



# ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

## **Board of Directors Meeting**

**Date: September 30, 2025**

**The Aspen Meadows Resort**

**Present:** Donnie Lee, Jeff Bay, Cari Kuhlman, Dwayne Romero, Diane Jackson, Debbie Braun, Patti Clapper, Matt Cook, Nina Eisenstat, Alan Fletcher, Michael Goldberg, Heather Shapard, Lisa LeMay, Tharyn Mulberry, Justin Nyberg, Henning Rahm, Dave Ressler, Rachel Richards, Steve Skadron, Maria Ticsay, Bill Tomcich, Peter Waanders, and Pete Yang

**Absent:** John Rigney, Cristal Logan, Julia Theisen, Justin Todd, and Brenda Wild

**Staff:** John Davies, Savannah Grant, Casey Graves, Karina Keller, Athena Pantelas, Sarah Reynolds Lasser, Eliza Voss, and Liz Watson

**Guest(s):** Alycin Bektesh and Ryan Mahoney

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

**Approval of the August 26th Minutes:** Approved

**Disclosure of Conflict of Interest:** None

**CMC Mill Levy:** Steve Skadron presented on Colorado Mountain College's Ballot Measure 7C, clarifying that he was speaking as a private citizen and not in his role as a CMC employee. He explained that the measure does not impose any new taxes or increase the mill levy, but instead seeks to restore local control over CMC's revenue growth, authority that voters originally granted in 2018. At that time, voters allowed CMC to adjust its mill levy to maintain revenue within a set range, which the college used to fund vocational and workforce programs such as nursing, firefighting, police officer training, skilled trades, and housing initiatives. In recent years, when property values surged, CMC voluntarily lowered its mill levy and returned \$47 million to taxpayers, making it one of the only local governments in Colorado to forgo the windfall. However, in 2024 the state legislature capped revenue growth for all local governments at 5.25%, effectively locking CMC into its reduced rate and eliminating the flexibility previously approved by voters. Ballot Measure 7C would waive this state-imposed cap for a period of 10 years, restoring the Board of Trustees' ability to adjust the levy within the voter-approved range of approximately \$216 to \$288 per million dollars of property value. Skadron emphasized that this flexibility is needed to expand capacity in oversubscribed programs like nursing, firefighting, and auto technology, where demand far exceeds available slots. The funds would also support essential workforce training in trades such as welding, construction, and HVAC, in addition to hospitality and culinary education, while continuing investments in housing solutions to retain local employees. Board members highlighted the importance of trades training, noting severe shortages in fields such as plumbing and electrical work, and discussed the ballot language, which explicitly states that the measure involves no new taxes and no authority beyond what voters approved in 2018. Questions confirmed that the restored flexibility would allow CMC to expand class sizes and meet local workforce needs. Skadron closed by affirming his confidence in CMC's fiscal stewardship and stated he would be voting yes on 7C.

**Aspen Airport Update:** Diane Jackson and Ryan Mahoney framed the update as a facts-and-figures briefing tied to County Ballot Question 1A. They walked through the airport modernization program: shifting the runway 80 feet west during a planned 8–9 month closure in 2027 (starting right after ski season and reopening before the holidays), while simultaneously kicking off the new terminal and multimodal hub so the current terminal can remain operational during most of construction. The program area includes terminal/landsides upgrades, FBO improvements, and west-side development. A temporary rental-car center will operate north of Hwy 82 during construction. Total project cost is currently sized at roughly \$575M (runway + terminal/landsides), alongside ~\$105M of FBO investments under the new Atlantic Aviation lease. The team emphasized the process lineage—Common Ground/North Star recommendations (2018–2020) guiding safety, sustainability, and design; the approved Airport Layout Plan; and recent environmental clearance that positions the County to chase FAA and state grants. Design is underway with Kimley-Horn (airside) and ZGF (terminal/multimodal—the Portland PDX firm), with CMAR procurement planned to control cost and constructability as estimates refine. On funding, the November ballot seeks authority for up to \$340M in revenue bonds (airport enterprise fund)—not a new tax nor a tax increase—with a conservative maximum repayment cap of \$940M based on an assumed 8% rate (finance staff hopes for ~6–7%, which would lower the ceiling). Bond repayment would come from airport revenues (including market-aligned fee/parking adjustments) and the stronger FBO lease; no programs are being “defunded.” Voter support is strategically important leverage when pursuing federal and state grants to shrink the local financing need. The high-level schedule shows design through 2026, the major airfield closure in Q2–Q4 2027, and terminal work continuing through 2029–2030, with a shorter spring 2025 maintenance closure already completed (Apr 23–May 21) to avoid Memorial Day impacts going forward. Community input is front-loaded: two nine-member task forces (Terminal; Multimodal) were selected from 87 applicants to vet design milestones against Common Ground goals and feed the Airport Advisory Board and BOCC. Public engagement uses the airport website as the single source of truth, plus “ASE Frequent Flyer” update emails, QR-coded handouts, open houses (e.g., Oct 15 at Aspen Fire; Oct 30 at Hoffmann's), pop-ups, and regular brief-backs. Operationally, the team noted near-term air service upgrades that should improve reliability



# ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

## ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

and the passenger experience: United converting all flights to E175s (Nov 9), Delta converting CRJ-700s to E175s, and American maintaining CRJ-700s while adding seasonal Charlotte service (3x/week starting Dec 19) and expanding Phoenix frequencies in Feb–Mar. A dozen E175s are now cleared for ASE, with two newly delivered aircraft already carrying Starlink Wi-Fi (fleetwide roll-out continuing). Boutique carrier Aero plans limited New York–ASE Gulfstream service this winter (approx. \$5,500 each way—a niche but notable option). On community concerns, staff addressed air quality and noise near Buttermilk/Maroon Creek: baseline monitoring equipment is being deployed to separate airport effects from roadway growth, and additional mitigations are being studied. They also responded to a national “most stressful airports” piece, acknowledging the perception but noting ASE’s unique constraints—high elevation, one-way-in/one-way-out ops, mountain weather, crowded regional airspace—and highlighting a long-term trend toward better completion rates, elite snow/ops crews, and a terminal redesign explicitly aimed at easing choke points (parking, check-in, security, seating, restrooms, food, and overnight contingencies). The close-out message: modernization delivers a safer runway, a right-sized, human-centered terminal, and a true multimodal hub tied to Hwy 82 and transit—advancing safety, climate, and customer experience—while the 1A revenue-bond authority is the keystone that lets the County match grants and keep the project on schedule.

**Chair’s Comments:** Donnie Lee kept his comments brief. He noted that the fall season has been beautiful and that summer performance ended about even with the prior year. Looking ahead, he said winter bookings remain inconsistent. Some weeks look strong, but then demand drops off, leaving uncertainty in the outlook. His expectation is that the winter will turn out fine overall, likely ending on par with last year, although current pace is trending slightly down.

**President’s Comments:** Debbie Braun shared several organizational updates and upcoming events. She reminded the group that the Afternoon Blend is tomorrow and that two tickets still need to be sold. On October 9, there will be a Business After Hours at Kemo Sabe, which she encouraged everyone to attend. October is also designated as Guest Service Appreciation Month, during which ACRA will distribute gift cards and make deliveries to frontline employees. Employers will be asked to share a QR code so staff can sign up for the appreciation list and be eligible for prizes. Looking ahead, December 11 marks Wintersköl, which will celebrate its 75th anniversary. The event has been awarded a state-sponsored drone show through the Colorado 150 initiative, and Braun suggested pairing that with fireworks for added excitement. She also flagged her main concern: a potential government shutdown that could close Maroon Bells during peak leaf-peeping season, which would create frustration for visitors and frontline staff handling those complaints. Braun then noted that the City of Aspen has asked ACRA to resume leadership for the Fourth of July and New Year’s Eve celebrations, with the city still providing traffic control and cleanup support, but ACRA coordinating the events more directly to ensure high quality. Internally, staff will hold a retreat on October 16 to reflect on the current five-year strategic plan, assess accomplishments, and conduct SWOT analyses ahead of the board’s involvement in drafting the next plan early next year.

**Purchase of 501 Rio Grande Pl, Unit 104:** The board discussed and approved the purchase of a permanent office space for ACRA in the Obermeyer building, marking the culmination of years of effort to secure a long-term home. Chair Donnie Lee acknowledged that this milestone was possible due to the organization’s strong financial management over the past 25 years, which built sufficient reserves to support the acquisition. A task force formed in June 2024, including board members, bankers, and legal advisors, worked closely with the City of Aspen to identify the right property. After exploring multiple options both on and off the market, ACRA made a successful \$3.6 million offer on a 2,200-square-foot space that includes four parking spots. The financing plan draws \$1.5 million from destination marketing reserves and \$500,000 from chamber reserves for the down payment, while leaving adequate reserves to cover six months of operating costs. Closing is scheduled for April 30, 2026, aligning with the end of ACRA’s current lease at the Armory in May. Board members expressed enthusiasm about the purchase, emphasizing the stability and long-term value of owning rather than renting, as well as the importance of keeping ACRA’s offices in downtown Aspen. The location provides proximity to city partners and community activity, reinforcing the chamber’s central role. Several members noted that this decision ends a long history of temporary office moves and demonstrates fiscal responsibility by replacing rent with a mortgage. Questions around renovations and carrying costs were addressed, with staff noting that the space requires minimal updates, and that an RFP has been issued to all ACRA banking members to secure favorable financing terms. Members commended Debbie Braun, Jennifer, and staff for their thorough process and diligence. With a quorum present, Patti Clapper moved to approve the resolution. The motion was duly seconded and passed unanimously with no opposition. The resolution authorizes the purchase and empowers Debbie Braun to act on behalf of ACRA in executing the transaction.

### **Directors’ Remarks:**

**Dave Ressler** shared that the AVH Health Fair is scheduled for this Friday in Aspen and Saturday in El Jebel. Reservations are still available, and more information can be found on the hospital’s website.

**Michael Goldberg** remarked that the restaurant scene remains in flux, with more closures than openings in the past month. He acknowledged ongoing concern about the planned 2027 airport closure, especially the timeline and whether the nine-month schedule can



# ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

---

## ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

be maintained but emphasized that the immediate challenge of keeping businesses operating is a more pressing issue than events several years out.

**Patti Clapper** thanked the group for their support in moving the county's airport ballot question forward, noting that the airport remains the county's focus. She also highlighted Carbondale's 116th Potato Day celebration taking place Saturday, which for the first time will have a beneficiary. Proceeds will go to Casey's Fund for Farmers, created in memory of young farmer Casey Piscura, to support health and wellness programs for farmers and ranchers. She shared that the event would feature a tractor pull and a largest-potato contest, though not the traditional pie-baking competition. She closed by reaffirming her commitment to advancing the airport project and keeping the community moving toward a 21st-century terminal.

**Heather Shapard** expressed appreciation for ACRA and the City of Aspen's support in launching the Green Business Network, noting it required significant effort but was a success. She shared that her business just experienced its busiest weekend ever, hosting a Louisiana family wedding in Snowmass Village that supported many local hotels and businesses, though the out-of-town caterers mistakenly drove their trailer over the pass. She reflected that off-season is approaching and welcomed the chance to rest, but staffing remains a challenge as costs rise, and she is still looking to hire two people for winter. She added that the 2027 airport closure could potentially ease staffing pressures by freeing up available workers.

**Rachel Richards** highlighted that RFTA's fare-free experiment begins October 1, timed for the off-season to test demand and operational needs such as additional drivers and park-and-ride capacity. The program, costing about \$550,000 in lost fare revenue, will help evaluate whether fare-free service could expand further. She also reported that a long-delayed \$32 million grant for the Glenwood Springs RFTA facility has been released, supporting electrification of the fleet. Richards noted concerns about a potential government shutdown, which could affect the Maroon Bells during peak fall visitation, strain air traffic, and limit Forest Service staffing. She suggested that ACRA help redirect visitors to alternatives such as Independence Pass. She also discussed new tariffs on Canadian lumber and the projected slowdown in regional construction, which could affect the city's Lumberyard housing project. That ballot measure seeks \$70 million in bonds to create 277 rental units at the Aspen Business Center, directly on the transit line. Richards explained the all-rental design was chosen due to state laws around construction defect lawsuits, though one building could convert to ownership after ten years. The units will be managed by a private partner, with APCHA-qualified tenants prioritized, particularly workers within the urban growth boundary. She noted the city is exploring whether businesses might reserve units for employees by covering costs, though most will go into an open lottery. Richards closed by expressing excitement about RFTA's direction and housing efforts, while mentioning she will miss the Afternoon Blend event due to her participation in a Denver Biz panel in Breckenridge on the challenges of mountain communities.

**Peter Waanders** reported that it was a strong summer for local nonprofits, with many successful events. He shared several cultural updates, including the Institute's community programs launching a moderated discussion on King Lear and the opening of JAS's new center in December. At the Ranch, he highlighted an upcoming residency for LA-based artists affected by wildfires, curated by one of the nation's top curators, which has already attracted national press interest. The Ranch will also host public events about every two weeks through winter and has seen a surge in business retreats and parties that combine artmaking, dining, and social gatherings. On broader community issues, Waanders noted that many nonprofits are worried about the economic and operational impacts of the 2027 airport closure, with little clear planning yet on how it will affect organizations. He also underscored concerns about the immigrant community and workforce, pointing to recent articles on ICE raids and the vulnerability of nonprofit employees and clients. Workforce housing remains another pressing issue, as many employees now live as far away as Glenwood Springs or beyond, raising questions about long-term viability. He closed on a lighter note, remarking on the beauty of fall colors and his eagerness to soon see the white of ski season on the mountain peaks.

**Steve Skadron** reflected on how community projects often take years to come to fruition but eventually succeed with persistence. He recalled past conversations as mayor about initiatives like the new Jazz Aspen venue, the Lumberyard project, and permanent office space for ACRA, noting with satisfaction that these efforts are now becoming reality. He thanked everyone for their commitment to strengthening the community. He also mentioned Colorado Mountain College's Ballot Issue 7C, tying it to the new culinary kitchen at the Aspen campus, which is now offering wine tasting classes. To proceed, CMC needs a liquor license, requiring 20 Pitkin County resident signatures, which he asked attendees to support. Skadron highlighted that 42% of CMC's current enrollment comes from high school students taking concurrent college classes, a trend that mirrors national growth in dual enrollment. Finally, he shared that he recently moderated the Carbondale Business Conference panel, appreciated the participation of ACRA leadership, and emphasized the value of stronger valley-wide collaboration among chambers.

**Nina Eisenstat** praised the inaugural Aspen Literary Festival, noting its many free public sessions, high-caliber authors and moderators, and strong community excitement. She was glad the chamber sponsored the event, calling it a potential world-class draw that was impressively



# ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

---

## ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

smooth for a first year. She observed that town has felt extremely busy with weddings, parties, and photo shoots, and said it will be interesting to see how things unfold in the coming weeks with the potential airport closure. Eisenstat emphasized the importance of clear messaging around the airport project, thanking staff for the message points and FAQs, and offered her support in helping educate the community.

**Bill Tomcich** provided an update focused on air service and the airport. He reiterated the confirmed dates for the 2025 spring airport closure, which will run from 9 a.m. April 23 to 7 p.m. May 21, reopening just in time for Memorial Day weekend. He praised the achievement of timing the reopening for such an early holiday date. Looking ahead to the 2027 full closure, he noted that no single airport will be able to absorb Aspen's traffic. Instead, service will be spread across a combination of Eagle, Grand Junction, Denver, and possibly Rifle, creating both a business need and opportunity for coordinated transportation. He also shared some passenger data highlights. Aspen's top market, Los Angeles, was slightly down due to wildfire impacts, though many LA visitors shifted their travel to summer instead of winter. Interestingly, the fastest-growing market came from Bradley International Airport (Hartford/Springfield, CT), which saw 77% year-over-year growth in traffic to Aspen, aided by improved connections and new larger United service to Denver. Additional growth was seen from the DC area and Florida. Tomcich closed by emphasizing the importance of ongoing communications with airline and transportation partners as the community prepares for both near-term and long-term airport changes.

**Dwayne Romero** highlighted the success of the inaugural Oktoberfest in Snowmass, noting it drew strong activity alongside SkiCo's El Camp party and was a positive way to close out the season. He then turned to the upcoming college fair, which has been running for over 20 years and is the largest gathering of its kind on the Western Slope, connecting around 2,500 students with 275 colleges, universities, trade schools, and military service academies. Romero emphasized the fair's importance for families and the community, especially given the growing need for technical and trade education alongside traditional college paths. He recognized CMC's strong presence and commended volunteers and board members who will be participating.

**Lisa LeMay** provided a retail update, noting that most businesses she has spoken with are down about 15–20%, though it varies by specialty. She shared that her staff is enthusiastic about the new free RFTA bus fare program and hopes it will encourage more to ride rather than drive, especially with the added benefit of Wi-Fi. Stores remain busy through the first two weekends of October thanks to fall color tourism, which she prefers to call "leaf lookers" rather than "leaf peepers." Looking ahead, she expects a quiet off-season and said many in retail are anticipating the seven weeks of downtime before Thanksgiving.

**Jeff Bay** addressed several community concerns. He noted widespread fear within immigrant communities and among workers in sectors like property management, landscaping, contracting, and domestic services due to potential ICE enforcement. He stressed the importance of providing resources and information to reduce anxiety and maintain this critical part of the local workforce. He also pointed to the November ballot, which includes numerous local tax questions along with state measures. Bay warned that the volume and complexity could confuse voters, leading many to default to "no" votes. He urged the Public Affairs Committee to focus on clear fact-sharing to help the community make informed decisions, particularly with important issues like CMC's Ballot Question 7C on the ballot. On transportation, Bay flagged the Smith Way left turn as increasingly dangerous, with traffic backing up and drivers creating improvised U-turns. He encouraged officials to act quickly before a serious accident occurs. Finally, he suggested that if Maroon Bells Road closes, e-bike rental options could be staged at Aspen Highlands so visitors without their own bikes could still access the area via RFTA, though he acknowledged challenges with rider behavior and safety.

**Cari Kuhlman** kept her remarks brief. Speaking as treasurer for the Jazz Aspen board, she noted that tickets are still available for some of the opening shows at the Red Onion, which will be an exciting new venue. She added that a finance committee meeting will likely be scheduled soon.

**Tharyn Mulberry** praised the upcoming college fair, calling it a premier community event that engages volunteers in many roles and now includes a dedicated career and technical education tent to highlight vocational paths. He also reminded the group about several ballot initiatives he is involved with, including sales tax, bond, mill levy override, and property tax measures across Aspen and Snowmass. He encouraged support and offered to share more details with anyone interested.

**Justin Nyberg** congratulated Debbie, Jennifer, and the team on securing the Obermeyer office space contract, calling it an important milestone that will bring long-term stability to ACRA. He also thanked Steve Skadron for his presentation on CMC's Ballot Measure 7C, praising CMC for responsibly lowering its levy during the property value boom and noting that this "good deed" should be highlighted in the campaign to help voters understand the context amid competing ballot measures. His main focus was the 2027 airport closure, a concern he has raised before. While he appreciated the optimism expressed by others and the sense that capable minds are working on solutions, he stressed that ACRA must play a strong role in messaging and preparedness. Nyberg emphasized the need for a clear, proactive



# ACRA DEFY ORDINARY

---

## ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT | MEMBER SERVICES | SPECIAL EVENTS | VISITOR SERVICES

communications plan that reassures the community and visitors that Aspen will remain open and accessible during the closure. He urged the chamber to quietly plan for worst-case scenarios while publicly communicating practical details, such as how travelers will move through alternate airports like Rifle, Eagle, Vail, and Grand Junction, and how businesses should prepare. He shared his own poor experience traveling through Eagle as an example of what could go wrong and underscored that many local businesses are financially fragile. Nyberg concluded by calling for a robust, visitor-focused message to ensure confidence that Aspen will continue to thrive during the closure.

**Maria Ticsay** emphasized that coordinating and communicating a clear plan for the 2027 airport project is ACRA's top public affairs priority. She noted that Glenwood Springs provides a strong model, where detailed information, clear coordination among partners, and confident messaging helped manage community concerns during a major access disruption. For Aspen, she said the next step is ensuring businesses and employees understand what will happen, pointing out that terms like "closure" may heighten anxiety unnecessarily when the airport will still operate outside defined construction windows. She stressed the need to translate technical details into practical guidance for members, since sectors like restaurants and the arts are already struggling, as shown by weak sales tax numbers, and construction faces uncertainty due to tariffs. By reassuring businesses with accurate timelines and a coordinated plan, ACRA can help ease anxiety and support advance planning. Ticsay added that, beyond the airport, the dense November ballot with multiple measures tied to board members requires strong education efforts. She thanked Debbie Braun for bringing those measures forward and said ACRA will work on programs, potentially with Aspen Public Radio and other convenings, to provide members with clear information on the initiatives.

**Pete Yang** shared that there has been recent bear activity near his home at the AABC, with Colorado Parks and Wildlife setting a trap and capturing one of the three bears frequenting the area. He also provided a quick update on the local banking scene, noting that FirstBank has been acquired by PNC Bank, and the FirstBank brand will be phased out by the end of the year, to be replaced by the larger national PNC brand.

**Adjournment:** Donnie Lee adjourned the meeting at 10:47 AM