

Marketing Department Annual Report 2019-2020

Overview

Twenty-twenty is a year that will be remembered as a year of challenges. The year got off to a good start with an increase in the number of visitors to the city. City events and museums were well attended. Advertising was on track. Websites and social media were going strong.

Then, on March 16, the COVID-19 pandemic reached Foley. Most city offices were closed. Our governor asked residents and visitors to stay home to stop the spread of the virus. After a six week shut down, the Welcome Center, Depot Museum and Holmes Hospital Museum reopened in May. We observed social distancing, wore masks and set up hand sanitizing stations to keep staff and guests safe. Visitor packets were made and placed outside the welcome center door so that guests could get information without coming inside. Visitor numbers dropped dramatically. Online, social media and website visits increased as people gathered information from the safety of their homes.

As the fiscal year was drawing to a close, Hurricane Sally visited the Gulf Coast. On Oct. 16, 2020, Foley was directly in the path of the storm and there was widespread devastation to parks, buildings and homes. The Tree City lost a large percentage of its green canopy as thousands of trees were felled in the storm. Another casualty was the Holmes Hospital Museum. The roof over the east corner building was peeled back and water poured into the building. Twenty-twenty was a challenging year for tourism and the city as a whole. As we head into the fall months, recovery efforts are in full swing.

Welcome Center and Museum Visitor Statistics

Annual visitor attendance in 2020 at the Welcome Center was 3,286. This was down 45 percent from 5,948 visitors in 2019.

At the Holmes Medical Museum, 2020 annual attendance was 6,582, which was down 26 percent from the 8,920 visitors in 2019.

Annual attendance in 2020 at the Depot Museum was 10,730. This was down 40 percent from the 17,832 visitors in 2019.

At the Model Train Exhibit, from October 2019 through March 14 there were 11,733 visitors. As the model train exhibit is operated by volunteers who all fall into the high-risk category for COVID-19, safety improvements at the model trains exhibit took longer and had just been completed when Hurricane Sally hit in mid-September. At 11,733, the number of annual visitors was down 55 percent from the 26,356 visitors in 2019.

Online Activity

Websites

Activity on Visit Foley and the City of Foley websites was mixed.

The Visit Foley website is used both by residents seeking information about restaurants and events and visitors seeking information regarding restaurants, accommodations, shopping and events. As events were cancelled and out-of-town visitors tapered off, website traffic decreased. On this website, the

average number of monthly users dropped from 5,294 in 2019 to 3,794 in 2020, which is a decrease of 28 percent.

The number of users on the City of Foley website increased throughout the year. This site is used by residents and those who are interested in becoming residents. Throughout the year, the marketing team worked in concert with city departments to improve content. On the City of Foley website, the number of users increased from an average of 7,225 monthly users in 2019 to an average of 9,862 in 2020. This is an increase of 36.5 percent.

Social Media

The Visit Foley Alabama Facebook page is used to promote events, restaurants, shopping, accommodations, and parks. Under Gov. Ivey's Safer at Home orders, families did not go out as much and this page use fell. The average number of monthly users (fans) in 2019 was 4,662. In 2020, that number was 3,994. This is a decrease of 14 percent.

In May of 2019, the city began a new Facebook page named City of Foley Municipal Government as a tool to provide timely information to residents. The number of users over the first few month was approximately 1,000. That number had grown to over 6,000 by April 2020. The page reached its stride in September, when it was used as the primary way to quickly push out city information after Hurricane Sally. In September 2020, there were over 29,000 users. This page became the go-to place to get up-to-date city information. That is an increase of 2,800 percent.

Events and reopening updates

October 2019: Hometown Halloween was held in the streets of Downtown Foley and enjoyed by a crowd of several thousand.

December 2019: Christmas in the Park was celebrated at the newly renovated pavilion in Heritage Park. The Christmas Parade and Let it Snow were well attended. Let it Snow used new "snow" machines that spread a gently falling snow among an expanded Christmas tree lane. A new snow globe was introduced for family photos. Christmas in the Park has an average attendance of about 500. Let it Snow has an annual attendance estimated at several thousand.

January 2020: The Snowbird Coffee, hosted jointly by the city and the South Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, had an attendance of 600 visitors.

February 2020: The marketing team participated in the Alabama Lifestyles Expo held at the Orange Beach Convention Center, where we delivered information about Foley to approximate 2,000 snowbirds.

March 2020: Gov. Ivey released a Safer at Home order due to COVID -19 that closed all museums and most city offices on March 16.

April 2020: Most city offices remained closed. The April Walking Tours were cancelled. The Welcome Center and museums were closed for the month. The Heritage Park Marketplace and Music and a Movie events were cancelled for the year.

May 2020: City employees came back to work on May 4. The Welcome Center reopened for normal hours on May 4, with modifications that included sneeze screens, and available hand sanitizers. Packets

with the most popular materials were placed outside the door to be available to guests without their having to come inside the building. The Depot Museum and Holmes Medical Museum reopened with modifications for safety of staff and visitors on May 18. These included rearranging displays and adding signage to encourage visitors to maintain social distance, providing hand sanitizer stations and disposable masks for employees and guests. Train rides around the park were restarted on June 30. An additional employee was brought in to wipe down frequently touched surfaces on the train between each ride and help promote social distancing.

June – August 2020: Visitor numbers were down from the previous year. The Model Train Exhibit was not open during the summer. Significant steps that were taken to make the exhibit as safe as possible for the volunteers, who all fall into a high-risk category for the virus. This included extra-large sneeze screens and a new path through the exhibit. New sidewalks were poured to make exiting easier. We began counting the number of riders on the park train. During the months of June through August, there were 2,682 riders. The event train ran on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. There were seven volunteer drivers.

September 2020: The Model Train Exhibit modifications were completed. A small number of Caboose Club members agreed to come in and reopen the exhibit on Saturdays. They did two trial runs and had over 100 visitors on both days – with no advertising. On Sept. 16, Hurricane Sally hit this area. The historic 111-year-old depot miraculously had no damage. The model train annex lost a few shingles. The doors to the storage buildings that house the park trains were damaged. The Holmes Hospital Museum building, although not owned by the city, is operated by city employees through the marketing department. Part of the building lost its roof during the storm and the building received severe damage. Water poured in. Ceilings were lost in that portion of the building. A remediation company began work and museum items were moved into storage or relocated in the building. The museum will be closed until the building is repaired. This is estimated to take several months.