOND ASHEVILLE BLACK CULTURAL HERITAGE TRAIL MURAL UNVEILING

The Asheville Black Cultural Heritage Trail's second public art installation, "Black Boy Joy" by artist Tommy Lee McGee, was unveiled on Depot Street, in partnership with River Front Development Group and Mountain Housing Opportunities. Explore Asheville's "History Comes Alive with the Black Cultural Heritage Trail" article directs visitors to Black-owned businesses along the trail, such as Noir Collective, the YMI Cultural Center, Good Hot Fish, and Black Wall Street AVL to amplify and preserve Affrilachian heritage.





Highlights

DIVERSITY DESIGNATIONS: 15 partners signed up for a diversity or accessibility designation this year.

AFAR BLACK CULTURE ITINERARY: AFAR's "3 Days Exploring Black History in Asheville" features 10 Black-owned local businesses and highlights local Black heritage.

BLACK PEOPLE EATS: A collaboration with Jeremy Joyce of Black People Eats connected and inspired his audience of 300k+ Black travelers to choose Buncombe County through a trusted voice in Black food culture.

TRAVEL NOIRE SERIES: Four articles from *Travel Noire* covered Asheville, spanning Foodtopia's Black culinary renaissance, generational recipes, and farm-to-table experiences, as well as Affrilachia: the reclamation of Black identity in Appalachia.



Strategic Imperative

Promoting & Supporting Asheville's Creative Spirit

MICHELIN GUIDE PARTNERSHIP & RECOGNIZED RESTAURANTS

Explore Asheville joined Visit NC and peer destination marketing organizations across the region in a collaborative, multi-year commitment to bring MICHELIN's inspectors South, positioning the area's culinary scene for years of recognition.

15 Asheville restaurants recognized in the MICHELIN guide's first-ever american south selection

In the inaugural *MICHELIN Guide American South* selection, 15 Asheville restaurants were recognized, the most of any city in North Carolina. Luminosa earned a MICHELIN Green Star for sustainability, one of only three restaurants in the South to receive that distinction, and Luminosa, Little Chango, and Mother each earned the Bib Gourmand distinction for great food at a great value. Twelve more Asheville restaurants made MICHELIN's Recommended list.



INDIE RETAIL MONTH CAMPAIGN

The Indie Retail Month campaign invited travelers to shift 10% of spending to local shops through "Shop by Vibe" guides. Asheville's Indie Retail Challenge, in partnership with MODA, Go Local, and the Asheville Downtown Association, allows shoppers to shop and win by checking into the Explore Asheville app at least five of the 239 participating retailers across Buncombe County.



Highlights

TOWN & COUNTRY + ESQUIRE EDITORIAL PARTNERSHIP

Explore Asheville invited *Town & Country* and *Esquire*'s high-visibility editors to the Asheville area to produce long-form editorials in each publication's print issue. *Esquire*'s "Guide to Asheville" followed local makers and explored cultural hot spots while *Town & Country*'s "Appalachian Surprise" sat down with working artists and traced a line from Black Mountain College's Bauhaus roots to the chefs and mountain musicians carrying that same creative spirit today.

AFAR'S A LONG WEEKEND IN ASHEVILLE FOR MUSIC

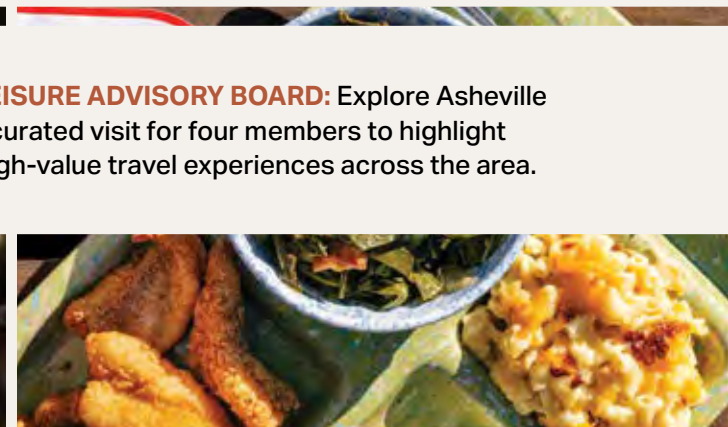
LOVERS: The article traced a path through the Orange Peel, the Grey Eagle, and the Moogseum, the record shops and street buskers that keep downtown's soundtrack alive, and Citizen Vinyl's working record-press studio.

BRAVO'S TOP CHEF APPALACHIAN CELEBRATION EPISODE:

Paid social and digital ads amplified this spotlight and directed traffic to a landing page where local top chefs Ashleigh Shanti, William Dissen, and Meherwan Irani recommended their favorite indie restaurants across the community.

LOCAL GIFT BAG GUIDE: Locally made goods from more than 40 local makers and creatives were showcased in gift bags to incoming meetings, and groups, and conferences booked through Explore Asheville.

TRAVEL + LEISURE ADVISORY BOARD: Explore Asheville organized a curated visit for four members to highlight luxury and high-value travel experiences across the area.



Inspiring Visitors to the Asheville Area through Trusted Voices

Sharing stories about this deeply rooted and ever-evolving community is core to Explore Asheville's work. Effective earned news coverage leverages trusted journalists and publications to share Asheville's story, delivering an impactful endorsement beyond traditional advertising. This storytelling continues through owned channels via content creation and influencer partnerships, engaging visitors at every stage of travel planning, from inspiration to knowing what to do while in town.

NATIONAL SIGNIFICANT STORIES

CBS News' Wendy Gillette visited in December, earning 765 mentions across CBS stations nationwide, and WBTV Charlotte's "Rediscover Asheville" special captured the moment: "Asheville isn't just back, it's better."

TODAY SHOW:

A NYC Media Mission produced a segment feature tied to Reader's Digest naming Asheville a 2025 Nicest Place in America.

SOUTHERN LIVING:

"America's Largest Collection of Giant Trolls Is on Display in the Forests of North Carolina," covering Thomas Dambo's Trolls exhibit.

TRAVEL + LEISURE:

On Black Mountain: "This Town Is the 'Front Porch of Western North Carolina'— With Small-town Charm and Stunning Blue Ridge Mountain Views"

BLUEGRASS TODAY:

"The Asheville Sessions — Celebrating a Forgotten First."



172 MEDIA SITE VISITS AND THREE MEDIA FAMS

Explore Asheville's PR team logged 172 media site visits, keeping the community's story top of mind nationwide. This included three FAM trips with journalists from outlets like *National Geographic*, *AAA*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Food & Wine*, as well as additional visits tied to events such as the NYC Media Mission and the IMM Media Mission.

INFLUENCER REACH + KEY VOICES

Influencer partnerships carried the invitation to visit across the country all year, reaching a combined audience well into the tens of millions through a rotating roster of creators and editorial partners. The Influential Creators program delivered 8 million+ impressions across ten influencers. Enlisting Trusted Voices campaign brought seven influencers and *Town & Country* and *Esquire* editorial partners to a combined 1.4 million impressions.

@VISITASHEVILLE AND OWNED DIGITAL MEDIA PERFORMANCE

Our social engagement consistently outpaces competitors, with Facebook posts earning nearly 8x and Instagram posts nearly 2x the average competitor engagement per post.

Facebook	389K FOLLOWERS	151M IMPRESSIONS / VIEWS	3M ENGAGEMENTS
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Instagram	206K FOLLOWERS	26M IMPRESSIONS / VIEWS	711K ENGAGEMENTS
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TikTok	81K FOLLOWERS	64M VIDEO VIEWS	486K ENGAGEMENTS
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YouTube	99.5M DESTINATION VIDEO VIEWS	24K HOURS OF WATCH TIME ON YOUTUBE ALONE	
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EXPLORE ASHEVILLE.COM	3.3M USERS	4.3M SESSIONS
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EXPLORE ASHEVILLE APP	72K DOWNLOADS	40K SESSIONS THIS YEAR
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NEWSLETTER	198K SUBSCRIBERS	2.2M EMAILS SENT
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Working Together: Engaging Our Partner Network

Nearly 2,000 Explore Asheville partner businesses and organizations both serve and benefit from guests in this community. Explore Asheville is grateful for them, and for the role our partners play in delivering quality experiences and services to visitors every day.

2026 ASHEVILLE SUPERSTAR AWARDS



Catherine Mitchell,
River Front Development Group, recognized for her leadership on the Asheville Black Cultural Heritage Trail.



Mike Rottjakob,
Asheville Buncombe Youth Soccer Association, recognized for restoring athletic space in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

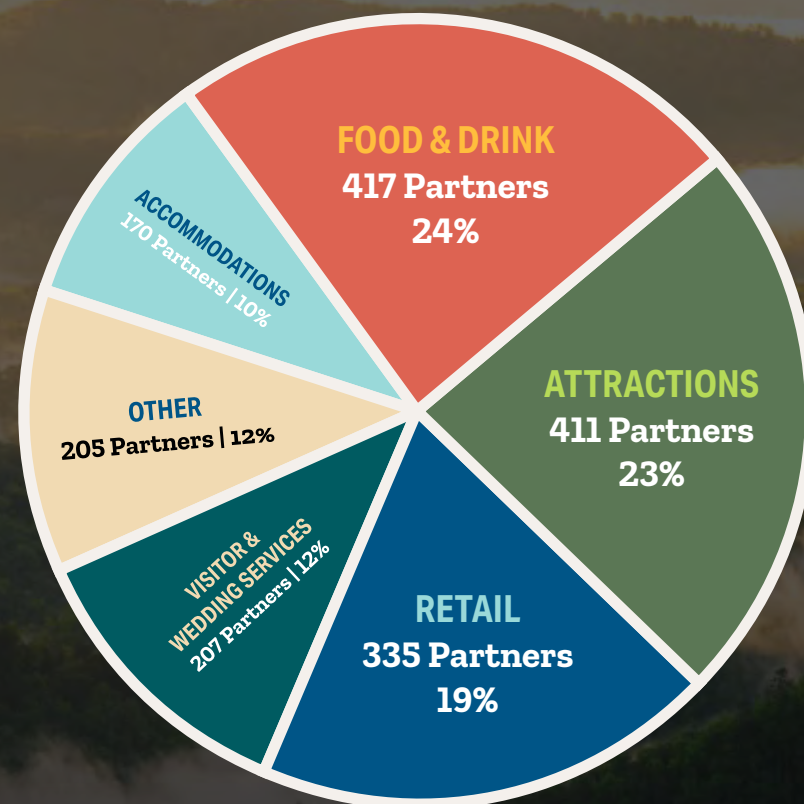


Vanessa Salomo,
Corner Kitchen and Chestnut, board chair of the AIR Association, honored for sustaining restaurant jobs and revitalizing Biltmore Village following Hurricane Helene.



Diane Rogers,
Pinecrest Bed & Breakfast, for consistent engagement that helps improve Explore Asheville's services and partnership.

FY26 Partners by Business Category



191 NEW PARTNERS ONBOARDED

By the close of FY26, Explore Asheville onboarded 191 new local businesses, spanning restaurants, bars, and coffee shops; attractions and tours; music venues; meeting venues and vendors; recreation and sports; arts, culture, galleries, and studios; transportation services; retail; and lodging.





CONSISTENT PARTICIPATION WITH VARIOUS COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS AND ASSOCIATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTY

Throughout the year, the Explore Asheville team engaged with key community stakeholders by attending local business and stakeholder meetings. These connections were essential for building relationships and understanding community priorities, ensuring our initiatives align with the region's needs and values.

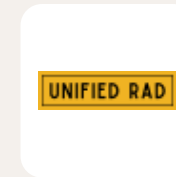
One partnership stands out: regular engagement with the Buncombe County Strategic Coalition helped lay the groundwork for Play Through the Mountains, the countywide partner activation tied to the Biltmore Championship Asheville.



**ARTS
AVL**



**ASHEVILLE
ROTARY CLUB**



**UNIFIED
RAD**



**HEART OF
WEST ASHEVILLE**



**ASHEVILLE AREA
CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE**



**ASHEVILLE
DOWNTOWN
ASSOCIATION**



**BUNCOMBE
COUNTY BUSINESS
RESPONSE GROUP**



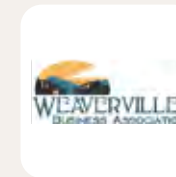
**OUTDOOR
BUSINESS
ALLIANCE**



**BLACK MOUNTAIN
SWANNANOA
CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE**



**HISTORIC
BILTMORE
VILLAGE
ASSOCIATION**



**WEAVERVILLE
BUSINESS
ASSOCIATION**



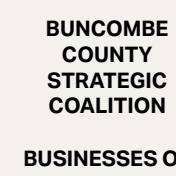
**WEST ASHEVILLE
BUSINESS
ASSOCIATION**



**ASHEVILLE
INDEPENDENT
RESTAURANT
ASSOCIATION
(AIR)**



**NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION
OF CATERING &
EVENTS (NACE
ASHEVILLE)**



**BUNCOMBE
COUNTY
STRATEGIC
COALITION**

**BUSINESSES OF
SOUTH SLOPE
(BOSS) ALLIANCE**



**EXIT 55
COALITION
MEETINGS**

**FRENCH BROAD
RIVER COMMS
PLANNING GROUP**

Strengthening Our Workforce

With the local travel and hospitality workforce down an estimated 2,000 jobs since Hurricane Helene, Explore Asheville's Workforce Development Program aims to foster growth and advance careers in the industry.



EXPLORE ASHEVILLE HOSPITALITY INTERNSHIP

Since 2025, nine interns from private, public, and city schools have completed the Explore Asheville Travel & Hospitality Internship, working alongside local partners in destination marketing, food & beverage, accommodations, recreation, and arts and culture. Their capstone projects have focused on accessible and sustainable tourism, recommending ways to improve the visitor experience.



EXPLORE ASHEVILLE HOSPITALITY SCHOLARSHIP

Since 2025, the Explore Asheville Hospitality Scholarship has awarded \$17,500 to six students, providing funding for tuition, housing, and books at any North Carolina post-secondary institution.

Staff also met more than 200 students at the Owen High School Career Fair and thanked 30 educators at a CTE Month Teacher Appreciation event.



CONCIERGE WORKING GROUP

The Concierge Working Group became a key training ground for frontline staff. Across four sessions, 125 front desk, concierge, and frontline staff from Buncombe County travel and hospitality businesses paired marketing and partnership updates with venue mini-fairs and direct introductions to the Business Development team, readying staff to serve meeting planners and groups.



HEROES OF HOSPITALITY

The 2026 program drew 41 nominees, with 100% of luncheon ticket and sponsorship proceeds benefiting the Explore Asheville's Workforce Development programs.

The third annual Heroes of Hospitality recognized honorees spanning airports, civic venues, neighborhood cafés, restaurants, and boutique hotels, each selected for longevity and a genuine commitment to guest connection:

- **Al Larson**, Front Desk Agent at the Grand Bohemian Lodge Asheville
- **Benita Wynn**, Event Staff Member at Harrah's Cherokee Center – Asheville
- **David King**, Manager of Guest Services at Asheville Regional Airport
- **Eva Rodriguez-Cué**, Owner and Barista at Haywood Famous
- **Marie-Louise Ramsey**, Asheville Visitor Center Manager
- **Willy Meadows**, Bartender at Vinnie's Neighborhood Italian



Destination Achievements: Showing Up for Our Community

Individual and organizational recognition reflects the caliber of work happening across Explore Asheville, and signals to the industry that this destination, and the people behind it, are ones to watch.

U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION'S BRIDGING COMMUNITIES AND DESTINATION ESTO AWARD

Explore Asheville won a Destination Award for its initiative "Through it all, We're Always Asheville: Explore Asheville Leads Hurricane Helene Relief with Amplified Events Fueling Recovery and the Always Asheville Fund," designed to encourage visitors back after Hurricane Helene. The campaign was awarded for its innovative and impactful marketing.

NCRLA STARS OF THE INDUSTRY

The North Carolina Restaurant & Lodging Association honored four Asheville-area travel and hospitality professionals with 2026 Stars of the Industry awards: Brenda Durden, chief operating officer of Asheville Hotel Group and outgoing BCTDA Board Chair; William Dissen, chef/owner of The Market Place; Chris Lovegood, server at Soprana Rooftop Cucina; and Thomas Barton, guest service supervisor at Embassy Suites.

DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP AWARD: VIC ISLEY

Vic Isley, president & CEO of Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, received the Destination Organization Leadership Award from Destinations International on July 14, 2025, recognizing her leadership through Hurricane Helene's economic recovery. One of the association's most prestigious honors, the award recognized Isley as one of just four honorees globally this year.

MARCOMMS MOST INFLUENTIAL 2025: DODIE STEPHENS

Dodie Stephens, vice president of marketing, was recognized on the third annual 'Marcomms' Most Influential' list, acknowledging top brand marketers and communicators for their leadership, innovation, and achievement in the field.

Meet The Team

Explore Asheville is powered by a team working on behalf of this community's residents and hospitality partners alike, carrying forward a legacy of investing in and building community that dates back more than four decades.

TEAM KEY:

- Business Development Team
- Executive Office Team
- Marketing Team
- Partnership & Destination Management Team
- Business Development + Marketing Team



Vic Isley
PRESIDENT & CEO
(She/Her)



Ed Silver
VP OF BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT
(He/Him)



Dodie Stephens
VP OF MARKETING
(She/Her)



Tiffany Thacker
VP OF PARTNERSHIP
& DESTINATION
MANAGEMENT
(She/Her)



Sarah Myers
DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE,
CULTURE & STRATEGY
(She/Her)



Sarajane Case
DIRECTOR OF
MARKETING
(She/Her)



Carli Adams
GROUP MARKETING
MANAGER
(She/Her)



Meredith Adams
MARKETING MANAGER
(She/Her)



Rachel Young
CREATIVE SERVICES
COORDINATOR
(She/Her)



Emily Crosby
DIRECTOR OF GROUP
SERVICES
(She/Her)



John Dawson
GROUP SERVICE
MANAGER
(He/Him)



Jay Curwen
DIRECTOR OF SPORTS,
FILM & ENTERTAINMENT
(He/Him)



Glenn Ramey
HUMAN RESOURCES
MANAGER
(She/Her)



Kyle McCurry
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC
RELATIONS
(He/Him)



Payton Byrnes
PR MANAGER
(She/Her)



Mickey Poandl
PR MANAGER
(He/They)



Alayna Fleagle
PR COORDINATOR
(She/Her)



**Connie Nuckolls
Holliday**
DIRECTOR OF SALES
(She/Her)



Shawn Boone
SENIOR SALES
MANAGER
(He/Him)



Tina Porter
SENIOR SALES
MANAGER
(She/Her)



**Cristina
Fernandez**
OFFICE ASSISTANT
(She/Her)



Emilie Soffe
DIRECTOR OF CONTENT
(She/Her)



Kayla Speis
SOCIAL MEDIA
MANAGER
(She/Her)



David Thompson
DIGITAL
COMMUNICATIONS
MANAGER
(He/Him)



Elizabeth White
WEB MANAGER
(She/Her)



Emily Banner
SALES MANAGER
(She/Her)



Kristen Childers
SALES MANAGER
(She/Her)



Ali Wainright
GROUP SALES
COORDINATOR
(She/Her)



Ashley Greenstein
PUBLIC INFORMATION
MANAGER
(She/Her)



Rachel Dudasik
COMMUNITY &
PARTNER ENGAGEMENT
MANAGER
(She/Her)



**McKenzie
Provost**
DESTINATION EVENTS &
PROGRAMS MANAGER
(She/Her)



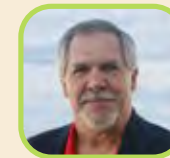
Kimberly Puryear
DESTINATION
INVESTMENT & PROJECT
MANAGER
(She/Her)



Shelby Pearsall
PARTNERSHIP
COORDINATOR
(She/Her)



Josh Jones
SYSTEMS &
TECHNOLOGY MANAGER
(He/Him)



David Setzer
ACCOUNTING
MANAGER
(He/Him)



Mia Brown
SALES & MARKETING
ASSISTANT
(She/Her)



ALWAYS ASHEVILLE

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