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## DESTINATION CLEVELAND REPORTS 2020 ACHIEVEMENTS AND VISITATION METRICS, OUTLINES PRIORITIES TO LEAD TRAVEL & TOURISM INDUSTRY RECOVERY & RETURN TO GROWTH

*Organization also announces initial Racial Equity & Inclusion actions*

**Producer/Editor Note:** The video shown in three segments at today's annual meeting can be accessed and downloaded [here](#) for inclusion in coverage.

**CLEVELAND** (Aug. 10, 2021) – [Destination Cleveland](#) shared today at its annual meeting the organization's 2020 achievements amid the abrupt and significant impact of COVID-19 on the travel and tourism industry. Additionally, David Gilbert, president and CEO of the destination marketing and management organization for Cuyahoga County, outlined key initiatives designed to help equitably and inclusively steward the rebuilding and renewed growth of the local travel and tourism industry after being decimated by COVID-19.

"Destination Cleveland's work for most of 2020 focused on organization and industry survival as the impact of the global pandemic was sudden and prolonged," said Gilbert. "What we accomplished – as a much smaller team than pre-COVID – to contribute to the industry's rebound and recovery is a testament to the team's commitment to the community and reflects our belief in collaboration. Now, we're laser-focused on getting back to the foundation of our work: growing the number of visitors – all of whom bring new dollars into our community, generate tax revenue, and contribute to creating jobs for Clevelanders. Returning the industry to its growth status opens the door for community progress."

### 2020 ORGANIZATION SUCCESS & 2020 VISITATION METRICS

Jon Pinney, the chair of Destination Cleveland's Board of Directors, reflected on the organization's shift from visitor attraction to industry support at the onset of the global pandemic as essential to its 2020 success. From March through September 2020, the organization pursued temporary priorities in response to the pandemic's impact on travel.

"2020 was the year that we anticipated reporting 20 million visitors and a tenth consecutive year of growth at a pace faster than the U.S. domestic visitation," stated Pinney. "When we pivoted to view our role and our relevance in the community in the context of helping the local industry survive, we knew that visitation, economic impact and traditional marketing and sales metrics wouldn't be relevant for last year."

For 2020, Cuyahoga County registered 13.8 million visits<sup>i</sup>, down 30% from 2019; economic impact slid to \$7.1 billion<sup>ii</sup>, a 27% drop. Both declines resulted from the immediate shutdown and prolonged contraction of the travel industry. Visitation to Cuyahoga County declined at a similar rate to U.S. domestic visitation (-32% in 2020).

Pinney continued, "The 2020 figures – while a setback – reflect the nosedive that most destinations experienced because of the pandemic. We are confident we'll get back to growing at record-setting rates – with a return to 2019 visitor levels expected no earlier than 2024. We know we need to continue to grow at greater rates to gain more market share than our peers and recover faster than predicted."

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He highlighted accomplishments from the organization's 2020 industry support, including:

- In collaboration with the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland and the hotel community, rebooked 102 meetings/conventions to future years, representing 123,045 room nights.
- Through its [CLEAN COMMITTED](#) program, delivered more than 225,000 consumer CLEAN Kits; more than 1,000 business took the CLEAN COMMITTED pledge. The initiative was a collaboration with Cuyahoga County, the City of Cleveland, the Cuyahoga County Board of Health, Cleveland Clinic, The MetroHealth System and University Hospitals.
- Launched the Rediscover Cleveland and Roam the Land campaigns to promote CLEAN COMMITTED businesses and encourage residents to get out and support the industry – from hotels to restaurants to attractions. The two integrated marketing efforts combined generated more than 50 million impressions and nearly 300,000 social media engagements.
- Collaborated with Downtown Cleveland Alliance's Winterfest and Cleveland Neighborhood Progress' Eat & Explore CLE program to drive traffic to impacted businesses downtown and in Cleveland neighborhoods. The effort, designed to help the hospitality industry – particularly businesses owned by people of color – as it continued to struggle heading into the traditionally challenging winter months, ran through mid-April 2021.
- Managed the application process for \$10,000 restaurant stabilization grants, which were funded by Cuyahoga County's CARES Act allocation. In total, the organization reviewed and ranked more than 840 applications and, in partnership with Cuyahoga County and Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, distributed nearly \$1.7 million to 168 community restaurants in late 2020/early 2021.

### **PRIORITIES FOR 2021 & 2022**

As Destination Cleveland continues to implement its recovery and return to growth strategy, which was launched in October 2020, it is applying what was learned during the pandemic and reexamining its priorities and work. Gilbert focused on key initiatives to illustrate how Destination Cleveland is working to serve the hospitality, travel and tourism businesses as effectively, efficiently and inclusively as possible in its role as industry steward. The organization is also working to position Cleveland not only as a visitor destination, but as a place to live, work and invest.

He noted "Through all that our industry and community faced, Clevelanders endured, showed their compassion and resilience and illustrated creativity in ways that were unexpected given the circumstances. How do we slingshot beyond the impacts on our industry and start rebuilding our businesses and the industry's metrics?"

"Additionally, everything we do is being looked at through a racial equity and inclusion lens to help ensure the renewed growth of the travel and tourism industry can benefit all residents more directly," he continued. "The work we are doing now will position our organization, industry and community to grow even faster on the other side of the pandemic."

Highlights of the organization's 2021/2022 industry stewardship include:

#### **Racial Equity and Inclusion Roadmap**

In response to the country and community's renewed call for social justice and racial equity, Destination Cleveland committed to making diversity, equity and inclusion part of how it operates to advance tourism and Cleveland's reputation as a destination city. At the meeting, it introduced the [Destination Cleveland Racial Equity & Inclusion Roadmap](#), a plan that lays out initial pragmatic actions to ensure the organization's work equitably, inclusively and intentionally grows the travel and tourism industry, improves Cleveland's

narrative and enhances visitors' experiences. The roadmap actions will be integrated into its 2021 Recovery & Regrowth Plan and additional actions will be integrated into its 2022 Strategic Plan. Actions will have clear staff accountabilities, timelines and quarterly Board review. A key performance indicator (KPI) dashboard will be published annually.

"The call to dismantle systemic and structural racism sparked a deep commitment to evaluate how Destination Cleveland as an organization and each team member could do better and do more with greater intention," said Gilbert. "After taking inventory of our efforts, we determined we could build on what was already being done by convening a Racial Equity & Inclusion Board Task Force, co-chaired by board members Michael Jeans and India Pierce Lee, to develop a set of actions to be undertaken by Destination Cleveland in the performance of its mission."

Earlier this year, the task force hosted six Convening & Listening Sessions with 65 individuals representing 46 organizations to understand the challenges faced by businesses owned by people of color in our community and Black and Latinx residents' perceptions of how we promote Cleveland. The insight received helped shape the roadmap actions. The organization is committed to ongoing listening and learning to enrich their work.

### **Harnessing the Power of the Visitor: Live/Work Ecosystem**

After a delay due to the global pandemic, Destination Cleveland shared that work to create a talent attraction ecosystem is again underway with Greater Cleveland Partnership, TeamNEO, Engage! Cleveland, Cleveland Leadership Center, Global Cleveland and others. As that ecosystem is evolving, the partners have agreed that a collaborative effort is essential to help grow the region's workforce and population. With the understanding that every visitor is a potential candidate to live and work here, Destination Cleveland will take a prominent role in shaping the effort to attract talent from other markets.

Based on insights from research conducted in 2019 by Destinations Counsellors International (DCI) and a pilot project executed during the 2021 NFL Draft with TeamNEO and Engage! Cleveland, Destination Cleveland will leverage the Cleveland brand to change perceptions of the region as a place to live and work. The organization is also working with other economic development organizations to finalize an ecosystem and a plan for getting visitors to consider Cleveland as a place to live and work.

"We will get our visitor engine humming again, and it will continue to be a growth engine for this community," stated Gilbert. "Just as before COVID, our best frontier is to leverage the strength of our vibrant and growing visitor economy for the long-term health of our region. We have research that shows that visitors to Cleveland are 32% more likely to consider a move to Cleveland than those who have not visited before. By proactively collaborating with community peers, we can get visitors to consider Cleveland as a place to live and work. Doing so is part of our organization's long-term vision of harnessing the power of the visitor to amplify the impact of work."

### **Brand Evolution**

Destination Cleveland announced that consideration for Cleveland as a visitor destination (by the target audience of Millennials) is up to 36 percent from 14 percent in 2014, and resident recommendation has increased to 81 percent from 34 percent over the same period<sup>iii</sup>, which illustrates the effectiveness of the current Cleveland visitor brand.

To better reflect the diversity of the community and encourage visitors to consider Cleveland as a place to live and work, Destination Cleveland is evolving the visitor brand. The incremental changes will reinforce Cleveland's current strengths, identify new ones and optimize messaging, targeting and imagery to improve perceptions, build consideration, and drive conversion to becoming a visitor and, ultimately, a resident. The evolved brand is expected to launch in the first half of 2022.

## TRAVEL AND TOURISM INDUSTRY RECOGNITION

Gilbert presented the Hospitality Star Award to the industry's workforce, an award normally given to one of the industry's frontline staff members who is recognized by his or her peers as going above and beyond to provide excellent customer service and true hospitality. He celebrated the thousands of Clevelanders that worked diligently over the past 16 months to keep the tourism and hospitality industry afloat.

"Day after day, this industry innovated, served their customers, and put the health and welfare of fellow staff and customers before their own," stated Gilbert. "They illustrated the resilience that Clevelanders are known for, and to honor the strength, ingenuity and determination they put forward throughout the crisis, we have donated all the ticket sales generated for today's meeting to the hospitality education programs at Cuyahoga Community College and Baldwin Wallace University."

Held at the [Cleveland Metroparks Zoo Savanna Theater](#), guests enjoyed live entertainment, a reception following the meeting and the opportunity to experience the Asian Lantern Festival. The organization is appreciative of the support of all its partners, particularly those that worked together to put on today's event. Destination Cleveland would like to thank [Bally Sports](#) for serving as the presenting sponsor of the annual meeting as well as the other event sponsors: [Angstrom Graphics](#), [Dominion Energy Ohio](#), [Enterprise Rent-A-Car](#), [iHeartMedia](#), [Medical Mutual](#), [Rock The House Entertainment](#), and [United Airlines](#). [Cleveland Metroparks Zoo](#) provided in-kind sponsorship.

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**ABOUT DESTINATION CLEVELAND:** *Destination Cleveland is Cleveland's destination marketing and management organization. This private, non-profit organization's mission is to drive economic impact and stimulate community vitality for Greater Cleveland through leisure and business travel. In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic reduced visitation by 30 percent, with 13.8 million visits occurring. Prior to the pandemic, Cleveland hosted 19.6 million visits annually, with the County experiencing annual visitation increases that surpassed the domestic travel growth rate for nine consecutive years. For more information, visit [www.thisiscleveland.com](http://www.thisiscleveland.com).*

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<sup>i</sup> Metrics sourced from Cuyahoga County's 2020 Visitor Volume study produced by D.K. Shifflet as well as the 2020 Tourism Economics Cleveland Visitation Report

<sup>ii</sup> Data sourced from Tourism Economics, a division of Oxford Economics and a world leader in global forecasting and quantitative analysis.

<sup>iii</sup> 2021 MMGY POAT Study for Millennial metrics and commissioned 2021 MMGY Community Perspective Study – Cuyahoga County Residents