



## Annual Report | Fiscal Year 2025



# FY 2025'S TOP TEN ACHIEVEMENTS

1. CB hotel/ motel taxes **surpass \$3 million** for a **fourth year in a row**.
2. Secured **\$155,000 in grants** in FY 25 - \$10,000 more than FY 24.
  - » \$70,000 grant through the **Iowa Regional Sports Authority District** program.
  - » \$50,000 **Iowa West Foundation** grant to attract and retain sporting events.
  - » \$25,000 **Union Pacific Railroad** grant to promote the 2024 Railroad Days.
  - » \$10,000 **Iowa Tourism Office** grant to support the 2025 business travel marketing initiative.
3. **Rebranded** the Council Bluffs CVB to **Unleash Council Bluffs** - embracing both a **new name** and emphasizing a **unique call to action**.
4. **Increased traffic to UNleashCB.com** by double-digit percentage points across three metrics.
  - » 22% surge in **unique users** to 387,037.
  - » 16% jump in **sessions** to 448,484.
  - » 26% growth in **views** to 729,163.
5. **Grew website event submissions by 247 or 15.55%**, from 1,588 in FY 24 to 1,835 in FY 25 - **another record high**.
6. **Multiplied impressions and clicks** prompted by seasonal marketing initiatives by **20%** and **20.89%**, respectively, year-over-year.
7. **Launched** the first-ever **Council Bluffs Business Travel Marketing Initiative** to attract **more business travelers** to CB and **increase hotel stays** between Sunday and Thursday.
8. **Generated 8,456 hotel room nights**, resulting in **\$902,255.20 of economic impact** from ten sporting events in FY 25.
9. **Hosted the Iowa Association of Business & Industry Conference** for the first time in the organization's 122-year history on June 10 - 12, 2025.
10. Nominated and earned the **Only in Iowa award for Hitchcock Nature Center** from the Iowa Travel Industry Partners Foundation.



# UNLEASH COUNCIL BLUFFS...

Unleash Council Bluffs represents both a new name and a uniquely fitting call to action.

As previously announced, the Council Bluffs Convention & Visitors Bureau will soon be doing business as Unleash Council Bluffs. While the long-time name performed its job well, in the landscape of destination marketing, it became a dated, out-of-step label for our nonprofit. In a world of Visits, Experiences, Explores, Discovers, and several other action verbs, the time had arrived for us to evolve.

In addition, the name change allows our destination marketing organization to embrace a call to action unique to this community we call home. Grounded in the city image campaign launched a decade ago, “unleash” represents the embodiment of the campaign and its intent to promote all that makes CB “Unlike anywhere else. On purpose.” The rebrand will take some time. There’s no magic wand to change everything from the old name to the new. The transition will occur over time as our budget allows, but rest assured, change is coming.

Speaking of unleash, what you may have already noticed is the vibrancy of our marketing over the past year. The ad creative reflects new energy, fresh design, and a resonating message. It also employs new photography and video assets that the organization didn’t previously have at its disposal. Expect to see even more impactful advertising going forward.

Let me conclude by reminding you of our focus to attract new customers to local businesses, to generate new taxpayers for local government, both for the benefit of all local residents. According to Tourism Economics, these new customers represented more than \$336 million in travel expenditures in Pottawattamie County during 2023 (the most recent available data). Yes, a third of a billion dollars.

We strive every day to deliver value to the City of Council Bluffs that exceeds, many times over, the dollars invested in us. Thank you for that investment.



Ashley Kruse  
Board President



## LEADERSHIP

- Board President - Ashley Kruse: City of Council Bluffs
- Board Vice President - Arian Haddix: Fox Creek Fundraising
- Vanessa Dobles: Union Pacific Railroad Museum
- Len Friedenbach: Country Inn & Suites
- Matt Johnson: Barley's Bar & Grill / Railway Inn
- Brian Shea: Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors
- Bill Vanderpool: Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites / Hampton Inn & Suites @ Ameristar

## TEAM

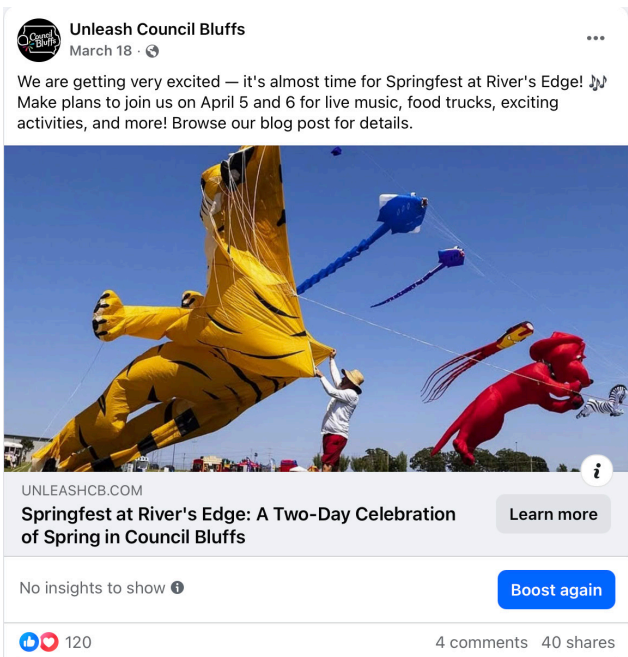
- Mark Eckman: Executive Director
  - Craig Carlsen: Director of Marketing
  - Sophie Kohler: Marketing Intern
  - Kathy Rosene: Director of Sales
- 509 23rd Avenue | Council Bluffs, Iowa  
(712) 256.2577  
UNLEASHCB.COM

# FY 25 CONTENT REELS IN SOCIAL & WEB AUDIENCES

During fiscal year 2025, enticing social and web content once again generated strong online interest in the city and county, emphasizing the six message pillars.

## MESSAGE PILLARS

- 1. Unmatched railroad history
- 2. Singular outdoor experiences + natural landscapes
- 3. Exceptional live music performances
- 4. One-of-a-kind public, visual, and performing arts
- 5. Superior sports facilities + fields
- 6. Unique nightlife, entertainment districts + historic neighborhoods



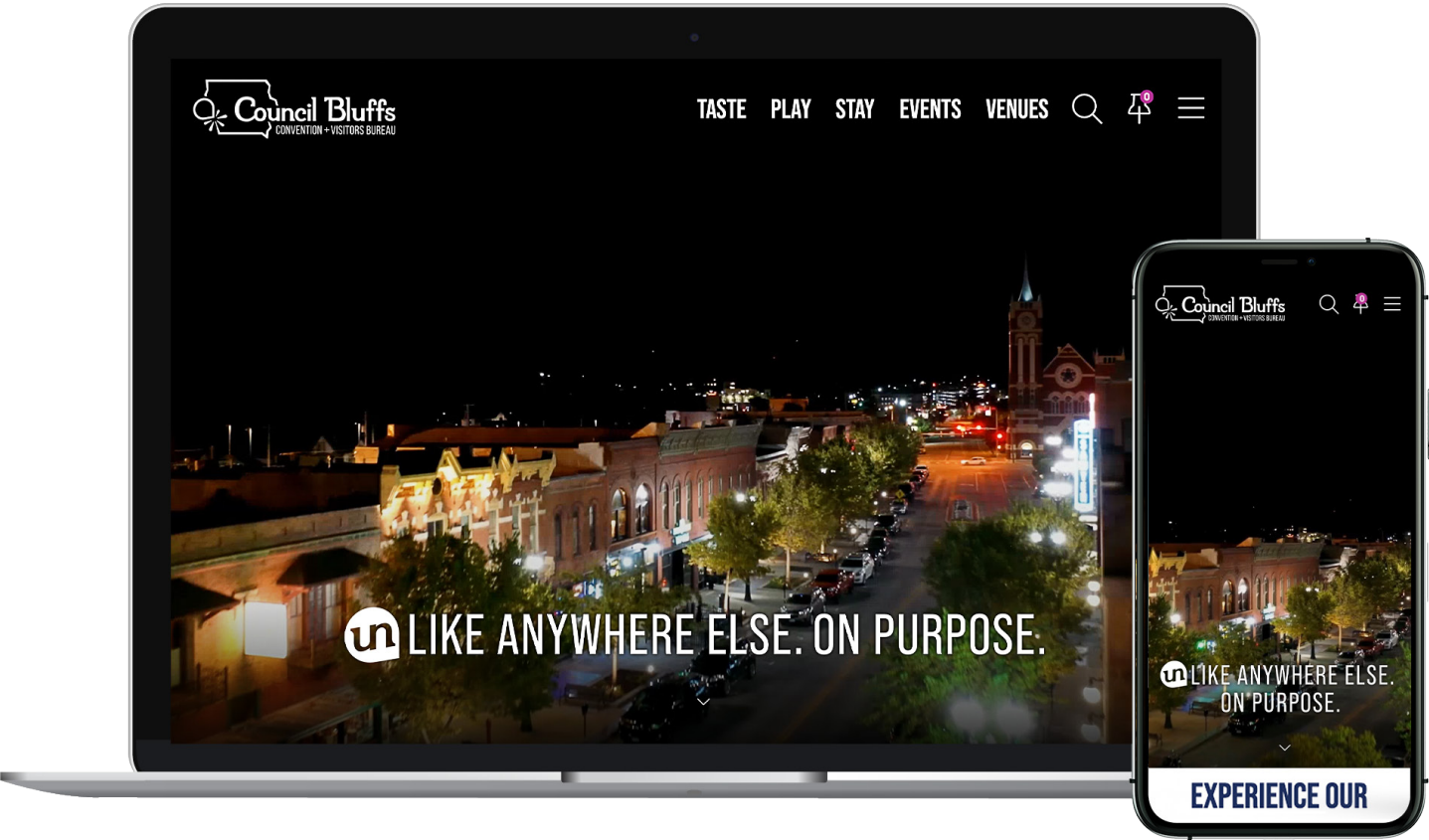
## LIVE MUSIC PROVES TO BE AN IRRESISTIBLE LURE

One of the six message pillars is “Exceptional live music performances,” and for good reason. Its draw and staying power are undeniable, as proven in FY 25. The appeal begins with the love many travelers have for their favorite artists and is only amplified by FOMO (fear of missing out). Between these motivators and the CBCVB’s marketing efforts, the fiscal year’s three top-performing blogs were live music-focused: Stir Concert Cove Calendar, 89.7 The River’s 30th Anniversary Show, and Council Bluffs Live Music & Concerts. The webpage with the third-highest number of users was Stir Concert Cove’s 2025 Concert Calendar, with 25,929.



# UNLEASHCB.COM METRICS SHOT UP BY DOUBLE-DIGITS

Following a top-to-bottom redesign in fiscal year 2024, website analytics jumped by double-digit percentages across four out of five data points. The event calendar continued its record-breaking streak with 1,835 submissions in fiscal year 2025, further cementing UNleashCB.com as the go-to source for discovering fun in the area. Each listing not only keeps the site fresh with daily updates but also extends the reach of those events through our robust social media promotions.



# SOCIAL METRICS CONTINUE GROWTH



# MARKETING INCREASED IMPRESSIONS & CLICKS BY 20%

Fiscal year 2025 saw four more seasonal marketing initiatives inspire travelers to make Council Bluffs and Pottawattamie County a year-round destination. Both impressions and clicks rose sharply—by 20.04% and 20.89%, respectively—a complete turnaround from the year prior when impressions had declined. This surge highlights the growing strength of seasonal campaigns in attracting attention, driving engagement, and reinforcing the area’s appeal across all four seasons.

## SUMMER INITIATIVE JULY 1 - SEPTEMBER 2, 2024

Investment	\$25,000
Impressions	1,577,143
Clicks	32,771
Page Views	57,349

## FALL INITIATIVE SEPTEMBER 3 - NOVEMBER 24, 2024

Investment	\$25,000
Impressions	1,418,213
Clicks	32,199
Page Views	46,351

## WINTER INITIATIVE JANUARY 2 - FEBRUARY 28, 2025

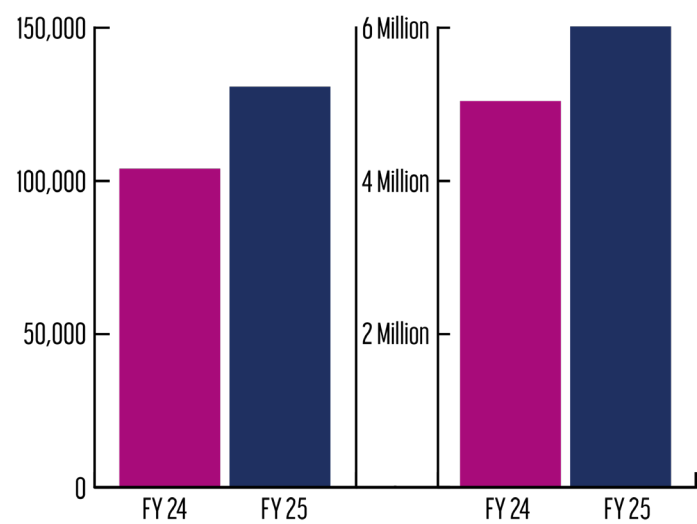
Investment	\$17,000
Impressions	1,051,661
Clicks	14,119
Page Views	23,296

## SPRING INITIATIVE MARCH 17 - JUNE 8, 2025

Investment	\$25,000
Impressions	2,046,941
Clicks	51,653
Page Views	64,566

CLICKS:  
+21% YOY

IMPRESSIONS:  
+20% YOY

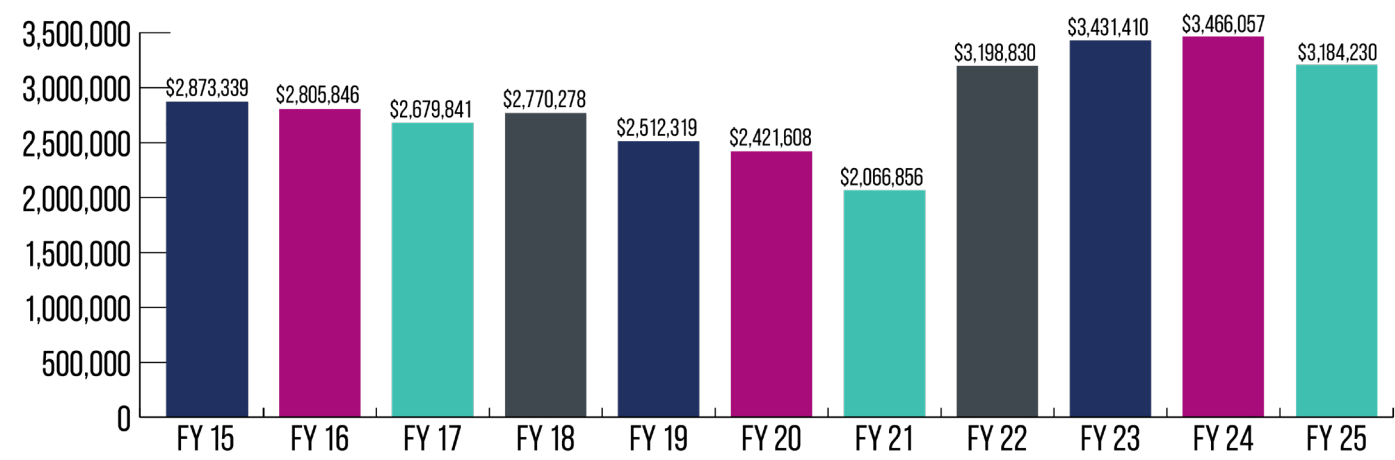


## TARGET MARKETS

DES MOINES, IA  
CEDAR RAPIDS, IA  
WATERLOO, IA  
MINNEAPOLIS, MN  
KANSAS CITY, MO  
ST. JOSEPH, MO  
HASTINGS/KEARNEY/GRAND ISLAND, NE  
SIOUX FALLS/MITCHELL/YANKTON, SD



# GRANTS PROMOTE HEADS IN BEDS & VISITOR SPENDING



## FY 25 HOTEL/MOTEL COLLECTIONS EXCEED \$3 MILLION FOR FOURTH YEAR

The City of Council Bluffs collected \$3,184,230 in hotel/ motel taxes in fiscal year 2025. That marks the fourth consecutive year the total has surpassed \$3 million.

## FY 25 GRANT AWARDS INCREASE BY \$10,000 FOR TOTAL OF \$155,000

The CBCVB received \$155,000 in grant awards during FY 25 compared to \$145,000 in FY 24. The Regional Sports Authority District (RSAD) grant program approved \$70,000 to support 11 tournaments. That represents the 18th consecutive sports grant received from the State of Iowa. The Iowa West Foundation played a big part in landing the RSAD funding. The foundation green-lit a \$50,000 grant to supplement the local match. Additional event support came from a \$25,000 Union Pacific Railroad grant to help promote the 2024 Railroad Days. Furthermore, the Iowa Tourism Office underwrote the CBCVB's 2025 business travel marketing initiative with a \$10,000 grant.



## VISITOR SPENDING CLIMBS 57% SINCE PANDEMIC, SIGNALING STRONG RECOVERY

According to Tourism Economics, visitor direct spending in Pottawattamie County **climbed two percent year-over-year in 2023, reaching \$336.24 million**. This marks a continued rebound from the challenges of 2020, when spending dipped sharply to \$213.89 million. Since then, the county has experienced a remarkable recovery, with an increase of \$122.35 million—a 57.2 percent surge in just three years.

Looking at the bigger picture, **travel expenditures between 2015 and 2023 totaled \$2.72 billion** in Pottawattamie County, according to data from the U.S. Travel Association and Tourism Economics. These figures reflect the ongoing value of tourism as a driver of the local economy, fueling everything from lodging and dining to attractions and retail.

# CB HOSTED IOWA'S LARGEST & OLDEST BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

For the first time in its 122-year history, the Iowa Association of Business & Industry held its “Taking Care of Business” annual conference in Council Bluffs on June 10-12, 2025. Approximately 300 business leaders from across Iowa participated in the three-day event at the Mid-America Center. They not only took part in educational sessions but also toured the city’s historical sites, public art, and local industries. The welcome reception was held at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center on the event’s first evening. The next night, the chair’s reception and dinner took place at the Harper Event Center of Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo.



## HITCHCOCK NATURE CENTER WON “ONLY IN IOWA” AWARD

Hitchcock Nature Center received an honor from the Iowa Travel Industry Partners Foundation for making the state of Iowa unique, noteworthy, and proud. The Only in Iowa Award was presented to Jeff Franco, Chad Graeve, and Chris Ruhaak, representing Pottawattamie Conservation, on June 10, 2025, in Winterset, Iowa. The nature center’s interpretation and preservation of the Loess Hills separated it from the other nominees. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the hills themselves could not have fit the literal definition of “Only in Iowa” better. The Council Bluffs CVB nominated the nature center for the iTIP Foundation award.



# SPORTS FLEXED ITS MUSCLES & GLOBAL REACH IN FY 2025

For the second time in as many years, the Yonex US Open Badminton Championships invited athletes from around the world to compete in Council Bluffs on June 24-29, 2025. In closely contested matches, 310 international athletes hit shuttlecocks as fast as 300 mph. The event generated 1,071 hotel room nights with a value of more than \$114,275.70.

Overall, with the assistance of the State of Iowa and Iowa West Foundation, the Council Bluffs CVB supported ten tournaments, resulting in 8,456 room nights worth \$902,255.20 to CB hotels, including the US Open. In addition to the Open, three of the ten were national championship-caliber events. The sponsorship support covered part of the event expenses incurred by the tournaments and ultimately benefited the local venues themselves. Of the \$155,613 invested by the CBCVB, \$119,000 went to the Mid-America Center, \$31,158 to the Iowa West Field House, and \$5,455 to the Council Bluffs Recreation Complex.



## RURAL PASSPORT PROMOTED POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY & MORE

Fiscal year 2025 kicked off with the inaugural Western Iowa Rural Passport already in full swing. The brainchild of Alysia Hess, owner of The Occasional Collective, the 36-page passport featured 54 locations—primarily small businesses and attractions in Pottawattamie County, with a selection from neighboring Mills and Cass counties as well. This collaborative staycation promotion encouraged locals and visitors alike to explore unique shops, eateries, and points of interest across the region. Running from June 19 through September 2, 2024, the effort saw enthusiastic participation, with 975 passports distributed.

To make the experience even more accessible, the Council Bluffs CVB hosted the passport's official landing page on UNleashCB.com. This digital hub provided a full list of participating locations, details on how to take part, and prize information for those completing the tour. By the promotion's conclusion, the page had generated 2,894 views from 1,905 unique users, reflecting strong interest and reach both in person and online.



# OMA COLLABORATION CELEBRATES DESTINATION'S BEST

Visit Omaha and the Council Bluffs CVB collaborated, as they have done since 2017, to present the 2025 Omaha Metropolitan Area Tourism Awards to the best attraction, hotel, retail business, and restaurant in Douglas and Pottawattamie counties.

The 2025 Pottawattamie County winners included Best Hotel: Harrah's Hotel & Casino, Best Attraction: Hitchcock Nature Center, Best Retail Business: Bloom Works Floral, and Best Restaurant: Boxer Barbecue. The winners are determined by locals and visitors over the course of a nomination and voting process. This year, 15,111 votes were cast.

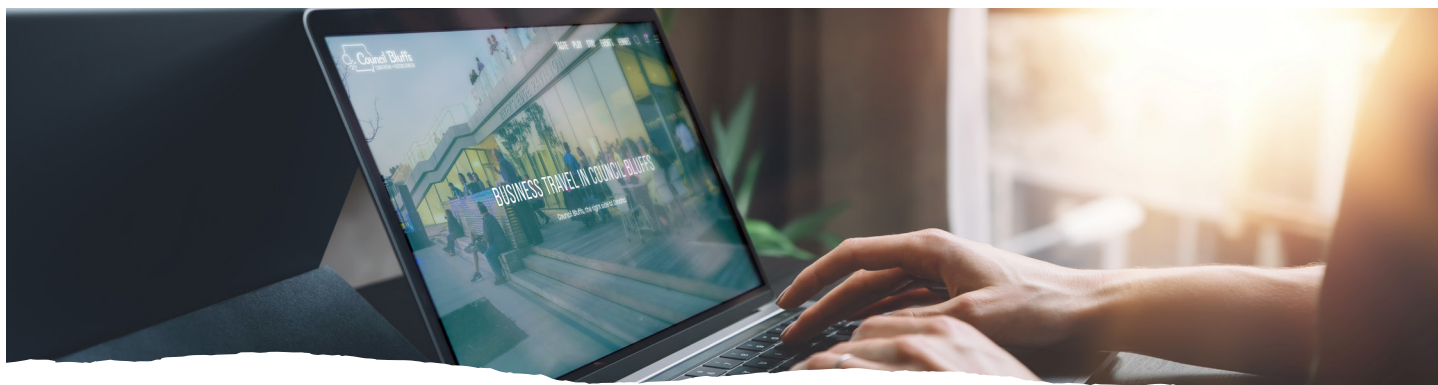
The rollout of the recipients coincided with National Travel & Tourism Week, May 4-10. That week, the winners attended both a Council Bluffs City Council study session and a Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors meeting with CBCVB representatives, at which the award recipients were recognized. On both occasions, the city and county also issued proclamations regarding NTTW.

Videos of the award recipients revealed the honorees to a broader audience and resulted in 141,877 engagements, impressions, and views on social media. Three metro area digital billboards also announced the winners, May 5-18, and generated 892,674 impressions. Furthermore, 20 stories mentioning the awards through online, print, social media, and television sources translated into \$1.2 million in coverage.



## YEAR-LONG BUSINESS TRAVEL CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

Sunday-through-Thursday overnight stays remain one of the most sought-after pieces of business for Council Bluffs. It represents the biggest opportunity for growth as well as the most elusive. The CBCVB developed a digital marketing initiative to persuade business travelers to book their hotel stays in CB. The Country Inn & Suites, Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites, and Hampton Inn stepped forward to contribute to it. A \$10,000 grant with a dollar-for-dollar match from the bureau and partner hotels underwrote the cost. It began on January 2, 2025, and will conclude on December 6. By June 30, the campaign's halfway point, it had generated 700,029 impressions and 12,190 clicks.



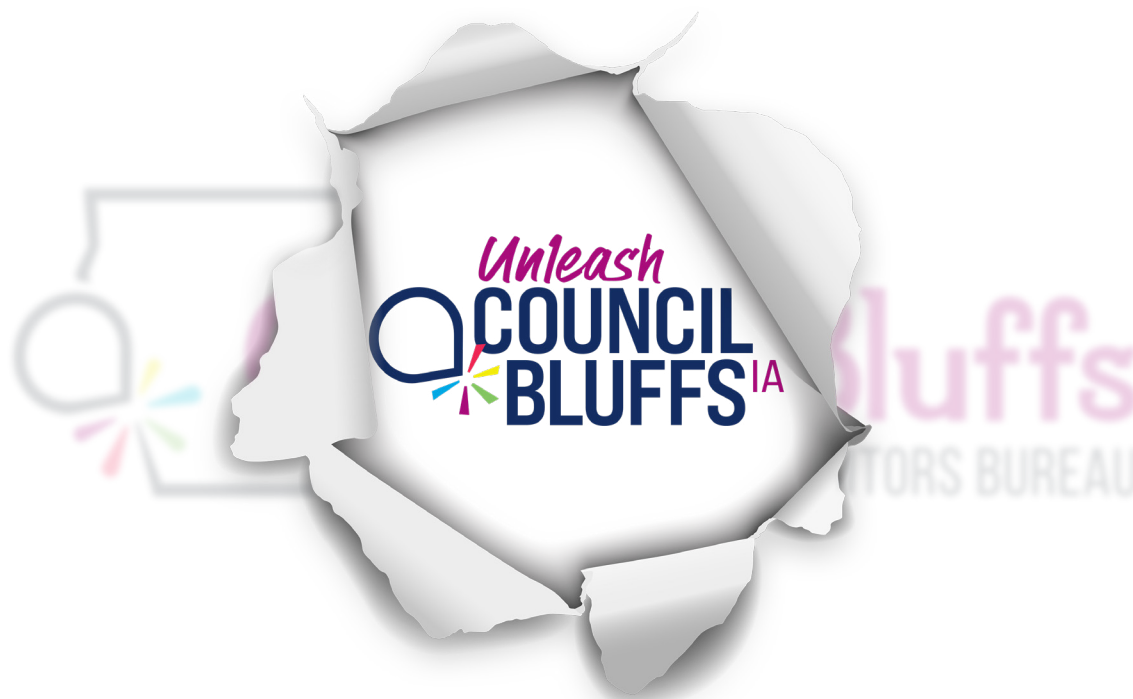
## 2025 BRINGS FORTH NEW NAME & NEW BRAND

Ashley Kruse laid out in her board president's letter on page two much of the rationale behind the organization's desire to evolve from the Council Bluffs Convention & Visitors Bureau to Unleash Council Bluffs. The following outlines a few more details about the development of the new logo.

While the CBCVB Board of Directors approved the name change in the spring of 2024, the process was paused due to a transition in the bureau's marketing director. Once Craig Carlsen became acclimated to his new role, Ashley, Craig, and Mark Eckman engaged Emspace + Lovgren to develop a new brand to reflect the new name. Emspace facilitated the city's image campaign and created the CBCVB's existing logo. The goal was for the new brand to mirror the look and feel of the image campaign.

All parties familiarized themselves with other destination logos and the context in which a new brand would be employed. The project process, timeline, and deliverables were set. After Emspace developed five initial concepts, one immediately rose to the top, but even it required some modifications. Those tweaks were incorporated, and on July 24, the board approved the new logo.

Its application to marketing, signage, collateral, and many other placements will be executed over the upcoming weeks and months. The Unleash Council Bluffs Board of Directors and team look forward to sharing it with local residents, partners, stakeholders, clients, and ultimately, travelers.





## OUR MISSION

Unleash Council Bluffs (formerly the Council Bluffs Convention & Visitors Bureau) serves as a catalyst to grow Pottawattamie County's visitor economy through collaborative sales and marketing, destination advocacy, and sustainable placemaking activities in order to enhance the region's quality of life.

Unleash Council Bluffs is funded by the City of Council Bluffs from a portion of the hotel/motel taxes generated by travelers. This support allows the bureau to promote CB as a destination for visitors to enjoy the city's hotels, restaurants, attractions, venues, and events. Visitors serve as new customers for local businesses and new taxpayers for local government, benefiting all local residents.