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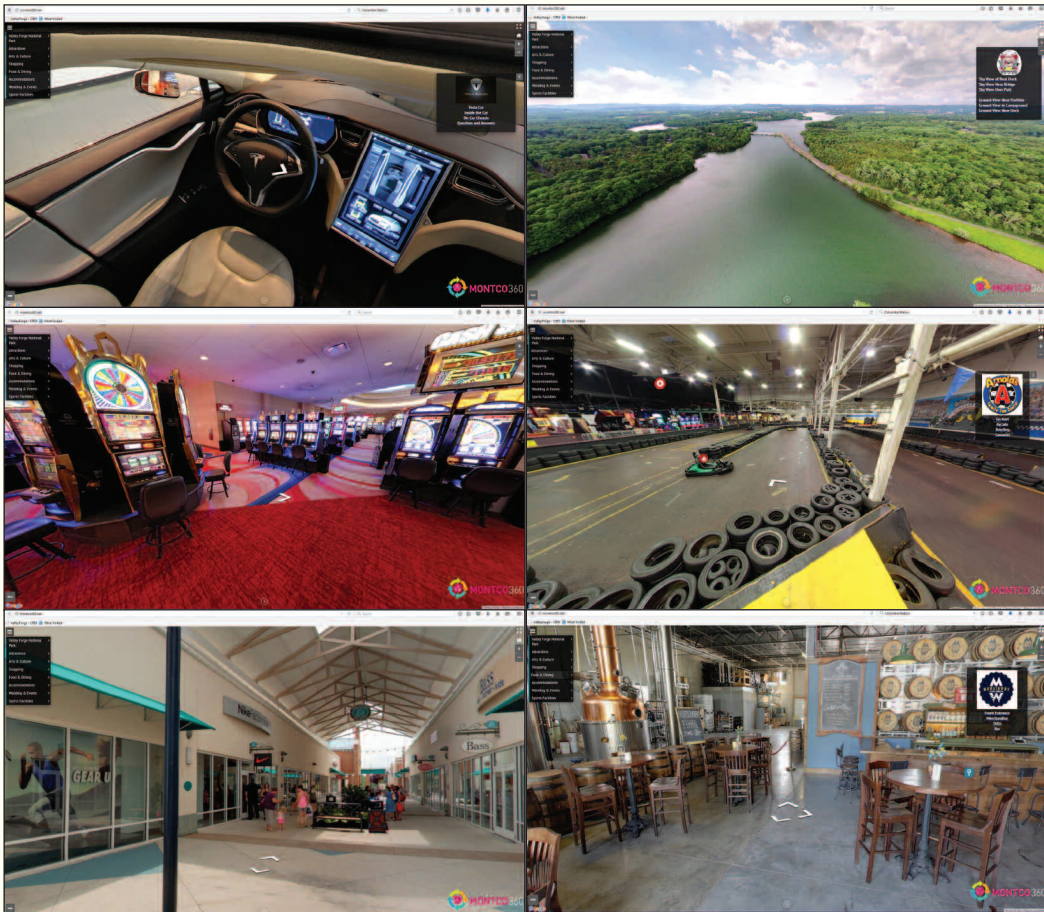
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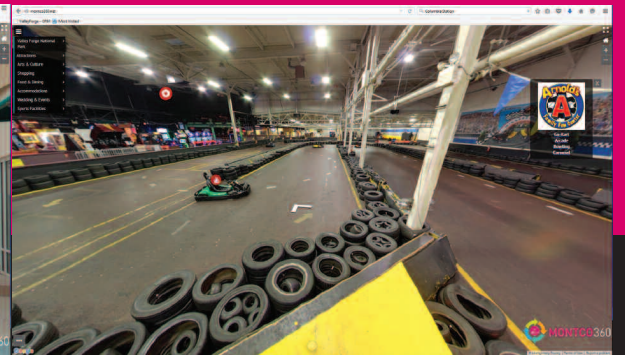
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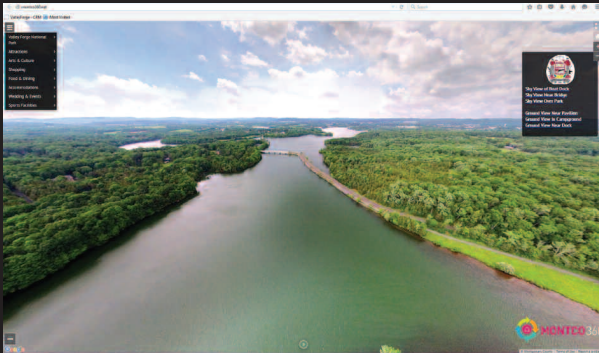
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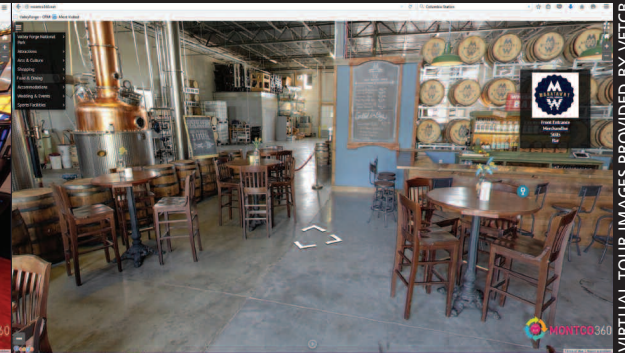
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VIRTUAL TOUR IMAGES PROVIDED BY VFTCB

# VFTCB Brings Virtual Technology to Montgomery County with MontCo 360



Edward Harris, Vice President of Marketing and Communications, VFTCB

PHOTOS BY STYLISH IMAGES PHOTOGRAPHY

Virtual reality will be the next great media platform. Comcast Corp., Time Warner and Walt Disney Company are all currently working behind the scenes to produce and broadcast virtual reality content. Soon, you will be able to pop on a digital headset made by Sony Corp., HTC Corp., or Samsung Electronics, and virtually experience being “on the field” at a professional ball game, or “in the room” at a presidential debate, in real time, without actually being there.

When it comes to learning about what there is to see and do in Montgomery County, PA, the “virtual” arena is already a “reality.” Virtual 360-degree tours of attractions in Montgomery County are available right now at MontCo 360 ([www.MontCo360.net](http://www.MontCo360.net)), thanks to an innovative partnership between Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board (VFTCB) and Google.

## The creative VFTCB team behind MontCo 360



(Standing left to right) Joe Tacyne, Creative Content & Social Media Manager; Dan Weckerly, Communications Manager; John Golden, Director of Communications. (Seated left to right) Taylor Tropea, Marketing Associate; Zach Brown, Online Marketing/Research Manager; Edward Harris, Vice President, Marketing & Communications.



MontCo 360 ingeniously combines Google technologies like *Street View* (used for Google Maps) and advanced cameras to give visitors the ability to explore 360-degree views of parks, museums, hotels, restaurants, malls and other unique attractions in Montgomery County.

A little over a year ago, **Edward Harris**, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at VFTCB, and his talented team, were brainstorming for a new way to showcase Montgomery County attractions for a new generation of visitors who prefer to access information on the go, through smart phones and tablets. Harris recalled how at his previous place of employment, **eBay**, they would talk about how virtual reality is the next frontier in retail, real estate, medicine, and entertainment. Now directing a creative marketing team at VFTCB, Harris thought, why not apply virtual reality to tourism as well?

"When Google asked if we would be willing to test *Street View* technology *inside* attractions, we said, 'Absolutely'" Harris recounts. "Thirteen months later, we've launched MontCo 360, featuring 32 virtual tours that provide an immersive interactive experience — surround sound for the eyes. Ideally we'd like to post 100 tours by next July when we have delegates visiting the region from all 50 states for the Democratic National Convention," he said. "That might be really ambitious, but that's my goal. We feel great about it right now, but we think it can be much more robust, as we add more and more restaurants, hotels, parks, and family fun things to do in Montgomery County."

The VFTCB is the first in the region to use Google's services to this extent. "The 360-degree view is what makes this unique," Harris explains. "Other counties and desti-

nations have experimented with this technology in the outdoors. They've shown off their parks and trails. We're the first destination to show the inside of ballrooms at hotels. We feel like we are a pioneer in terms of the emerging digital marketing landscape," he said, adding, "The new generation of visitors and people who want to travel are attached to their phones, are interested in being in control, and they are used to communicating in a very visual way. What we're trying to do here is bring that exciting technical wave to tourism and try to be a pioneer in that space," he said.

"I'm really lucky that the team I work with is an award-winning team," Harris says appreciatively. "They've won awards for everything from blogging to advertising to website design. They are all very creative, smart people. And they're also very flexible and positive, which is important for this project. They knew we were on to something and we think this has lots of potential to evolve, because we're one of the first groups to do this. We anticipate seeing other counties and cities starting to test and try this, because we see it taking off," he said.

You can access MontCo 360 wherever you are — on your laptop, your tablet, your phone, or your desktop computer. "In the tourism world, when you're thinking of going to a different destination, you want to see it," Harris explains. "In the old world, a picture was worth a thousand words. Now, a virtual tour is worth a million words, because you can be here before you get here, and really get a sense for, is this the type of restaurant I want to go to this coming weekend, or not? Or, do I want to take my family to this amazing park, because they have kayaking? Or, do I want to go to this zoo because you can feed the giraffes? Those are things we feature on MontCo 360," he said.

(See "Cover Story" on page 10)

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## COVER STORY

(Continued from page 7)

Using MontCo 360, residents and potential visitors can walk through interior rooms as well as outdoor landscapes. For the first time, users of the site can now be in total control of viewing where they want to go, and what they want to see before they step foot in Montgomery County.

A nontraditional vantage point created by drones brings users above the rooftops of the Elmwood Park Zoo in Norristown, Peter Wentz Farmstead in Worcester and the Philadelphia Premium Outlets in Limerick. The county's magnificent open spaces are also presented from great heights, with views of Green Lane Park and the Germantown Academy athletic fields.

For history buffs, MontCo 360 showcases places like Valley Forge National Historical Park. Clicking your mouse or using your finger over the screen whirls the landscape and opens the viewer to the beautiful trees, fields of waving grass, statuary and honorifics associated with a key Revolutionary War location. One of the highlights of touring the park using MontCo 360 is the opportunity to navigate the museum of Continental Army artifacts within the Visitor Center, which displays the treasures in an interactive way.

When exploring the King of Prussia Mall on MontCo 360, visitors can step inside the tech-savvy Tesla Motors store and experience what it's like to sit in the driver's seat of one of their premium electric cars. "Knowing this was going to be high tech, we wanted to feature somewhere in the King of Prussia Mall that represents technology," Harris said. "Tesla Motors let us go around the store and inside a car so you can feel what it's like to be inside one of these electric cars. It really syncs up well with the fact that this is a technical cutting-edge product. It made sense to feature Tesla Motors as well as other unique places like Arnold's Family Fun Center located in Oaks. It's part of the heart of the 422 corridor."

Parents looking for a place to take their kids to unwind can click on Arnold's Family Fun Center to walk through the massive arcade and see the bowling alley and indoor

go-kart tracks, and visually experience what it like to ride on the track. "What's nice about MontCo360.net is we can put layers (of video) on top of it," Harris said. "Arnold's created a video of what it's like to do the go-kart experience from a driver's perspective. The driver has a helmet camera and you can see what the driving experience is like."

There are also plenty of hotels and restaurants to explore on MontCo 360, as well as Manatawny Still Works, a popular distillery located in Pottstown, that you can tour virtually before you arrive. "You're able to go right inside, tour the facility, see how everything's made," Harris said. "You can get a sense for the place, and maybe have your next corporate luncheon there, or get a sense for how you can use the space."

"It was important for Valley Forge Casino to be on MontCo 360 as well," Harris said, "because they offer that nightlife piece. They love this. They had Google come back two or three times to continue to do more photography. You can spend all kinds of time looking around. Next month, we're going to be filming a virtual tour at the Expo Center in Oaks," Harris said. "That's a really key draw for people around the country looking for a great place to have their next convention. So we can show off that space with these virtual tours."

Next spring VFTCB will launch MontCo Golf on MontCo360. "The intent is to show off our 59 golf courses in Montgomery County, using drone cameras for views of some of the beautiful holes, get inside the clubhouses, show off some of the restaurants, at both private and public courses," he said. "We think there will be a real appetite for that. We're going to put a stake in the ground in May 2016 that we are a serious golfing destination."

VFTCB members can arrange to have their business or location featured in a virtual tour on MontCo 360 for a minimal investment. The opening package consists of five 360-degree photos for — appropriately — \$360.00.

(See "Cover Story" on page 12)



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**COVER STORY**

*(Continued from page 10)*

As a non-profit, VFTCB arranges for Google to come down once a month from New York, and coordinates the best time for the business to allow Google to come in and set up 360-degree cameras. If an aerial shot is requested, they'll bring their drone camera.

Photography on the MontCo 360 site is constantly being refreshed and new attractions are being uploaded. "I think when people discover the value of being able to see their business through a virtual tour, they'll want to then add it to their own website, which is part of this project," Harris said. "After we upload their virtual tour onto our MontCo 360 site, they can then have their tour embedded on their own site."

MontCo 360 has turned out to be a great tool for VFTCB to utilize in its efforts to attract visitors and conventions from around the country and the world to Montgomery County. "We have a sales organization that does extensive traveling to other states to talk to meeting planners about things like the fact that we have more than 75 hotels here in Montgomery County," Harris said. "We have more than 500 restaurants. We have 60 miles of trails. We have the best shopping on the East

Coast, when you think about the Premium Outlets, our malls in King of Prussia, Willow Grove, Plymouth Meeting, and Montgomeryville. There's so much we have to offer, and to have the ability to be at a trade show or convention and pull up on your phone and give those virtual tours to prospects who are deciding between Montgomery County PA and somewhere in Ohio or New Jersey or any other state they may be thinking about, we feel as though this is something in our toolbox that our sales team can use to really showcase our area, and our members," he said.

The Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board is a nonprofit, membership-based sales and marketing organization with nearly 400 members, with plans to continue to grow its membership base and the number of virtual tours on MontCo 360. "At the end of the day, we want to make sure that people in general are all aware of the wide variety of assets that we have here in Montgomery County to experience, and for us to do that, it means having great relationships and partnerships with the business community, our members, so that they can be part of that story," Harris said.

*(See "Cover Story" on page 14)*

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## COVER STORY

(Continued from page 12)

"The more members and more businesses that join MontCo 360, the better the experience is going to be for those delegates who descend here next summer, so they will go back to where they are from and say, 'I had this amazing experience in the Philadelphia region and check out this MontCo 360! I checked out some of these attractions when I was there, and I want to go back because there's so much more that I didn't get to. And you should too.'"

"Our task is to promote all things tourism," Harris emphasizes. "When we talk about tourism in Montgomery County, we're talking about over 20,000 jobs, close to \$1.6 billion in economic impact. So tourism is a big deal. We serve to stimulate the economy here in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, and also promote the area as a place where you

can come and spend the night," he said. "Our organization is funded in part by the hotel tax from Montgomery County, so we want to make sure visitors are aware of all the amazing attractions we have throughout Montgomery County and give them enough reasons why they should make it a long weekend or a week-long vacation. And we're fortunate because we have some incredible assets."

"So far the feedback's been great," Harris said. "We debuted MontCo 360 at our annual luncheon last month, and we're getting all kinds of calls from businesses interested in being featured because they want to be part of the club so to speak. There's something for everybody on here, and the goal is to just build this out. We feel like there's tons of opportunity here." 🗑️

Montco 360 is available at [www.MontCo360.net](http://www.MontCo360.net). To learn more about the many benefits of membership in VCTCB, and about Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board's ongoing efforts to promote Valley Forge area and Montgomery County as a convention site and leisure visitor destination by encouraging patronage of its member hotels, restaurants, attractions and services, please visit [www.valleyforge.org](http://www.valleyforge.org); call 610.834.7961; or email [info@valleyforge.org](mailto:info@valleyforge.org).

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