

# On the up and up: Covid got tourists looking to the Mountain State – and US

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Perry Bennett WV Legislature

CVB director Tina Ladd (left), with Delegate Rick Hillenbrand (R-88) at the Legislature's annual Tourism Day last week.

Tourism numbers are up, up, up in Hampshire County this year – in fact, they're up 30 percent six months into the fiscal year, dwarfing numbers from the last couple years.

Tina Ladd, director of the Hampshire County Convention and Visitors Bureau, cited the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the top reasons tourism has not only been booming in Hampshire – but the entire Mountain State as a whole.

"I don't think that people realize how much tourism is in the county. I don't know that anyone has ever realized how much tourism is in the state of West Virginia," she said. "I think that once Covid hit, it was an eye-opener."

The money brought in through lodging taxes in Hampshire County is split right in half, Ladd said, and divided between the CVB and Parks & Recreation.

In 2018, Ladd said the organization had the "biggest year" ever prior to Covid, bringing in \$51,632, and then the numbers for the next two years dropped because of the pandemic, first to \$46,102 in 2019-20 and then \$43,724 in 2020-21.

It's hard to do a good job with marketing and advertising with only about \$50,000, Ladd explained.

Last fiscal year, however, the numbers began to climb again, bringing in \$63,495.

"Those are some pretty impressive increases in people coming here and spending money," said Commission President Brian Eglinger at last Tuesday's meeting, where he offered a few numbers about Hampshire County tourism in his president's report. "I wanted to be more aggressive with the CVB. I'm a facts and figures person, and those facts and figures are showing it."

The CVB became accredited in 2021 and 2022 with help and support from the Commission.

Eglinger attributed a lot of the CVB's success to their efforts in advertising; Ladd said that the advertising targets a 55-mile radius with the center being Augusta, thereby marketing to local folks and those who live beyond Hampshire's borders.

For the fiscal year that began in July, the CVB is already clocking in at \$51,343 – with half of the year still to go.

"By the end of the year, I'm expecting we should (bring in) \$160,000 total, and \$80,000 of that should come to the CVB," Ladd predicted.

Hampshire County might be a hidden gem of West Virginia tourism – a little different from the draws of Charleston or, say, Tucker County – but Ladd said she's aiming to capitalize on our strengths, charms and everything we have to offer.

After the success of last summer's Farm Crawl, which gave farmers here an opportunity to host open houses for the community, there's another Hampshire-centric event on the horizon: the Potomac Highlands Sportsman & Outdoor Show.

"I've had a lot of folks interested in that, and I've been hearing good feedback. People are happy that this is happening in the area," Ladd said. "This is something to target our locals and also targeting tourists...lots of people come here to hunt, fish, float the river and hike, and it doesn't limit it to people in this area."

After the pandemic hit, there was a tangible change in the flux of people who looked to West Virginia to "get away."

"The pandemic helped West Virginia in that regard," Ladd pointed out. "People want to have space, get outside... we're going to do everything we can to keep people coming here."