



Jan. 27, 2021

To San Antonio:

In recent weeks, as I have counted down my final days in San Antonio, I have taken the time to truly appreciate the remarkable community that has been home to me and my family for nearly a decade. Being President & CEO of Visit San Antonio in that span has given me a unique vantage point to the many assets that make our destination exceptional.

But it is in this twilight of a farewell that I have allowed myself a moment of heartfelt gratitude for this city, its leadership and the many partners and staff members who have worked alongside me to lift San Antonio into the spotlight, each and every day.

We often say at Visit San Antonio that we sell fun in pitching our destination to potential visitors – and we have fun doing it. Today, as I get ready to take over as President & CEO of Visit Orlando in Florida, I can truly say that nearly every moment of my time in San Antonio has been an amazingly fun ride.

During my time here, San Antonio has enjoyed some outstanding highs and, thankfully, only a few bruising lows. Over the past 10 years, I discovered what so many of you knew long before my arrival: This community, so proud of its culture and heritage, has a unique heart for service and hospitality. We treat each other – and those who visit – with a warmth and giving that is not found at most other destinations.

It's why, in 2019, before the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 40 million leisure visitors came to San Antonio. Time and again, those guests told us that the reason they were here, often for a second or third time, is because they were treated like family at almost every turn.

It is that truth that is expected to fuel the recovery of the tourism and hospitality industry in San Antonio as we move forward out of this damaging period. When travelers answer that pent-up desire to get out and get moving again, they'll seek out the familiar and generational places that make them feel safe and welcome. For many in Texas and surrounding states, that will mean coming to San Antonio.

I felt that welcome spirit when I arrived from Dallas in June 2011, taking over what was then the San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau. I and my family were immediately embraced, and it is a feeling we'll never forget. For my two children, this extraordinary city has been effectively the only home they have ever known.

It is my hope that I, along with Visit San Antonio and its hospitality partners, have made an impact in return over the past decade. It has been my privilege to be a part of some incredible moments. For instance:

- Two years ago, Visit San Antonio joined with the City and the hotel industry to create the San Antonio Tourism Public Improvement District (SATPID), which is forecast to eventually generate a 33 percent gain in the organization's marketing budget.
- In 2016, we saw the grand re-opening of the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center after a \$325 million transformation – the largest infrastructure upgrade in the city's history.
- Visit San Antonio was a partner in the successful pursuit of a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for San Antonio's legendary Spanish colonial missions. Today, one of those missions, the famous Alamo, is the focus of continuing discussions on how to expand and improve its footprint. Doing so effectively would represent a game-changer for San Antonio and its tourism sector.
- Visitation to San Antonio grew by nearly 37 percent since 2011, reaching 41 million in 2019.

There was much more, of course, including so many moments away from the headlines that contributed to enduring changes to the hospitality industry and San Antonio's skyline. I recall being with you for announcements of Final Fours, major conventions and other impactful events, cutting the ribbons on needed improvements on our landscape and filling the City Council chambers to let our leaders know how important this industry is for this community.

Perhaps the most impactful development was the City Council's decision five years ago to transition the Convention & Visitors Bureau, a municipal department, to what is now Visit San Antonio, a public-private nonprofit. By doing so, the organization was able to be more agile, operating with more speed-to-market capability and pursuing additional revenue streams such as the SATPID.

The City Council will be considering a renewal of that agreement in coming months, and keeping Visit San Antonio in place in its current structure will be invaluable as the organization leads the recovery of a tourism and hospitality industry that is the third-largest in city, contributing more than \$15 billion annually to the local economy.

The domino effect for residents is powerful. The visitor dollar enhances the quality of life for you and your family. The contributions to taxes and fees have helped support many major projects around the city, including the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts and the AT&T Center, and those funds help keep property taxes down.

If there's one message I'd leave behind for you, however, it is this: Join me in taking the time to appreciate this incredible city that you call home. San Antonio is special, recognized around the world for its beauty, history and accommodating spirit. Allow yourself to take a voyage of discovery – or rediscovery – of what you have right here in your own back yard.

In recent days, I've certainly done just that. While I may be leaving soon, I will for sure come back many times as a visitor.

Deep. In the Heart,



Casandra Matej, CDME, CTA

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Casandra Matej was President & CEO of Visit San Antonio from June 2011 until January 2021. In February, she takes over as President & CEO of Visit Orlando.