

The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Spring 2016

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New website set to launch in May

The Mat-Su CVB's website, www.alaskavisit.com, will tentatively relaunch on May 19 with a new look and increased functionality, giving site visitors more tools than ever before to research their trip to the Mat-Su Valley.

The site, being designed by Simpleview, the global leader in destination marketing organization websites, takes advantage of new technology and features a responsive design.

"The new site incorporates the latest design trends, but more importantly, it also takes advantage of the latest technology to optimize the performance of the site," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said. "We last redesigned our site in 2010, and in the lifespan of a website, that's considered a long time."

The new site is optimized for users

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The new Mat-Su CVB web site, which launches in late May, is responsive designed, meaning it scales for users on any device.

CVB hosting BBQ on May 25 Member spotlights help build referrals

The Mat-Su CVB is hosting the "Summer Season Kickoff" at Alaska Garden Gate B&B on May 25, giving members an opportunity to give updates about their businesses to help with referrals throughout the summer.

The event begins at 4 p.m. at Alaska Garden Gate B&B, which is located on Trunk Road near the roundabout. The Mat-Su CVB will once again be grilling up hamburgers and hot dogs, and Lorraine Jallen's "almost world famous root beer floats" will be served.

Typically, the event is held at the Visitor Information Center, but due to the Mat-Su CVB offices moving, the open house event is being held at Alaska Garden Gate. Along with the barbecue, every Mat-Su CVB member can give a three-minute business spotlight.

"This is a good opportunity to learn about what other members are doing this summer, learn about new products and tours and network to build relationships that generate referrals," said Mat-Su CVB membership manager Justin Saunders. "It kicks off the summer in style."

To RSVP for the event, interested members can e-mail Justin@alaskavisit.com.

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From the president's desk

Future brings new opportunities, potentially new name for CVB

This year marks the 30-year anniversary of the formation of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau, a benchmark of longevity that is a testament to the successes of the organization. For 30 years, the CVB has been marketing the Mat-Su Borough as a premier visitor destination, helping bolster the local economy in the process.

It also marks 30 years of going by the Mat-Su CVB name, MSCVB, the CVB or any number of other acronyms, initials or, in essence, a mouthful of letters. That's why, as a board, we're looking into a name change for the organization later this fall, to better describe our scope of work, as we get ready to kick off the next 30 years of destination marketing.

Name changes for visitor bureaus is something that is taking place around the country.

Right here in Alaska, we now have Visit Anchorage, Explore Fairbanks and Travel Juneau in place of the longer names with "convention & visitors bureau" attached to it. A shorter, action name better reflects the role of a destination marketing organization, and the board feels like there is no better time to cross that bridge with our organization than right now – during our 30-year anniversary.

This year is a fresh start of sorts for the organization, with the offices moving to downtown Palmer, the Gateway Visitor Center project on the horizon and a brand new website that bolsters the marketing plan.

A name change fits in with these big changes, and we're excited about all of these developments.

So, what is the organization's name going to be? Well, that's something we're actively working on at the board level, and

we'll be evaluating a number of different options. We want something that not only summarizes what we do, but also what we have to offer to visitors. We plan on unveiling the name change at the annual meeting, typically held around the first week of November. Even though it's only May right now, we're busy putting together an annual meeting that will not only be educational for our members, but also a celebration of the last 30 years – and a kickoff for the future.

While the name of the organization may change in the near future, you can count on something never changing – our commitment to marketing the Mat-Su Valley and growing tourism across the entire Mat-Su Borough, from Denali State Park to Lake Louise, and all places in between.

Tourism is one of the few bright spots in Alaska's economy right now, and we're proud of the role we've played in that growth – both locally, and across the state. We are steadfastly committed to marketing our great area both effectively and efficiently, and having a positive economic impact on our communities. That's been a commitment for the last 30 years, and it'll be our commitment for decades to come.

If you'd like to weigh in on the name, please feel free to contact me or one of the other nine members of the board.

Having member support and input is important in everything we do, just as it has been for the last 30 years. This is your organization, and your contributions of ideas is welcomed.

Cheryl Metiva (cherylm@catheatres.com) is the president of the Board of Directors and the general manager at Extreme Fun Center in Wasilla.



**Cheryl Metiva,
Mat-Su CVB Board President**

**The Mat-Su CVB television advertising campaign kicks off
May 16-June 12, with spots airing on KTUU Channel 2,
creating awareness of the Mat-Su Valley and AlaskaVisit.com!**

From the executive director

Mat-Su CVB office relocating to downtown Palmer

The process of organizing and packing for a move after 27 years is a big task. June 1 is the big day a truck will show up and move our organization to our temporary home in downtown Palmer (610 S. Bailey Street, in the Fosselman Building). Now that the travel auction is over, we are beginning to fill boxes and sort through files of communications, drawers of archived visitor guides, ad designs and visitor research. Carbon copies, white out and handwritten notes bulge from file folders. I can't help but flip through old binders of board meeting minutes and resolutions and think of the discussions 30 years ago of growing tourism in the Mat-Su Valley. I'm pretty certain we are going to find a few unexpected treasures - some "I totally forgot about this" moments. (Like the photo to the right of the groundbreaking in April 1989.)

We are using the 3-step method of save, recycle and trash. We have researched and found homes for the wildlife mounts and items on loan from folks who wanted to share something special with visitors. The empty brochure racks, display cases and cabinets are being inventoried and will be donated to local museums and chambers.

The property's new owner, Spring Creek, will begin construction this summer on the new Mat-Su Colony Senior



Volunteers and local leaders break ground on the current site of the Mat-Su Valley Visitor Information Center in 1989.

Care Center, a facility in high demand for our growing senior population. It is also a much more appropriate use of property surrounded by a medical campus. Visitor center manager Lorraine Jallen exclaimed, "those people that found the visitor center deserved a certificate!" Since the Parks-Glenn highway interchange and the Trunk Road roundabout construction, access and visitation to the center had decreased considerably.

But just like the passionate volunteer board members 30 years ago, your current board of directors is passionate and determined to finish the final construction phase of the new Mat-Su Valley Gateway

Visitor Center. The move out of the current visitor center isn't like when your parents decide to downsize from your childhood home. The sale of the property is a down payment on an upgrade to a better location and visitor experience. The board has been meeting frequently to discuss finding funding solutions to finish the project and we have been transparent in communicating that process. We are steadfast in calling our office space in Palmer our "temporary home" not our new home.

Bonnie Quill (bonnie@alaskavisit.com) is the executive director of the Mat-Su CVB.

Go West FAM trip highlights the Mat-Su Valley

The Mat-Su CVB, in conjunction with Visit Anchorage and Salmon Berry tours, hosted a four-day Yahoo! Mat-Su familiarization trip for international operators as part of the Go West Convention, held in Anchorage in late February.

It marked the first time Go West has been held in Anchorage, and served a great opportunity to highlight the Mat-Su Valley to international operators attending the event.

"We had an amazing group of eight tour operators on the FAM trip, and they all left ready to build Alaska packages, or add more of the Mat-Su if they are already selling Alaska," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler, who escorted the group.

The Mat-Su FAM included operators from China, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Canada and U.S.-based operators who do inbound tours.

"Thank you very much, I will sell much more of Alaska Tour, your investment was worth it," commented Marc Leclerc of Croisieres Amarc.com, a Montreal-based company, on his review of the FAM.

"It was an awesome FAM overall! I would definitely recommend all the activities and restaurants to our clients coming into Alaska," said Betty Zhou of Tourico Holidays.

In addition to the FAM trip, the Mat-Su CVB also sponsored a buyer's reception where Ressler gave a one-minute product overview. The Mat-Su CVB also hosted 15 operators on a "Day



Casey Ressler and the group of eight international tour operators have breakfast at the Talkeetna Roadhouse on the second day of a four-day Yahoo! Mat-Su familiarization trip as part of the Go West convention.

of Adventure" that featured ice fishing on Finger Lake with Butch and Jehnifer Ehmann, including a boxed lunch from North Star Bakery.

International marketing effort focuses on Europe

ITB generates bookings, coverage in leading travel guide

For the second year in a row, the Mat-Su CVB joined other Alaska destinations and businesses at ITB Berlin, the world's largest travel show, in early March.

Participants took appointments throughout the four-day show, meeting with tour operators, media representatives and other members of the travel trade. Casey Ressler attended from Mat-Su CVB and said the Mat-Su Valley has already seen a positive return.

"Last year, we saw several bookings in the fall from one tour operator I met there, and you usually don't see a return that fast," Ressler said. "The Mat-Su Valley was also featured in a seven-page section of Germany's largest travel guide to Alaska. We previously only had one page."

Mat-Su CVB hosted Kanada/Alaska Travelguide author Kurt Ohlhoff for three days last summer, which resulted in the six additional pages of Mat-Su Valley activities and attractions being listed in the guide.

Additionally, a television producer Mat-Su CVB met in Germany booked several properties along the Glenn Highway National Scenic Byway for a week's worth of scouting last May, as well as in September for filming.

"It's great to see those appointments turn into business for our members," Ressler said.

At ITB, the state of Alaska schedules appointments with operators who sell Alaska packages. Businesses and organizations who partner with the state can sit in on the appointments and talk about what they have to offer.



Casey Ressler meets with a German tour operator while in the state of Alaska booth at ITB Berlin in March.

Mat-Su CVB attends Mid-Atlantic Seminar

The Mat-Su CVB participated in the Icelandair Mid-Atlantic Seminar in Reykjavik, Iceland in February, meeting with tour operators and travel agents who are looking to expand their Alaska products.

Icelandair heavily subsidizes the event every February, making it one of the most affordable international marketing programs available. Bonnie Quill attended from the Mat-Su CVB and took appointments.

"The direct flights from Reykjavik to Anchorage are very convenient for European travelers because it minimizes the time it takes to get here," Quill said. "It's an important route for Alaska's international visitors."

At the Mid-Atlantic, Icelandair brings suppliers from their U.S. markets, as well as tour operators and travel agents from Europe to Iceland for three days of networking, appointments and more. Icelandair is operating the nonstop flight starting in early May, through mid-

September. This year is the fourth year the flight has been operated, and the second year in a row that two flights weekly will be operated. From Reykjavik to Anchorage is just over six hours.

"It's an important market, and we've been working hard to highlight the Mat-Su Valley to these tour operators, not only through participation in the Mid-Atlantic Seminar, but also by hosting familiarization trips in the past," Quill said.

Other than the Mat-Su CVB, other destination marketing organizations attending from Alaska included Visit Anchorage and Explore Fairbanks. Businesses such as Talkeetna Roadhouse, the Alaska Railroad, CIRI Alaska Tourism and Alaska Travel Connections attended the event.

"There is a strong contingent of Alaskans, including many from the Mat-Su Valley, who attended, giving us a great presence at Mid-Atlantic," Quill said. "Alaska leaves a big impression on the tour operators every year."

IPW up next

The Mat-Su CVB is partnering with the Valdez Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Kenai Peninsula Tourism Marketing Council at International Pow Wow in early June in New Orleans.

The three organizations have partnered for years at the event, under the "Authentic Alaska" name.

Bonnie Quill will be taking appointments from international tour operators and travel media at the event, which is one of the largest gatherings of international tour operators who sell United States-based tours.

"By partnering with Valdez and KPTMC, we make it affordable and productive," Quill said. "We've had great response from our attendance at this convention year after year."

Travel trade targeted at ABA, NTA conventions

The Mat-Su CVB participated in the American Bus Association Marketplace event, as well as the National Tour Association Travel Exchange in January, reaching tour operators who are looking to expand their Alaska products or introduce Alaska packages to their current offerings.

At both events, Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler had prescheduled meetings with tour operators and highlighted the many opportunities the Mat-Su Valley has for the group tour market.

"Connecting with tour operators at both conventions is important, because the meetings are highly qualified and lead to more business for our members," Ressler said.

At ABA Marketplace in Louisville, Ressler met with 26 tour operators. The focus at ABA is motorcoach tours.

"It's a great market for the Mat-Su Valley because of our location. Many of these tours are along the Railbelt, and Mat-Su fits in perfectly with those itineraries," Ressler said.

At NTA Travel Exchange in Atlanta, Ressler had appointments with 18 tour operators.



Casey Ressler mans the Alaska booth at the National Tour Association Travel Exchange event in Atlanta in early February.

All of the leads generated by attending the shows are available to members. To receive these leads, interested members can e-mail casey@alaskavisit.com.

Other Alaska destination marketing organizations attending included Visit

Anchorage, Explore Fairbanks, Travel Juneau and the Valdez CVB. Private sector businesses that offer Mat-Su products attending included Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge, Mahay's, K2 Aviation and the Alaska Railroad.

Outdoor shows, summer showcase target Alaskans

The Mat-Su CVB participated in four in-state travel shows during the spring, targeting in-state residents as well as their visiting friends and relatives.

In addition to the Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show, the Great Alaska Sportsman Show and the Fairbanks Outdoors Show, the Mat-Su CVB participated in the Alaska Summer Showcase for the first time in late March.

"The Alaska Summer Showcase was a big hit. It brings together people from Southcentral Alaska who are interested in learning more about things to do around the state," Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler said.

Organized by Alaska travel guru Scott McMurren, the showcase featured 24 booths of destinations and businesses around Alaska. Attendees had to visit each booth and earn a stamp to be entered to win one of the many prize packages. The Mat-Su CVB worked with members to come up with the "Glacier View Adventure and Relaxation" prize package, which included an overnight at Sheep Mountain Lodge, a trek with Matanuska Glacier Adventures, a zipline adventure with MICA Guides, followed by an overnight at Tundra Rose Cottages, with a massage from Hands Above the Rest.

"We had an impressive prize package, and the winner was ecstatic," Ressler said. "Special thanks to our members who made the prize package possible."

At all four shows, Mat-Su CVB distributed visitor guides, as well as rack cards and brochures from members.

April meeting planner luncheon a success

The Mat-Su CVB hosted a successful meeting planner luncheon in Anchorage on April 20, with 18 meeting planners hearing presentations from 12 members.

The annual luncheon brings together event and meeting planners with members who have the facilities and services to meet this market's needs.

"This year, we had more members participate than ever before, and I've already heard back from some of the planners that they learned a lot about new facilities and opportunities in the Mat-Su Valley that they didn't know about," said Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler.

This year's event was held at Kinley's in Anchorage, and members had the opportunity to give a four-minute presentation, with visuals, to the meeting planners in attendance. Additionally, information sheets about each member property were compiled into a PDF catalog that was distributed to meeting planners, along with the complete lunch presentation.

"This is a low-cost effort that can have big returns for our members," Ressler said. "The attendees do everything from small board retreats to large weddings and events, so showcasing what the Valley has to offer them is important. Meetings and events are big business."

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24th annual ExTRAVELganza another successful event

The Mat-Su CVB's annual beer and wine tasting travel auction ExTRAVELganza was a hit in late April, as more than 125 people turned out for the organization's largest fund-raiser.

This year, the event featured three local craft breweries – Arkose in Palmer, Denali Brewing Company from Talkeetna and Bearpaw River Brewing Company in Wasilla – as well as wine from The Grape Tap. The Hannah Yoter Band provided music as well. The event was held at Evangelo's in Wasilla on April 29.

“Everyone had a great time, and most importantly, it was financially successful for the organization,” said Justin Saunders, who organizes the event every year. “We couldn't have pulled it off without the generosity of the sponsors, the many businesses who donate each year, and the support from the community.”

Four silent auction tables and 13 outcry auction items were up for bid, including season golf passes, Alaska Railroad trips, tickets for many Mat-Su and Southcentral Alaska activities and gift certificates from local restaurants and attractions.

“The variety and the quality of the donated items really helps make the auction a success,” Saunders said. “We have people who come every year just to bid on art, for example. Others come because they want a specific activity. It's become quite a



Attendees at the Mat-Su CVB's beer and wine tasting travel auction ExTRAVELganza enjoy locally made craft brew, as well as donated wine from The Grape Tap, while listening to the Hannah Yoter Band and bidding on great packages.

tradition.”

Once again, the MTA/Alaska Airlines luggage tag raffle was a highlight. The winner was Sharon Morris of Wasilla, who was ecstatic when she was told she won the two Alaska Airlines tickets that are good system-wide.

This year's ExTRAVELganza also helped highlight the Mat-Su CVB's 30-year anniversary. Promotional materials for the event, including print and radio spots, highlighted the organization's 30-year commitment to marketing the Mat-Su Valley as a premier visitor destination.

Thank you to all of the ExTRAVELganza donors

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White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad

2017 Visitor Guide ad and renewal packets mailed soon

While it's only the start of the 2016 summer season, the thoughts are already turning to the 2017 Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide.

Advertising and membership renewal packets are being mailed to members later in May, with a variety of options available. All members receive a free listing that includes the name of the business, contact information and the website, and the ability to enhance their listing with the purchase of additional lines of narrative text, additional listings in other categories or display advertising.

The Mat-Su CVB prints 100,000 guides each year, and distributes them in a number of ways. Approximately 50,000 are mailed to high-potential visitors identified through the state of Alaska's tourism marketing and research efforts, while others are distributed throughout Alaska at high-traffic areas such as airports, visitor centers and the Alaska Railroad depot, in addition to the direct requests to the Mat-Su CVB office.

"Our guides get in the hands of highly qualified potential visitors who are actively planning their Alaska vacation," explained Mat-Su CVB's Justin Saunders. "It's a great way to gain valuable exposure for your business."

Advertising rates in the Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide have not been raised in more than 10 years, Saunders noted.

"It really is one of the most affordable advertising options out there," he said. "We keep the advertising rates as low as possible to give our members the opportunity to have as big a presence as possible."

Display advertising starts at just \$170 for directory ads, with ad sizes and prices increasing accordingly.

The new guide is published in late October and available by the middle of November, just in time for when people start planning their summer vacations to Alaska. For the fourth year in a row, Solstice Advertising will be handling the design and printing of the visitor guide.



News from the membership

Alaska Farm Tours is excited for its first season offering farm tours in the Palmer area. Tours will depart from the Palmer Visitor Center and visit several local farms throughout the Mat-Su Valley. A lunch is included in the cost of the tour. For more information, interested people can visit www.alaskafarmtours.com.

Arkose Brewery is once again continuing its free brewery tours on Tuesday nights throughout the summer. Tours begin at 6 p.m. The brewery also offers Beer Meets Chocolate and Beer Meets Canvas events throughout the summer. Beer Meets Chocolate feature local craft beers paired with creations from locally-owned JB Chocolatier, while Beer Meets Canvas includes a pint of Arkose Brewery beer and all art supplies (second Saturday of each month). For more information, visit www.arkosebrewery.com.

Talkeetna is celebrating its 100 year anniversary this summer. Join the **Talkeetna Chamber of Commerce** and other organizations during the annual Fourth of July events, including the Moose on Parade event. On July 4, the painted and decorated wooden moose will be auctioned off. Don't miss this exciting event.

The Hudson Memorial Fly-In takes place at the Talkeetna Airport May 14-15, bringing together aviation enthusiasts from around Alaska for a weekend of demonstrations, contests and more. There will also be a silent auction benefitting the Talkeetna Build a Plane organization.

Talkeetna Roadhouse, K2 Aviation and Talkeetna Air Taxi are all celebrating 20 years with their current owners, and hosted a

block party earlier this spring. Owners Suzanne Rust (K2), Trisha Costello (Talkeetna Roadhouse) and Paul Roderick (Talkeetna Air Taxi) look forward to the future and serving visitors and residents at their businesses.

Sheep Mountain Lodge is entering its first summer season under new ownership. Mark and Ruthann Fleenor and Ryan and Rachel Cote bought the lodge from longtime owners Zack and Anjanette Steer at the end of last summer. Sheep Mountain Lodge will continue serving meals at the lodge, as well as offering cabins for rent year-round. Visit www.sheepmountainlodge.com for information.

Knik River Lodge is unveiling a brand new central lodge facility this summer, with a full-service restaurant. The lodge is opening on Mother's Day, and will be open to the public for dinner seven days a week. The new lodge facility is an ideal setting for weddings, as well as corporate retreats and meetings. Knik River Lodge also offers helicopter tours, dog mushing on the glacier and many more activities. Visit www.knikriverlodge.com for more information.

In addition to their ice climbing and trekking adventures and zipline experiences, **MICA Guides** is offering "glamping" this summer. Onsite at the MICA office at Mile 102 Glenn Highway, this experience is described as luxury camping. Canvas tents are 12'x14' on a permanent cedar floor with a covered porch nestled in the forest on a small hill overlooking the Matanuska Glacier and valley. Glamping tents accommodate up to 2 people with a queen-size bed or two twins and plenty of blankets with a down comforter to keep you warm at night. Two adirondack chairs on the deck are provided for you to relax and enjoy the views.

WEB: New site

Continued from Page 1

on any device – from desktop computers to tablets to mobile phones. The site essentially scales content based on the screen size of the device accessing it. This gives users an optimal visual experience while retaining functionality and usability.

In addition to being easier to use, a responsive design site also helps with search engine optimization.

“Google rewards sites higher in search rankings that are responsive, so it was important to go that route when redesigning our site,” Ressler said. “Three years ago, responsive design was being talked about as something ‘new’ and ‘innovative.’ Now, it’s the standard. Technology changes at such an amazing pace, and keeping up with it is vitally important.”

The web site is the CVB’s largest marketing investment and is important in reaching all of our target markets, from in-state residents to domestic visitors. There are sections for the media and travel trade as well.

“We want our web site to be robust, helpful and intuitive, no matter who is using it,” Ressler said. “It provides a wealth of information for visitors planning their trip, and it gives members the opportunity to be seen by these visitors during the decision-making process, which is incredibly important.”

In addition to giving site users a better experience, it also gives members more opportunity to market themselves on the site.

Larger images for member listings are being integrated into the site, and membership manager Justin Saunders can work with members to upload the best images for their listings (see story at right)

“We’ve been working on the new site for several months, and we’re excited about the launch,” Ressler said.

There are also new advertising opportunities available to members through a partnership with Destination Travel Network (see related story at right).

Don’t forget - the Mat-Su CVB office will be moving to 610 S. Bailey Street in Palmer in June!

All the contact information other than the mailing address will stay the same however.

DTN offering web marketing opportunities

As part of the redesign of AlaskaVisit.com, the Mat-Su CVB is partnering with Destination Travel Network to offer members the opportunity to advertise on the site for the first time.

Advertising positions are available on interior pages throughout the site, as well as text spotlight ads. The goal of offering advertising is to give members increased exposure, in a tasteful way that doesn’t detract from site’s visual appeal.

“We’re excited about this new opportunity,” said Mat-Su CVB’s Justin Saunders. “We’ve never offered display ads on our site before, so this is a new tool for our members.”

DTN handles all the sales, design and placement of the ads on the site, and Mat-Su CVB receives a commission from all sales. In essence, it’s like adding a sales rep to the Mat-Su CVB team that handles digital advertising only.

“Our rep from DTN is going to be reaching out to our members and explaining the new site, the new opportunities and trying to find ways to help members maximize their marketing dollars,” Saunders said.

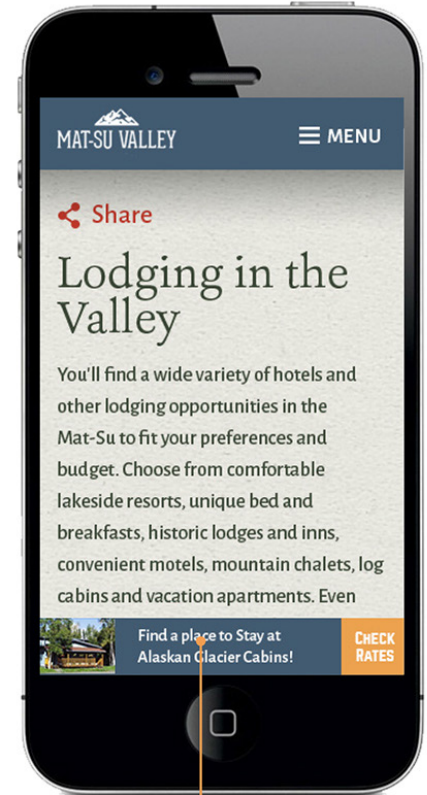
Member images needed for site

The new www.alaskavisit.com is a great tool for our members, giving you even more exposure.

However, we need you to upload your photos (or send them to us) so that your listing stands out and helps market your business.

Many of the provided images for the old website are too small to render properly on the new site, appearing pixelated and blurry. We’d like to make the member listings as visually appealing as possible for site visitors, and that’s going to take some teamwork.

If you haven’t submitted photos for your listing before, now is as good a time as ever – you get two free photos in your listing with your membership.



Mobile Banner

- Give “ready-to-spend” visitors one-click mobile access to your business NOW
- Photo (90x50 Pixels)
- Copy (41-50 characters)

If you have submitted them in the past – either via the member log-in portal or by e-mailing Justin Saunders, we’ll need those images resubmitted in a larger format.

The new site requires images that are 72 dpi, with dimensions of 960 pixels wide by 690 pixels tall. If these figures are confusing, don’t worry, as we’re here to help.

Please e-mail your photos in as large a size as possible to Justin@alaskavisit.com and we’ll take care of making sure they are in the right aspect ratio.

The site is launching soon, so your help is greatly needed to make the site look great.

If you have any questions, please call Justin at 354-5032.

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