

CONTACT:
Cara Schneider
cara@visitphilly.com
(215) 599-0789

VISIT PHILADELPHIA® Board of Directors Announces Leadership Transition as Founding President & CEO, Meryl Levitz, Plans Departure in 2018

January 19, 2018 (Philadelphia, PA) – The Board of Directors of VISIT PHILADELPHIA® today announced that its founding president and CEO, Meryl Levitz, plans to leave her leadership post by the end of the year. A search committee has been established by the Board of Directors to oversee the process of identifying the organization’s new chief executive and it has engaged Diversified Search to undertake a national effort to recruit and secure a highly qualified and passionate candidate. Until the transition to a new leader is complete, Ms. Levitz will continue in her current role as president and CEO of VISIT PHILADELPHIA to ensure a seamless transition and help drive continued success throughout 2018.

“Meryl Levitz is one of Philadelphia’s original tourism pioneers,” said Manuel N. Stamatakis, Chair, Board of Directors, VISIT PHILADELPHIA. “Today, VISIT PHILADELPHIA is a recognized industry leader in tourism marketing and its transformational impact on the region – changing its perception in the eyes of the world and serving as an economic engine – cannot be overstated. Meryl has also developed an outstanding staff, positioning the organization well for continued success and future growth. On behalf of the Board of Directors, we salute Meryl for her 22 years of commitment and the legacy of organizational excellence she will leave.”

That legacy is rooted in creative, first-of-its-kind and consistent marketing that has delivered dramatic growth in leisure tourism and driven economic impact. The results of VISIT PHILADELPHIA’s efforts are clear. The five-county region is now a sought-after tourist destination – not just for major events – but day in and day out, year after year. Since VISIT PHILADELPHIA’s inception in 1996:

- **Overnight leisure visitation to the five counties has grown 101 percent, from 7.3 million in 1997 to 14.7 million in 2016.¹**
- **With the beginning of its advertising in 1997, Center City Philadelphia has seen a 296 percent increase in leisure hotel demand.²**
- **Whereas leisure tourism in 1996 accounted for only 14 percent (250,000) of all Center City hotel room nights booked per year, today it represents 32 percent (more than one million) room nights.³**

- **And while leisure visitors arrive all year and every night, Saturday has become the busiest night for Center City hotels – and has remained so for 14 years – hitting 90 percent average hotel occupancy for the first time ever in 2017.**⁴
- **In 2016 alone, Greater Philadelphia welcomed a record 42 million domestic visitors – 37 million of which were leisure travelers (88 percent).**⁵

Further, in the past 21 years, tourism and hospitality efforts, of which VISIT PHILADELPHIA is a critical contributor, have seen 100,000 jobs for Greater Philadelphia residents supported, delivering \$50 billion in wages.⁶ And in just two decades, the Philadelphia tourism and hospitality industry has **generated \$10 billion in state and local taxes, funding priority programs such as education, transportation and safety.**⁷

This success has been achieved through VISIT PHILADELPHIA’s sophisticated and strategic marketing efforts, especially in its role as digital innovator. Its web sites – **Visitphilly.com and Uwishunu – have more than 29 million page views and are among the top 10 destination marketing web sites in the United States.**⁸ Its social media channels, @visitphilly, engage 1.5 million fans and followers, delivering total reach in 2017 of 83 million people. Memorable and effective tourism slogans have defined VISIT PHILADELPHIA’s marketing efforts, notably *The Place that Loves You Back*, *Philly’s More Fun When You Sleep Over*, and *With Love, Philadelphia XOXO*, which is rated one of the best tourism slogans in the world.⁹ In 2003, VISIT PHILADELPHIA launched its *Get Your History Straight and Your Nightlife Gay* campaign, which was grounded in deep research and of strategic community relationships. It featured the first openly gay television commercial ever aired by a destination. And it continues to be forward-looking in its marketing efforts with the *We Got You* campaign, which launched in 2017 and is an innovative approach to welcoming African American visitors to the region.

“My decision to step away from VISIT PHILADELPHIA has not been easy, but I am confident that now is the right time,” said Ms. Levitz. “I have spent four decades putting Philadelphia on the map. In 1996, VISIT PHILADELPHIA set out to prove the naysayers wrong. The words ‘Philadelphia’ and ‘fun’ do belong in the same sentence and people do want to come here. I am proud of the work that my staff and I have done, and I am happy to have made a difference for a city I love. Knowing how strong and dynamic VISIT PHILADELPHIA is today, I feel it is time to begin a new chapter for my family and me.”

From VISIT PHILADELPHIA’s efforts, the City now regularly tops lists — from major media outlets including *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Smarter Travel*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *USA Today*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Lonely Planet* and *BUZZFEED* — of the world’s best destinations. It has also been instrumental in helping the City of Philadelphia to execute and capitalize on several top-tier national events including the

Republican National Convention (2000), The World Meeting of Families and Pope Francis' visit to Philadelphia (2015), the Democratic National Convention (2016) and the annual Welcome America festivities.

The Board and search committee will work diligently over the coming months to hire an experienced executive to lead VISIT PHILADELPHIA in its next chapter of success. Ms. Levitz has expressed her commitment to the Board to onboard her successor to ensure that the critical work of VISIT PHILADELPHIA continues unabated during this transition.

FOOTNOTES:

1. *Source:* Econsult Solutions, Inc./Longwoods International
2. *Source:* CBRE Hotels
3. *Source:* Econsult Solutions, Inc./Longwoods International
4. *Source:* Smith Travel Research
5. *Source:* Econsult Solutions, Inc./Longwoods International
6. *Source:* Econsult Solutions, Inc.
7. *Source:* Econsult Solutions, Inc.
8. *Source:* Google Analytics
9. *Source:* AirfareWatchdog.com

ABOUT VISIT PHILADELPHIA

VISIT PHILADELPHIA® is our name and our mission. As the region's official tourism marketing agency, we build Greater Philadelphia's image, drive visitation and boost the economy.

On Greater Philadelphia's official visitor website and blog, visitphilly.com and uwishunu.com, visitors can explore things to do, upcoming events, themed itineraries and hotel packages. Compelling photography and videos, interactive maps and detailed visitor information make the sites effective trip-planning tools. Along with Visit Philly social media channels, the online platforms communicate directly with consumers. Travelers can also call and stop into the Independence Visitor Center for additional information and tickets.

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