



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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The Lodging Tax: An Investment in Growing State Tourism

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Mark Lewis is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Greater Parkersburg Convention and Visitors Bureau.

After graduating from Parkersburg High School in 1978, Mark studied political science at West Virginia University and spent his summers as a rafting guide on the New River. After completing his bachelor's degree, he decided to defer going to law school in order to spend a couple of years on the pro-fun tour (rafting in the summer, skiing in the winter). His law school deferment is currently entering its 35th year.

After three decades in the rafting business, Lewis returned home to Parkersburg in 2012 and now spends mostly dry days working to promote travel and tourism in the Mid-Ohio Valley. In addition to his role at the Greater Parkersburg Convention and Visitors Bureau, Lewis is President of the Blennerhassett Foundation and serves on several other local boards and committees.

Almost heaven, West Virginia. The words alone evoke a feeling of warmth and connection. This year, the West Virginia Tourism Office secured the rights to John Denver's iconic song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" and created a framework of ads for a regional and national advertising campaign using the song's opening line "Almost heaven, West Virginia." The campaign has been well received.

Tourism professionals all across the state are working hand-in-hand with the tourism office to reach out to potential visitors and invite them to experience the warmth, hospitality and incredible variety of experiences our state has to offer. From the scenic splendor and world-class outdoor recreation opportunities provided by our spectacular mountain counties to a wide variety of history and heritage sites and an assortment of unique fairs and festivals, we have substantial tourism assets ready and waiting. Tourism has tremendous potential to help transform and diversify our economy.



I have seen this potential first-hand during my years as a front-line tourism professional. I spent over 2,000 days as a commercial whitewater guide, taking guests down the world-class rapids of three of our signature whitewater rivers: the New, the Cheat and the Gauley. I was fortunate to also work in the skiing industry, spending winters at Canaan Valley and at Snowshoe Mountain. During my career, I met and interacted with guests from all over the country and all over the world. I was a witness to so many of those guests falling in love with West Virginia and the experiences they had here. Study after study has shown that once a visitor has been to the Mountain State, they are highly likely to come back. The challenge we face as we work to grow our tourism industry is to get more people here for that initial visit.

The work of promoting and marketing the state to potential visitors is a partnership between the



The annual Taste of Parkersburg has been offering an exciting mix of food, wine and music for 13 years.



*Top: Located on a small island in the Ohio River, the Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park is visited by 40,000 people each year.
Bottom: On the first Fridays of June, July, August and September, patrons can enjoy tribute bands in Point Park.*

West Virginia Tourism Office and private, non-profit entities called Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs). CVBs, like the one that serves the Greater Parkersburg area, are local or regional destination marketing organizations. The primary source of CVB funding comes from the lodging tax established by the state legislature as an investment in tourism marketing. As the latest numbers show, that investment is producing great returns. While we were putting together our annual report earlier this year, members of the West Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus accounted for 252,863 Facebook likes, 40,322 followers on Twitter and 24,388 followers on Instagram. Our websites last

year saw 3,593,584 unique visitors, and we produced 435,739 newsletters and over one million travel guides highlighting the best attractions, events and activities that different areas of the state have to offer.

Though the primary focus of local and regional CVBs is attracting visitors to the state, an equally important part of our mission is to work with the tourism office to promote the overall image of West Virginia as a desirable travel destination. Sometimes it is an uphill struggle. Too often, our state makes the national news for negative reasons. While we can't control what others say about us, we do have the ability to get a positive message out about all of the great things that we know are

the true heart of West Virginia. Tourism advertising, via funding from the lodging tax, gives us that ability.

I love working in an industry that is all about promoting the positive aspects of our state and bringing more people here to experience and fall in love with “almost heaven.” For too long, West Virginia has had the status of being one of the “best kept secrets” in tourism. Though a charming distinction, we are working to shed that status and become a widely known and recognized travel destination. Together, I am confident that we will reach that goal. ▽