CHARACTERIZING FY 2020 IS NOTHING SHORT OF A TALE OF TWO TOURISM ENVIRONMENTS EXPERIENCED BY OUR REGION. What began as banner year for tourism on July 1, 2019, turned into a nightmare amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that brought unprecedented levels of fear, closures, economic and personal hardships.

The year started with monumental opportunities to host major industry events. In July, Destinations International brought their annual convention to St. Louis, attended by destination marketing organizations from around the globe, every travel industry association and travel and meeting trade publication. A few months later, in December, tour operators from around the world descended upon St. Louis to attend the International Showcase of the Travel South organization. This provided us with the opportunity to showcase our tour and travel product to potential buyers and key industry publications.

In March, our world upended, when the COVID-19 virus brought all travel to a screeching halt. Our customary metrics of success had little meaning as they were so removed from the healthy and vibrant industry we enjoyed prior to the pandemic. In response, we redefined success in the reality that surrounded us: to solve the challenges we faced with grit, resilience and determination as we built the road to recovery.

Through our weekly online Partner sessions with sectors of the tourism community, we co-created and introduced a series of new initiatives such as Virtual St. Louis, Re-explore St. Louis, STL Take it Home, Takeout Tuesday, Staycation Saturday and Passport to St. Louis. We showed our resolve by recognizing Global Meeting Industry Day and National Travel and Tourism Week with nearly 1,000 members of the hospitality community joining virtually. Our sales and services teams worked tirelessly to re-accommodate literally thousands of meetings and events displaced by the pandemic. And, who could forget hosting American Ninja Warrior’s new season in the Dome? The show was the first NBC series to have completed a full season of episodes during COVID-19 and they did it here, in St. Louis, beginning in June 2020.

Our industry came together with public health officials and created health and safety protocols to guide the re-opening of St. Louis’ tourism community. We formed six working groups representing dozens of Explore St. Louis partner organizations and devoted countless hours to translate public health imperatives into the operating realities of hotels, restaurants, venues, attractions, retail and travel organizations. We celebrated the re-opening of St. Louis City & County on May 18th introducing a host of new health and safety protocols impacting every aspect of the tourism experience. We involved and shared that information with regional partners in metro east and Missouri counties surrounding St. Louis. Most importantly, we never lost faith and continued to advocate for our industry and make plans for the future, including selection of contractors to begin work on AC Next Gen.

As I write, the pandemic continues its destructive course, but with new vaccines on the immediate horizon, its days are numbered. With the heartfelt support from all of you, and the host of world tourism assets we’re so fortunate to have in this region, I have never been more optimistic about our future. And I have never been more grateful for you, our partners and our friends. Thank you.

Kathleen M. Ratcliffe, President
EXPLORE ST. LOUIS ORGANIZED 46 PARTNER WEBINARS OVER 34 WEEKS DURING THE PANDEMIC TIME FRAME OF THE FISCAL YEAR, TOTALING MORE THAN 50 HOURS OF COLLABORATION, EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Pre-Pandemic
July 1-March 15
At the beginning of the fiscal year, Explore St. Louis continued its practice of regular partnership outreach and recruitment activities in support of more than 800 Partner organizations. This included weekly information sharing sessions where Partners came together to meet with our staff and share insight into their business and discuss opportunities for collaboration.

Networking events for our Partners included:
- Explore St. Louis Holiday Magic Partner Celebration
- Coffee with Explore St. Louis at Angad Arts Hotel
- Partner After Hours Connection at Third Degree Glass Factory

Partner recruitment remained steady through 2019 as we welcomed several new hotels, venues, service providers and restaurants to our ranks. Meanwhile, partner retention remained steady at 95%, well above the national average of 82%. We continued to grow a base of partnership and collaboration in the industry that would serve us well for the fight ahead.

Our partners were actively engaged in helping us host both Destinations International and Travel South for their international events.

Phase One of Pandemic
March 15-April 3
Explore St. Louis led the hospitality and tourism industry in a coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic with a series of communication activities designed to keep our Partners informed. A key tool in this effort was weekly Partner update calls. Each Partner update included a guest speaker or panel, and updates on Explore St. Louis marketing and sales activities from Brian Hall, Chief Marketing Officer and Eric Janecke, Acting Vice-President of Sales.
Our Partner updates began with a three-week series of four separate webinars: hotels, restaurants, attractions and general partners. An average of 350 Partners joined us for webinars each week featuring various guest speakers and updates with a focus on immediate relief for our industry. Our priority was sharing educational speakers and resources from a local to national level including:

- Local Industry Food Donations & Giveaways
- Alderwoman Christine Ingrassia – Gateway Resilience Fund
- SLDC Small Business Relief Fund
- Discounted Advertising Opportunities
- CARES Act Funding Opportunities
- Rhonda Hamm-Niebreugge, St. Louis Lambert International Airport
- Bank of America – SBA Loan Program
- Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis
- Regional Business Council/STL.works – Job Opportunities

Several major initiatives co-created or shaped by these discussions are further discussed in the marketing section.

**Phase Two of Pandemic**  
**April 6-April 30**

Weekly webinars were shifted to twice weekly with one session designed for hoteliers and meeting suppliers with a focus on event rescheduling, and a second for all other Partners with industry forecasts, outlooks and a focus on leisure marketing activity. During this time period, we hosted 461 total attendees with an average of 65 attendees per webinar.

Guest speakers during this time included CBRE Hotel Research and Lodging Hospitality Management. Our team also shared feedback from our virtual meeting with our National Customer Advisory Board to provide insight on impacts and recovery.

**Global Meeting Industry Day**  
Explore St. Louis collaborated with Maritz Global Events, Lodging Hospitality Management, Niche Food Group, and the St. Louis Chapter of MPI in recognition of Global Meetings Industry Day. This event was a panel discussion designed to celebrate our industry, share insights on how to cope with this crisis and outlook for moving forward.

The event was held on Thursday, April 14th with over 200 participants in attendance.
Working Groups – Road to Recovery
Explore St. Louis assembled a group of industry leaders to collaborate on developing reopening protocols in collaboration with public health officials in St. Louis City and County. These groups included leaders in hotels, restaurants, attractions, venues, transportation services, and retail operations.

The working groups held more than a dozen meetings, spanning hours of collaboration on initial drafts of opening protocols which were reviewed and edited by public health officials in St. Louis City and County, and the Metropolitan St. Louis Pandemic Task Force to produce protocols issued by public health orders.

Phase Three of Pandemic
May 6–June 30
Calls were narrowed to one weekly partner update that covered marketing, sales, pandemic updates as well as insightful guest speakers focused on immediate best practices to host customers and events while looking at our future recovery. Guest speakers included:

- Barnes & Thornburg, LLP – Event Contract Information
- Butler’s Pantry – Catering Best Practices
- CBRE Hotel Research – Forecast and Research
- CONNECT Meetings – Planner Research
- Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis – Economic Impact Research
- The KNOWLAND Group – Traveler Research
- Levy Restaurants – Food Service Protocols
- Missouri Division of Tourism – State Tourism Initiatives
- PSAV – Virtual/Hybrid Meetings
- Vicia (Tara Gallina) – Restaurant Act

National Travel & Tourism Week
On Thursday May 7th, Explore St. Louis held a National Travel and Tourism Week web panel to reflect on the vitality of the industry and the impressive developments underway – setting the stage for the industry’s recovery. Panelists included representatives from the St. Louis Cardinals, Live! By Loews Hotel, Lodging Hospitality Management, MLS4TheLou and the Lawrence Group. The 90-minute webinar welcomed some 200 attendees.
DURING THE FIRST EIGHT MONTHS OF FY2020, LEISURE ACTIVITY IN ST. LOUIS WAS AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH. The “In the Know” advertising campaign featuring celebrities from St. Louis was continuing to build momentum, thanks in part to the added star power of Jenna Fischer and Jennifer Lewis with Jon Hamm and Ellie Kemper on tap to film new spots towards the end of the fiscal year. Fall campaigns targeting African American, Hispanic, and LGBT travelers featured Sterling K. Brown, Andy Cohen and Jackie Joyner-Kersee. The holiday campaign highlighted all the wonderful events, light displays, and shopping available. We started promoting winter activities and were preparing for the spring campaign when everything changed.

During the first weeks of the pandemic, Explore St. Louis launched several marketing programs to stay engaged with locals and visitors and to help support our partners. These programs included:

- **STL Take It Home:** When in-dining was suspended and then reactivated, Explore St. Louis worked with Curbside STL to provide a list of restaurants offering curbside and delivery service, and a link to donate in support of these businesses and their employees.
- **Virtual St. Louis:** When attractions were closed for several months in the spring, Explore St. Louis developed Virtual St. Louis to highlight virtual tours from attractions, as well as virtual art projects, performances, classes, and more around the region.
- **The Daily Explorer:** An email series sent each day to the consumer database and partners that highlighted two virtual offerings – predominantly from the Virtual St. Louis page.

As the region started to reopen, we switched gears to offer the following programs:

- **Re-Explore St. Louis Responsibly:** When St. Louis City and County began re-opening on May 18, the marketing team introduced an integrated campaign featuring digital and social media, spot radio advertising and outdoor billboards to generate demand for leisure experiences available throughout the region. Digital ads served to browsers within a drive market radius of 300 miles highlighted the health and safety protocols in place at attractions, restaurants and venues, encouraging guests to Re-Explore St. Louis Responsibly. Radio spots running in approximately a dozen known feeder markets feature St. Louis Cardinals’ emcee Todd Thomas reminded residents and visitors alike of the many reasons to plan a getaway in the gateway city. The campaign was made possible by CARES Acts funding administrated by the Missouri Division of Tourism and accounted for 60% of the site traffic to www.explorestlouis.com.
- **Passport to STL:** Provided information and offers from hotels, attractions, restaurants, and shops to build packages that visitors can enjoy when they are ready to visit St. Louis.
- **Social Media Promotions** included: *Wish You Were Here Wednesdays* (ran while attractions were closed) which featured a short video about a St. Louis attraction and encouraged visitors to share their memories of that attraction; *Take It Home Tuesdays* which highlights the STL Take It Home program of supporting a local restaurant by ordering out every Tuesday; *Staycation Saturdays* which encourages locals to book a hotel room on a Saturday night for a fun way to get out of the house and enjoy local attractions.
DESPITE COVID-19, EXPLORE ST. LOUIS SECURED $3.3 MILLION WORTH OF EARNED MEDIA COVERAGE, OVER 45 MILLION IMPRESSIONS AND WORKED WITH OVER 60 OUTLETS. Before COVID, plans were underway to host events in New York and London; however, those were cancelled, along with any in-person media visits. Stories were pitched and covered about the Virtual St. Louis the Take it Home programs. Media picked up stories on the re-opening of St. Louis, new hotel and attraction openings, and the planned improvements at America’s Center. Outlets that provided coverage of the St. Louis region included: BizBash, Condé Nast Traveler, Fodor’s, Forbes, Frommers, Meetings & Conventions, Midwest Living, Thrillist, Travel + Leisure, and USA Today.

VISITOR SERVICES VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF WELcomed and assisted 37 CONVENTIONS AND EVENTS IN THE FIRST THREE QUARTERS OF THE FISCAL YEAR. Highlights included dozens of Street Greeters positioned throughout downtown during United Pentecostal Church International’s Youth Congress; for Travel South International, our team greeted every arriving Travel Buyer at their Airport gate, meeting over 100 flights; and for the NHL All Star Game, we provided special welcomes at St. Louis Lambert and key hotels. On March 9, 2020, a fifth Visitor Center opened at St. Louis Union Station, at the entrance to the St. Louis Aquarium. Other locations include Forest Park Visitor Center, Gateway Arch National Park, and Terminals 1 and 2 at St. Louis Lambert International Airport.

During COVID-19, Visitor Services continued to provide assistance and assurances to travelers through the phones and website. By the end of the fiscal year, preparations were made for Visitor Center re-openings in early July.
NEW STRUCTURE. The year began with a comprehensive review of the structure and deployment of meetings and events against the backdrops of pace imperatives and AC Next Gen, the expansion and enhancement of America’s Center.

The team analyzed a host of factors in creating a new and enhanced deployment structure including:

- Meetings and events that match the characteristics of AC Next Gen
- Booking windows and lead volume by peak night
- Vertical markets vs. geographical alignment
- Pace needs of both America’s Center and hotel partners

Foundational to our re-deployment plan was understanding the decision-making processes of customers, including the important role of intermediaries in the process. The resulting structure offers a hybrid approach aligning our team of sales executives with both geographic territories and vertical markets echoing the deployments of many of our hotel partners.

NEW TOOLS. To provide our sales executives with actionable information on potential lead activity, we secured two database resources “Topline” and “Knowland Insight.” Using these tools and other prospecting methods, each sales manager prepared detailed action plans designed to impact their individual territories in a proactive and strategic fashion. To improve our ability to track and manage customer relationships, an audit of our present CRM was conducted in collaboration with team members representing the entire Explore St. Louis enterprise. After an exhaustive analysis, a recommendation was prepared for and accepted by management to migrate to SimpleView and Event Pro in FY 2021.

NEW EFFICIENCY. A critical analysis of our business review process including license agreements was conducted resulting in an enhanced and streamlined workflow critical to responding nimbly to customer inquiries. A key change in our review process was embracing the concept of “total revenue contribution” as there are many ways a group may benefit the St. Louis hospitality community and America’s Center. In an effort to improve pace and streamline decision-making, we established “free sell dates” with a shortened booking window and utilizing the strategy of layering.
NEW CHALLENGE. The sales and services team served as a communication center for customers and stakeholders with questions related to the pandemic including restrictions, health safety protocols and re-bookings. Between March 15 and June 30, Explore St. Louis staff assisted 13 conventions with rescheduling their events for future dates accounting for an estimated $50 million in economic impact. To maintain customer relationships, the team engaged with Connect Meetings to conduct two virtual programs to introduce St. Louis to some 60 meeting professionals from around the United States.

Convention Services
Early in the year Convention Services was instrumental in hosting the Destinations International 2019 Annual Meeting in July and Travel South USA International Showcase in December as a means to create greater awareness of the unique travel and meeting package that our destination offers. The Convention Services team also hosted 31 planning visits for groups booked to meet in future years during the FY ensuring they were fully prepared to have a successful event in St. Louis. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, department representatives attended five pre-promote events for future conventions to generate excitement about their upcoming meeting in St. Louis.

The team provided service to 247 groups of varying sizes, 20 of which were citywide groups and 225 where single hotel meetings for the fiscal year. As the pandemic unfolded the Convention Services team worked to retool their practices, standard operating procedures, training and structure to position itself to advise customers on the health and safety protocols, openings, closings and restrictions associated with operating in the COVID-19 environment. Our focus on maintaining strong client relationships, in collaboration with our partners, was crucial to assisting groups scheduled between March 15 and June 30, 2020, to reschedule their events for future dates in St. Louis.

Film Office
The St. Louis Film Office assisted 69 productions ranging from short films and documentaries to reality TV Shows with locations, permits and general filming information. The Film Office also participated in the Annual NY Meet Up with the Missouri Film Office, attended the Independent Filmmaker Project, worked with local production companies like the Missouri Film Office, KC Film Office and Missouri Motion Media Association to provide information for productions in St. Louis during COVID-19.
From July 1, 2019-March 15, 2020 the America’s Center Convention Complex hosted a steady line-up of event activity that came to an abrupt halt on March 23rd when St. Louis City and County issued stay-at-home orders suspending all previously contracted event activity, including the nascent St. Louis Battlehawks football season.

The XFL’s St. Louis Battlehawks kicked off their home season at The Dome at America’s Center on February 23, 2020, to more than 28,000 enthusiastic fans and hosted their second game on February 29 with plans to expand their seating given the impressive demand for tickets. The third game was cancelled, as was the remaining XFL season ultimately leading to the league filing for bankruptcy.

The operations team worked to maintain building systems and security during the shutdown and played a central role in the development of health safety protocols to resume limited activity when the community began re-opening on May 18, 2020. With the support of St. Louis City public health officials and the introduction of comprehensive health safety procedures, America’s Center played host to NBC’s hit show, American Ninja Warrior starting late-June. This marked the first network production undertaken since the pandemic began.

The team applied for CARES Act funding made available by the State of Missouri through the Missouri Division of Tourism to plan for many health and safety improvements to America’s Center including the purchase of personal protective equipment, cleaning materials, touchless entries, improved air filtration and temperature scanning. In addition, plans were made to apply for certification from the leading international source for facility cleaning standards known as the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC) STAR Facility.

Improvements made to America’s Center during the year included:

- Concourse level floor refinishing
- Field repair and upgrades to coach and press levels for football
- Purchase of walk-through metal detectors for dome and convention center
- Security access control upgrades
- Purchase of new chairs for convention center
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Explore St. Louis is the driving force behind St. Louis’ $5.8 billion convention and tourism industry. Explore St. Louis also operates the America’s Center Convention Complex and The Dome at America’s Center.

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