



## **Travel and Tourism – Getting The Economy Rolling Again**

*By Jay Markwalter, Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus Executive Director*

The jobs of our families, friends, and neighbors are in danger. A busy summer travel season has typically employed tens of thousands in our state, but this year's new reality has put many Georgians out of work. With restrictions in place and understandable traveler concerns, the summer travel season has not been at its usual levels, even while travel businesses and employees take safety precautions and implement new health and safety protocols.

At the Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus (GACVB), our role is to support our local destination marketing organizations (DMOs) of all structures (CVBs, Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Authorities, etc.) promoting their destinations and regions to attract visitors who will support our local businesses—from our storefront retailers, award-winning restaurants and craft beverage establishments to our hotels and meetings and events spaces.

As the association of Georgia's DMOs representing the local (and collectively, state) travel and tourism-based economic development industry, our members' and allied partners' responsibility is promoting our communities to guests and businesses alike. Our industry, one of the largest in our state, are all experiencing this reality firsthand, while we urgently prepare for travel's safe return so our state's destination attractions, lodging properties, and convention business can get back up and running ... and in turn, get people back to work.

In order to do that effectively, we need Congress to help save the travel industry. The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) is a critical lifeline for small businesses throughout the country to keep their doors open and people employed. Up until recently, DMOs have been excluded from its benefits, though we so desperately need their support, particularly the loan forgiveness the program offers—and even though current legislation includes this provision, this relief is not guaranteed.

Travel and tourism businesses and organizations, of which 83% are small businesses, have experienced an unprecedented contraction due to coronavirus. 8.1 million of the industry's 15.8 million jobs (51%) have been lost so far. Travel spending is on pace to decline by over \$500 billion this year, with a total negative impact to the U.S. economy of over \$1.2 trillion dollars.

However, as vital community entities reliant upon tourism revenues, our local tourism organizations have made difficult decisions to stay afloat, while continuing to share critical information and encouraging our communities and visitors to exercise preventive health and safety measures—like wearing masks, maintaining safe distances and washing hands regularly. Our DMOs also take every chance to remind everyone that the vibrant regions of our state will be ready once travel can pick back up.

Access to PPP funding would tremendously assist our resiliency and continuity. DMOs are no different from any other PPP recipient—except our incorporation as quasi-governmental agencies, authorities, or 501 (c) 6 organizations serving as local jurisdiction partners vital to tourism marketing and community development. This specific distinction has so far precluded our participation in the PPP, placing our survival at risk.

Luckily, the solution is easy and well within reach. The U.S. Senate's latest relief and stimulus bill, the HEALS Act, which builds upon the good work of the HEROES Act introduced by the U.S. House, supports the expansion of PPPs to include DMOs. We applaud Senate leadership for including these provisions in their opening legislative statement, and we implore Senators Perdue and Loeffler to ensure these measures are nonnegotiable and included in the final package that passes through both chambers.

The stakes are high right now for the overall health of our economy and our workforce—particularly in Georgia. And as some of the primary drivers of economic benefits to our communities through efforts to attract visitors, our tourism professionals want to be in the position to do exactly that as soon as possible. Expansion of PPP for our organizations, locally, throughout our state and nationwide, will enable us to dramatically contribute to the rebuilding of our economy, as we safely reopen our country and welcome visitors to experience all Georgia has to offer.