

# The Bureau Bulletin

A publication of the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

Winter 2013

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Jim Fairburn of Denali Zipline Tours accepts the Cheechako Award from Mat-Su CVB Membership Manager Justin Saunders during the annual "Stars of the Industry" awards luncheon.

## Tourism leaders honored at luncheon

The Mat-Su CVB honored several local organizations and businesses – and even a cat – during its annual "Stars of the Industry" awards luncheon in November, held in conjunction with the annual business meeting.

The Mat-Su Nordic Ski Club was honored with the Gold Star Award for its work in developing the Government Peak ski area, trail grooming efforts, event organization and its overall contributions to the local Nordic ski scene. Mark Stigar accepted the award on the organization's behalf.

The Cheechako Award, given to a new business that has thrived in its early years, was handed out to Denali Zipline Tours. After just two years in operations, the Talkeetna business has blossomed, adding tours daily to meet demand. They also are partnering with another business to bring a new zipline to Seward in 2014, and are offering some winter tours by appointment for the first time.

Ina Mueller was the recipient of the

*"Vern (Halter) always has the industry's best interest at heart, and he's been a champion for tourism every step of the way."*

- Bonnie Quill,  
Mat-Su CVB Executive Director

Northern Lights Award, for her efforts in getting the Big Lake Winterfest event started. The event is held on the Iron Dog race weekend in Big Lake and in two years has become a community standard. The initial event went from "idea" to "success" in just 90 days of planning, and grew in its second year. This March marks the third year the event will take place, and Mueller expects it to grow even more.

The Tourism Angel Award was given to Vern Halter, a longtime member of the tourism industry and current Mat-Su Borough Assemblyman. Halter has repeatedly recognized the economic benefits of the visitor industry by

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**2013-2014  
Mat-Su CVB  
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*The Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors  
is voted on by the general membership  
every October.*

*From the president's desk*

## We enter the new year with great momentum and continued focus

First, thank you to everyone who turned out to our annual meeting on Nov. 8 and heard about all the exciting news regarding the Gateway Visitor Center, a project I'm very passionate about. It was the largest event I can remember, and that speaks volumes about how interested you, our members, are in the success of the Gateway Visitor Center project.

As an update for those of you who were unable to attend the annual meeting, the Mat-Su Borough is in the process of purchasing the old Homestead RV Park property from Matanuska Electrical Association, thanks to a \$1 million appropriation from the Alaska Legislature this spring. We expect to have that purchase completed in the very near future. The Borough and the Mat-Su CVB will then look for other funding opportunities as we enter into the construction stage.

The Mat-Su Borough has included the Gateway Visitor Center in its legislative priorities as well, which shows the borough's commitment to this project, which would have a positive economic impact in our community.

As 2013 winds down, we've got great momentum, both for the Gateway project and also tourism in general.

I'm happy to report that the bed tax revenue generated in the Mat-Su Borough grew for the third straight fiscal year. A record \$1.10 million bed tax revenue is a strong indicator that the tourism industry is growing in the Mat-Su Valley.

Even better, the first quarter of the 2014 fiscal year is looking just as strong, based on early indications, giving us optimism that the trend of increased bed tax revenue will continue.

It's natural at this time of year to reflect on the last year, and look forward to a new "beginning" as we turn our calendars to 2014.

I was honored to serve as the Mat-Su CVB Board President last year, and look forward to continuing in that role again this year. We've got a dynamic board

with two new members, Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours and Zack Steer of Sheep Mountain Lodge, who are eager to contribute. Many of the board members have served for several years, giving us not only fresh voices with Travis and Zack, but also a sense of continuity as we move forward.

The board will be charting the course for the next year at our annual board retreat in Big Lake in early January.

If you have something you'd like the board to consider at the retreat, I'd love to hear from you.



**Craig Saunders**

Input from our membership helps the board make decisions on the direction we're taking, and we value the voice of our membership.

We're proud about all the things we accomplished in 2013, including improvements to our Web site, generating national news coverage, attracting more group tour business and infrastructure developments like the Government Peak Nordic skiing facility, the initial construction projects at the South Denali Visitor Center and new meeting facilities throughout the Mat-Su Borough. But more so, we're excited about the possibilities 2014 brings, and look forward to growing the tourism industry even more.

There's a lot of opportunity for growth and success, but it doesn't come without strong leadership, hard work and a continued focus. You can be assured that is the goal of the board of directors.

Have a very safe and happy holiday season, and let's all get ready for a successful 2014.

*Craig Saunders is the president of the Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors. He owns Alaska Backcountry Adventure Tours.*

## From the executive director

# Retreat offers board a time to plan future course

Our busy summer visitor season is in the rearview mirror. But for the board and staff of Mat-Su CVB, we are actively occupied in strategizing for 2014 and 2015. Our annual board planning retreat is scheduled for Jan. 7-8 in Big Lake.

Typically the retreat is an opportunity to focus on the big picture and drawing a road map to get us to our destination or "goal."

The discussion for relocating the visitor center and building a Gateway facility including partner organizations began at the November 2006 board retreat in Talkeetna. I recently reviewed the notes and minutes of that board retreat and feel confident we have remained on course ever since.

The board then passed a resolution in support of relocating the visitor center in October of 2007. In March of 2008 the bureau submitted a National Scenic Byways grant application for a Preliminary Feasibility Study and was awarded \$114,000 in December of 2008. The study was completed in June of 2010 and Task Force meetings were scheduled to implement the recommendations in the plan.

A Gateway Gathering event and public process in May of 2011 elevated the Homestead RV site as the No. 1 potential location for the Gateway Visitor Center.

The borough is now in the final stages of closing and acquiring the 48.8-acre site with a \$1 million state capital appropriation that came earlier this spring.

The borough has included \$5 million in its legislative priorities for 2014 for design and construction of the Gateway Visitor Center, and that doesn't include \$2 million dedicated



**Bonnie Quill,**  
Mat-Su CVB  
Executive Director

to the project from the sale of our current Visitor Information Center site, located at Mile 35.5 Parks Highway, in front of Mat-Su Regional Medical Center.

This is all the result of board of director vision and follow through. A text book case of working together to accomplish a common goal.

Of course we will talk at length about the effectiveness of our marketing efforts and new trends to reach more high potential visitors.

Our Mat-Su CVB committees and contractors will meet prior to the retreat to analyze our current efforts and make recommendations for the board to consider when planning the FY15 budget. We are blessed with a diverse and knowledgeable volunteer board of directors that brings many disciplines to the table.

Every year we select and reach out to a different community in our borough to visit, consider and reflect on our future and how we can best influence our opportunities.

This year, in Big Lake, we are extending an invitation for the community to meet with us and share their future possibilities in a board-hosted lunch on Jan. 8. We'd love to have lunch with you and

hear your visions for the future as well.

We are all connected in the visitor industry and the vision and completion of the Mat-Su Valley Gateway Visitor Center will unite us all.

*Bonnie Quill (bonnie@alaskavisit.com) is the Mat-Su CVB Executive Director.*

## Board of Directors seat 2 new members, elect officers

The Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors welcomed two new members during the annual meeting in early November.

Elected to the board were Travis Taylor of Premier Alaska Tours and Zack Steer of Sheep Mountain Lodge.

Two board members also won reelection to the board – Mark Austin of the Palmer Musk Ox Farm and Cheryl Metiva of the Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman.

They join Craig Saunders (Alaska Backcountry Adventure Tours), Steve Zadra (Princess Tours), Mabel Wimmer (Mendeltna Creek Lodge), Karen Harris (Alaska Garden Gate B&B and Cottages), Dee Dee Kay (Grand Denali Lodges) and Nicole Bendle (Key Bank) on the 10-person board.

"The ballot this year was one of the strongest we've ever had," said Mat-Su CVB Executive Director Bonnie Quill. "All of the candidates were exceptional."

Saunders will continue to serve as president for a second term. Metiva will remain the vice president, and Bendle will continue to serve as the treasurer. Harris will serve as the secretary, while Austin will continue to serve on the executive committee.

Darlene Hunter of Susitna River Lodging and Ruth Kimerer, formerly of the Alaska Railroad, were thanked for their contribution to the board during the annual meeting in



**Travis Taylor, left, of Premier Alaska Tours, joins Zack Steer of Sheep Mountain Lodge as new board members. They won election along with Cheryl Metiva and Mark Austin, who return to the board.**

November.

The Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors will meet during a two-day planning retreat in early January in Big Lake to discuss the upcoming year's marketing strategy, among other topics.

## Aussie market targeted during Down Under mission

The Mat-Su CVB brought the “Yahoo, Mat-Su” message Down Under in November, targeting Alaska’s top international visitors during a sales mission in Australia.

Casey Ressler of the Mat-Su CVB met with more than 200 travel agents and tour operators during the 10-day mission conducted by Visit Anchorage. Ten Alaska destinations and companies participated in the events in New Zealand, Sydney and Melbourne.

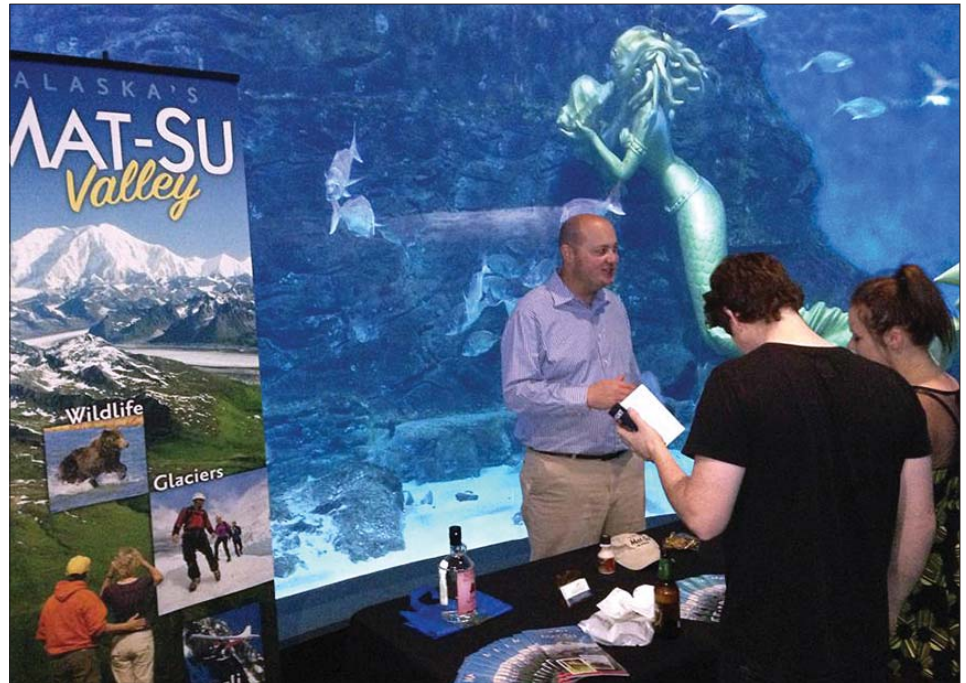
“The mission was very successful, and there is a lot of interest in Alaska from the Australians,” Ressler said. “Australia is the top international inbound market for Alaska, and this mission helped us educate decision makers about what they should be considering for their Alaska programs.”

Visit Anchorage organized the sales mission and invited partners from around Alaska to participate. The format varied, but the message did not.

“We visited agencies and operators and conducted 30- to 45-minute training programs about the destination, and highlighted products we thought would fit well into their Alaska vacation packages,” Ressler said.

There were also two evening events where agents and operators visited the Alaska booths and picked up more information in an informal setting.

Visits and trainings with key tour



Mat-Su CVB’s Casey Ressler visits with Australian travel agents during an evening event in Melbourne. Ressler was one of 10 Alaskans to participate in the Visit Anchorage Down Under Sales Mission, meeting with agents, tour operators and wholesalers from around Australia.

operators such as Adventure World, Spectrum Holidays, Globus, Scenic Tours and Evergreen Tours were also part of the sales mission.

“Developing relationships with those key tour operators is crucial,” Ressler said. “By building those relationships, it leads to

future business.”

Also participating in the Australia sales mission were the Alaska Railroad, Alaska Holiday, Fairbanks CVB, Fountainhead Hotels (Fairbanks), Northern Alaska Tour Company and CIRI Alaska Tourism Corp. and the state of Alaska tourism office.

## CVB to meet with tour operators at ABA, NTA

The Mat-Su CVB will meet with domestic tour operators during two national conventions in the next few months, highlighting lodging and activities that fit into Alaska group tour packages.

Casey Ressler is attending the American Bus Association Marketplace in Nashville in early January, and the National Tour Association Travel Exchange event in Los Angeles in mid-February. They are the two largest domestic travel trade events in the country.

“ABA and NTA are important because you have prescheduled appointments that are very qualified,” Ressler explained. “We are connecting

these tour operators to our members.”

Prior to both events, Ressler researches tour operators who will be attending, to see if they would be a good fit. Then, an extensive appointment request process matches up the CVB to interested operators, and appointments are scheduled.

Throughout the year, the CVB also hosts familiarization tours with NTA and ABA operators who come to Alaska to experience products first hand. This allows them to build out their Alaska packages.

“It all starts with those initial meetings at Marketplace or Exchange. You are building relationships that lead to business,” Ressler said.

**ABA Marketplace  
Jan. 11-14  
Nashville**

**NTA  
Travel Exchange  
Feb. 15-19  
Los Angeles**

**Mat-Su CVB staff  
will attend both**

# Summer ad campaign wins 2 statewide design awards

The Mat-Su CVB and its ad agency partner Solstice Advertising were recently honored with one of the state's top awards for the "Put the U in Mat-Su" in-state campaign conducted last summer.

The CVB and Solstice won two AGIA "The Big One" awards for the campaign, which launched statewide in May and was designed to highlight the Mat-Su Valley as a destination for Alaskans.

"Solstice did a great job taking our ideas and turning them into a visually stunning campaign," said Mat-Su CVB Marketing and Communications Manager Casey Ressler. "It's great to be recognized by AGIA for the campaign. We've received a lot of positive feedback about the ad series."

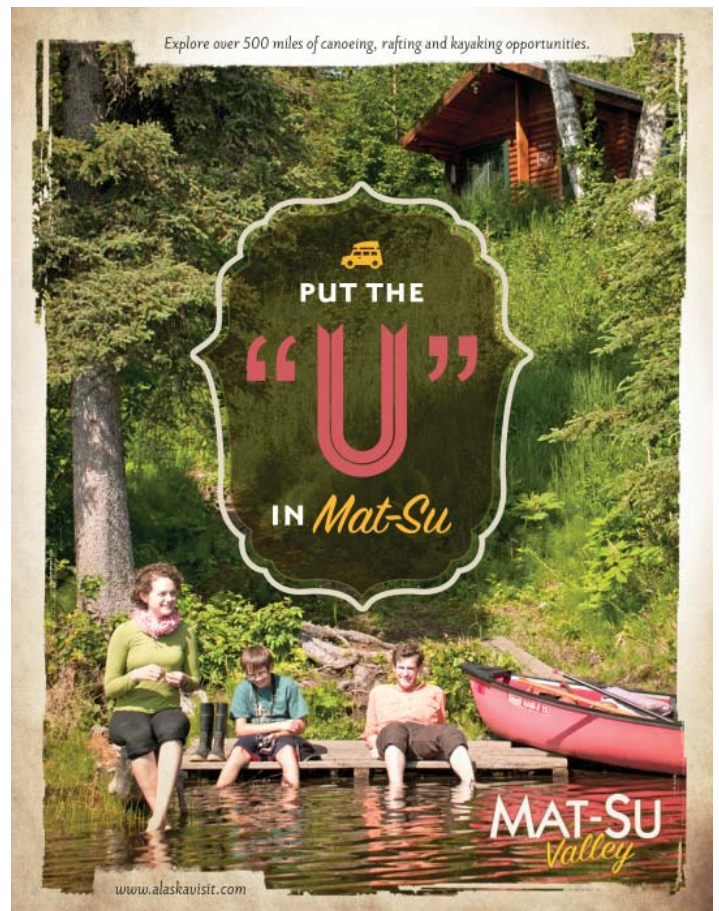
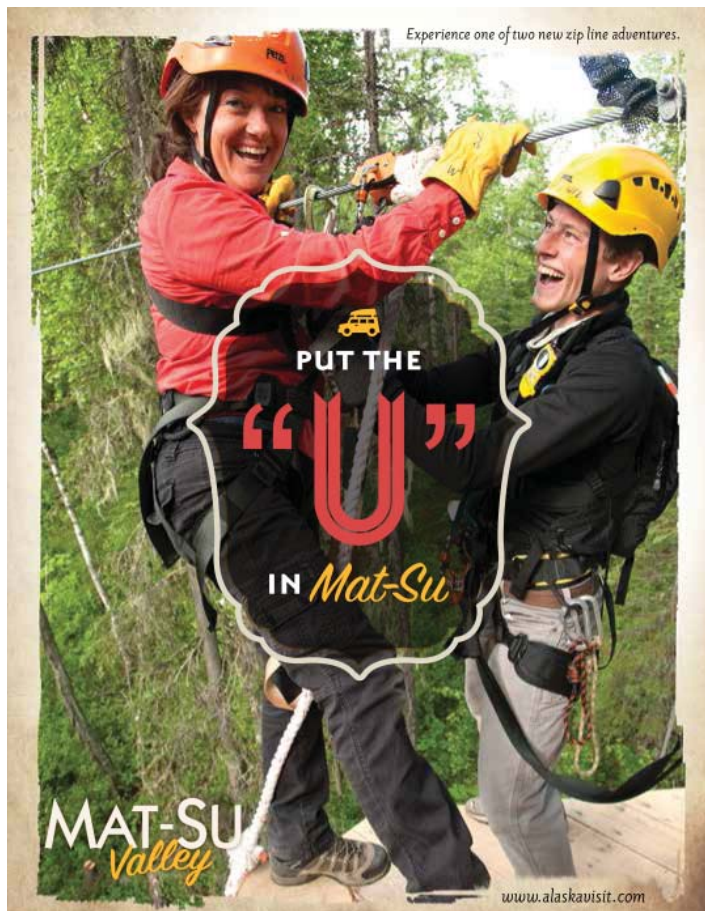
The CVB won the "Silver" and "Best of Campaign" awards. The judging criteria

is based on the visual appeal of the ads, and is judged by three industry experts from the Lower 48, explained Lincoln Garrick, president of Solstice Advertising.

"Judges award points based on certain criteria to reach honorable mention, silver and gold levels," Garrick said. "There were no gold designations awarded this year, but the Mat-Su CVB "Put the U in Mat-Su" campaign scored the highest among all submissions. We were very excited."

Garrick's team of Alexis Roskelley, Jackie Bartz and Katy Peck worked on the advertising campaign.

It was the first time the CVB and Solstice Advertising worked on a project together. Solstice Advertising designed the 2014 Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide this summer (see story, Page 6).



## 2014 Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide available now

The 2014 Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide has been printed and is now available for members, featuring a twilight view of Denali on the cover.

The guide was designed by Solstice Advertising, under direction from longtime designer Chris Whittington-Evans, giving the guide a fresh new look.

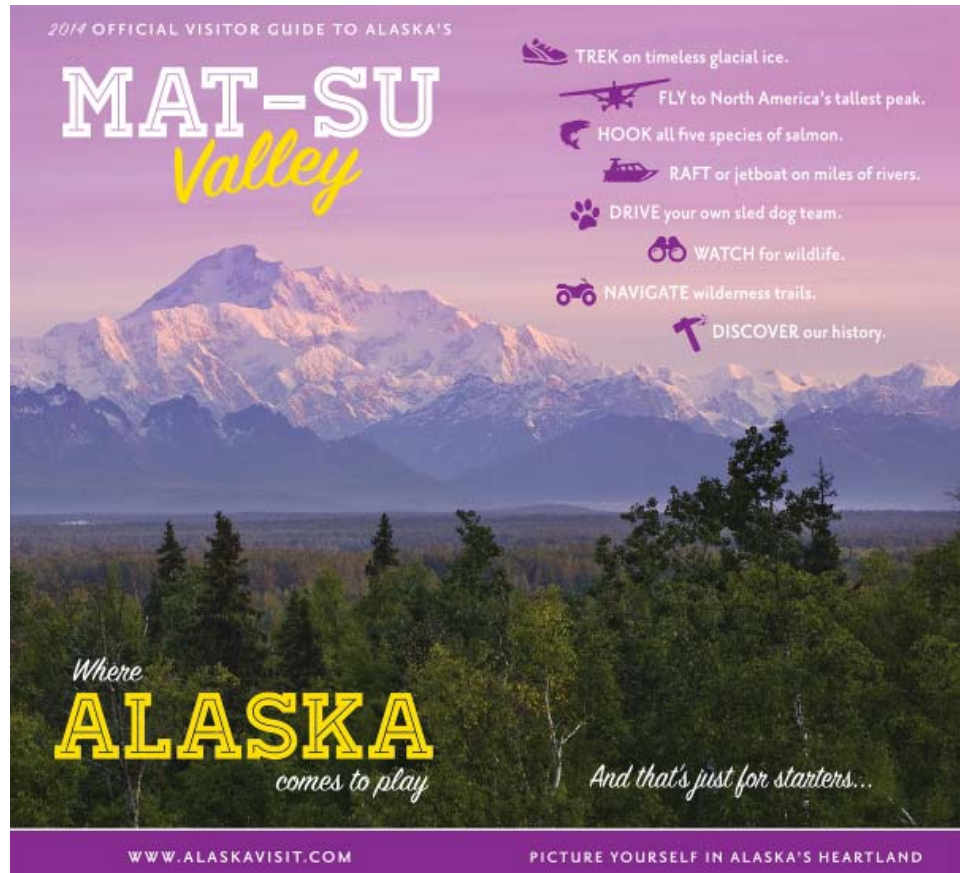
"We're very happy with the way the guide turned out, and Solstice Advertising brought a fresh take to the project," said Mat-Su CVB Marketing and Communications Manager Casey Ressler. "The visitor guide has a bolder look to it this year."

New photography includes shots from Hatcher Pass, Talkeetna, the Musk Ox Farm, golfing and more. Solstice utilized catchy icons throughout the guide to tie together into a very attractive package.

This year, 100,000 copies of the guide were printed. The guides are available at highly traffic visitor locations throughout Alaska, including airports, visitor centers and other attractions. Guides are also fulfilled through direct inquiries on the Mat-Su CVB Web site, as well as through reader reply cards in guides from other destinations.

The Mat-Su CVB also purchases 56,000 leads from the state of Alaska, which are highly qualified visitors who have requested information about Alaska through the state's marketing efforts and have indicated they plan to visit.

Another 4,000 guides are included in the state of Alaska's travel agent mailing program, in which high-producing travel agents receive packets featuring destination information for the entire state. This is the second year the Mat-Su



The 2014 Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide features a twilight view of Denali on the cover and gatefold. The guide was designed by Solstice Advertising.

CVB has participated in the program.

"By advertising in the Mat-Su CVB Visitor Guide, you reach a wide audience including tour operators, travel agents and prospective visitors," said Justin Saunders, the Mat-Su CVB membership manager. "It's a very low-cost way to reach high-potential visitors."

In early December, Mat-Su CVB members were mailed a copy of the visitor guide, along with a Mat-Su CVB annual report

If members would like more copies of the guide to distribute at their businesses or to mail, they can e-mail [casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com) or call 746-5000.

## Stay connected!



[www.facebook.com/  
visitmatsu](http://www.facebook.com/visitmatsu)



[www.twitter.com/  
visitmatsu](http://www.twitter.com/visitmatsu)



YouTube  
"yahoomatsu" channel

## Alaska Media Road Show attracts top travel writers

The Mat-Su CVB met with more than 30 national travel journalists during Alaska Media Road Show in October in Santa Barbara, highlighting the Mat-Su Valley's many attractions, activities and events for large media outlets.

The event, held each October, brings together Alaska partners and highly regarded national media for two days of appointments. The event has proven to be very valuable in the past.

"We've had great results from the appointments we've had at Alaska Media Road Show," said Casey Ressler, Mat-Su CVB marketing and communications manager. "We've received coverage in such outlets as the New York Post, Wall Street Journal and the Huffington Post, based on those conversations."

A key to Alaska Media Road Show is developing relationships with members of the media. Often, there isn't "instant gratification" in terms of coverage, but long-term relationships are made that lead to future coverage.

"Last summer, we had a story appear on a leading national sports Web site, sbnation.com, that was two years in the making," Ressler said. "We talked about the Denali centennial to the writer three years ago at Road Show, and we kept in touch. In the end, it was a very good story, but it didn't happen overnight."

Mat-Su CVB has also hosted several writers based on appointments made at Road Show, including Pam Mandel, who visited Talkeetna and Matanuska Glacier last fall and produced several stories.



Bonnie Quill and Casey Ressler meet with a travel journalist during the Alaska Media Road Show event in late October. The annual event attracts top travel writers from around the country has led to coverage of the Mat-Su Valley in such publications as the New York Post, Wall Street Journal and the Huffington Post.

### CVB assisting local events with marketing

This winter, the Mat-Su CVB is assisting four community events with extended marketing opportunities as a way to attract in-state Alaskans to the Valley.

The CVB is providing marketing assistance to Talkeetna Winterfest, Colony Christmas, the Willow Winter Carnival and the Big Lake Winterfest events in the form of media buys including radio and print advertisements in the Anchorage market.

"Winter events are important in attracting the in-state market, so we're happy to give these smaller events marketing assistance," said Bonnie Quill, Mat-Su CVB executive director. "We can use our reach to give them more exposure than they might have been able to do on their own."

The events are highlighted in the Mat-Su CVB's "Yahoo, Mat-Su" radio campaign heard in Anchorage, as well as in print advertisements placed in the Anchorage market.

The Mat-Su CVB board of directors made the decision to provide marketing assistance at last year's board retreat and planning session.

"Events drive people here, so it's a win-win opportunity for the CVB and for the event organizers," Quill said. "We're trying to get them to come for the event, but stay the weekend."

For more information on the program, interested members can e-mail [casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com).

### AlaskaVisit.com statistics

August through December 1  
Performance at a glance

#### Unique Visitors

13,343

Up 6.7 percent from same period last year

#### Page Views

35,041

Up 3.5 percent from 2012

#### Mobile Usage

2,736 visits

Up 41.5 percent from 2012

#### Tablet Usage

2,099 visits

Up 56 percent from last year

## Marketing, Hatcher Pass focus of next luncheons

The next two Mat-Su CVB member luncheons are slated for Jan. 24 and Feb. 28 at Evangelo's in Wasilla, and will give members the tools they need for a successful summer season.

On Jan. 24, Mat-Su CVB's Casey Ressler will talk about the 10 simple things you can do during the slower winter months to ensure a busy summer – and attract more customers to your business.

On Feb. 28, representatives from the Mat-Su Borough and local trails groups will be on hand to talk about the borough's new Olympian-designed Government Peak Nordic skiing facility in Hatcher Pass.

This world-class trail system has been busy since it opened a year ago, and new developments include an adventure center that is currently under construction.

"Luncheons are always informative for members, and just as important, they are a chance for members to network and develop some relationships with other members that often lead to referrals in the summer," said Mat-Su CVB membership manager Justin Saunders.

The final two luncheons of the winter season are scheduled for March 21 and April 18, both at Evangelo's at noon. The programs are still to be decided, with one of them tentatively being an Alaska Travel Industry Association workshop for members. In May, the annual Visitor Center open house replaces the usual membership luncheon.

Luncheons are free to attend and are open to the public, and a buffet lunch is available for purchase directly from Evangelo's for \$15.

To RSVP for any of the monthly membership luncheons, interested people can contact Saunders at [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com).



Talkeetna-area members accept the "It Happens" Award on behalf of the unofficial mayor of Talkeetna, Stubbs the cat. Stubbs brought international attention to Talkeetna during his amazing recovery from "political wounds" suffered this fall.

## AWARDS: 'Stars' honored in November

Continued from Page 1

supporting trails and infrastructure projects.

"Vern always has the industry's best interest at heart, and he's been a champion for tourism every step of the way," said Mat-Su CVB Executive Director Bonnie Quill. "I think the term 'Tourism Angel' perfectly describes Vern and the work he's done on the industry's behalf."

Finally, the "It Happens" Award is given

to laugh with, not at, someone. This year's winner was none other than Stubbs The Mayor.

The feline, which has been an icon of the Talkeetna area for years, was hurt in a dog vs. cat incident this fall. Out of that terrible news came a tremendous amount of positive coverage in international media, highlighting Talkeetna and the Mat-Su Valley. Stubbs is making a strong recovery, and the award is one step of that recovery process.

## Get involved by joining a committee

Serving on a committee is a great way to get involved with the Mat-Su CVB and help shape the direction the organization takes in marketing the Mat-Su Valley.

There are currently openings on all three committees – membership, marketing and Internet.

Committees typically meet quarterly for an hour or two, so there isn't a major time commitment needed from members.

Committees form recommendations that are forwarded to the board of directors for consideration and action. The membership committee focuses

on membership benefits, dues and membership programs.

The marketing committee focuses on marketing programs, the visitor guide cover and contents and related topics. The Internet committee focuses on the CVB's Web site, including online marketing strategies and directions.

To get involved with one of the Mat-Su CVB committees, interested members can e-mail either [casey@alaskavisit.com](mailto:casey@alaskavisit.com) or [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com) for more information, including upcoming meetings.



## Tourism industry calendar of events

Dec. 24-Jan. 1	Mat-Su CVB offices closed for holidays	
Jan. 7-8	Mat-Su CVB Board of Directors Retreat	Big Lake
Jan. 11-14	American Bus Association Marketplace Mat-Su CVB will participate	Nashville
Jan. 17-19	LA Times Travel Show Mat-Su CVB will participate in the state of Alaska booth	Los Angeles
Jan. 24	Mat-Su CVB monthly membership luncheon Casey Ressler will present "10 tips to get your season started right"	Evangelo's, noon
Feb. 6-9	Icelandair Mid-Atlantic Seminar Mat-Su CVB will participate	Reykjavik, Iceland
Feb. 7-9	Boston Globe Adventure in Travel Show Mat-Su CVB will participate in the state of Alaska booth	Boston
Feb. 15-19	National Tour Association Travel Exchange Mat-Su CVB will participate	Los Angeles
Feb. 28	Mat-Su CVB monthly membership luncheon "Update on Hatcher Pass developments"	Evangelo's, noon
March 21	Mat-Su CVB monthly membership luncheon Program TBD	Evangelo's, noon
March 21-23	Mat-Su Outdoorsman Show Mat-Su CVB will have a booth	Wasilla (Menard Center)
March 27-30	Great Alaska Sportsman Show Mat-Su CVB will have a booth	Anchorage (Sullivan Arena)
April 11	Mat-Su CVB Travel Auction	Evangelo's
April 18	Mat-Su CVB monthly membership luncheon Program TBD	Evangelo's, noon
April 25-27	Fairbanks Outdoors Show Mat-Su CVB will have a booth	Fairbanks (Carlson Center)

### Save the date - the ExTRAVELganza is coming!

Mark your calendars for April 11, when the Mat-Su CVB's annual wine tasting and travel auction ExTRAVELganza takes place at Evangelo's in Wasilla.

The fund-raiser is the largest of the year for the CVB, and each year, the event sells out early.

Tickets will be available in mid-February for the event - check your e-bulletins for upcoming announcements about tickets. Tickets are \$35 each, and reserved tables of eight are available for \$255.

Members can expect to receive donation request forms in January. Each year, donations range from inexpensive items like coffee punch cards, to grand prizes such as a cruise. All donations are valued by the CVB, and help the

CVB further its mission of marketing the Mat-Su Valley as a premier visitor destination. Sponsorship opportunities are also available, which give your business exposure in the weeks leading up to the event, as well as signage and mentions during the travel auction.

"Donating is a great way to get some exposure for your business, and to help us further our marketing efforts," said Justin Saunders, membership manager for the Mat-Su CVB and the coordinator of the event. "We are thankful for the members' support of the travel auction."

For more information about the event, including donation and sponsorship opportunities, interested people can contact Saunders at [justin@alaskavisit.com](mailto:justin@alaskavisit.com) or 746-5032.

Happy Holidays from  
the Mat-Su CVB!

Bonnie Quill Neil Campbell



Casey Ressler

*The Mat-Su CVB office will be closed Dec. 24-Jan. 1.  
We'll reopen for regular business hours on Jan. 2.*

YAHOO!  
**Mat-Su**

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[www.alaskavisit.com](http://www.alaskavisit.com)