



Thief River Falls Convention & Visitors Bureau, Inc.

D.B.A. Visit Thief River Falls

2018 City Council Report & 2019 Budget Presentation

History

The Thief River Falls Convention & Visitors Bureau was enacted in February 1984. The CVB operated as a tourism marketing division under the Chamber of Commerce from 1984 to 2006. In 2006, the CVB incorporated and formed their own organization. The tourism marketing trend has shifted toward specialization versus generalization.

In the spring of 2018, as part of their new creative marketing strategy, the CVB officially rebranded their organization to "Visit Thief River Falls" and also redesigned their logo. We didn't change our legal name, we are simply doing business as "Visit Thief River Falls." This type of rebranding has been a common shift that many CVBs have made over the past few years. The new brand is a call to action and will simplify our marketing efforts. Being the "Thief River Falls Convention & Visitors Bureau" is still our legal name, that's what our organization will be referred to in this report.

Funding Source

The CVB is funded solely by the 3% *Lodging Tax* that is collected from overnight visitors at all 7 hotel properties in Thief River Falls, as well as the city campground. This tax is collected by the City of Thief River Falls and 95% is passed along to the CVB monthly. These lodging tax dollars are used to market the entire community. There are no membership dues or fees assessed from individuals or businesses.

State of MN Office of the Attorney General: Lodging Tax Statute § 469.190

The funds that the CVB operates on are state-regulated by the following State Statute: "Ninety-five percent of the gross proceeds from any tax imposed under subdivision 1 shall be used by the statutory or home rule charter city or town to fund a local convention or tourism bureau for the purpose of marketing and promoting the city or town as a tourist or convention center."

Mission Statement

The objective of the Thief River Falls Convention & Visitors Bureau shall be to promote the Thief River Falls area as a destination for conferences, conventions, events, group tours and leisure travelers; thereby enhancing the economic growth of the area.

Tourist Definition

- ❖ *The University of Minnesota Tourism Center uses the definition given by the U.S. Travel Association: "A tourist is defined as someone who is 50 miles or more (one way) from their primary residence."*
- ❖ *Patrick Simmons, Research Analyst at Explore Minnesota Tourism: "We consider a tourist to be someone traveling for pleasure on an overnight trip, or on a day trip of at least 50 miles from home."*

Lodging Tax Usage: According to the Office of the Attorney General

- ❖ *If lodging tax usage is questioned, the Attorney General's office is asked for an opinion. Here are a couple examples of those opinions:*

"We have been of the view that 'marketing and promoting' the city for purposes of lodging tax expenditures includes activities directly related to providing information concerning tourist or convention assets of the city to persons outside the immediate area or in directly seeking to attract such persons to the city, but does not generally include creation of such assets or the support of community betterment in general. In light of the fact that the revenue in question is raised by taxation of hotels, motels and like tourist facilities, it is likely that **the legislature intended that the restricted 95 percent be used in ways calculated to directly attract persons likely to patronize such facilities as opposed to uses which generally benefit the city as a whole.**"

"Certainly advertising or similar efforts to make tourists or convention planners from outside the area aware of local events such as the fair or sporting events would appear to be legitimate marketing or promotion. **If, on the other hand, the result of the expenditures is simply to assist the event in general or in some way that would not reasonably be seen as calculated to attract additional people for tourism or convention business, they would not likely qualify.**"

Economic Impact

According to Explore Minnesota's "Tourism Facts: Minnesota Leisure and Hospitality Industry 2016," tourism in Minnesota has an impact of \$41 million in average daily sales at leisure & hospitality businesses, supporting almost 265,000 jobs. This in an industry that needs and deserves support because of the immediate return it brings to the state. Every \$1 invested in tourism promotion brings \$9.00 in state and local taxes and \$92 in spending by travelers.

- ❖ *In 2016, the Leisure & Hospitality Industry had the following impact on Pennington County:*
 - Gross Sales - \$24,639,522
 - State Sales Tax - \$1,715,322
 - Jobs - 572
- ❖ *Explore Minnesota estimates the following travel spending by sector:*
 - Food - 24%, Lodging - 21%, Retail - 17%, Transportation - 16%, Recreation - 16%, Second homes - 6%
 - Using the data above, for every dollar a visitor spends at our hotels, they spend an additional \$4 elsewhere in our community.
 - ***The 2017 gross lodging tax revenue was approximately \$117,000 x 33 = \$3,861,000 in Total Thief River Falls Annual Hotel Revenue x 4 = \$15,444,000 in Total Thief River Falls Visitors' Annual Economic Impact***

Grants & Cooperative Marketing Programs

In 2018, the Convention & Visitors Bureau accessed \$5,000 in marketing grant dollars through the *Explore Minnesota Tourism Organizational Partnership Grant*. We also accessed \$1,500 in marketing grant dollars through Riverland Association and \$2,500 through Pine to Prairie Birding Trail. Those are cooperative marketing programs that we buy into with membership dues.

The CVB was also a partner in the *2018 Minnesota Heartland Tourism Association Marketing Program*. We were able to receive approximately \$25,000 in marketing value for the cost of \$1,400. This consisted of both email marketing and retargeting campaigns promoting biking, fishing and hunting. The geo-targeted areas included MSP, Eastern SD and Eastern ND.

Vertical Markets

The CVB works hard to promote all Thief River Falls assets to attract overnight visitors. Here are a few vertical markets that we focus on promoting through a variety of advertising initiatives:

- ❖ *Snowmobiling*
- ❖ *Summer Attractions*
- ❖ *Events*
- ❖ *Meetings and Conventions*
- ❖ *Sports Facilities*
- ❖ *Biking*
- ❖ *Fishing*
- ❖ *Hunting*
- ❖ *Shopping*

Print Advertising

- ❖ The CVB Board of Directors feel that the demand of print is slowly decreasing, but there are a few staple print pieces that we advertise in. One is the [Explore Minnesota State Travel Guide](#), another is the [Minnesota Explorer](#) (which is printed seasonally, and another is the Northern Highlights guide that is printed each summer. The CVB has also partnered with the Chamber of Commerce on an ad in the [Miss Minnesota Pageant Booklet](#) supporting our Miss Thief River Falls and Miss RiverFest contestants, but also promoting our great community.

Online Advertising

- ❖ Online advertising is something that the CVB is focusing more of the budget on each year. One of the most successful digital advertising campaigns that we run each year is on [ExploreMinnesota.com](#). We continue to receive the most website referral traffic from that campaign. We also are putting more and more of their budget into [Facebook](#), specifically toward the Manitoba market. One of the newest digital ad campaigns that we have run is one with [Midco](#) this summer. This campaign combined display ads with retargeted ads and promoted the summer attractions and events that Thief River Falls offers.

Radio Advertising

- ❖ Due to the snowfall that Thief River Falls received this winter, the CVB decided to run winter snowmobile trail report on [KFGO Radio](#) in Fargo, ND for eight weeks this winter. We partnered with the SnoDrifter's Snowmobile Club and utilized the knowledge of their groomer for live weekly call-in reports.

Media Event

- ❖ *"Call of the Goose" Media Familiarization Tour: 2018* was our 12th year in partnership with the Middle River Community Club to promote waterfowl hunting in NW Minnesota and the 44th Annual Goose Festival in Middle River, MN. This is a great partnership as this is an event that celebrates waterfowl hunting and draws approximately 5,000 visitors. Being Middle River doesn't have lodging amenities besides a small campground, Thief River Falls lodging properties are positively impacted by this event.

The following media companies attended the 2018 media event: Outdoors Weekly, Outdoor Hub, Wild Dakota TV, Brainerd Outdoors Radio, KKWQ Radio, The Honker, TRF Radio, TRF Times & North Country Promotions. We intend to continue growing our media representation each year. Examples of the coverage Thief River Falls gets from this event includes multiple page articles in hunting publications, 30-minute television shows and significant radio coverage throughout NW Minnesota.

Here are a few examples of the coverage we have received from the Call of the Goose Media Familiarization Tour:

- Wild Dakota's television episode: <http://bit.ly/2eySnVd>
- Minnesota Bound's television segment: <http://bit.ly/2ehmrON>
- The Outdoor Report's video: <http://bit.ly/2eCEAXP>

Pine to Prairie Birding Trail

Another vertical market that we are heavily involved in promoting is bird-watching. We are a member of the *Pine to Prairie International Birding Trail Committee* which stretches from Fergus Falls to Warroad. A few years ago, Manitoba's birding trail was connected to our trail, creating North America's 2nd International Birding Trail. This has increased international tourism to all communities along the trail. MN DOT approved our signage request in 2010 for a brown sign directing motorists to our Birding Observation Site at the Thief River Falls Wastewater Treatment Ponds. They are located west of Thief River Falls off State Hwy 1. The signs direct both eastbound and westbound motorists to our site where they will find a handicapped accessible, enclosed birding shelter and an interpretive sign.

Local Attractions Tour

The FREE "Be a Tourist in Your Town" tour is available to our city's front-line staff to provide education about our city's attractions and recreational opportunities.

Customer Service Training

The University of Minnesota Tourism Center puts on a customer service training course called "At Your Service," which trains the trainer to give the course in their community. CVB Director, Laura Stengrim, went through this training course in St. Paul and is now certified to deliver the course locally. This course has been offered to all persons working in the hospitality industry over a dozen times in the past few years. This includes, but is not limited to staff at: Hotels, restaurants, retail stores, convenience stores and attractions.

Health & Hospitality Program

Sanford Health partners with the CVB on the "Health & Hospitality Program" which gives visiting Sanford patients and family members a discounted hotel room and a free taxi ride. This program is promoted internally with Sanford's patient access staff and brochures are distributed at clinic registration desks.

Community Branding

The Chamber of Commerce's Downtown Development Association initiated a Community Branding task force and asked Executive Director, Laura Stengrim, to facilitate that task force. The mission of this task force is to create a consistent brand for Thief River Falls and to use that brand as the design on new welcome banners for the city of Thief River Falls. A community tagline is also being created that could be used to market Thief River Falls consistently across several organizations and entities.

Bike Thief River Falls

A group of volunteers are working together to make Thief River Falls more bike friendly and the CVB has contributed to this effort in the following ways: 1) Assisted with creation of a new bike trail map, 2) Created a promotional video promoting biking, 3) Facilitated the creating of a new bike rental program at the hotels that will start next spring.

Advance Thief River

Executive Director, Laura Stengrim, was asked to serve on the Advance Thief River Steering Committee to share information on how Visit Thief River Falls serves the community, to identify areas of potential overlap and to brainstorm potential partnerships to move Thief River Falls forward. The new “Making it Home” marketing initiative that is aimed to attract new residents is being led by Advance Thief River, so Laura has also been involved in the timeline creation and identification of future facilitators for that project’s work groups.

Marketing & Promotional Event Funding

The CVB has the ability to provide Event Marketing Sponsorship Funding to attract out-of-town visitors to Thief River Falls events. This funding must be used to fund marketing and promotion of event in media that reaches primarily out of town visitors. Priority will be given to events that encourage overnight visitation. Events must also be open to the public.

The CVB sponsored the tourism marketing of the following events in 2018 totaling \$5,490:

- ❖ TRFAHA Hockey Tournaments - \$1,740
- ❖ Pennington County Fair - \$1,000
- ❖ Thunder on Hooves Bull Ride - \$1,000
- ❖ RiverFest - \$1,000
- ❖ TRF Archery Club - \$750

One of the board’s 2019 objectives is to encourage more local events and clubs to take advantage of this funding.

Click here for more information on the CVB’s Event Marketing Sponsorship Funding:

<http://www.visittrf.com/EventMarketingSponsorship>

Thief River Falls Visitors Guide

The theme of the 2018 Thief River Falls Visitors Guide is “*Spend a day, a week or a lifetime*” which focuses on encouraging visitors to consider Thief River Falls a potential home. Click here and scroll to the bottom to view the page-turning version of the Thief River Falls Visitor Guide: http://www.visittrf.com/guide/register_free/id/3.

The guide includes comprehensive two-sided map page that features the City map, River Walk Trail map, Cross Country Ski Trail map & Snowmobile Trail map. This is the centerfold and pulls out easily. We also printed over runs of the map in tablet form. These are free of charge for any business that is interested.

The guide is almost solely funded by advertisements. The CVB pays less than \$2,500 to our publishing company annually for higher quality paper and a gloss cover coating. We print 25,000 copies and distribute to all Travel Information Centers across the state, Thief River Falls businesses, and to individuals as requested through an electronic form on our website. We also have both a page-turning and PDF version of our Visitors Guide on our website.

The 2019 Thief River Falls Visitor Guide will be printed in December 2018 and distributed in January 2019.

Visitor Guide Distribution

In addition to distributing the Thief River Falls Visitor Guide to all potential visitors who request information on Thief River Falls and to all Thief River Falls businesses, we also distribute the guide to the following locations across the state:

Paid Distribution Locations:

- ❖ Mall of America Brochure Distribution Program
- ❖ Minneapolis St. Paul Airport Distribution Program
- ❖ Pioneer 90.1 Minnesota State Fair Distribution Program

Free Distribution Locations:

- ❖ Worthington Travel Information Center
- ❖ Thompson Hill Travel Information Center
- ❖ Moorhead Travel Information Center
- ❖ St. Croix Travel Information Center
- ❖ Beavercreek Travel Information Center
- ❖ Fisher's Landing Travel Information Center
- ❖ Albert Lea Travel Information Center
- ❖ Two Harbors Information Center
- ❖ MN United Snowmobilers Association
- ❖ Albertville Premium Outlets
- ❖ Grand Forks Air Force Base
- ❖ Red Wing Visitor Center
- ❖ Cass Lake Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Wabasha Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Bemidji Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ St. Cloud Travel Information Center
- ❖ Leech Lake Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Pelican Rapids Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Willmar Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ New Ulm Chamber of Commerce
- ❖ Sauk Centre CVB
- ❖ Little Falls CVB
- ❖ Hinckley CVB
- ❖ Fargo-Moorhead CVB
- ❖ Greater Grand Forks CVB

Tourism Information Website

The CVB gave its website (www.visittrf.com) a fresh new look in February 2017. Our website has a responsive design and the capability for flash, video, Google Maps and much more. We will be implement a color scheme changeover by the end of 2018.

The 2018 Visitors Guide is available to download on the website and our TV commercials are embedded in the site. In the last year, 31,946 users accessed our website with 40,083 sessions. 86% were new users, and 14% were returning users. The majority of our users come from Minneapolis, Winnipeg and Fargo. The top two pages visited are events and attractions.

Social Media Marketing

- ❖ *Facebook:* The CVB manages the [Visit Thief River Falls](#) Facebook page. We created it in 2009 and have 8,696 likes, which is 1,000 more than last year at this time. We market events, retail promotions, restaurant specials and seasonal attractions through this page. We also do giveaways and contests.
- ❖ *YouTube:* The CVB manages the [Visit TRF](#) YouTube channel. All television commercials and video contest entries are posted on this channel. We link this directly to our Facebook page and website.

Tourism Education

Laura is the Marketing Chairman of Riverland Association, so the CVB has been very involved in hosting their NW MN Tourism Conference the past nine years. This first four were held in Thief River Falls, and the last six have been held in Crookston. The speakers range from advertising agencies and event organizers to marketing professionals and business owners. Everyone interested in attracting more visitors to their business, event or community is welcome to attend, and the cost is \$40 for members and \$45 for non-members.

Tourism Awareness

- ❖ *Radio Interviews* - The CVB has been invited to be interviewed on *TRF Radio & Pioneer Radio* monthly to bring tourism awareness to the residents of Thief River Falls and update the community on our tourism marketing efforts.
- ❖ *Newspaper Editorial* - The CVB has submitted an editorial to the Thief River Falls Times to be featured in their "Progress Edition" the last few years. This is an educational article aimed to explain our mission and tourism marketing efforts and specifically how our mission differs from that of the Chamber of Commerce.
- ❖ *Community Expo* - The CVB has had a booth at the Thief River Falls Community Expo every other year to educate the public on our mission, tourism marketing efforts, and how we can help local businesses and events succeed.

Welcome Bags

In 2013, the CVB partnered with the City and the Chamber to print 15,000 new welcome bags that feature all three logos and websites. Those bags are distributed to new residents at the City of Thief River Falls utilities office, as well as to visitors at conferences, conventions & sporting events. The ODC assists with the storage and fulfillment of bags for a minimal fee. We will be ordering new bags soon.

Promotional Items

The CVB has several promotional items that are available free of charge to visitors, such as pens and magnetic power clips. The CVB also created and printed four Thief River Falls postcards that are available free of charge to any visitors or any business that would like to give them away.

Tourism Information Booth

In 2015, the CVB purchased a 3-piece fabric tension display booth, which includes a backdrop, table cover and iPad stand. We have used this booth at local events to distribute tourism information and execute social media promotions.

Statewide/Regional/Local Representation

Thief River Falls is represented by the CVB's Executive Director on the following associations/boards/committees:

- ❖ Riverland Tourism Association Board (*Secretary/Treasurer and Marketing Chairman*)
- ❖ Minnesota Heartland Tourism Association Board (*Secretary*)
- ❖ Thief River Falls Chamber of Commerce Board (*Ex-Officio*)
- ❖ Red Lake River Corridor Joint Powers Board (*Advisor*)
- ❖ Minnesota Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus Board of Directors
- ❖ Pine to Prairie Birding Trail Committee
- ❖ Call of the Goose Familiarization Tour Planning Committee
- ❖ Sanford Health Consumer Council
- ❖ Northland Community & Technical College Community Advisory Committee

- ❖ Ralph Engelstad Arena History Committee
- ❖ Minnesota Lodging Association

Visit Thief River Falls Board of Directors

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Feel free to contact the Board of Directors or Executive Director

with questions or suggestions at any time:

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