

Bowles Rice

VIEWS & VISIONS

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Annette Gavin Bates
West Virginia Association
of Convention and
Visitors Bureaus

Annette Gavin Bates serves as President of the West Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus. She is also the Chief Executive Officer of the Jefferson County Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Eastern Panhandle Representative for the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association, proudly promoting the county and state as a premiere tourist destination. Prior to her nine years with the Jefferson County CVB, Gavin Bates spent 23 years in the hotel and hospitality industry, providing hotel sales, operations, and public relations support.

The Hospitality Economy

There are two things you should know about West Virginia. First, the song Country Roads is our anthem, and we are darn proud of it! Catch the end of a WVU home game or hang in the local bar and you'll end up belting out this song. Whether you're a resident Mountaineer or not, you can't help but sing along. It is fabulous and infectious, and we own it. Really. The Department of Tourism owns the rights to Country Roads. Brilliant move, Secretary Ruby.

Second, nowhere in the world is there a more beautiful and wonderous place than West Virginia. While the legendary song describing the Blue Ridge mountains and Shenandoah River compels you to a place (... *where I belong...* see, you can't help yourself), the reason you come to West Virginia is because you watched an amazing video, saw



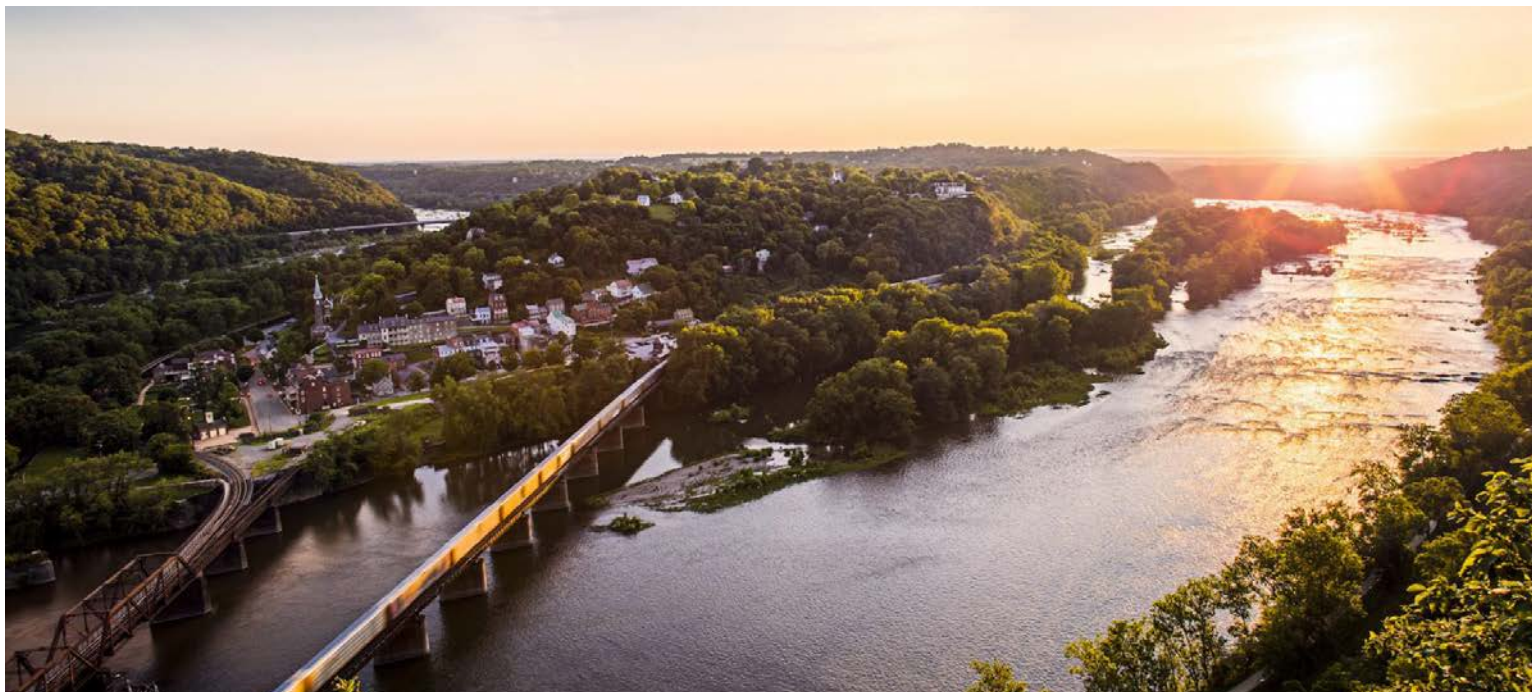
I am proud to represent the state's many tourism ambassadors and recognize their critical role as boots on the ground and experts in their destinations. These 41 non-profits represent more than 4,000 partners, including over 39,000 lodging rooms throughout West Virginia, and demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting their destinations. In 2022, our members dedicated over \$10 million to marketing their attractions, towns, and partners. Furthermore, many CVBs operate visitor centers that function as the front door to their community, welcoming

“Through the hard work of many, the hospitality and tourism sectors are now a significant driver of West Virginia’s overall economy!”

some stunning photography, or read some engaging content aimed at inviting you to this special place called “Almost Heaven.” Sincere appreciation to the state tourism department and all their marketing efforts that lead you here, and then to your local Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB).

Through the hard work of many, the hospitality and tourism sectors are now a significant driver of West Virginia's overall economy. As President of the West Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus (WVACVB),

thousands and helping ensure a positive visitor experience. Some function as event organizers and sponsors, participating in over 325 events last year. Others play a critical role in development projects, whether it's remodeling an historic grand theater in Wheeling or remodeling and creating welcome centers at gateways to the state in Parkersburg and Harpers Ferry. You see, there is no one-size-fits-all, and we celebrate the diversity of our CVBs. After all, the role of any CVB is ultimately determined by the region they represent.



Now, it's time for a quick explanation of how CVBs are funded, which should help you understand the importance of the education and advocacy work involved over the past years. Convention and Visitor Bureaus are non-profits, with dedicated funding from the West Virginia state code; they receive a portion of the hotel motel occupancy tax. Growth in the occupancy tax is a direct result of the success of the strategic marketing initiatives of the West Virginia Department of Tourism and our regional and local CVBs.

The WVACVB is a self-governing organization dedicated to maximizing marketing dollars to attract more visitors to West Virginia. In alliance with the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association (WVHTA) and our shared management team at Bowles Rice, the WVACVB is proud to have taken the initiative to collaborate with legislators and write language for an oversight bill aimed at outlining best practices and principles for destination management organizations to ensure that our marketing dollars are effectively and accountably advancing our tourism economy. This language for West Virginia Senate Bill 488 dovetailed the

association's existing accreditation program with the criteria of West Virginia Code § 7-18-1, et seq. Ultimately, this move to work with legislators and take a hard look at CVBs proved to be a positive advancement of integrity while amplifying the importance of local CVBs.

The strength of tourism in West Virginia continues to grow as the industry powered through the pandemic and has since bounced back to record levels. The data is impressive, as reported in the Dean Runyan "The Economic Impact of Travel in West Virginia," commissioned by the state Department of Tourism. Travel spending in the state was \$4.9 billion and, in my little eastern panhandle of paradise, our region had the highest spend in the state at just over \$1 billion, or 20 percent of the entire visitor spend. Now, let's drill down into Jefferson County, a destination just an hour from Washington, D.C. that is rich in history and outdoor recreation and includes the most well-known town in the state: Harpers Ferry.

With a brand that highlights this magical iconic village, as well as the contemporary college town of Shepherdstown, we can tout the highest

visitor spend for any county in the state at \$824 million, or almost 17 percent of the entire state. It makes sense, with a destination that includes assets such as the famous Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Bavarian Inn Resort and Brewing, River Riders Adventure Resort, Hollywood Casino at Charles Town Races, and incredible trails like the Appalachian Trail and C & O Canal. If it seems like I'm name-dropping, it's because I am. Jefferson County, with the brand of these four small towns of Harpers Ferry, Bolivar, Charles Town, and Shepherdstown, is simply where Almost Heaven begins.

The future for the state of West Virginia is, emphatically, tourism. West Virginia has become an internationally recognized vacation destination, garnering attention from major publications, websites, and travel sources. More visitors are discovering West Virginia every day. Our incredible natural resources, world-class outdoor recreation, and friendly people make us a desired destination for those seeking refuge from the hustle and bustle of urban life. The tourism economy for West Virginia is, and will remain, one of the most significant economic drivers for our state. **W**