



**The Power of Travel:
Centre County 2021**

**The Power of Travel
in Centre County 2021**



The pandemic hit the local and national economy hard, taking a tremendous toll on the hospitality industry in particular. Sports, leisure and business travel will play a significant role in recovery. The Power of Travel is already opening new doors locally and positioning the region for success moving forward. Capitalizing on an expected robust rebound in travel will require having the workforce necessary to provide the best service to patrons, a community that is supportive of new tourism opportunities, and even residents becoming tourism ambassadors for the county in their own right. The Power of Travel can once again help our economy thrive and continue its contributions to making Happy Valley a wonderful place to live, work, learn and play in the process.

Happy Valley Adventure Bureau prepares for a new era of visitation

By **LESLEY KISTNER**
Special to the Gazette

In May, The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau (HVAB) announced strategic changes that will better position the organization to drive local economic recovery efforts through leisure, sports and business visitation, as well as ensure that the county can capitalize on future tourism growth.

Mapping out a strategy to best provide access to information to all visitors to Happy Valley, and being out front of the changing ways travelers prefer to receive information, was on the HVAB's radar prior to the pandemic.

The pause in travel provided more time to begin putting these strategies in motion.

The new downtown State College visitor center, at 131 S. Fraser St., Suite 3, will meet the needs of those in Happy Valley for Penn State-related reasons, while the HVAB works to enhance services throughout the county to further grow visitation.

Future plans being considered are additional satellite visitor centers at key entry points into the county and in outlying communities, in addition to the existing satellite visitor center at the Bellefonte Train Station at 320 W. High St.

Greater emphasis is also being placed on digital and online tools — in addition

to print — to raise visitor awareness about Happy Valley. With website traffic continuing to be strong, the HVAB will move forward later this year with plans for a newly redesigned HappyValley.com.

Launched in early 2020, the Adventure Bureau Dispatch blog site (Dispatch.HappyValley.com) places greater emphasis on storytelling to market the county.

The digital 2021 Inspiration Guide can be updated in real time and more easily shared across social media platforms and other digital channels.

Online promotional campaigns through Expedia and TravelZoo have done well, generating favorable ROIs by the way of hotel room nights booked.

The past year also saw greater focus on a promising new market — youth sports. Youth sports is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry, according to Sports Destination Management.

Happy Valley is well positioned to become a "tournament town."

The area has already hosted 29 non-Penn State athletic events, with 37 additional events booked from June through December.

This activity has helped hotel occupancy rates rebound, generating roughly 15,000 room nights to date.

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Submitted photo

THE HVAB recently hosted Chad Hoover in Happy Valley to film segments for his TV program, Chad Hoover Fishing.

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE
HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY**

The pandemic has been particularly hard felt by the hospitality industry. The U.S. travel industry shrank 42 percent in 2020, from \$2.6 trillion to \$1.5 trillion. Travel-supported jobs fell by 5.6 million, from 16.7 million to 11.1 million — 65 percent of all jobs lost during the pandemic. Nationally, the restaurant industry alone lost \$240 billion in 2020.

Source: U.S. Travel Association, National Restaurant Association

Centre County impact:



For the year, local and visitor spending in Centre County was down an estimated **\$422.5 million** compared to 2019. Spending was up in January and February 2020, with the county on pace for a record visitor spend year alone prior to COVID.



At the height of the pandemic in 2020, 1,600 Centre County hospitality industry employees were out of work.

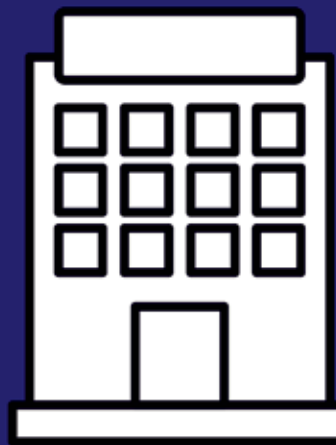
\$437.5M

The estimated loss in spending (all receipts) in Centre County from March 2020 through December 2020 due to the pandemic.

Sources: STR, Visa Vue and tax revenues

Hotel and lodging revenue

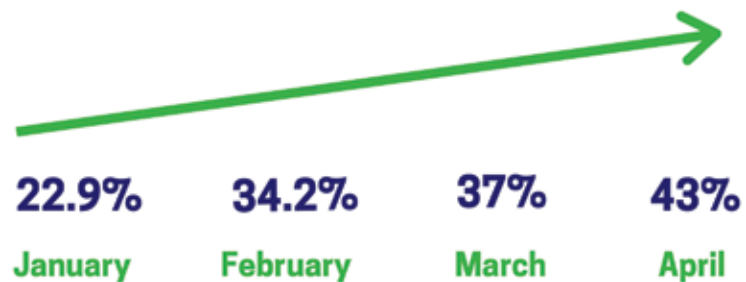
Centre County hotel room revenue was down a staggering 71.6 percent over the past year, reflecting a loss of nearly \$60 million.



Road to recovery

April 2021 occupancy was the best since August 2020. According to Smith Travel Research, occupancy for April was 43 percent, compared to a meager 11.5 percent in April 2020. A strong May showing is also expected.

2021 occupancy



The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau is the official tourism promotion agency for Centre County. A 501(c)(6) nonprofit, the HVAB's mission is to grow the local economy through leisure, business and sports visitation.

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Explore your back yard

Summer 2021 bucket list

Submitted by HVAB

Summer is the perfect time to plan new adventures, including those that can be found right in your own back yard. Our 2021 bucket list is all about discovering Happy Valley all over again, from new things to see and do, to new-to-you experiences.

1. SCALE NEW HEIGHTS AT CLIMB NITTANY

The climbing walls, courses and classes at the newly opened facility in Boalsburg are designed to help everybody climb.

2. LEARN TO MOUNTAIN BIKE

Harvest Fields Community Trails' multi-use trail system is an ideal place for the whole family to discover the sport of mountain biking, with trails designed for all skill levels.

3. OBSERVE NATURE

More than 140 resident and migratory birds can be spotted throughout the year at the Galen and Nancy Dreibelbis Viewing Area near Julian, which features fully accessible viewing blinds and a linear trail surrounding the wetland.

4. ATTEND NEW FESTIVALS

Happy Valley's communities

have stepped up with some exciting first-time events for the July 9-11 weekend. Millheim's Art and Music Walk will feature three days of art, music, food and fun.

Art in the Orchard takes place July 8-10 at Way Fruit Farm.

Philipsburg Fest will kick off July 10 with the Wilderness City 5k race around beautiful Cold Stream Dam, followed by fireworks set off from the We Are Inn later that night.

The Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts is virtual in 2021. Get schedule information at HappyValley.com/events.

5. GO ON AN AG-FOCUSED DRIVING TOUR

Happy Valley Agventures' Ag Heritage Driving Tour and the Centre County Farmland Trust's Farm Routes (There are three to choose from!) are fun ways to learn about the county's agricultural roots — with plenty of memorable stops along the way, not to mention beautiful scenery.

6. CREATE YOUR OWN ICE CREAM TRAIL

Happy Valley is THE PLACE for the best ice cream, including

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Submitted photo

THE BEAUTIFUL VIEW from one of the accessible bird blinds at the Galen and Nancy Dreibelbis Viewing Area in Julian.

Wanted: Passion, creativity and hard workers

Hospitality industry needs employees to capitalize on a rebound in travel

By LESLEY KISTNER
Special to the Gazette

STATE COLLEGE — Ask those in the local hospitality sector what they look for in building successful teams and you'll get a pretty consistent answer across the board — motivated, hard-working, personable and creative individuals. After a challenging pandemic year, Happy Valley's hospitality industry is on the rebound, and hoping to rebuild a workforce that possesses those very traits.

At the height of the pandemic, nearly 1,600 Centre County hospitality workers were out of work. With the lifting of COVID restrictions, restaurants, bars and hotels are now facing another challenge — a shortage of employees to meet growing customer demands, not to mention the return of 107,000 strong on football weekends this fall. With restaurants and hotels — including several new establishments that are set to soon open their doors this summer — hiring at all levels, it's the perfect time to explore employment in the industry.

Local chefs, restaurant owners and hoteliers are forthright in saying that hospitality is not always the easiest industry, but they agree that it is extremely gratifying, and can take those who work in it places where their creative energy leads.

The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau asked a few industry standouts to weigh in on their own career path, the value of working in hospitality and what they personally look for in their workforce. They are all currently hiring, as are establishments all across the county.

MICHAEL MARX — CREEKSIDE AT THE GAMBLE MILL

Michael Marx has 36 years in the restaurant/catering/motion picture catering/food truck business.

He has trained in Paris, with culinary stints in San Diego, Calif., Santa Fe, N.M., Philadelphia and Austin, Texas.

Owner of Worlds Fare Catering, he will soon open Creekside at the Gamble Mill, featuring a locally sourced, global menu format.

"When I started in this industry, restaurant work was just a resume filler. It's now a respected professional career," Marx said.

"Servers, mixologists, cooks are professional craftspeople, just like an electrician, automobile technician or

mason. They are integral parts of this nation's backbone."

Marx said one key to his success in the industry is the knowledge gained from working in every restaurant position and all levels of management.

He was also lucky enough to work for chefs who were willing to actually teach. Marx wants to share this same enthusiasm and knowledge with the team he is compiling for his eagerly anticipated Creekside restaurant. He is looking for energetic, passionate professionals with a desire for a culinary future, including bartenders, servers and bussers who want to take their service to the next level. Like the chefs who helped him early in his career, he is willing to do the same for those who want to learn.

MEGAN MARCAURELLE — THE REPUBLIC AT THE GAMBLE MILL

Megan Marcaurelle has been in the service industry for almost 15 years, working in a wide range of different bars and restaurants, including a family-owned Italian restaurant; an Irish Pub; an elegant, traditional tea house; and a semi-corporate microbrewery.

She is about to realize the dream of owning her own establishment — The Republic cocktail bar in the historic Gamble Mill in Bellefonte — along with her husband, Cody Jones, and business partners Chris and Jonathan Virgilio.

"I just left my longest restaurant job of nine years, and when reflecting on my experience there, I realized just how special this industry can be," she said. "It thrives on relationships and teamwork."

"It creates a personal connection to people in a fast-paced setting that is constantly moving and changing," said explained. "Choosing a career in hospitality is certainly rewarding, providing many useful skills that one can carry into every aspect of life."

Marcaurelle said she is thankful to have chosen this career path, and looks forward to many more years of serving people in her community, and fostering connection and relationships.

Thoughtful, energetic, passionate team players with bartending or serving backgrounds, and who are commit-

"Servers, mixologists, cooks are professional craftspeople, just like an electrician, automobile technician or mason. They are integral parts of this nation's backbone"

Michael Marx
owner, Creekside at The Gamble Mill

ted to delivering consistent customer experiences, may just find their fit at The Republic.

DUKE AND MONICA GASTIGER — RE FARM CAFÉ AT WINDSWEEP

Born out of deep care for the community and the local food system, RE Farm Café at Windswept combines Duke and Monica Gastiger's commitment to offering opportunities for community connectedness. They believe connecting food, land and people around that table is a recipe for success.

Duke's prior corporate life with Sheraton and Hyatt hotels embraced training with master chefs from around the world, learning the essence and nuances of each of their cuisines.

With a strong entrepreneurial drive, Duke returned to his college town and in 1987 opened Spats Café and Speakeasy, a themed "prohibition era" eatery, which he operated for 30 years prior to opening Re Farm Café.

His advice for those considering working in the service industry?

"There are many fulfilling aspects that drive all of our employees," Gastiger said.

"Growing food for a community that is interested in health and sourcing is a rewarding aspiration that is held by each of our employees."

Led by a dedicated team of farm managers, Gastiger said every person working at the farm and cafe is involved in knowing how and where things are evolving and thriving.

"Preparing food with creativity and intentionality of highlighting freshness, flavor, and health is far more than following a recipe," he said.

"The unnamed ingredient is passion. Passion for the art of creating dishes combining all of these factors is what drives our composers."

Gastiger's service staff is eager to know the farming practices and food wonders so they can convey this information with knowledge and pride.

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“Service staff are unique individuals who truly want the guest to have more than dinner; when people make plans to dine out at a place like RE Farm Cafe, they have expectations. Our service staff is the front line who shares the carefully planned and implemented dining experience,” he said.

ROD AND DOROTHEA STAHL — SEVEN MOUNTAINS WINE CELLARS, AXEMANN BREWERY

Much like the award-winning — and fellow Central PA Tasting Trail member — Seven Mountains Wine Cellars, Axemann Brewery is the culmination of turning a hobby into a business for owners Rod and Dorothea Stahl.

Rod had already been brewing with his beer brewing partner Stephen Hirlinger, and had previously started an engineering firm. Dorothea worked in bars and restaurants during college.

“Between his beer making skills and my limited background in the service industry, we made it work,” Dorothea said. “And having a great marketing director from the engineering firm to collaborate with made the transition from brewing in the barn to opening a brewery fun, and

made Axemann a success, despite the pandemic.”

Since Axemann was not open prior to COVID, the recent lifting of restrictions is new territory. As they look forward to seeing Axemann Brewery thrive in a fully opened Centre County community, they are looking for team members to support growth.

Rod said they look for “a good personality fit,” and said they can train those team members in the technical side, if necessary. In fact, Axemann has recently taken on several interns on the brewing side of the operation, which helps us and helps them learn the brewing process from start to finish.

LIZ GROVE — PINE GROVE HALL

Opening its doors in the summer of 2020, Pine Grove Hall seeks “creative, motivated and hard-working individuals to help create their vision.”

Owner Liz Grove said while it’s not often thought about in this way, working in a restaurant can be a very creative outlet.

“Hiring people who share a passion about their particular area of expertise and giving them the tools and freedom to use that creativity is an incredible



powerful way to build a team to execute the vision of the restaurant,” she said. “We work hard to match a person’s natural skills and personality to the right job.”

Grove said doing so can be the difference between success and failure, not just for the employee but for the restaurant.

“It’s a difficult industry, but it can be

extremely rewarding,” she stressed. “Get the right pieces to the puzzle, and let the magic happen!”

Looking to create magic? Hospitality businesses throughout Centre County want to hear from you.

Lesley Kistner is Public Affairs Director for The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau.

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several farm fresh, hyper-local options: the world-famous Berkey Creamery; Wasson Farm, Inglebean Ice Cream; Meyer Dairy, Big D’s Cones and Shakes in Milesburg; and the We Are Inn in Philipsburg (serving up Berkey Creamery ice cream and Italian water ice) are just some of the many cool options to beat the summertime heat in Happy Valley.

7. GIVE A BOOST TO NEW BUSINESSES

Belle Mercantile, Art a la Carte, Axemann Brewery, Pine Grove Hall, University Wine Company’s new tasting room and Titan Market are among the businesses that opened during or directly before the pandemic. Check out what’s new!

8. ENJOY A SPIKES BASEBALL GAME

Major League Baseball’s inaugural Draft League kicked off last month, bringing another exciting season of State College Spikes baseball to Happy Valley. What hasn’t changed is the comfortable, family friendly atmosphere at Medlar Field at Lubrano

Park, always enjoyable entertainment and delicious ballpark food.

9. DISCOVER NEW OLD FINDS

Happy Valley’s antique and vintage shops are full of unique finds. Philipsburg’s Shindig Alley specializes in Mid-Century Modern; and Apple Hill Antiques in State College is one of central Pennsylvania’s premier antique co-ops. The Great Mish Mosh is a “great collection of everything” and one of many browse-worthy antique stores in Bellefonte.

10. STAY TUNED FOR NEW EXPERIENCES ON THE HORIZON

The pollinator garden at the Arboretum at Penn State is expected to welcome visitors later this month. In Bellefonte, all eyes are on The Gamble Mill project, including the anticipated opening of the Creekside at the Mill restaurant and The Republic bar. In nearby Milesburg, Happy Dishes and a second Lupita’s location will soon bring flavorful dining options to the Bald Eagle Valley.

Need more inspiration? Visit HappyValley.com or Dispatch.HappyValley.com.

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The HVAB is prioritizing efforts to more fully capitalize on this premiere visitation segment. A sports sales and marketing professional with considerable experience in the industry was hired in 2020 to help achieve this goal. The HVAB is ensuring that our athletic facilities and the destination have national visibility on Play Easy Sports and other marketing platforms.

The HVAB’s Sports Committee is fostering communication and coordination among community and university athletic interests. The HVAB works closely with our venues, tournament organizers, hotels and municipal officials to ensure positive tournament experiences and outcomes. Finally, as a member of PA Sports, the HVAB helps to raise Pennsylvania’s visibility in this competitive market. With an inventory of top-notch athletic facilities, it is no surprise that the past year has seen a considerable uptick in interest in Centre County as a tournament destination.

Interest from travel writers and bloggers has also picked up significantly. The HVAB has already hosted several travel influencers this year, with more visits upcoming. In addition, the HVAB will help welcome the Mid-Atlantic Tourism Public Relations Alliance (MATPRA) gathering in October, bringing nearly 60 travel writers and 50 destination marketing organizations to Happy Valley this fall, providing even greater exposure for the destination and the region.

Future initiatives to grow our tourism product include the creation of a new, Arts and Culture Committee to help that industry recover from the pandemic and thrive, and the formation of a local tourism ambassador program, which recognizes the role we all can play in marketing Happy Valley as a great place to visit, live, work, learn and play.

Lesley Kistner is the public affairs director for The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau.



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