

# TAXPAYER MONEY IS WRAPPED UP IN ADVERTISEMENTS

In 2017 West Virginia took the bold step of eliminating the Tourism Matching Advertising Partnership Program from the state's Tourism Office.<sup>1</sup> But instead of eliminating it outright like the state should have, it allowed the Tourism Office to recreate the program under a new name: the Cooperative Advertising Program (CAP). At the core, this program has the same function as the previously named program.<sup>2</sup>

Under this program, state businesses can get a dollar-for-dollar match on advertising costs, funded by taxpayers. One would think this program would be available for small business owners to help them save on expenses, but that is not the case. A variety of not-so-small businesses can participate, from casinos to resorts to vineyards. For example, the Greenbrier, a luxury resort in the state that has been around for many years, has been a recipient of the solid portion of funds.

According to the Tourism Office, partners can “leverage state resources and brand identity to advertise individual destinations, attractions and events” with taxpayer financial contribution “dependent on industry interest.” In 2019, a total of \$1.275 million was allocated to the program.

In 2019, the Tourism Office planned a \$5.1 million state advertising campaign called “Almost Heaven.” With this campaign, the office planned to target individuals in the 25-54 age demographic and concentrate on out-of-state markets. That’s more than double the \$2.5 million that state taxpayers coughed up for the 2018 campaign after the division received a surplus revenue transfer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> West Virginia Tourism Office: Matching Advertising Partnership Program. Available at <https://wvtourism.com/industry-information/mapp/>. Accessed on February 12, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> West Virginia Tourism Office: Cooperative Advertising Program. Available at <https://wvtourism.com/industry-information/cooperative-advertising-program/>. Accessed on February 12, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Herald-Dispatch. “WV tourism officials approve \$5.1 million ad campaign for 2019.” Available at [https://www.herald-dispatch.com/news/wv-tourism-officials-approve-million-ad-campaign-for/article\\_633e1df2-ccca-5415-9c35-cf5a9e11f487.html](https://www.herald-dispatch.com/news/wv-tourism-officials-approve-million-ad-campaign-for/article_633e1df2-ccca-5415-9c35-cf5a9e11f487.html). Accessed on February 12, 2019.