

2020 REVIEW

Tourism Board is Busy to Benefit the Community

As we recover from COVID-19, tourism will be a sustainable economic driver that brings prosperity to Custer County and continues to support our small businesses. Our world has changed and growth is inevitable. It's here, but we can have an influence to preserve our way of life while embracing responsible change and moving forward. We want to conserve our natural resources while attracting visitors to experience our strong rural character and scenic bounty. Everyone plays a role in the vitality of the Valley. The volunteers that make up the Custer County Tourism Board work to improve the quality of life here through tourism.

The economic value of tourism is in the numbers. Marketing efforts are funded by visitors, not locals, through a 2% lodging tax. For every \$1 spent promoting Custer County, \$283 is spent by visitors. This spending supports jobs. In fact, 1 out of every 4.5 jobs in the county is tourism related. This spending creates tax revenue from visitors that help fund our police, firefighters and even maintain our roads. Each household in Custer County would pay \$386 more in taxes if it were not for our tourism economy and the efforts of the Tourism Board. Visitors spent a whopping \$15.6 million in Custer County in 2019. (*Sources: CTO, BLS, US Census*)

Marketing campaigns and publicity will strengthen the brand and message we created in 2020 with a CTO grant. "Wet Mountain Valley *Come for the mountains, stay for the stars*" will increase overall geographic awareness of Custer County. Campaigns will focus on experiential tourism and portray the Wet Mountain Valley as a close-by destination to get away from it all. It is a summer playground for fishermen, hikers, horseback riders, mountain climbers, art gallery seekers and music lovers. Internationally known night skies offer unparalleled stargazing, a major trend in sustainable astro tourism. We provide a year-round getaway for a slower pace of life and an oasis of serenity. That's why we all live here and why visitors spend their travel dollars here.

Airbnb and VRBO have brought the short-term rental (STR) market into the mainstream. The rise of online lodging marketplaces has led to a growth in property owners renting out their homes. It is a convenient and affordable mode of stay for vacationers, while homeowners get a chance to earn extra money or get a return on their investment. STRs have become a nationwide trend in travel and are essential to sustaining tourism in Custer County. If we cannot accommodate visitors, they will go somewhere else.

The Valley has less than 80 traditional hotel rooms. Short term rentals help tremendously during peak season as they allow us to have capacity, which strengthens support of local businesses throughout the year. STRs attract a broader audience and families and are normally a higher-end traveller. It is a good residential use for our rural community to have short term rentals without impacting the in-place density limits

2020 REVIEW

already established by the Custer County Zoning Resolution for the non-incorporated areas of the county.

We are excited about the professionally designed Wet Mountain Valley brochure that is hot off the press. Our gratitude to local photographers Christoph Stopka and Scott Dankof; and local artists Cheryl Swartz and Andy Mast for use of their images. The 12x18 *Experience the WONDER* inside poster is simply stunning and will surely grace many walls. This brochure will be out just in time for spring. We will also be releasing the SKYGLOW time-lapse video of the Wet Mountain Valley, which is quite impressive. This was the only piece of the Sangre Star Festival 2020 that was able to happen and it is well worth the wait.

We are working in close collaboration with Kirkpatrick Bank to produce monthly media ads to showcase local businesses. In January we featured new businesses and owners in 2020. February was an impressive list of businesses that have served the Valley for 20 years or more. We're rounding up the multi-generational ranchers to honor the Valley's history and heritage in a future ad.

If you have not been to our website, visitwetmountainvalley.com, we encourage you to browse around. We have the most dynamic website representing the area very well. Check out the publicity list on the "In The News" page on the website. In the past year, we were featured in the *National Geographic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Elevation Outdoors*, *Roadtrippers* and *5280*, to name just a few. All Custer County businesses can list their services for free on the online Business Directory with up to eight images including a logo. Use the "List Your Business" link at the bottom of the website to submit information for your listing. There is also a link to sign up for our monthly e-newsletter; we now have over 3,600 subscribers.

The Custer County Welcome Center at 107 3rd St. in Westcliffe will reopen on Friday, March 19 from 10am to 3pm on Fridays and Saturdays until May. During the summer months, we would like to expand the days open to include Thursdays and be open on holiday weekends on Sundays as well (Memorial Day, July 4th, and Labor Day). If you are a friendly person with five free hours, consider becoming an Ambassador to staff the Welcome Center once a month. It is an easy task, and the space is a nice place to hang out for a few hours. There is plenty to read to get to know the area. The media room provides inspiration and information for all who enter.

We are fully aware there is a desire by many to keep the status quo in our county, but the status quo will not support the economy of this area and allow businesses to thrive. We have all seen the turnover of Valley businesses over the years, and thriving tourism is key to turning that around. Custer County Tourism has made a lot of progress in the last few years promoting the area, and tourism will continue to benefit everyone in our community by providing economic vitality, a top-priority pillar of the Custer County Economic Prosperity Strategic Plan. Beautiful days are ahead in the Wet Mountain Valley.