



**ACRA** DEFY ORDINARY  
ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION  
DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

**Board of Directors Meeting**

**Date: June 24, 2025**

**Zoom**

**Present:** Donnie Lee, Jeff Bay, Cari Kuhlman, Dwayne Romero, Cristal Logan, Debbie Braun, Matt Cook, Nina Eisenstat, Alan Fletcher, Michael Goldberg, Lisa LeMay, Tharyn Mulberry, Justin Nyberg, Henning Rahm, Dave Ressler, Rachel Richards, Julia Theisen, Maria Ticsay, Justin Todd, Bill Tomcich, Peter Waanders, Brenda Wild, and Pete Yang

**Absent:** John Rigney, Diane Jackson, Patti Clapper, Heather Kemp, and Steve Skadron

**Staff:** Jennifer Albright Carney, John Davies, Savannah Grant, Casey Graves, Jessica Hite, Karina Keller, Sarah Reynolds Lasser, and Liz Watson

**Guest(s):** Erin Davis, Max Marolt, and Mary Rodino

**Call to order:** Donnie Lee called the meeting to order at 8:34 AM

**Approval of the May 27th Minutes:** Approved

**Disclosure of Conflict of Interest:** None

**Reese Henry Audit Update:** Erin Davis of Reese Henry presented the results of the audit conducted specifically on ACRA's Destination Marketing segment, clarifying that the audit did not encompass the organization as a whole. She thanked ACRA staff, particularly Debbie and John, for their support throughout the process. The audit resulted in a clean opinion—the highest level of assurance—with only minor adjustments related to fixed assets and depreciation. Erin walked the board through the communications letter, noting there were no disagreements with management and that overall, financial processes were sound. She offered several forward-looking recommendations based on trends seen in other organizations and CPA conferences, including maintaining robust cyber protections, reviewing any use of AI, safeguarding against fraud, updating disaster recovery plans, and being aware of potential supply chain disruptions. Debbie confirmed that many of these measures are already in place or being updated, including multifactor authentication, a whistleblower policy, cloud-based backups through Mitchell & Company, and ongoing review of cyber insurance as part of the current policy renewal. An AI policy is also being developed. Erin raised a final point regarding Destination Marketing's accumulated reserves, suggesting the organization consider investing excess funds to generate additional yield in light of potential property acquisition. Debbie confirmed the funds are currently placed in an interest-earning sweep account with Alpine Bank and that long-term financial planning is ongoing in coordination with the city and the Finance Committee. The board expressed appreciation for the organization's strong financial controls and thanked both ACRA staff and the Finance Committee for their diligence and transparency. Erin concluded by offering to send the full audit report upon request.

**Aspen School District Ballot Questions:** Tharyn Mulberry, Superintendent of the Aspen School District, introduced Assistant Superintendent Mary Rodino and Controller Max Marolt to present an overview of the district's funding challenges and the potential ballot measures being considered for fall. They emphasized the complexity and inequity of Colorado's school finance system, highlighting that Aspen ranks 67th in per-pupil state funding despite having one of the highest costs of living. Over \$23 million has been lost since 2009 due to the state's budget stabilization factor, and a new state funding formula will further reduce Aspen's funding over the next six years. Compounding the issue, the district receives no additional funds from recent property tax increases, as those gains are offset by reductions in state aid, resulting in Aspen now being 100% locally funded. Federal funding is also unstable, with Title I funding already being slashed by 40%. The district's current operating reserve is critically low at 7.4%, far below the state-recommended 30%, and notably lower than other local entities like the City of Aspen and Pitkin County. To address these issues, the district is exploring four potential ballot measures: a new bond for housing and facilities; a mill levy override (MLO) to offset the upcoming \$5 million loss in state funding; and renewals or increases to the Aspen Public Education Fund (a city sales tax) and the Snowmass Village Public Education Fund (a property tax). The proposed bond would help meet a projected need of 136 housing units (up from the 98 currently owned), particularly benefiting support staff. The MLO would allow the district to preserve its existing funding level despite the state cuts. The sales tax initiatives, which currently fund 32 staff positions and programs like outdoor ed, IB, and summer learning, are essential to maintaining Aspen's comprehensive educational offerings. Without renewal, the district would face steep cuts, no raises, and zero ability to rebuild reserves. Board members and community stakeholders raised concerns about the equity and optics of raising the Aspen sales tax, especially as businesses outside city limits are not subject to it and visitors already bear a large tax burden. Others voiced support, emphasizing the importance of strong public education and public safety to Aspen's brand and long-term vitality. The school district clarified that they are working on rebuilding reserves slowly through attrition and operational cuts and that the proposed sales tax increase may include a removal of the sunset clause, though they are mindful of voter fatigue. Ultimately, the presentation underscored the urgent need for community support to preserve Aspen's educational excellence in the face of declining state and federal funding.

**Chair's Comments:** Donnie Lee emphasized the vital role a strong school system plays in upholding the community's core values, while also acknowledging the growing financial strain felt across Aspen. He noted that rising costs of living, housing shortages, and the challenge of fairly compensating employees are not unique to the school district—they're pressing concerns for every sector, including tourism and hospitality. Lee warned that Aspen may be reaching the upper threshold of what visitors are willing to pay, with short-term rentals and vacation properties now facing tax rates approaching 20%, contributing to mounting sticker shock. He stressed the need for creativity in identifying sustainable funding solutions—not just for schools, but for the broader business community as well. In closing, he congratulated Debbie Braun and the ACRA team for another successful FOOD & WINE Classic, humorously acknowledging the lively atmosphere and praising the event's impact on Aspen's image and economy.

**President's Comments:** Debbie Braun began her remarks with a quick nod to losing her voice after a busy event weekend, but provided key updates nonetheless. She highlighted the upcoming Transportation Coalition meeting scheduled for Thursday, encouraging board members to review her notes from the previous session, which focused on congestion pricing, and to share any feedback with her or fellow committee members like Dwayne and Tharyn. This week's meeting will cover innovative transit ideas such as filling empty seats, RFTA's role in carpooling and alternative transit modes, as well as equity incentives. The group will also finalize the committee's charter. Debbie committed to summarizing that discussion in the next meeting minutes. She closed with thanks to the staff for a successful FOOD & WINE weekend, noting that apart from one rogue wind gust that sent a sign onto a limo (which will be handled), the event ran smoothly. She praised the addition of the South Tent for helping to distribute the crowd more comfortably and appreciated seeing so many members—or at least their passes—out enjoying the festivities.

**Marketing Advisory Committee Update:** Justin Todd opened his update by thanking the team for a successful FOOD & WINE weekend and appreciating the great weather. He recapped the early June MAC meeting, which featured a thorough presentation by Eliza, who was recognized for her efforts while currently on vacation. Key topics included the Aspen airport redesign—Eliza made it clear that conversations around transportation won't begin until the Board of County Commissioners finalizes plans later this year or early next. The committee was encouraged to give feedback on the North Star Working Group survey and to note the Forest Service cutbacks at Maroon Bells, including no drinking water, limited restrooms, and no shelter, so visitors must be prepared. These updates were passed along to local businesses. The committee also discussed joining the Colorado Green Business Network and welcomed Jack Wheeler of Day Fire Company, who is handling ACRA's social media. Updates were shared regarding changes at Backbone Media, with Jesse continuing the account after Corey's departure. The group reviewed the Resident Sentiment Survey and discussed how to turn insights—particularly around non-resident worker dissatisfaction—into action, aligning with ADMP transportation initiatives. Jessica shared upcoming changes to the website, slated to launch in late February, and members were urged to submit design feedback during development rather than post-launch. Justin closed by encouraging continued input from the committee to ensure the marketing direction aligns with community needs.

**Directors' Remarks:**

**Alan Fletcher** shared a brief but optimistic update, noting that Aspen is poised for significant national media exposure this summer thanks to a new partnership with 21C, the leading public relations firm in the classical music industry. The organization recently hosted its first-ever press luncheon in New York City, which was a major success—every major classical music outlet attended and confirmed plans to cover the Aspen Music Festival this season. Attendees included representatives from The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Associated Press, Town & Country, Musical America, Symphony Magazine, and Opera Magazine, with Vanity Fair also possibly joining. Fletcher expressed excitement about the forthcoming positive Aspen press and noted that the music season officially begins on July 2. He also mentioned his role on the Transportation Coalition and welcomed any input ahead of Thursday's meeting.

**Cristal Logan** congratulated the Aspen Chamber team on a successful FOOD & WINE Festival and shared updates from the Aspen Institute. Programming is in full swing, beginning with the inaugural Advancing Women's Health Series, which drew over 400 attendees—primarily women, along with a few "smart and brave" men. She noted that the Aspen Ideas Festival is currently underway, with some à la carte tickets available through Aspen Show Tix. Following Ideas Fest, the Institute will roll out its popular community programs, featuring a strong lineup of free speakers open to the public. Cristal offered to share schedules for both events in the chat and encouraged everyone to attend.

**Jeff Bay** began by congratulating the community on a fantastic start to the summer, praising both the Food & Wine Festival and the Aspen Saturday Market for creating great energy in town. Still recovering from a cold himself, he joked about whether Debbie Braun's hoarse voice was from illness or just enjoying the festivities. Turning to policy issues, Jeff flagged a growing movement—especially in states like California—for greater pricing transparency on booking platforms, where all taxes and fees must be clearly disclosed upfront. He cautioned that as this becomes more widespread, sales tax increases will no longer fly under the radar, and travelers may begin to push back more visibly. On the transportation front, he highlighted the proposed 100-unit Aspen One employee housing development in El Jebel on the



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Crawford property, noting it will place significant pressure on RFTA's already stretched infrastructure, since transit is being positioned as the primary transportation solution. He stressed the importance of making sure RFTA is fully resourced and included at the table during planning discussions. Finally, he voiced frustration over the dash line extension near the Buttermilk merge section by the airport, which he says is causing daily driver confusion. He suggested returning the road markings to their original state to improve traffic flow.

**Lisa LeMay** echoed the positive feedback on the Food & Wine Festival, particularly praising the new layout, which she agreed made the event feel more spacious and less congested, improving the overall experience for guests. She thanked whoever was responsible for that change. Lisa noted that with FOOD & WINE, Ideas Fest, Jazz Aspen, and Fourth of July happening in quick succession, downtown Aspen is buzzing with activity. She added that the great weather has helped keep visitors in high spirits, which makes a significant difference for her team working on the front lines of hospitality. She closed with a cheerful, "Here goes summer!"

**Justin Todd** shared that Aspen's summer pace is generally strong, though there was a noticeable lull in bookings immediately following the Ideas Festival, particularly around the Fourth of July period. He noted that business typically rebounds by mid-July and picks up steadily from there. Justin also referenced a recent article highlighting that mountain communities across states like Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and Colorado have experienced six consecutive months of declining occupancy, a trend attributed to shifts in domestic travel patterns. He remarked that it will be interesting to see whether that trend reaches Aspen, as the season progresses.

**Nina Eisenstat** began by commending Donnie, Debbie, Cari Kuhlman, and the Finance Committee for the clear and informative presentation, noting how reassuring it is to see ACRA being so responsibly managed. She was especially interested in the discussion around cybersecurity risks and insurance, suggesting that the organization consider sharing best practices with members who might not be as informed. Nina also praised the recent Marketing Advisory Committee meeting, calling it robust and productive, and highlighted a new digital asset created by Eliza and her team—an impactful video featuring local youth urging visitors to care for the environment. She first saw it at the FOOD & WINE luncheon, where she felt it was a powerful addition to the event. Nina concluded with high praise for the entire FOOD & WINE Festival experience, including the luncheon, giving special credit to Debbie Braun for her role as a stellar emcee and noting the excellent weather, vibe, and the success of the new layout.

**Bill Tomcich** acknowledged the great weekend weather and festivities but noted that strong winds—particularly at the Aspen airport—have caused significant operational disruptions this summer. He reported an unusually high number of flight diversions, including five just the day before, mostly due to wind conditions exceeding aircraft safety thresholds. Despite these challenges, he praised the airlines for their efforts in completing flights—whether through diversions to Grand Junction with ground transport or by refueling and attempting a second landing. He advised travelers to build extra time into their itineraries for connecting flights and delays, though the forecast shows promise for calmer weather ahead. Bill also mentioned that Patti and Diane are in Washington, D.C. this week, meeting with the FAA to discuss funding for ongoing airport improvements. Regarding the anticipated 2027 airport closure, he noted that while formal plans are on hold, airlines are paying close attention and actively planning alternative service options, including expanded service to nearby airports and potential motor coach transport from Aspen. He also shared exciting news from the Paris Air Show, where SkyWest announced a new order of 60 Embraer E175 aircraft, including a flying agreement with Delta to replace several aging CRJ models—five of which currently serve Aspen. This mirrors a prior 2023 SkyWest/United agreement that led to the successful rollout of the E175s into Aspen, offering a noticeable upgrade in performance and passenger experience. In response to Donnie's question, Bill confirmed that the E175 is outperforming the older CRJ-700 in Aspen's difficult wind conditions due to its superior handling, faster approach speed, and greater wind resilience. While weather remains a wildcard, the new aircraft and airline strategies are improving reliability for travelers flying into and out of Aspen.

**Justin Nyberg** opened by celebrating the vibrant energy in Aspen, noting how full and lively the town feels, especially during the Food & Wine Festival, which he praised for its fresh layout and positive atmosphere. He congratulated the ACRA staff on the clean audit, calling it reassuring to know the organization's finances are in strong order despite the complex mix of funding sources. Shifting focus, Justin zeroed in on the upcoming Aspen airport closure in 2027, building on earlier remarks from Bill Tomcich and Justin Todd. While acknowledging Eliza's position that it's too early for detailed planning until the BOCC makes formal decisions, Justin encouraged the board and ACRA as a whole to begin preparing sooner rather than later to avoid building anxiety among members. He raised a series of thoughtful questions: What level of air travel drop is expected? How will impacts vary across sectors—hotels, restaurants, major events like FOOD & WINE and the Aspen Music Festival? What are the airlines planning—can they suspend and resume service? And how can ACRA help members and the community strategize for the disruption? Justin emphasized the importance of early information-sharing and mitigation planning, both for internal preparedness and visitor education. He questioned whether tourists even realize that Eagle and Grand Junction are viable alternatives to flying directly into Aspen, pointing out that a search on Google Flights only surfaces Aspen and Denver. As a proactive idea, he suggested that ACRA look into working with Google Flights to add Eagle and Grand Junction as listed options—acknowledging that this could take time and should be initiated well in advance. Justin closed by expressing his interest in hearing more about any existing studies



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or projections regarding the closure's impact and reaffirmed his belief that ACRA can play a valuable role in guiding both the business community and visitors through the challenges ahead.

**Dwayne Romero** shared enthusiastic praise for the FOOD & WINE luncheon, calling it a total hit and commending Debbie Braun for shining in her element, especially during the mocktail segment, which he felt brought a great balance to the midday event. He also remarked on his recent tour of the Armory Visitor Center, led by Jen and Karina, expressing appreciation for seeing the long-dormant building brought back to life. Having previously spent significant time in the space, he found the layout, color scheme, and interactive format of the visitor center to be engaging, fun, and ideally situated. Dwayne wrapped up his comments by sharing his excitement for the rest of the summer season with the group.

**Rachel Richards** began by joining in the praise for ACRA staff, the board, and Debbie Braun, applauding their continued hard work and recent successes. She shared a critical community update that Aspen has entered Stage One voluntary water restrictions, urging everyone to reduce usage due to the city's limited water supply, which relies solely on surface flows and has no reservoir. She emphasized the wildfire risk due to persistent red flag warnings and encouraged making guests aware of both water conservation and fire safety. Rachel also promoted Bike to Work Day, with gift cards being distributed at several local parks, and highlighted the Aspen 360 civic engagement course, which educates residents about city operations and encourages leadership in boards and commissions. Applications are due by July 14. Turning to transportation, Rachel noted that a fare-free pilot program for RFTA was recently approved. The two-month trial, supported by funding from Pitkin County, Snowmass Village, Glenwood Springs, and the City of Aspen, aims to gauge ridership growth and logistical demands. However, she cautioned that making the program permanent could cost over \$6 million annually, so this pilot will focus on identifying infrastructure, driver, and vehicle needs. She also discussed the July 7 Aspen City Council work session, where members will decide whether to reevaluate the existing Entrance to Aspen preferred alternative or embark on a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Rachel strongly advised against a new EIS due to its high cost, lengthy timeline, and current federal leadership that is unsupportive of climate-forward, multimodal transportation planning. She advocated instead for a streamlined update of the current plan, which already includes agreements and documentation. Rachel then raised serious concerns about a federal budget bill that would allow public land sales, threatening local trails and open space. She urged the business community to speak out against these proposals, citing the permanent loss of shared public assets. She also warned that federal funding cuts are impacting essential services—from Forest Service staffing at Maroon Bells to community health, mental health, and food security—and that local governments are being asked to cover these gaps, a solution she said is unsustainable. Looking ahead, Rachel flagged a very crowded fall ballot, which may include questions related to childcare, the fire district, the school district, the airport, and a proposed \$70 million bonding initiative for the Lumberyard housing project, which would create 288 rental units at the Aspen Airport Business Center. She emphasized the project's critical role in housing Aspen's year-round workforce and expressed hopes for partnerships with both public agencies and the business community to make long-term financial support realistic and equitable. Rachel closed by inviting further conversation and encouraging everyone to stay engaged.

**Julia Theisen** began by lightheartedly noting that following Rachel Richards is always a tough act, but she echoed many of the positive comments shared earlier. She extended kudos to the ACRA team for yet another outstanding event and expressed her appreciation for the revamped Armory Visitor Center, saying she loved the new look and feel during her visit over the weekend. Julia pointed to a DestiMetrics report indicating that Colorado resorts are seeing a dip in business, and referenced a Longwoods International study released the same morning showing that 30% of American travelers plan to reduce their travel over the next six months. She tied these trends to concerns around international perceptions of the U.S. and declining domestic consumer confidence. Despite the broader travel softening, Snowmass is pressing forward with a full summer events calendar, including the Rodeo and Thursday night concerts, which are already underway. Julia noted that while occupancy is down about 11%, the average daily rate is holding strong, which means revenue is projected to remain roughly flat year-over-year. She wrapped up by sharing that she's putting the finishing touches on the long-awaited Destination Management Plan and looks forward to releasing a close-to-final draft soon.

**Pete Yang** began by thanking everyone involved for putting on a successful FOOD & WINE event, noting it was a great weekend with strong community participation. He also expressed appreciation for the Aspen School District's financial presentation, saying it was helpful to get up to speed on the district's fiscal health and the positive audit results. Pete used the opportunity to stress the importance of cybersecurity and fraud prevention, especially in light of audit discussions. Drawing from his experience at Alpine Bank, he warned that phishing scams, text message fraud, and email schemes—particularly those involving fake wire transfer instructions—remain a major threat. He urged everyone to verify suspicious requests by phone rather than assuming emails or texts are legitimate. Finally, he mentioned that Alpine Bank staff are active volunteers during the summer event season and encouraged anyone needing extra hands for galas or activities to reach out, as they're happy to pitch in.

**Maria Ticsay** expressed appreciation for the informative meeting and specifically thanked Rachel Richards for her support of the RFTA fare-free transit experiment, noting it aligns with the goals of the Destination Management Plan and could significantly benefit the workforce.



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She also welcomed Rachel's comments about potential business collaboration at the Lumberyard housing development, expressing interest in learning more as the fall ballot measures approach. Maria acknowledged the complexity and weight of the upcoming ballot, especially the sales tax increase proposal, and emphasized the importance of hearing more feedback from the business community. She wants to understand how local businesses are feeling about the proposal in this current economic climate and hopes to start conversations soon to get ahead of public sentiment. She also supported Justin Nyberg's call to proactively plan for the Aspen airport closure in 2027, noting that she's already overheard tourists and second homeowners expressing concern. Maria admitted she lacks a clear picture of how the closure will affect the local economy and wants to gather more insights from businesses to help guide planning efforts. She closed by thanking everyone for the engaging discussion and wishing them a great summer.

**Dave Ressler** shared that the recent health fair drew over 1,000 participants, reflecting strong community interest in health and wellness. He then shifted focus to express concern over proposed Medicaid cuts in the reconciliation bill currently being debated in the Senate. He warned that the legislation threatens to penalize states like Colorado that expanded Medicaid access beyond the federal poverty line by reducing federal matching funds, a move he described as a major step backward. Dave emphasized that these cuts could result in 16 million more Americans becoming uninsured by 2034, exacerbating the country's already broken and expensive healthcare system. He advocated for more people being insured to stabilize costs and avoid what he called a "death spiral" where only those with significant health needs remain covered. He urged those with connections to Representative Hurd to speak up and share concerns, noting that Senators Hickenlooper and Bennet already oppose the cuts. He wrapped up by thanking the group and offering to discuss the implications further if anyone was interested.

**Peter Waanders** praised FOOD & WINE as a strong kickoff to Aspen's summer and shared that Anderson Ranch is in full swing, now in week four of summer programming with around 150 students on campus. He noted that public programming ramps up in July, beginning with a film screening of *Exhibiting Forgiveness* by Titus Kaphar, in partnership with Aspen Film. He gave a shoutout to local nonprofits like Aspen Public Radio, Buckhorn Arts, Snowmass Rodeo, Theatre Aspen, ACES, and the Farm Collaborative, acknowledging how they contribute to the rich cultural ecosystem of Aspen—not only for visitors but for locals and second homeowners who help sustain the nonprofit economy. Peter reflected on Aspen's legacy as a cultural and intellectual hub—an "Athens in the mountains"—and emphasized the community's responsibility to engage with global issues, from healthcare to international affairs. He encouraged Aspen to continue being both a refuge and a place that seeds real change.

**Matt Cook** kept his update brief, noting that much had already been covered by others. He shared that High Mountain Taxi is launching a new black car service as part of its portfolio, which he's excited to introduce. Additionally, he mentioned that they're exploring ways this service—and other transportation initiatives in development—could help bridge transportation gaps in the community. He hinted at more announcements to come but kept the details under wraps for now.

**Adjournment:** Donnie Lee adjourned the meeting at 10:31 AM