



Visit Buffalo Niagara
Annual Members Meeting
Wednesday, February 18, 2026
Buffalo Convention Center

PRESENT: C. Abbott-Letro, T. Beauford, M. Brown, A. Chase, M. Chiazza, M. Glasgow, P. Kaler,
B. Karmazyn, G. Loomis, K. Minkel, M. Urbanczyk

ABSENT: T. Alford, M. Alnutt, D. Castle, T. Long, W. Paladino, S. Patch, M. Roberts, D. Schutte,
S. Ranalli

STAFF: J. Bialek, J. Calkins, K. Fashana, D. Marzo, L. Mueller, H. Nowakowski, R. Toney

GUEST: C. Cross

GUEST PRESENTATION:

Prior to the official call to order, Patrick Kaler introduced Christian Cross of HVS to provide an overview of the recently completed Downtown Buffalo Hotel Market and Feasibility Study. Mr. Kaler noted that the study was commissioned to evaluate current market conditions, lost business opportunities, and overall demand for additional hotel inventory in downtown Buffalo.

Mr. Cross shared key findings, noting that the study analyzed market trends, occupancy levels, and demand generators, and evaluated the feasibility of adding a new full-service, large-scale hotel property in the downtown core. The analysis found that while the market is currently stabilizing, there is demonstrated unmet demand, particularly during peak periods when hotels reach high occupancy levels and events are unable to secure adequate room blocks.

Mr. Cross explained that the study indicates a strong business case for additional hotel supply, particularly a full-service property of approximately 350–450 rooms located within close proximity to the Convention Center. He noted that the addition of new inventory could help the destination compete for larger meetings and conventions currently being lost due to insufficient hotel capacity.

Mr. Kaler added that Visit Buffalo has identified 38 pieces of lost business representing nearly \$60 million in potential future economic impact due to limited hotel inventory.

Mr. Cross concluded that while the study does not guarantee development, it demonstrates that market conditions could support additional hotel supply and provides a foundation for discussions with potential developers.

CALL TO ORDER: Board Chair Cindy Abbott-Letro called the Annual Members Meeting of Visit Buffalo to order at 3:27 PM.

Ms. Abbott-Letro welcomed Grant Loomis, who is filling the seat previously held by Dottie Gallagher. She also noted that when Deputy County Executive Dan Castle is unable to attend meetings, Zaque Evans from the County Executive's Office will serve as the County's representative.

ELECTION OF DIRECTORS: Ms. Abbott-Letro reported that David Schutte and Steven Ranalli have stepped down from the Board. The Executive Committee, which also serves as the Nominating Committee, recommended the following individuals to join the Board:

- Paris Roselli, President of the Richardson Olmsted Campus and Executive Director of the Lipsey Architecture Center Buffalo
- Gary Siddall, President & CEO of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences, overseeing both the Buffalo Museum of Science and Tiff Nature Preserve

Ms. Abbott-Letro then presented the full proposed slate of directors for 2026:

Representatives of the Hotel Industry:

Matt Chiazza
Thomas Long
Bob Karmazyn

At-Large Directors

Terry Alford
Kimberley A. Minkel
Shannon Patch
Paris Roselli
Gary Siddall
Michelle Urbanczyk

A motion was made by Mr. Beauford and seconded by Mr. Karmazyn to approve the slate of directors as presented. Motion carried.

ADJOURNMENT: A motion was made by Ms. Urbanczyk and seconded by Ms. Minkel to adjourn the Annual Members Meeting. Motion carried.

Minutes prepared by J. Bialek

Approved: /s/ CindyAbbott-Letro
 Cindy Abbott-Letro, Chair



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PRESENT: C. Abbott-Letro, T. Beauford, M. Brown, A. Chase, M. Chiazza, M. Glasgow, P. Kaler, B. Karmazyn, G. Loomis, K. Minkel, M. Urbanczyk

ABSENT: T. Alford, M. Alnutt, D. Castle, T. Long, W. Paladino, S. Patch, M. Roberts, D. Schutte, S. Ranalli

STAFF: J. Bialek, J. Calkins, K. Fashana, D. Marzo, L. Mueller, H. Nowakowski, R. Toney

CALL TO ORDER: Board Chair Cindy Abbott-Letro convened the Annual Directors Meeting of Visit Buffalo at 3:30 PM.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: A motion was made by Mr. Chiazza and seconded by Mr. Chase to approve the minutes of the previous meeting as presented. Motion carried.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS: Ms. Abbott-Letro reported that her term as Chair has concluded and she will now serve as Immediate Past Chair. The Executive Committee recommended the following slate of officers for the 2026 term:

Chair – Thomas Long
Vice Chair – Kimberley A. Minkel
Treasurer – Matt Chiazza
Secretary – Thomas Beauford, Jr.
Immediate Past Chair – Cindy Abbott-Letro

A motion was made by Ms. Urbanczyk and seconded by Mr. Karmazyn to approve the slate of officers as presented. Motion carried.

2026 BUSINESS PLAN: Mr. Kaler provided an overview of the streamlined 2026 Business Plan. He noted that the document was condensed this year to focus on key priorities and maintain flexibility given rapidly changing market conditions, particularly related to Canadian visitation.

Canada Market Update: Mr. Kaler shared recent findings from Longwoods International's Travel Sentiment Study, which indicate that Canadian visitation to the United States remains cautious. While hotel occupancy has remained stable year over year, safety perceptions, political climate, and exchange rates continue to impact travel decisions.

Visit Buffalo will continue monitoring cross-border trends and adjusting strategies accordingly.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS: Karen Fashana reviewed highlights from the 2026 marketing plan, which centers on continued execution of the "That's Buffalo For You" campaign.

Key initiatives include:

- Development of new campaign imagery spotlighting major milestones and partner anniversaries
- Creation of a new destination video to support marketing and sales efforts
- Expansion of the neighborhood mural program
- Implementation of a \$150,000 Market New York grant focused on accessibility initiatives in partnership with Wheel the World
- Continued upgrades to website content, including a new hiking guide and historic restaurant directory
- Addition of an AI chatbot
- Planning for a full website redesign aligned with the new brand, targeted for summer 2027

Regarding Canada, Visit Buffalo will cautiously re-enter the market with limited paid media investment (approximately 4–5% of total budget), including targeted Expedia campaigns and paid search supported by Google Grant funds. PR outreach in Canada will remain limited but ongoing to maintain media relationships.

Board members discussed accessibility challenges at Canal Side and noted collaboration opportunities with local stakeholders to improve accommodations for visitors with disabilities.

SALES, SERVICES AND SPORTS COMMISSION: Leah Mueller reviewed the 2026 sales and services priorities, emphasizing both new business development and repeat bookings.

Key strategies include:

- Expanded use of prospecting tools such as Cvent, MINT, and PlayEasy
- Relaunch of the “Bring It Home” campaign targeting alumni networks and Buffalo expats
- Attendance at more than 35 trade shows
- Growth of Great Lakes cruising, with six ships scheduled for 2026 and Buffalo now designated as a turnaround port
- Continued execution of the Buffalo Book Club initiative for planners
- Development of a new 10-year Sports Master Plan in partnership with Game Changers
- Preparation for major events including NCAA and USCAA tournaments
- Launch of family reunion seminars to cultivate that emerging market segment

DESTINATION EXPERIENCE: Renata Toney provided an overview of the 2026 Destination Experience priorities, which focus on strengthening Buffalo’s infrastructure, experiences, amenities, and storytelling to position the region as a must-visit destination.

Key initiatives for 2026 include:

- Expansion of the Certified Tourism Ambassador (CTA) Program to build a more informed and connected hospitality workforce. The program continues to receive strong participation and positive feedback, with 125 ambassadors trained to date. Demand has grown significantly, with weekly half-day sessions and increased on-site trainings at local hotels and partner locations.
- Continued enhancement of the Buffalo Visitor Center as the gateway to the region for travelers visiting Canalside and downtown Buffalo.
- Collaboration with Wheel the World to amplify accessibility initiatives throughout the destination.
- Formation of a Cultural Tourism Advisory Board to guide cultural strategy and strengthen community alignment.

- Expansion of culinary tourism efforts, including support of local restaurants and new programming. Restaurant Week will transition to one iteration this year to allow focus on broader culinary initiatives.

RESEARCH & BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE: Heather Nowakowski provided an update on research and business intelligence priorities for 2026, noting that the team's goal is to deliver the right data to the right people to support informed decision-making across the organization.

Strategic priorities include:

- Implementation of the Zartico media attribution platform to better measure marketing effectiveness and visitor engagement.
- Enhancement of trade show return-on-investment measurement to support the sales team in evaluating performance across industry events.
- Renewal and expansion of key data sources, including the Longwoods Visitor Profile Study, Visitor Center data collection efforts, and national benchmarking tools.
- Strengthening operational infrastructure through expanded partner engagement, improved destination content management, and enhanced CRM capabilities.
- Elevation of the department's support role from Administrative Assistant to Business Intelligence Coordinator to reflect the growing sophistication of the organization's data operations.

ADMINISTRATION & ADVOCACY: Mr. Kaler reviewed administrative priorities for 2026.

Key focus areas include:

- Continued management of the expanded operating budget and long-term financial planning.
- Strategic reserve development, which will be addressed further in the financial report.
- Human resources initiatives, including onboarding for new and existing positions and continued staffing support for the Buffalo Visitor Center.
- Ongoing advocacy efforts in collaboration with U.S. Travel Association, New York State partners, and local stakeholders.
- Advancement of discussions related to hotel development, convention center improvements, destination connectivity, and pursuit of international air service.

APPROVAL OF 2026 BUSINESS PLAN: There being no further discussion, a motion was made by Mr. Loomis and seconded by Ms. Minkel to approve the 2026 Business Plan as presented. Motion carried.

2026 OPERATING BUDGET: Mr. Marzo presented the proposed 2026 Visit Buffalo Operating Budget. He noted that the budget was reviewed in depth and approved by the Finance Committee at its February 9 meeting.

Mr. Marzo explained that the organization's budget is primarily driven by hotel occupancy tax revenue and is aligned with projections provided by the Erie County Budget Office. For 2026, the County is projecting \$14 million in hotel tax revenue, a \$300,000 decrease from 2025 levels. The entire reduction will be covered by Visit Buffalo, while Convention Center debt service, capital expenditures, and operating allocations will remain consistent with 2025.

Mr. Marzo reported that Visit Buffalo will enter 2026 with sufficient carryover funds from 2025. As a result, the proposed 2026 budget reflects:

- Revenues of approximately \$7.9 million
- Expenses of approximately \$8.1 million
- A planned deficit of approximately \$250,000

He explained that the deficit will be covered by a portion of prior-year carryover funds. This approach allows Visit Buffalo to maintain consistent programming levels while also beginning to build reserves for future strategic initiatives, including anticipated hosting obligations related to the NFL Draft.

Mr. Marzo further noted that while hotel revenues were projected conservatively, year-end data indicates a potential 2025 overage of approximately \$400,000. The 2026 budget conservatively assumes use of only \$200,000 of that amount.

On the expense side, Mr. Marzo reviewed key highlights:

- Personnel costs reflect merit increases and five full-time equivalent positions added in late 2025. Personnel expenses remain approximately 35% of total budget, within industry norms for a DMO of this size.
- Advertising expenses decrease slightly due to reduced hotel tax revenue and one-time onboarding costs incurred in 2025 for agency engagements.
- Convention commitments decrease year-over-year due to large 2025 event commitments not recurring in 2026.
- Trade show participation remains active at approximately 40 shows.
- Destination development, research, and visitor engagement programs remain consistent with 2025 levels.
- Website development continues in 2026, with heavier investment anticipated in late 2026 into 2027.
- Film and video production costs increase due to delayed 2025 projects and rising production costs.
- Technology and equipment expenditures include replacement of aging laptops originally purchased during the pandemic.

During discussion, Vice Chair Kimberley Minkel noted that approval of a deficit budget can be uncomfortable and requested that the budget document clearly reflect that prior-year reserves will be used to offset the deficit. Mr. Marzo confirmed that a footnote will be added to the budget to clarify that carryover funds will be used to cover the planned shortfall.

A motion was made by Ms. Minkel and seconded by Mr. Beauford to approve the 2026 Operating Budget as presented. Motion carried.

FINANCIAL REPORT: Mr. Marzo reviewed the financial statements for the year ended December 31, 2025.

Balance Sheet: Visit Buffalo finished 2025 with approximately \$3 million in total assets, primarily consisting of cash and receivables. Total liabilities were approximately \$543,000, largely representing normal accounts payable and deferred revenue related to 2026 Visitor Guide advertising sales.

Mr. Marzo noted that the organization's current ratio is approximately 5:1, indicating strong short-term financial health and the ability to meet obligations as they come due. The quick ratio, which excludes prepaid expenses and inventory, remains strong at approximately 4.5:1.

At year-end, Visit Buffalo reported approximately \$2.2 million in net assets to be carried forward into 2026. Approximately \$250,000 of that amount is budgeted to offset the planned 2026 deficit while remaining in compliance with Erie County contract requirements.

Statement of Activities: For the year ended December 31, 2025, Visit Buffalo realized an increase in net assets of approximately \$1.2 million, driven by higher-than-anticipated revenues and lower-than-budgeted expenses.

Key revenue highlights include:

- Hotel occupancy tax revenue exceeding budget projections, with a \$400,000 overage above the anticipated \$1 million carryover.
- Receipt of approximately \$310,000 in Employee Retention Tax Credits.
- Increased interest income due to higher balances and improved cash management procedures.

New York State grant revenue related to the Freedom's Footsteps project came in lower than anticipated due to project delays. Associated expenses were also deferred, resulting in no material impact to net position.

On the expense side:

- Total expenses were approximately \$588,000 below budget.
- Personnel costs were under budget due to delays in opening the Canalside Visitor Center and timing of staff hires.
- Convention commitments were lower than anticipated due to reduced final costs for major events and certain events not materializing.
- Site inspection activity significantly exceeded projections, resulting in higher sales bid and promotion expenses.
- Website, video, influencer, and photography costs were below budget due to project timing delays.
- Approximately \$150,000 in Freedom's Footsteps expenses were deferred.
- Operating costs budgeted for the Canalside Visitor Center beginning in May were deferred until the center opened in late November. Unspent funds were used to assist with build-out costs.

Mr. Marzo also reported on affiliated entities:

- Foundation activity centered primarily on the Palm Murphy Scholarship Fund and Mobile Visitor Center.
- Sports Commission activity focused largely on fulfilling 2025 sports-related financial commitments.

A motion was made by Mr. Urbanczyk and seconded by Mr. Chiazza to approve the financial statements as presented. Motion carried.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: Mr. Kaler provided a brief year-end overview.

Hotel performance ended the year relatively flat overall, which was viewed as positive given ongoing cross-border challenges. Airport passenger numbers increased, while Peace Bridge traffic declined.

SALES REPORT: Ms. Mueller reported that year-end sales performance exceeded expectations despite staffing transitions earlier in the year.

- Leads were down approximately 5% year over year.
- Definite bookings were up approximately 1%.
- Room nights increased approximately 5%.
- Economic impact increased approximately 3%.

Sports tourism projections for 2026 are anticipated to exceed \$81 million in economic impact, representing one of the strongest years on record.

During Q4, Visit Buffalo hosted 68 events, conducted approximately 12 site visits, and attended 10 trade shows.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS REPORT: Ms. Fashana reported that Q4 focused on rollout of the new brand and concentrated advertising efforts.

Highlights include:

- Sponsored content placements with Condé Nast Traveler, People, and Bon Appétit, generating over 72,000 online readers.
- Expedia campaign delivering a 43:1 return on advertising spend, resulting in approximately \$6.2 million in bookings.
- Recognition as a top place to visit in 2026 by Condé Nast Traveler and AFAR.
- Named “Most Festive City in the U.S.” by Travel + Leisure.
- Hosted 37 travel writers, resulting in approximately 300 media placements.

A new winter campaign was launched, marking the first dedicated winter promotion initiative.

DESTINATION EXPERIENCE UPDATE: Ms. Toney provided updates on Q4 initiatives:

- Partnership with the Buffalo International Film Festival resulted in over 9,500 attendees and broad brand exposure, including screening of the “Flight 716” video before 62 features and short film programs.
- The Certified Tourism Ambassador program launched in late October and certified 68 ambassadors by year-end.
- The Buffalo Visitor Center opened prior to Thanksgiving and welcomed 321 visitors between November 1 and December 31.
- The job-sharing partnership with Explore & More continues to perform well and strengthen frontline operations.
- Weekly newsletter subscriptions reached 13,204 by year-end, with an average open rate of 58%, significantly exceeding industry benchmarks.

Mr. Kaler also recognized departing Board members David Schutte, Steven Ranalli, and Mary Roberts. Donations will be made in their honor to charities of their choosing.

OTHER BUSINESS/ADJOURNMENT: There being no further business, a motion was made by Ms. Urbanczyk and seconded by Ms. Brown to adjourn the meeting. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 4:29 PM.

Minutes prepared by J. Bialek

/s/ CindyAbbott-Letro

Approved: _____
Cindy Abbott-Letro, Chair