

\$20M in COVID-19 Funds Earmarked for Tourism Marketing

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

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Of the \$20 million for tourism marketing, \$15 million will go to the following five tourism organizations, according to JBRC records:

- Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce: \$6.88 million;
- Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau: \$4.08 million;
- Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce: \$1.43 million;
- Visit Greenville SC: \$1.33 million;
- Columbia Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau: \$1.28 million

The Nerve last year [reported](#) that the five organizations in fiscal 2018 received a total of \$14 million in “Destination Specific Tourism Marketing” grants from SCPRT, and collectively provided \$28 million in required matches. Representatives of several of the groups said then that participating hotels in their areas assess a room fee toward the private matches for the state grants, though an investigation by The Nerve raised questions about whether the fees were as voluntary and transparent as claimed.

Those state grants are separate from state or local accommodation taxes that the organizations receive annually for tourism promotion, or from other public revenue sources. The Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, for example, received nearly \$26.7 million in total “local government support” in 2017, according to its annual financial statement.

The SCPRT annually spends millions of tax dollars on tourism promotion. Out of its \$136.7 million total budget last fiscal year, which included state, federal and “other” funds, nearly \$39 million was designated for “tourism sales and marketing,” budget records show.

The remaining \$5 million of the \$20 million approved Tuesday by the JBRC would be used by SCPRT to “implement a tourism recovery advertising strategy that provides the flexibility to adjust to changing consumer marketing conditions as they occur,” according to SCPRT materials provided for the meeting.

During the meeting, Rick Harmon, the JBRC director of research, said Parrish agreed that organizations receiving tourism marketing grants out of the approved \$20 million will “specifically identify all expenditures.”

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