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The WVHTA: Supporting West Virginia's Hospitality and Travel Industry



Jordan Nuzum
Bowles Rice LLP

Jordan Nuzum is a Government Affairs Specialist and professional staff member of the Bowles Rice Government Relations team. He also serves as the Membership Director for the West Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association. A former Deputy Press Secretary for the West Virginia Attorney General's Office, Nuzum spent nearly five years with the West Virginia Legislature, where he served as the legislative policy analyst for two Senate Presidents, Director of Legislative Rule-Making and Legislative Analyst for the Senate Judiciary Committee.

A little over a year ago, when I began my work with the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association (WVHTA), tourism was buzzing in West Virginia. In fact, according to our friends at the West Virginia Tourism Office, there had been a 9.9 percent growth in traveler spending in our state in two years. We were outpacing the nation's growth by 58 percent. The tourism industry in West Virginia supported 45,400 jobs and \$534.5 million in state and local tax revenue.

Tourism clearly has become a huge player in our state's overall economy and ongoing diversification efforts. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit our state, it hit the hospitality and travel industries first and probably the worst. People stopped traveling. Restaurants were closed. Events and conferences were canceled.

Many of the businesses impacted by COVID-19 are important places in our lives – places we had our birthday parties, anniversary dinners, a clean place to sleep after traveling for a sports tournament, and more. They all hold a special place in our life and community. In

these uncharted times, the hospitality and travel industries in our state have done their best to persevere, looking for new ways to get creative and market their business differently while providing guests with a safe and hospitable visit at their destination.

At the WVHTA, we were thrilled to see the creativity and ingenuity of our members happen right before our very eyes. While we tracked federal relief packages, state and local guidelines, regulatory measures and legislation, they got to work rebuilding and retooling their businesses on a daily basis. Our resources and updates allowed our members to get the information they needed in a timely manner without having to take time out of their busy workday to do necessary research or outreach calls.





We have seen hotels, restaurants, resorts and travel attractions build new, socially distant structures for outdoor dining, offer in-home meal options so folks still can take their dinner to the next level, and plan socially distanced events. These businesses have invested in heaters, tents, masks and more to make sure their customers feel safe and happy, all while trying to keep their businesses afloat. Restaurants are now back to 100 percent capacity. With social distancing in place, hotels are welcoming more guests and meetings at their locations. And our state's awesome travel attractions are ready for adventure seekers lured by warmer weather.

While our members pivoted and got to work, so did WVHTA. We began outlining a series of priorities for the 2021 Session of the West Virginia Legislature that would help our members, their businesses and the hospitality and travel industry as a whole. WVHTA was able to work successfully to get multiple pieces of legislation across the finish line this year, including House Bill 2025, Senate Bill 270 and Senate Bill 488.

House Bill 2025 is an alcohol reform bill that will streamline and reform antiquated laws that will help restaurants, bars, and hospitality businesses by cutting fees, allowing for alcohol delivery and to go orders. Senate Bill 270 will level the playing field and create tax fairness across the lodging industry. This bill will benefit our hotel and convention and visitors' bureau (CVB) members by requiring existing hotel occupancy taxes to be collected and remitted by marketplace facilitators on short term rental units, such as AirBNB and Vrbo. Lastly, Senate Bill 488 was another important piece of legislation for our CVB members as it provides new and enhanced oversight, reporting and establishment criteria for CVBs.

While we witnessed creativity among our members and our legislators, we also saw a groundbreaking, outside-of-the-box tourism-driven initiative being developed at West Virginia University through the generosity of Brad and Alys Smith. Their extraordinary gift will allow for WVU to create new programs focused on the state's outdoor adventure experiences and remote working opportunities, attracting new visitors and residents to the state in the process.

We are thrilled to see such a great program being developed right here at home. In fact, WVHTA and our members were happy to support House Bill 2026 during the legislative session as well. This piece of legislation was imperative for West Virginia

to use its resources to attract remote workers to the region. This bill would modernize and update the income tax laws so remote workers would not be double-taxed and goes hand-in-hand with the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative (OEDC) at WVU.

The OEDC aligns perfectly with what WVHTA members do every single day – create a hospitable and welcoming experience to everyone who visits West Virginia. This initiative will encourage remote and work-from-home entrepreneurs to consider West Virginia, and allow them to experience the great adventures, restaurants, hotels and resorts WVHTA members pour their blood, sweat and tears into every day.

West Virginia's tourism and hospitality industry is primed for a rebound once more traditional travel habits are able to resume. Our tourism industry offers amazing and easily accessible outdoor adventures where folks can socially distance, naturally. These ongoing and innovative efforts are what makes West Virginia and our tourism industry so great.

Just as we hope to see new people move to our state as part of the OEDC, we hope to have you and your business join us as members of WVHTA.

Our association supports members in the travel and hospitality industries and serves as the official voice of the restaurant, lodging, convention and visitors' bureaus, and travel industries in the state. WVHTA represents the hospitality and travel industry's interests to both governmental and private sectors, serving as the connection between all those involved with the development of tourism in West Virginia.

For more information, please visit www.wvhta.com. 