



ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

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Board of Directors Meeting

Date: February 25, 2025

Aspen Meadows Resort

Present: Dan Bartholomew, Jeff Bay, Debbie Braun, Patti Clapper, Matt Cook, Nina Eisenstat, Alan Fletcher, Donnie Lee, Lisa LeMay, Cristal Logan, Tharyn Mulberry, Dave Ressler, John Rigney, Dwayne Romero, Steve Skadron, Julia Theisen, Maria Ticsay, Justin Todd, Bill Tomcich, Torre, Peter Waanders, and Brenda Wild

Absent: Cari Kuhlman, Michael Goldberg, Heather Kemp, Justin Nyberg, Henning Rahm, and Pete Yang

Staff: Jennifer Albright Carney, John Davies, Savannah Grant, Casey Graves, Nichole Hellinger, Julie Hardman, Jessica Hite, Karina Keller, Sarah Reynolds Lasser, Eliza Voss, and Liz Watson.

Guests: Diane Jackson

Call to order: Donnie Lee called the meeting to order at 8:33 AM

Approval of the January 28th Minutes: Approved

Disclosure of Conflict of Interest: None

ACRA Membership Update: The ACRA Membership Update, presented by Sarah Reynolds Lasser and Savannah Grant, provided a comprehensive overview of the membership profile and engagement at the end of 2024. They emphasized ACRA's role as a champion of the Aspen business community, working to provide programming, benefits, and networking opportunities based on feedback from member surveys. Notably, membership dues increased by 7.15%, and ACRA welcomed 90 new members, primarily from the service and retail sectors. However, overall membership declined from 770 in 2023 to 738 in 2024, largely due to business relocations or closures, with the restaurant sector seeing the most non-renewals. Despite this, engagement across platforms increased, with a 5.5% rise in business directory activity and new subscribers joining the chamber's distribution list. Key initiatives included guest service appreciation programs, business forums, and networking events like ACRA Biz Lab, which replaced the former leads group to foster deeper professional connections. ACRA also maintained its advocacy efforts, supporting the Mountain Chamber Alliance and legislative updates. Looking ahead, ACRA plans to implement a member retention strategy, enhance its marketing materials, expand its 7908 campaign, and refine its new member email drip campaign to better highlight benefits beyond the popular ski pass. They also discussed strategies to improve benefit awareness, including a potential "benefit of the month" feature. To address membership cost concerns, ACRA introduced a 3% early payment discount to encourage timely renewals. The update concluded with a discussion on retention strategies and ways to further engage members in ACRA's diverse offerings.

Advocacy Survey Update: The Advocacy Survey Presentation by Maria Ticsay provided an in-depth analysis of ACRA members' business concerns, with a strong focus on affordable housing, workforce retention, and transportation challenges. The survey received a 29.6% response rate from ACRA's 750 members, reflecting significant engagement despite survey fatigue. The top concern identified was lack of affordable housing (81%), marking a sharp increase from 73% in the previous year. Commute time and staff shortages followed closely as additional pressing issues. Maria highlighted that while Aspen businesses struggle to attract and retain workers due to rising costs and long commutes, three key areas for improvement emerged: affordable housing, expanded transit options, and competitive benefits packages. The survey indicated growing support for employer-owned housing, despite historical resistance to the idea of tying housing to jobs. 61% of respondents expressed interest in living in employer-owned housing, and 70% of business owners were interested in purchasing housing to rent to employees. Many also called for better management of existing workforce housing inventory, noting that vacant units could be optimized. Public transportation challenges were also emphasized, with financial incentives, better transit access, and flexible work hours identified as ways to increase bus ridership. RFTA remains a strong asset but overcrowding and service limitations prevent more widespread use. Notably, 100% of survey respondents stated they would use RFTA more if buses were less full and more frequent, with 56% saying they would ride if bus stops or bike stations were closer. There was also discussion on the potential for free bus fares through increased subsidies or employer-sponsored passes. Another major issue raised was the high cost of doing business, which surpassed even housing and transportation concerns for some business owners. Many legacy and small businesses struggle with high rents, increasing costs, and competition from national brands. Maria suggested that ACRA could explore ways to help businesses generate revenue and compete more effectively, drawing parallels to COVID-era advocacy efforts that supported local businesses through collaborative policymaking. The presentation concluded with calls for ongoing collaboration between business owners, policymakers, and ACRA to



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address these concerns. There was also discussion about expanding data collection on ACRA member employees and exploring solutions for improving affordability, transportation, and business sustainability. The conversation reinforced the need for early engagement and proactive advocacy to shape policies that support Aspen's workforce and business community.

Chair's Comments: Donnie Lee took a moment to express gratitude for the ACRA staff, acknowledging their dedication and hard work in making the organization's initiatives successful. He emphasized that it is easy to take their efforts for granted, but their contributions are essential to ACRA's impact. He also thanked the board members for their continued engagement, recognizing the challenges of navigating complex and sometimes emotional community discussions. With recent and upcoming elections, along with other significant local issues like the airport entrance, he stressed the importance of maintaining open and respectful dialogue. He encouraged the board to remain engaged, open-minded, and willing to compromise while also recognizing that differing opinions are natural and acceptable. His remarks underscored the need for civility, gratitude, and constructive participation in shaping the community's future.

President's Comments: Debbie Braun took the opportunity to thank Dan from the airport for his service as director and congratulated him on his next steps while welcoming Diane Jackson, hoping to get to know her better in the coming months. She also introduced ACRA's newest marketing coordinator, Karina Keller, a 2024 CU Boulder graduate, who is transitioning into Bridget's role as Bridget prepares to leave for film school in London. Debbie expressed gratitude for Bridget's contributions to the chamber and for ensuring a smooth transition. Additionally, she congratulated Heather Kemp, who recently got married. She then turned the floor over to Jennifer Carney for an update.

Jennifer Carney provided a public service announcement about the Roaring Fork Valley Wildfire Collaborative's upcoming outreach efforts. She highlighted a community meeting on Tuesday, March 4, from 5:30 to 6:30 PM at the Aspen Fire Department, where agencies will share information about wildfire mitigation and the planned Sunny Side prescribed burn for the spring, which will depend on weather conditions. The chamber is supporting the outreach efforts and will help communicate updates as the burn approaches. Jennifer emphasized the importance of informing both residents and visitors, noting that the chamber will work with hotels and property managers to ensure that visitors are aware of the wildfire mitigation efforts. She encouraged board members to spread the word and invited everyone to attend the meeting.

Public Affairs Committee Update: The Public Affairs Committee update from Donnie Lee centered on the discussion of two referendums on the ballot and whether ACRA should take an official position. At the January board meeting, the decision was made to focus on education and outreach rather than advocacy due to time constraints before the vote. However, during the Public Affairs Committee meeting, strong and differing opinions emerged, with some members feeling that ACRA should take a stance. Despite this, Donnie emphasized that ACRA typically follows a process of educating, surveying members, and then acting based on broader input, which was not feasible given the short timeframe. While the Public Affairs Committee recommended opposing referendum one and supporting referendum two, Donnie advocated for maintaining the original course of action—continuing to inform members without taking an official stance. Several committee members initially felt strongly about action due to frustration over a lack of movement on key issues but later agreed that leadership also means providing clear, unbiased information to help members make their own informed decisions. Concerns were also raised about potential political implications, as one of the referendums was tied to a candidate running for office, making it difficult to separate policy support from perceived political endorsements. Ultimately, the consensus was that without overwhelming agreement from members, it was best to refrain from taking a formal position and instead focus on ensuring that businesses and the community had the necessary information to vote independently. Several board members, including Jeff, Steve, and Dwayne, supported this approach, reinforcing that the best action at this time was to stay the course as originally decided in January.

Directors' Remarks:

Cristal Logan provided an update following the Public Affairs discussion, highlighting an Op-Ed and news story in the Aspen Daily News that calls for the formation of a citizen-led coalition to study upper valley transportation options. The coalition aims to take a comprehensive approach by evaluating key interconnected projects, including the airport, the lumber yard, Burlingame, and the entrance to Aspen, to develop long-term solutions for reducing congestion, lowering CO2 emissions, and ensuring equity in transportation planning. The idea for the coalition emerged after the airport election, when the county received a RAISE grant to focus on transit and was further solidified by the complexity and confusion surrounding the two current ballot initiatives, which many felt would not adequately address the community's transportation challenges. Rather than rushing into fragmented solutions,



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the coalition seeks to carefully examine all available options and work closely with government agencies, including the City of Aspen, Pitkin County, Snowmass, CDOT, and RFTA, to provide well-researched recommendations. The coalition, set to begin meeting after the election, is actively seeking diverse perspectives, transportation experts, and engineers who are committed to developing actionable solutions. While the group itself cannot implement policies, it will serve as a critical advisory body, working alongside local governments and agencies to help shape transportation improvements. Several community leaders, including Cristal, Alan, and Dwayne, have signed onto the Op-Ed in support of this initiative, reinforcing the importance of a well-coordinated and informed approach to transportation planning in Aspen.

Jeff Bay shared two key points in his remarks before leaving early. First, he acknowledged the importance of reading the day's Aspen Daily News, given the ongoing discussions. Second, he recounted a moment with his 12-year-old daughter, who questioned why no one was addressing the traffic congestion in town. This prompted him to emphasize the importance of involving younger generations in discussions about Aspen's future, as they will ultimately be responsible for implementing solutions. Jeff suggested actively engaging students from institutions like Colorado Mountain College (CMC) and even local high schools in transportation and community planning efforts. He stressed that while younger individuals may not always be seen as mature enough to contribute to these conversations, their perspectives are valuable and should be included. He also noted that decision-making processes are often dominated by an older demographic, which may not always reflect the long-term needs of the community. By incorporating younger voices now, Aspen can ensure that future leaders are part of shaping sustainable solutions.

Peter Waanders provided an update on the nonprofit sector within ACRA's membership, emphasizing the significant cultural programming that local nonprofits bring to the community. He highlighted recent events from Aspen Words and the broader nonprofit community, noting their positive impact on Aspen's cultural life. He also attended the AVSC bonfire and praised the Nordic community as a hidden gem of mountain life. However, he acknowledged that many nonprofits are facing the same challenges as for-profit businesses, particularly with staffing shortages and the increasing crowding in town. He mentioned Aspen Film's ongoing efforts to work with the city for adjustments to their downtown space, highlighting the regulatory struggles some nonprofit organizations face. On a more positive note, he shared exciting news from the Aspen Art Museum, which recently announced "Aspen AIR" (Art in Relation), a major arts festival in late July that will bring thought leaders and artists together. The festival will feature collaborations with Anderson Ranch, the Aspen Physics Center, and other nonprofit organizations, making it a significant addition to the region's cultural calendar. He also noted that WeCycle is expanding its e-bike program in Snowmass Village, offering more opportunities for residents and visitors to travel without cars. Additionally, his organization, Ute Ranch, will be honoring artist Titus Kaphar this summer, with Aspen Film screening his movie Exhibiting Forgiveness as part of the event. Peter concluded by mentioning that Cristal Logan and the ACRA team are hosting an Arts and Culture Roundtable on Thursday, an event aimed at strengthening connections between ACRA and the nonprofit arts sector. He encouraged participation and noted that the responsibility for this initiative would be transitioning to him.

Steve Skadron shared updates on Colorado Mountain College (CMC) initiatives, highlighting the success of their recent open house. The event allowed attendees to sample various classes, including knife skills, sewing, Shakespeare reading, financial fitness, and screen printing. The event was well attended, with notable community engagement, including a collaboration with Anderson Ranch to host an art gathering in the college's gallery. Given its success, CMC plans to hold similar events in the future to further raise awareness and craft programs that support the local economy. He also announced the launch of a second round of community culinary classes, starting with Mediterranean cooking, followed by Japanese cuisine and CMC's first wine series. These classes have been well received and are already sold out. Steve noted that beyond education, these courses serve as a social gathering space for the community, filling a void left by the decline of traditional meeting spots in downtown Aspen. Additionally, he provided an update on CMC's attempt to purchase nine deed-restricted studio units in the new Basalt downtown development at the former City Market site. After several nonprofits declined the opportunity, CMC stepped up, seeing it as a chance to create a live-work-learn environment. The goal is to provide housing for students who will also work locally and attend classes, contributing to the Basalt economy. Steve has been navigating the approval process, attending meetings with the housing board, planning and zoning, and the Basalt Town Council, where he hopes to secure approval. He concluded by thanking Dan for his service and congratulating him on his next steps.

John Rigney provided a brief update on Aspen's skiing conditions and upcoming events. He noted that the skiing has been excellent and that the season is in great shape as it moves into its final stretch. He highlighted recent and upcoming programming, including the Colorado Alpine State Championships held at Highlands and Aspen, where both the girls' and boys' teams won state titles on



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their home turf. Looking ahead, the Snow League event at Buttermilk is generating excitement, with a strong lineup and a well-planned buildout. Mardi Gras celebrations in Snowmass Village will feature the Spazmatics, an 80s-themed band, promising a lively event for music lovers. He also mentioned an art installation at Ruthie's, which was open for ten days and will reopen from March 7 to 16. Finally, he noted that preparations for summer events are already underway, with exciting plans in development. He wrapped up by thanking everyone and emphasizing the shift in focus toward the upcoming season.

Bill Tomcich provided an update on recent travel disruptions at the Aspen airport, noting that major snowstorms have consistently coincided with peak travel days, leading to significant delays. He highlighted how air traffic congestion extends beyond the roads, as airplanes often must circle and idle in the sky, burning excessive jet fuel. This traffic jam in the air occurs frequently, even on clear weather days, due to the high volume of commercial and private flights. He acknowledged the ongoing efforts to find solutions to these challenges and expressed appreciation for Dan's leadership at the airport while welcoming Diane to the role. He also provided insights into the performance of the Embraer 175 aircraft, which has exceeded expectations. Pilots have reported fewer weight restrictions than anticipated, and the aircraft is performing better out of Aspen than at Eagle. The plane's new approach allows it to fly lower and faster, reducing flight time from the approach fix to touchdown by about two minutes per flight. When multiplied across 98 flights per week, this results in a total reduction of approximately three hours of flight time in the air. Regarding noise impact, he explained that while areas like Aspen Village may experience slightly more noise due to the plane's flight path, the impact over Woody Creek and Rush Creek remains nearly identical to the CRJ 700. However, the 175's more powerful engines allow for a steeper climb, making it quieter as it ascends. He personally witnessed this during his drive that morning, noting how quickly the aircraft gained altitude. Bill concluded by sharing that United Airlines has already transitioned 14 out of 22 daily flights to the Embraer 175, and once the airport reopens following its May closure, United plans to operate 100% of its Aspen flights with this aircraft. He emphasized the various benefits of the transition, including reduced noise, improved performance, and fewer flight restrictions.

Dave Ressler expressed appreciation for Sarah's event and Maria's presentation while also wishing Debbie Braun a speedy recovery, acknowledging that flu, colds, and COVID are still circulating in the community. He addressed the topic of bus passes, noting that Aspen Valley Hospital (AVH) subsidizes 90% of the cost of seasonal bus passes and 80% of weekly passes. However, despite having about 500 employees, only around 10 consistently use seasonal passes, with an additional 20 taking advantage of weekly passes. He suggested that bus route adaptations, such as having the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) stop at the roundabout near the hospital instead of requiring a transfer from downtown, could increase participation. While acknowledging that route changes are challenging, he emphasized that better access would likely encourage more employees to use public transit. Regarding housing, he supported Donnie Lee's earlier comments about the challenges in workforce housing availability. AVH owns 66 housing units and has historically been able to provide new hires with two years of housing and other employees up to five years, with most eventually securing long-term housing through APCHA or the private market. However, this housing pipeline has dried up, making it necessary for AVH to explore longer-term solutions for employee housing. He emphasized that there are no complaints from employees about living in employer-provided housing, reinforcing the importance of maintaining and expanding these options.

Nina Eisenstat shared her perspective as a member of the Public Affairs Committee, reinforcing that the discussion about the two ballot measures was thorough and complex, with no clear consensus. She agreed with Donnie Lee's assessment that ACRA made the right decision by not taking an official stance. She also expressed optimism about the newly formed citizens' coalition, which will take a more comprehensive approach by bringing in experts and fresh perspectives. Drawing from her experience with the Aspen Institute community forum, she emphasized the value of learning from best practices in discussions like these. With the election just a week away, she noted that many voters remain confused about the ballot questions. She encouraged those providing guidance to help by clearly outlining the pros and cons. She also mentioned hearing that voter turnout has been low but expressed hope that more of the community will participate. Nina concluded by wishing Dan Bartholomew well in his future endeavors, acknowledging his contributions and expressing that he will be missed by the community.

Dwayne Romero reflected on the recent Public Affairs discussions, acknowledging that they were intense and productive, with plenty of "heat" as participants pushed to get to the core of the issues. He fully supported ACRA's decision to focus on education and information-sharing rather than taking a formal position on the ballot measures. He also emphasized the importance of voter participation, urging everyone to encourage a strong turnout in the upcoming election, noting that mail-in voting is already underway. Shifting focus, he discussed the challenges of the dry January, which brought extreme cold and numerous property management issues, particularly frozen and burst water lines. He noted that the recent snowfall and milder temperatures have



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provided some relief. Dwayne also expressed enthusiasm for the citizen-led transportation coalition, believing that grassroots efforts can help build trust and confidence in the community. He emphasized that having more citizen-driven initiatives, alongside common-sense solutions, could lead to meaningful progress, similar to the advancements made in airport planning. He concluded with optimism, encouraging forward momentum in these initiatives.

Matt Cook emphasized the importance of safety on the roads, especially in light of recent traffic closures and hazardous winter conditions. He mentioned that with 70 vehicles operating in winter, there have been numerous close calls and near misses, highlighting a recent incident on Brush Creek where a vehicle spun out and narrowly avoided hitting three cars by mere inches. He urged everyone to remain cautious, particularly as melting snow refreezes in the afternoons, making roads treacherous. Despite these challenges, he noted that the past few weeks have been very strong for the community, with high activity levels and businesses staying busy. He wrapped up his remarks by reinforcing the need for safety and expressing appreciation for the continued engagement in the community.

Brenda Wild provided an update on a proposed bill, HB 1247, which seeks to increase the state lodging tax cap from 2% to 6%. If passed, this could significantly impact lodging properties, though not residential ones. She acknowledged that the bill's future remains uncertain and promised to provide further updates after the next legislative discussion. She then shared real estate market insights, reporting that total sales for 2025 so far stand at approximately \$435 million. In Aspen, the average home price has risen 50% from last year to \$19 million, with an average price of \$3,677 per square foot and an increasing average of 247 days on the market. Snowmass has seen strong activity, particularly with the Ara project nearing completion, with over 75% of Stratos units under contract and expected to sell out soon. The average price of a single-family home in Snowmass is now \$7.35 million, an 18.5% increase, with an average price of \$1,922 per square foot and 190 days on the market. In Basalt, the average price per square foot is \$1,017, with homes sitting on the market for 236 days, a number that is also increasing. The Mid-Valley market has been relatively slow, and conditions are shifting toward a buyer's market. She noted that political uncertainty is adding strain to real estate, and while the second quarter of an election year typically sees an uptick in activity, early indicators suggest a slower-than-expected market. She concluded by stating that the next few months will reveal how the market responds.

Lisa LeMay expressed appreciation for events like the Palm Tree Festival, organized by Michael Goldberg, which brought a younger crowd to Aspen. She emphasized the importance of attracting youth to the town, comparing it to the impact of X Games. She noted that Aspen had shifted toward an older demographic, primarily second homeowners, which diminished some of the vibrancy that younger visitors bring. She shared an example of one of her employees, a DJ, who observed packed venues over the weekend, including a long line outside the W Hotel. While these types of events may not appeal to everyone, she encouraged the community to embrace them for their positive impact on the town's energy and economy. She also addressed retail sales figures, cautioning that while overall retail numbers appear strong, they may be misleading. High-end luxury retailers have had exceptional seasons, but many other retailers are not seeing the same success. She pointed out that large purchases by a small number of wealthy individuals can significantly skew the numbers, making the retail landscape seem more robust than it actually is. While acknowledging that tax revenue is beneficial regardless of its source, she urged people to consider the broader picture when evaluating Aspen's retail health.

Torre reflected on the changing nature of Aspen, acknowledging that the town's desirability has led to significant shifts, particularly with the influx of high-end brands. While he understands that change is inevitable, he admitted to missing the old character of Aspen. Regarding the upcoming ballot measures, he recommended voting no on both, agreeing with Cristal Logan's earlier comments that neither proposal effectively addresses the community's transportation goals. He emphasized that the city is actively working on an entrance to Aspen planning effort, including a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) study in collaboration with CDOT, which is open to exploring alternative solutions but is unlikely to pursue building a tunnel. He briefly mentioned that the city council would be discussing Sara Ott's resignation that evening, which would require significant attention in the coming weeks. Finally, he strongly encouraged voter participation, noting concerns about low turnout and urging people not only to vote but also to remind others to do the same.

Patti Clapper shared that she is still in "airport ballot question recovery mode" and is refraining from commenting on the city election, despite having strong opinions. She then announced that she will be traveling to Washington, D.C., for the National Association of Counties legislative conference, where she will be advocating on various issues, including airport funding, transportation grants, and U.S. Forest Service support. She will be meeting with Congressman Jeff Hurd, as well as staff from Senator



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Bennet and Senator Hickenlooper's offices, to discuss grant opportunities and federal support for projects like the intermodal transportation system at the airport. She also mentioned that Pitkin County has a longstanding policy regarding ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), ensuring legal compliance while also working to protect the local immigrant community. She emphasized concerns about federal pressure on local jurisdictions and reassured that the county does not provide confidential public health information to ICE. She acknowledged the fear among immigrant communities and stressed the county's approach to balancing cooperation with federal authorities while maintaining community trust. Additionally, Patti highlighted the critical need for bipartisan support in retaining U.S. Forest Service workers, particularly for fire mitigation. She noted that staff reductions could have catastrophic consequences for wildfire prevention and public safety. While Pitkin County was able to retain some positions that the federal government initially cut, she intends to advocate for sustained funding and emphasize the importance of preemptive mitigation to save resources and lives. She promised to share updates from her trip when she returns.

Dan Bartholomew provided several key updates on the Aspen airport, starting with the success of the Embraer 175 aircraft. To accommodate its growing presence, the airport will add two additional parking positions during the spring closure (May 5–June 1), bringing the total to 15 when the airport reopens in June. He introduced Diane Jackson, who has been the deputy airport director for over two years and will take over as interim director upon his departure on April 5. Dan strongly recommended her for the permanent role, praising her experience, skills, and leadership. Regarding airport funding, he highlighted a \$2 million federal RAISE grant (previously called BUILD), with an additional \$500,000 local match, earmarked for intermodal planning. The airport will soon issue requests for qualifications for both runway and terminal design, with a projected runway rebuild scheduled for 2027. This will likely require an airport shutdown from March through Halloween of that year, though efforts are being made to streamline the design process. Addressing air traffic congestion, Dan and Diane met with the regional air traffic control center to explore ways to improve efficiency, including potential slot systems to manage arrivals. A major challenge remains staffing shortages for commercial jet ground services, leading to diversions to Grand Junction or Denver when no parking positions are available. He also clarified that private jets are not responsible for delaying or diverting commercial flights, as both use separate facilities and operate on a first-come, first-served basis. Dan concluded by expressing his appreciation for working with everyone and confirming that he will participate in the March meeting before officially handing over responsibilities to Diane.

Julia Theisen shared an update on the launch of the Snowmass Tourism Destination Management Plan. A virtual meeting will be held on March 5, followed by a community meeting on March 12, where stakeholders can provide feedback on the draft plan. The final version will be presented to the town council this spring.

Adjournment: Donnie Lee adjourned the meeting at 10:35 AM