

# Lancaster Eagle Gazette.

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## NEWS

# Visitors bureau finds new way to promote Fairfield Co.

**Jeff Barron** Lancaster Eagle-Gazette

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LANCASTER - The mission of Visit Fairfield County Ohio is to promote the county as a good place to visit and highlight various sites and activities to enjoy.

But the coronavirus pandemic has made that job difficult with so many places closed and people sheltering in place.

"We can't do any of those things right now," executive director Jonett Haberfield said. "It has pretty much affected us pretty significantly."

The agency is funded by the bed, or lodging, tax guests to local hotels and motels pay. But that revenue is down, of course, because so many people are staying home. Haberfield said that is the problem that is affecting VFCO the most.

"Obviously, people aren't staying at hotels," she said. "And we don't know how quickly they will be staying in hotels. That's going to affect the way we're able to promote the county because the money collected from that tax is how we do things."

Fortunately, Haberfield said the big VFCO projects like publishing its visitor guide were completed earlier in the year. Also, the agency gets its money quarterly, meaning its next check comes at the end of April or beginning of May for January, February and March hotel stays.

"January and February, we're OK because that's not our busy season, obviously," Haberfield said. "But in March, about the middle of the month, is when it really starts to take hold. So we're not expecting that check to be what it typically is. And then going forward, depending on how long this lasts, the check that we get for June, July and August is going to be substantially less, we're expecting."

## **Focused on supporting local businesses**

The visitor's center at 158 W. Wheeling St. is closed, but there is a rack outside filled with brochures for those walking by.

"We're kind of using 'plan now, visit later' as a campaign," Haberfield said. "Just to plant the seed that there are a lot of great things you can do in the county once we're allowed to get out and do that. Right now we're really focused on supporting local business and what people can do like buy gift cards or order food or shop at our online stores and not necessarily at Amazon."

While Haberfield and marketing director Fran Tiburzio are working from home, all phone calls to the office are routed to them. The pair are also working on the VFCO website by putting up photos of local attractions and putting games on the site.

"So one silver lining is that we're able to do things we're not normally able to do," Haberfield said.

She is also talking to other visitor bureaus across the country talking about what the future may hold.

"There's been all kinds of discussions about how long this will last, how quickly will we recover and will people be taking business trips first or leisure trips," Haberfield said. "The beauty of our situation is we're kind of in a driver market. People don't get on airplanes typically to come to see us, and I think that's an advantage to us."

## **Lancaster Festival cancellation a blow**

One disadvantage for VFCO, however, is the cancellation of the Lancaster Festival in late July. Haberfield said many of the festival's orchestra usually stay in hotels for 10 days, which will not happen now. She said the cancellation will also affect the morale of the community.

"I know it was a really tough decision for them and it's a decision they had to make," Haberfield said. "We completely support it. But people in our community love the arts and they love live music. It's been a tough thing and it will affect us financially because we'll lose a little bit of that lodging tax money."

She said she's working with other local organizations to see if there are some activities that can be presented on a smaller scale to help mitigate some of the festival loss.

Those wanting to reach VFCO can call 740-654-5929 or 800-626-1296 or at [www.visitfairfieldcounty.org](http://www.visitfairfieldcounty.org).

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