

**MEETING MINUTES
SANTA MONICA TRAVEL & TOURISM (SMTT)
REGULAR MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2025
SANTA MONICA TRAVEL & TOURISM – 2427 Main Street**

Call to Order: Chairman Atallah called the meeting to order at 5:12 PM

Roll Call & Self Introductions: Chairman Atallah called for self-introductions. Those present provided brief self-introductions. The following persons were recorded in attendance:

Present: Chairman Younes Atallah, Vice Chair Charlie Lopez-Quintana, Treasurer Karen Ginsberg, Secretary Lauralee Asch, Member Tim Defuria, Member Neil Carrey, Member Jeff Klocke, Member Simon Fricker and City Manager Oliver Chi, who arrived at 5:52pm.

Also Present: SMTT President and CEO Misti Kerns, SMTT Chief People Officer Rachel Lozano, SMTT Vice President of Communications Lauren Salisbury, SMTT Vice President of Marketing Ashley Dowgwillo, SMTT Director of Sales Ozzie Otero, SMTT Executive Assistant Haylee Miller, and SMTT Administrative Assistant Bella Cifuentes.

Absent: Member Jan Williamson and Member Darlene Evans.

Public Comment: Chairman Atallah called for public comment. There was none.

Approval of the July 9, 2025, Board of Directors Meeting Minutes: Secretary Asch presented the July 9, 2025 meeting minutes. Member Lopez-Quintana moved to approve the minutes, and Member Defuria seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously through a roll call vote with Member Williamson, Member Evans and City Manager Chi absent.

Acceptance of the June 2025 Financials: Treasurer Ginsberg presented the June 2025 financials. Member Carrey moved to accept the financials and Member Fricker seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously through a roll call vote with Member Williamson, Member Evans and City Manager Chi absent.

Opening Nominations & Voting of EOC: Chairman Atallah called for any additional nominations for the Executive Committee Slate of Officers. Chairman Atallah nominated the following slate: Chairman Atallah for Chair, Vice Chair Lopez-Quintana for Vice Chair, Treasurer Ginsberg for Treasurer, and Member Klocke for Secretary. Member Carrey moved to approve the Executive Committee Slate of Officers as presented. Member Defuria seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously through a roll call vote with Member Williamson, Member Evans and City Manager Chi absent.

Tourism Marketing District (TMD) Renewal Timeline: SMTT President/CEO Kerns presented expected timeline for the Tourism Marketing District (TMD) Renewal that would be effective in January 2028. SMTT President/CEO Kerns informed the Board that she will present a finalized timeline at the next Board of Director's meeting on November 12, 2025.

SMTT Staff Updates: SMTT Vice President of Marketing Ashley Dowgwillo provided a performance update on recent marketing initiatives and shared early insights from ongoing research efforts.

Preliminary results from the Expedia co-op campaign, which launched July 1 and runs through September 30, indicate an estimated \$3.1 million in bookings generated from an initial investment of \$40,000 from SMTT. Final conversion data is expected following campaign completion.

Dowgwillo also addressed evolving digital challenges, including the growing influence of search engine AI, which is reducing organic website traffic by providing users synthesized information without directing

them to source pages. In response, SMTT has engaged a specialized SEO team to develop a strategy that adapts to this shift, with plans to share insights and best practices with destination partners. Additionally, social media platforms are now factoring into SEO rankings as of this summer.

Looking ahead, event-driven marketing will play a larger role in SMTT's strategic approach. From October 13–19, 2025 LA Tech Week will be coming to Santa Monica. The event will feature an official kickoff at Tech Street on October 13th, hosted on Ocean Avenue and is expected to attract over 3,000 attendees. The City of Santa Monica is confirmed as a presenting sponsor. Hotel packages have been curated in support of the event. Additionally, SMTT will debut an enhanced Digital Business Passport program to track business specials offer utilization and evaluate visitor spending patterns in real time.

SMTT Vice President of Communications Lauren Salisbury shared earned media highlights from July and August, with international coverage secured in *Entrevue* (France), *Times Now* (India), and *Travel + Luxury* (UK).

Completed FAM tours included returning visits from Australian blogger Cassie Tannenberg, U.S. influencer Erin Fong, Australian blogger Megan Singleton, and U.S. journalist Karuna Eberl. Upcoming press visits include Abigail Hill of the UK's *Nonchalant Magazine*, Sonal Ved representing *Harper's Bazaar* and *Cosmopolitan India*, and German travel writers Aliko and Sascha Rettig of *American Journal*.

On social media, Instagram remained the leading platform for traveler engagement. The channel saw a 1.1% increase in followers, with the team on track to surpass 60,000 followers. Engagement rose 21% over the previous period.

Salisbury also represented SMTT at the Ragan Communications Conference, hosted at Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, where she led a workshop for industry CEOs focused on leveraging storytelling to drive KPIs and enhance employee engagement. Additionally, Santa Monica was one of only four DMOs selected by Visit California to participate in a legislative tourism hearing in Sacramento. The delegation addressed the current state of tourism across the state, including continued challenges to international travel and media perception due to the Los Angeles wildfires.

SMTT Director of Sales Ozzie Otero provided a brief on recent and upcoming travel trade activities aimed at expanding international reach and driving high-value visitation.

In July and August, SMTT hosted multiple FAMs for top advisors from the UK, Australia, Mexico, and France, in collaboration with Flight Centre and Comptoir des Voyages. Experiences included curated itineraries, hosted dinners, and hotel site visits.

SMTT represented the destination at the Signature Circle Live Event and Virtuoso Travel Week, completing over 90 one-on-one appointments and co-hosting VIP events with key partners including Spago, Shutters on the Beach, and Hotel Casa del Mar.

Looking ahead, SMTT will join Visit California's India Trade & Media Mission (Sept 15–19) and attend ILTM North America (Oct 6–10), with 65+ appointments planned alongside Santa Monica hotel partners.

SMTT Director of Sales Ozzie Otero also shared updates on group sales efforts focused on positioning Santa Monica as a premier meetings and incentives destination. In July and August, SMTT hosted the Flight Centre Meetings & Events FAM (July 15–16), showcasing top hotels and experiences to five planners following Flight Centre's Global Event in Los Angeles. Key highlights included site visits at Shutters on the Beach, Fairmont Miramar, Santa Monica Proper, and a guided bike tour.

SMTT also hosted SITE Southeast's Incentive Experience (August 18) with a one-hour buyout of Pacific Park, welcoming 75 incentive buyers and suppliers from across the southeastern U.S. Additional trade engagements included participation in IBTM Americas (August 20–21) in Mexico City—conducting 24 one-on-one appointments in partnership with Shutters on the Beach and Hotel Casa del Mar—and the **HPN Destination Showcase** (August 25–26), providing updates to HPN's network of account directors and sourcing managers.

Looking ahead, SMTT will attend IMEX Americas (October 7–9) in Las Vegas, meeting with over 200 global meetings industry professionals. SMTT will be joined by nine local partners to represent the destination collectively.

Film Santa Monica Presentation & Startup Funds Request: SMTT Chief Operating Officer Evan Edwards presented that Film Santa Monica officially launched on September 1, 2025, after being awarded the city's film permit business in May 2025, taking over operations from Film LA. The program offers a concierge-style permit service, designed to streamline the film permitting experience in Santa Monica.

As of September 10, 2025, the program has received 14 inquiries, processed 6 formal permit requests and requests and issued 2 permits.

Edwards presented a request for a \$180,000 loan from SMTT to cover initial start-up and operational costs. The proposed repayment schedule would begin in February 2027, 16 months after launch. While the program budget was approved, the loan request was not approved by the Board.

Edwards will return to the Board at the next scheduled meeting on Wednesday, November 12, 2025, to present the full program budget and proposed schedule of fees for further review.

Member Klocke moved to approve the Film Santa Monica Budget as presented. Member Carrey seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously through a roll call vote with Member Williamson, Member Evans and City Manager Chi absent.

City Manager Update: City Manager Oliver Chi provided a comprehensive update on the city's fiscal outlook and upcoming initiatives. Despite expressing optimism about Santa Monica's future, he acknowledged significant financial challenges, noting a steep decline in city revenues over recent years.

To stabilize the budget, Chi is developing a two-year fiscal strategy focused on evaluating current revenue streams, controlling expenditures, and exploring new revenue opportunities, including a potential parcel tax. The city also plans to resume fire inspections and associated fee collections, increase traffic enforcement and reassess city-owned parcels for more efficient and profitable use.

In an effort to revitalize the local economy and improve public perception, Chi emphasized the need to support residents and Santa Monica's travel and tourism strategy. A new "Safe & Clean" operating model will launch in October, reorienting resources toward public safety, homelessness response, and downtown cleanliness. The plan includes a street medicine team to support the Fire Department and expanded bike patrols deployed in the downtown corridor.

Chi noted that 50% of all homelessness-related calls occur between Ocean Avenue and Lincoln Boulevard, while 36% of all service calls citywide originate from the Downtown corridor. In response, he plans to request council funding to enhance downtown maintenance efforts, including sidewalk cleaning and updated signage, with an emphasis on rapid implementation.

To boost cultural programming and economic activity, Chi also announced efforts to reinvigorate public events, including the return of the 626 Night Market and plans to host a large-scale music festival in Santa Monica in 2026.

CEO Update: SMTT President and CEO Misti Kerns provided an update on key national and local developments impacting the travel and tourism industry.

Kerns highlighted a recent statement from Geoff Freeman, President of the U.S. Travel Association, describing the current federal travel policy landscape as "one step forward, one step back." Positive strides have included federal investments in air traffic control, modernized TSA policies, the launch of the Great American Road Trip, and strong collaboration with the travel industry around World Cup planning. However, concerns remain over increased visa fees, negative international headlines about the U.S., limited efforts to address the growing travel trade deficit (projected to reach \$70 billion by the end of 2025), and broader economic uncertainty that is discouraging inbound travel.

Kerns noted that new visa fees—now \$250 per person—present a significant barrier to international visitation, particularly for families. Additionally, the discussion of implementing visa bonds could further deter travelers, sending an unwelcoming message to potential visitors.

Locally, JSX Jet Service has proposed offering flights from the Santa Monica Airport. Kerns shared that more than 2,200 Santa Monica residents are members of JSX services from other airports in the Los Angeles area. Given the upcoming series of major sporting events in 2026, 2027, and the Olympics, she expressed interest in writing a letter of support for JSX's proposal, framing it as a potential opportunity to provide more access for locals and visitors.

Kerns concluded her update with positive performance highlights, noting a 5.8% increase in total trips and a 3.3% year-over-year increase in total trip days.

For the Good of the Order: Member Klocke announced that the new Pacific Park Funhouse on the Santa Monica Pier will open on Saturday, September 13. The project has been two years in the making and is a significant addition to the Pier's attractions.

Adjournment: Chairman Atallah adjourned the meeting at 6:39 PM.

Next Board of Directors Meeting

Wednesday, November 12, 2025

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Santa Monica Travel & Tourism works to strengthen our local economy by enhancing and promoting our community as a distinctive, compelling and welcoming travel destination.

OUR VISION

To ensure Santa Monica is recognized as the premier beach-city destination in the world.

OUR BRAND PROMISE

Santa Monica... an unforgettable beach city experience filled with eye-catching people, cutting edge culture and bold innovations. It's the essence of the California lifestyle.