**From:** Maarja Hewitt
**Sent:** Wednesday, August 11, 2021 12:40 PM
**To:** Council <Council@duluthmn.gov>
**Subject:** The Future of Tourism in Duluth

City Councilors,

I’m writing to you as a Duluth resident with deep concerns regarding Mayor Larson’s recent announcement involving tourism. Less than four weeks ago, I was employed by Visit Duluth, the local, and long-standing organization that has successfully and passionately championed the tourism industry since 1935. The Mayor effectively axed this non-profit yesterday to send tourism tax dollars to the Twin Cities.

I offer a unique perspective and inside look that I hope you’ll consider as this resolution is brought before you. Having just removed myself from this situation, I was heavily involved in the RFQ/RFP process and all the ups and downs of the past year. Why did I leave? Because I came to the realization that my mental health is more important than trying to prove my worth to a City who doesn’t want to hear it. I understood that no matter which way this contract was awarded, whether to Visit Duluth or an outside entity, our relationship with the City was forever changed, and in my opinion – ruined. The Mayor said it herself in the press conference – this is about the City taking back control. This was a power move.

I will bullet my main concerns and attempt to keep them brief – please feel free to call or email for any clarification.

* What was Visit Duluth doing wrong? We never got an answer. I am by no means an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” person. I’m all for change and evolution even if what we are doing is working! Visit Duluth made it clear to the City we were willing to make changes, listen to the City’s feedback, and work toward a new vision together. That fell on deaf ears.
* But really, what’s wrong with tourism in Duluth? It’s GROWING! What are your expectations? And as non-industry experts – are those expectations realistic? Are they sustainable?
* How can you justify eliminating Duluth jobs and sending tourism tax dollars to a Twin Cities firm?
* Yes, the Mayor offered Visit Duluth to continue doing the Convention/Sales portion of the proposal with $400,000 a year. A consolation prize? Maybe it will work out to slice and dice the effort. Though it doesn’t appear to me to be a sound way to form a cohesive brand.
* This RFQ/RFP process apparently seemed transparent to the Mayor as she was on the other side. But for me, it was shrouded in secrecy. I’d still like to know how the City selected the “third party” that facilitated the proposals and interviews.
* A personal sore spot: The lack of respect from the City for Visit Duluth throughout this long, drawn-out process. Deadlines were missed by the City, details were unclear, communication was last-minute – which was maybe fine for all the agencies who were applying to simply add another account to their business, but at Visit Duluth, seven women were fighting for their livelihoods and wondering each and every day – will we learn if we lose our jobs today? There was a very real human toll to this situation that was never taken into account. I won’t speak to my former co-workers’ mental health, but this whole process certainly had a negative impact on mine.

I’m not sure what the answer is in this situation – you all have a tough job. But I’m hoping as City Councilors, you will ask some tough questions and advocate to keep our tourism tax dollars local, to support local talent, and lift up the local passion and expertise that has fueled this industry for decades.

Thank you for your time,

Maarja Hewitt