

Testimony for House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development by Willie Docto
January 15, 2020

Good Morning, Committee Members. Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the importance of increased tourism funding in Vermont. My name is Willie Docto and since moving to Vermont in 1996, I have been actively involved with tourism in various capacities. My husband, Greg Trulson, and I established the Moose Meadow Lodge & Treehouse in Duxbury in 1998. I have served as President of the former Waterbury Tourism Council. I was the first professional Executive Director of the Vermont Brewers Association & Festival, promoting the growing reputation of Vermont's brewing industry for 10 years. I was the founder of the Vermont Gay Tourism Association – the only statewide organization of its kind in the country whose mission was to target the highly competitive LGBTQ travel market. I have promoted Vermont at travel shows in New York City, Chicago, Massachusetts, Florida and Madrid, Spain. I'm also an active classical violinist performing around the state with various orchestras and one who values the importance of the arts in the cultural fabric of our state. I have served on the board of the Vermont Arts Council, and I currently serve as a member of the Vermont Travel & Recreation Council having been appointed by Gov. Peter Shumlin and reappointed by Gov. Phil Scott.

Tourism is in my blood and I am honored to be part of an industry filled with outstanding, intelligent and diligent professionals who wake up each morning thinking of new innovative ways to attract visitors to our beautiful state. I'm humbled to be here on this panel with these distinguished colleagues.

"Magical...Beautiful...A slice of heaven...Living the good life." These are words that I have heard constantly over the years from my B&B guests when they describe their experience in Vermont. One of my favorite comments from guests is "We already know we want to come back," as they're checking in and even before they've even seen their bedroom. Vermont is one of those rare places in the world where visitors want to return over and over again. Some visitors eventually make the giant leap of buying property in or relocating to Vermont.

I have seen this phenomenon occur numerous times over the years since we've been in business. Take for example Maria & Ken who repeatedly stayed at our B&B for years, got married here and then decided to move from Annapolis, Maryland to Addison, Vermont. Maria continues to do consulting work and Ken continues his work as an IT trainer. Their daughter, her partner and grandson also moved to Vermont.

As another example, Leonard (a former principal dancer in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) and his husband Thomas would spend a week or two each year with us. Eventually they left their hectic New York City life to achieve their dream of living in a log cabin which they found in Bethel. Leonard now works in banking and Thomas works as a restaurant/bar manager.

There are Jeri & Cathy, two recently retired police officers from Tulsa, who have been visiting since 2001 and who then bought property in Hyde Park where they eventually plan to build a home.

Then there are Bob & Jeff, long-time residents of Austin, Texas who for years visited for a week or two at a time. They got married at our property in an elaborate wedding in 2014. They then decided to buy land in Moretown where they built a vacation home, and where they plan to retire in a few years.

There's also Jose & Gloria who left their Miami home and moved to Montpelier. *Who dreams of leaving sand for snow?*

Our guest list is a diverse group of people. They're Black, Hispanic, Asian, LGBTQ, young, middle-aged, retired, families with children, couples, singles. They're from all over New England, the North Country, the Mid-Atlantic, The South, Canada, Great Britain, Scandinavia, Japan, Taiwan, and Australia.

In 2008 when we celebrated the 10th Anniversary of our B&B, we gathered all the people (and their real estate agents) that we could find who were our guests but ended up moving to Vermont. Since then we have seen dozens more visitors turn into Vermont residents. We have lost so many customers to Vermont that I often joke: Vermont is bad for our business. They come here, fall in love with the state and then buy their own place to stay.

But that's all good.

My point is that tourism marketing is not just about getting heads to beds. It's not just about offering discounts or packages or specials. It's not just about attracting couples for romantic weekends, or weddings, or family reunions, or conventions. Indeed, it's not really about promoting at all. It's really about SHARING...sharing an experience that people can get only in Vermont. Not anywhere else. Just Vermont.

Sharing Vermont cannot be the sole responsibility of tourism businesses. It is also the responsibility of the State. We small B&Bs have very limited marketing budgets and we rely on the reputation, image and brand that Vermont has to attract visitors. The State must continue to nurture and grow the Vermont brand.

I ask you to please consider increasing the tourism budget by \$500,000. It is an investment that will pay off in many ways. It will bring in out-of-state dollars for lodging, restaurants, attractions, retail and other ancillary businesses. It will help Vermont compete with other better funded destinations who are stealing way the travel market share. And IT IS a very competitive travel market.

Tourism creates a significant and far-reaching economic impact.

I will argue that tourism is the gateway to attracting new residents and investors into the state. I'm just one small B&B and I've witnessed dozens of couples and families turn into Vermont homeowners, business owners and investors. Multiply that by the hundreds of other small B&Bs, inns, hotels and resorts around Vermont, and you'll begin to realize the potential. Tourism not only gets people into the state. It gets people to move here, too. So, if your desire is to attract new residents, increase the workforce and grow the tax base, then invest in tourism.

Everyone wants their lives to be filled with magic, beauty, and a slice of heaven. They want to live the good life. Vermont offers that opportunity, but we need your help.

I'd like to close by recounting the story of a 5-year-old guest who gave us the very best complement ever. When it was time for the 5-year-old and his parents to check out of the Treehouse, my husband Greg drove the golf cart to transport their luggage to their car. The mother asked Greg: if it's OK with you, would you mind just taking my and my husband's luggage. Leave our son's luggage for now. He's inside the treehouse crying, because he does not want to leave. He enjoyed himself so much that he is just not ready to leave.

This is the kind of experience we in the tourism industry strive to give each guest - the feeling that they never want to leave Vermont, and when they do, they think about returning. It is an experience we want to share. Help us!

Please make that extra \$500,000 investment in tourism.

Thank you.