

# ANNUAL REPORT 2011

YAKIMA VALLEY  
VISITORS & CONVENTION BUREAU



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**LEADERSHIP MESSAGE**

On behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of the Yakima Valley Visitors & Convention Bureau (VCB), we are proud to present our 2011 Annual Report.



**Kathy Miller Parrish**  
2011 Board Chair



**John Cooper**  
President & CEO

The state of the economy continued to have an effect on travel and tourism, but trends indicated recovery was underway. By year end, Yakima County lodging room demand was down 1% over 2010 but up 1% over 2009. Yakima room tax receipts grew slightly over 2010 and were 4.7% greater than 2009.

Tourism is vital to the local economy. According to Washington State Tourism research,

- ▶ Travelers spent an estimated \$331 million in Yakima County in 2010 (most recent year figures available).
- ▶ Visitors created more than 3,370 jobs directly in tourism related industries.
- ▶ Tourism generated an additional 1,500 jobs for Yakima County in support industries including finance, construction, food processing, education, insurance, real estate and wholesale trade. The average wage of these jobs exceeded \$40,000.
- ▶ Visitors to Yakima County created \$25 million in state and local taxes, new revenues that supported our local roads, police and fire services, parks and other vital community services.

Clearly tourism is economic development. It creates jobs and local taxes while sustaining a quality of life we all enjoy. As the designated agency responsible for this important industry, the VCB works hard to build tourism for the Yakima Valley.

**SHARE YOUR WA**

The loss of the state tourism office in 2011 was a frustration to our industry, however the tourism office went out with one final marketing campaign, "Share Your Washington." The project had Washington residents send digital postcards to friends and family encouraging them to visit. VCB's throughout the state had a friendly competition to promote the campaign. The Yakima Valley embraced the challenge by posting photos, videos, etc.



Kathleen Goyette of White Pass Ski Lodge Shares Her Washington on Facebook, Twitter and on our website and succeeded at winning the competition. Our prize was increased exposure for the Yakima Valley on the still-active state website [experiencewa.com](http://experiencewa.com).



Yakima Convention Center

## YAKIMA CONVENTION CENTER

After dedicating more than two million dollars in upgrades and additions over the previous two years, visitors to the Convention Center were able to enjoy and appreciate the many improvements at the center. In its inaugural year, the new Outdoor Plaza was utilized by 27 groups for meal events, convention displays and social gatherings.



Yakima Convention Center South Lobby Art

The Convention Center hosted 149,543 visitors (**up 17% from 2010**) during 554 event days (**up 13.5%**) and brought in more than \$6.7 million to the local economy in 2011.

EVENT DAYS HELD			
	2009	2010	2011
Total	512	488	554
REVENUE			
	2009	2010	2011
Total	\$708,329	\$681,147	\$799,217

The Convention Center is the premier meeting facility in Central Washington and serves an important role in presenting the community to visitors while being a major generator of economic activity in downtown.

## CONVENTION & GROUP SALES

The meetings and group business industry in the Yakima Valley is an important part of the travel and tourism industry. The VCB worked hard to grow this sector of the industry in 2011. **Future conventions confirmed were up 2% compared to 2010, and staff generated 185 qualified leads, an increase of 9% from 2010.** Due to the state of the economy and decreased attendance, actual convention/group room nights utilized were down compared to 2010.

### Sales Activities

In July we conducted our third "Customer Advisory Forum". VCB Industry veteran and meeting consultant Linda DiMario facilitated the forum for meeting executives and local industry partners.

We kept our presence with Olympia based meeting planners strong by hosting two major functions. Although great weather kept a few planners from attending our Spring reception, our Fall "Farmer's Market Luncheon Extravaganza" drew in a record number of attendees at just over 60 planners! Guests loaded up on farm fresh Yakima Valley produce and local products while learning about the improvements at the Convention Center and updates within the hotel community. In addition, staff made numerous trips to the west side to conduct individual sales calls with convention and group related clients.

### Convention & Group Services

2011 was the third year of utilizing MeetingMax, an on-line group reservations system, and our first year using ePly, an online conference registration system. Our Volunteer Information Specialists logged 743 hours and assisted 3,450 convention delegates.

### Industry Involvement & Education

Taking an active role in professional trade organizations assists in staff development while building relationships and attracting groups for their meetings. Trade organizations we belong to include the Washington Society of Association Executives and the Society of Government Meeting Planners.

### 2011 VCB STAFF:

#### Administrative

**John Cooper**  
President & CEO

**Wendi Bixler**  
Controller & HR Manager

**Stephanie Gangle**  
Office Manager

**Barbara Fleming**  
Receptionist

#### Convention Center

**Connie Upton**  
Conv. Center General Manager

**Lisa Krous**  
Assistant General Manager

**Laura Rodriguez**  
Event Coordinator

**Sheldon Butler**  
Director of Operations

**Convention & Group Sales**  
**Brynn Kloster**  
Director of Convention & Group Sales

**Diane Reim**  
Senior Sales Manager

**Miles Eaton**  
Convention Sales Manager

**Andrea Stone**  
Convention Services  
& Housing Coordinator

**Sports Commission**  
**Rich Austin**  
Director of Sports

**Mike Carey**  
Sports Sales Manager

**Richard Huebner**  
Sports Services Coordinator

**Leisure and Internet Marketing**  
**Kirsten Danielson**  
Director of Marketing

**Daniel Writer**  
Graphics & Web Developer

**Visitor Services**  
**Pam Alamos**  
Visitor Information Center Manager

**Diane Smestad**  
Travel Consultant

**Herb Schmidt**  
Travel Consultant

**Tourism Development**  
**Katie Heaverlo**  
Director of Tourism

**Member Services**  
**Michelle Hopkins**  
Director of Member Services

**VisitYakimaValley.org  
2011 Web Campaigns**



**RedWineRoute.com**  
(January - February)



**VisitFarmFreshFun.com**  
(May-September)



**WineCountryThanksgiving.com**  
(October-November)



**WinterInTheValley.com**  
(November-December)



**Wine Country Getaway**  
(Year Round)



**WineCountryGirls.com**  
(Year-Round)



**YakimaValleyLive.com**  
(Year-Round)

**MARKETING**

Our consumer website [www.visityakimavalley.org](http://www.visityakimavalley.org) continues to be an effective communications tool. A strategic advertising schedule in 2011 of print media, partner advertising, seasonal or themed micro websites and giveaways focused on driving consumers to the website was successful. The year ended with 211,943 unique visitors to the VCB's website, **a 28% increase in traffic over 2010 and a 76% increase over 2009.**



This year we designed advertisements that were editorial in nature – telling the story of the Yakima Valley. Aligned with our brand strategies, the main focus was “where the grapes are grown” and “farm, fresh, fun!” depicting the Yakima Valley’s unique agricultural goodness. Event advertisements were placed bi-monthly in the Sunday issue of the Seattle Times’ “NW Travel” section covering what to do during the upcoming weekend. Destination promotion advertisements were placed in magazines such as Washington Tasting Room, Sunset, AAA Western Journey, and Wine Press NW.

To stimulate travel, staff created Wine Country Getaway Giveaways promotions that encouraged potential visitors to enter a drawing plus opt-in to our email communications and receive timely updates on packages, events and attractions. Lodging, wine-industry and dining members partnered with the VCB to create eight giveaways that were advertised via social media and various pay-per-click and impression campaigns on popular sites like [seattletimes.com](http://seattletimes.com), [oregonlive.com](http://oregonlive.com), [sunset.com](http://sunset.com), etc. **Requests for information resulting from advertising increased 6.6% over 2010.**

**VISITOR INFORMATION CENTER**

The Yakima Valley Visitor Information Center (VIC) off Interstate 82 is one of the most comprehensive, state-of-the-art information centers in Washington State. VIC staff is well-informed on lodging, dining, attractions and event information with an expertise in outdoor recreation for which the Yakima Valley is known. The VIC is often referred to by visitors from all over the world as one of the best they have visited.

In 2011 new features were added to the VIC. Free 24 hour Wi-Fi access was made available plus a Facebook page was developed specifically for the VIC gift shop to generate sales and interest in local products. The VIC crafted more than 300 gift baskets with local products for various businesses and local residents.

Wine enthusiasts from Yakima and beyond tasted and bought wine at our visitor center making it a destination for local Yakima Valley Wine. The VIC did over 400 tastings and sold 1,100 bottles of Yakima Valley Wine. **The VIC gift shop ended the year with an 18% increase in sales.**

In 2011, the Visitor Information Center served 14,997 walk-in visitors, helped 259 families relocate to the region, plus responded to 6,330 people via online and mail.



Visitor Information Center

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## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

### Wine Country Signage Project

The VCB assisted Yakima County Development Association (YCDA/New Vision) on the development of a new signage program in Yakima Valley's wine country. The completed project will provide visitors with cohesive directional signage within Yakima County.

### Group & Leisure

The Yakima Valley gained exposure through our attendance at industry and consumer trade shows in 2011. Staff participated in the following shows in 2011:

- ▶ Go West Summit (international operators)
- ▶ PRSA/Society of American Travel Writers Travel & Tourism Conference
- ▶ Travel Industry Association Pow Wow (international operators)
- ▶ Two Nation Vacation Travel Show (tour and travel trade)

A special event we participated in was the Travel Alliance Partners (TAP) General Partner Meeting in Spokane. As a sponsor, we were able to present and showcase the attractions and wineries of the region.

### Media Exposure

In addition to calling and corresponding with writers, we target niche market writers. For example, in the fall we invited and hosted beer bloggers to experience the Fresh Hop Ale Festival.

GreenRubino remained the public relations firm to direct a campaign to promote tourism and year-round culinary travel to the Yakima Valley. By the end of the year, our collective editorial media efforts generated \$2,845,395 in advertising value in 106 publications/media outlets with a combined readership exceeding 77 million. This is up from 2010 because of results from a media blitz to New York and larger stories appeared in big circulation publications and media. **The media coverage in 2011 was greater than 2010 by 38%.**

The Yakima Valley enjoyed editorial exposure in the following media in 2011:

- ▶ AAA Journey Magazine
- ▶ Entrepreneur Magazine
- ▶ Food & Wine Magazine
- ▶ Frommers.com
- ▶ Northwest Meetings & Events
- ▶ Sunset Magazine
- ▶ Seattle Times
- ▶ Wine Press Northwest

## MEMBERSHIP AND EVENTS

More than 360 businesses and organizations are members of the VCB, contributing \$115,000 in dues to support our efforts to advance tourism.

To add value to their membership, the VCB hosted educational programs for the members. During the summer the VCB brought in Linda DiMario, a respected tourism professional in the industry, to lead a workshop dedicated to customer experience that gave tips and strategies to grow your business. With the demise of the State Tourism office, the VCB also hosted the Washington Tourism Alliance (WTA) meeting with a community outreach session to discuss future tourism plans for Washington State.



### Holiday Reception and Silent Auction

The 22nd Annual Silent Auction and Holiday Reception welcomed more than 450 guests. Thanks to the generosity and goodwill of VCB members and the community, the event netted \$30,000 for the VCB and Visitor Information Center.



### Annual Lunch and encore! Awards

In May the VCB hosted our Annual Lunch titled "Tourism Survivor." Our guest speaker was Seattle based radio show host John Curley, who spoke of the importance of taking on new challenges.

At the event, the VCB honored well-deserving businesses and individuals that made contributions to our community by consistently providing excellent service and leadership. We congratulate the following recipients of the 2011 encore! Awards:

Tourism Persons of the Year

**Committee for Downtown Yakima - Clean & Safe Ambassadors**

Tourism Business of the Year

**White Pass Ski Area**

Chairman's Award

**Dick Zais for 30 years of service to the Yakima Valley travel industry in his role as City Manager to the City of Yakima.**

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## YAKIMA VALLEY SPORTS COMMISSION

The sports event market continues to expand and grow, providing economic benefits and exposure for the Yakima Valley. The Yakima Valley Sports Commission works to enhance existing sporting events and tournaments, attract new events, and promote the Yakima Valley as a premier sports destination in the Northwest. **The economic impact of sports tourism in the Yakima Valley was an estimated \$28.9 million in 2011 and the number of sporting events held was 386 (up 18% from 2010).**

### Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA)

The Yakima Valley is host to several Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) State High School Championships including Girls Volleyball (1B, 2B and 1A), Boys and Girls Basketball (1A and 2A), Girls Dance and Drill (all classifications), Boys Baseball (1B, 2B, 1A and 2A), Girls Softball (1B, 2B and 2A) and Boys and Girls Tennis (1B, 2B and 1A).

### Yakima Valley Sports Commission's Signature Events

Each year, the Yakima Valley Sports Commission organizes, promotes and operates three Signature Events:

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**Yakima Valley Sports Awards Luncheon**  
Awards were given in 20 high school sports for athletes, coaches and teams at the 2011 Sports Awards Luncheon, attended by more than 500 people.



**SunDome Volleyball Festival**  
72 varsity and junior varsity volleyball teams came to the Yakima Valley for the annual SunDome Volleyball Festival, held at the Yakima Valley SunDome and East Valley High School.



**Yakima Hot Shots 3-On-3 Basketball Tourney**  
A record-447 teams and 1,788 players participated in the 2011 Hot Shots Tournament held on 36 courts in the streets of downtown Yakima.

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Sports Awards Luncheon



SunDome Volleyball Festival



Hot Shots 3-on-3 Basketball Tourney

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## WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2012

The following is a synopsis of the 2012 Business Plan for the Yakima Valley Visitors & Convention Bureau:

### COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

- Play a leadership role at the state level through active involvement in the Washington Tourism Alliance and their activities to market the state and find a long term funding solution for state tourism marketing.
- Continue to be the community leader in tourism economic development through effective community and government outreach efforts.
- Build awareness of the importance of the tourism industry.
- Generate news releases and story ideas for the local press on VCB activities and the tourism industry.

### DESTINATION BRANDING

In 2012 the organization will continue to pursue a number of strategies and programs to build the brand. Activities include:

- Implementation of three new themed micro websites in the areas of: Wine Tourism, Culinary Tourism, and Agritourism. The sites will contain new photography, video, member advertisements, extensive area mapping, and event listings.
- Increased banner ads on sites targeting demographics identified in the brand strategy.
- Streamlining our co-op advertising with key brand messaging: Wine, Food, Farm.

### CONVENTION AND GROUP SALES

- Through various sales efforts, generate 200 convention/group sales leads and book 34,000 future room nights.
- Attract meeting planners to the region for FAM tours through programs that target their needs for meeting planning and continuing education.
- Conduct sales blitzes/trips to the Puget Sound corridor and other regions of the state where meeting planners and associations are located.
- Increase the number of hosted association/group board meetings for new and/or pending pieces of group business.
- Host local appreciation events for pre-selected staff members belonging to organizations that regularly assist in hosting state conventions and meetings.
- Continue on-site services to ensure quality service for groups

### YAKIMA CONVENTION CENTER

- Implement year four of the Capital Facilities Plan.
- Aggressively market the improvements at the Convention Center, in particular, the new Outdoor Plaza.
- Expand "green" environmental practices at the center.
- Convention Center staff will maximize use of the facility to increase earned revenue by 5%, hosting 500 event days and 150,000 attendees

### MARKETING & ADVERTISING

- With the absence of significant state funding for tourism, utilize the website to reach leisure markets through a variety of campaigns.
- Implement a leisure advertising campaign consisting of high impact advertisements in magazines/newspapers representing priority markets.

### MARKETING & ADVERTISING CONTINUED

- Further appeal to the 'wet' side of our state with sponsored radio weather reports encouraging visitors to the Yakima Valley, 'sun central.'
- Continue advanced social media marketing strategies through utilization of user generated websites, social media sites and an optimized website for smart phones.
- Purchase and implement the Book Direct accommodations booking tool for the website that allows real time lodging reservations.

### MEMBER SERVICES

- Continue to provide meaningful support and services to partners to ensure a high level of satisfaction.
- Build membership to 375 members and sustain a high level of retention.
- Continue workshops and programs that assist member businesses in their marketing and operations.
- Print and distribute the Yakima Valley Official Visitors Guide™.
- Stage the successful Annual Lunch and encore! Awards and Holiday Reception.

### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

- Increase media coverage on Yakima Valley attractions and communities through public relations efforts.
- Utilize PR firm and membership in the Western Association of CVBs to make media sales calls to publishers and writers in key markets. The goal is the placement of more than 45 stories with a media value exceeding \$500,000.
- Actively promote the region to the group tour and international markets. Attend leisure and industry travel shows, showcasing key attractions and activities to attract visitors.
- Continue development of wine and farm fresh fun components of the brand strategies to further expand exposure and recognition.

### YAKIMA VALLEY SPORTS COMMISSION

- Enhance existing Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) state high school championships.
- Utilize resources to submit and compete for various sporting events.
- Provide leadership in the development of existing and new sports facilities.
- Strengthen working relationships with local sporting organizations, tournament directors, venue owner/operators and key officials.
- Encourage and support local organizing committee members to take an active role in state, regional and national sports organizations.

### VISITOR SERVICES

- Continue to position the Yakima Valley Visitor Information Center as an interpretive center to expand its effectiveness in educating locals and the visitors on the unique attributes of the Yakima Valley.
- Continue to provide exceptional customer service to a projected 17,000 visitors at the VIC, encouraging them to extend their stay.
- Maintain and secure additional sponsorships for the VIC.
- Expand the retail offerings at the VIC, continuing efforts to expand locally made products.



**Visitors and  
Convention Bureau**

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