

**Town of Blowing Rock
Tourism Development Authority
March 3, 2020**

The Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority (TDA) met on Tuesday, March 3, 2020 beginning at 3:30 p.m. The meeting was held at the American Legion Building located at 333 Wallingford St., Blowing Rock. Present were Chairman Dean Bullis, Outgoing Vice-Chair Jim Steele, Members Greg Tarbutton, Kevin Walker. Outgoing Member Lance Campbell was unable to attend. Newly appointed Authority Members, Virginia Powell and Tim Gupton. Others present were Ex-officio Members Nicole Norman and Shane Fox, TDA Executive Director Tracy Brown, Assistant Director Amanda Lugenbell, and Town Clerk Hilari Hubner, who recorded the minutes.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Bullis called the meeting to order at 3:30 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Member Tarbutton made a motion to approve the December 2, 2019 retreat meeting open and closed session minutes as written, seconded by Member Walker. Unanimously approved.

NEW BUSINESS

• **Presentation**

Chairman Bullis presented a Proclamation of appreciation and thanked outgoing Members Steele and Campbell, whom was unable to attend the meeting, for their years of service to the Board.

• **Organizational Matters**

Town Clerk Hilari Hubner administered the Oath of Office to new Board Members, Virginia Powell and Tim Gupton. **Attachment A – Oaths of Office**

Chairman Bullis asked for nominations for Vice-Chair. Member Tarbutton nominated Member Walker for Vice-Chair, all were in favor of the nomination.

Chairman Bullis reviewed the TDA regular meeting schedule set for the upcoming year; June 2, September 1 and December 1 (Annual Retreat), and asked if anyone had a conflict with the scheduled dates. Consensus was the meeting schedule worked for all. Chairman Bullis advised a Budget Planning Work Session needed to be scheduled for mid to end of May. Members briefly discussed and set May 19th at 3:30 p.m. for their budget work session.

REGULAR AGENDA

• **Chamber Update**

Executive Director Charles Hardin gave two updates on requests made at the December 3rd meeting. The first was the request for consideration of donation to the Blowing Rock Leadership's bathroom facility project at Blowing Rock School which was an estimate of

approximately \$65,000 for the whole project. Mr. Hardin advised that thanks to residents/private donors, the Village Foundation and Rotary Club as well as a few others that had made donations; the total raised to date is \$58,924. He further advised due to the total raised and the timing of the request with the TDA budget, the Leadership class would like to withdraw the previous request of \$40,000 from the Board as it is no longer needed.

Second project was the Sunset Gateway project. Mr. Hardin explained the Chamber/Village Foundations take on the Gateway project. Mr. Hardin advised that from the beginning of the project it was amended to take into consideration all the stakeholder comments from the TDA, BRAAC, DOT, Town Council etc. The project was to be presented to Town Council at the December 10th meeting, which was right after TDA Board's last meeting on December 2nd. On December 9th the Chamber was advised they didn't have the votes necessary to approve the project and they should wait to present it when they had support along with the support from the business owners. Between the December Council meeting and the Council retreat on January 6th, one of the Council members directed the Town Manager to have Chris Pate, the Town's landscape specialist, to present some ideas on a Gateway Design. Some rough sketches were presented at the retreat and the decision was made to further develop and present at the February 11th Council meeting. On February 10th the Village Foundation was informed that Mr. Pate and Parks and Recreation would be presenting a new concept, but never was informed or even fathomed that this project would be the only project that would be considered before a decision was made. On February 11th Mr. Pate did present concept sketches to the Council of beautiful pedestrian scale flower beds to be located at seven locations. Which are to be based on the beautiful gardens that you will find in front of Town Hall. All of this was estimated to cost less than \$200,000 coming, presumably, from the money the TDA had put aside in April of 2015. Seven flower beds will be located at North and South Main, both sides of Sunset Drive, the two Chamber owned signs (one located near Tanger Outlets and the other near Green Park Inn) and the Blowing Rock Fire Department.

Mr. Hardin stated from what appeared to be a pre-determined action, the Chamber was promptly told they would not be given the opportunity to present their plan, nor would it be considered. No option was offered to collaborate to bring the best of both of these concepts together. He advised the Chamber would like to make sure that the TDA had no misconceptions about this.

Mr. Hardin stated "first of all, these are not gateways" and he outlined and explained the following:

- Gateways are highway scaled, vertical and horizontal structures with durable low maintenance landscaping often with water or hardscaped features.
- Gateways are generally not designed for pedestrian enjoyment, but for vehicles traveling at moderate speeds
- Gateways are also designed to slow traffic and direct travelers in the direction of something very special
- Gateways are economic development tools, are designed to enhance business

Mr. Hardin explained the Chamber's concept was professionally designed by the Design Collaborative located in Asheville, NC. This is the same group of landscape architects that

designed the Mayview Plaza project. The Village Foundation and private donors (business owners) have contributed over \$10,000 to bring this concept to the Town Council and its various agencies; including the TDA.

Mr. Hardin advised after the rejection of the previous designs that had been commissioned, the chamber enlisted the help of the branding and marketing professionals at Appalachian State to advise. A special half day session was held to help the Chamber learn the importance of the Gateway concept and design. Representatives of the Town, the TDA, the Chamber, the EDC and the Civic Association were in attendance. Several businesses on Sunset Drive have asked the Chamber not to give up on the project. Most of the business owners understand the value of the Gateway concept and how it will enhance their businesses.

Mr. Hardin stated the Chamber would also like the TDA to know that the funds that will most likely be used to create these flower gardens will be coming from your restricted fund. The fund has already been drawn down to pay Destination and Design for the first Gateway concept leaving a much reduced balance. Mr. Hardin advised he wasn't sure the exact amount, but Ms. Nicole Norman would have the exact amount. The TDA may want to examine the ongoing maintenance cost of this concept. It has been estimated that the labor alone to maintain these gardens to the level of the one in front of Town Hall will require at least one additional landscape employee. He advised since this is considered tourism infrastructure the Board may be asked to override this employee's salary. This concept appears to be largely on private property, where as the Chamber's concept is located entirely on DOT right of way with their consent. He further stated using public tax payers money to landscape on private property isn't genially a good idea. The Chamber is pleased there is "something going down there" as this has been a large, hard project. Since two Chamber Board members started this idea when they taught a class at Appalachian State on Gateways to direct first time visitors to the High Country and thus into Town.

Mr. Hardin asked for questions or comments.

Member Tarbutton advised he was curious what the concerns were from the Council Members about the Gateways. He explained Blowing Rock is known for flowers and thought they looked great as well as do visitors as he has heard lots of positive feedback regarding them. He further explained none of the Council struck him as being mutually exclusive which is why he was asking the question. He admitted when he first heard about the Gateway project, while he felt it added character, he was also a bit concerned because some Towns have gone to "chrome and glass" that "scared him to death". Again, he restated he was just curious what their concerns were.

Mr. Hardin advised there were some cost concerns from an original estimate, but the Chamber put out funds to get a new plan and brought it down to a level that was more acceptable, but reiterated they weren't allowed the opportunity to present it.

Ex-Offico Nicole Norman advised the funds were actually designated to the Town and paid to the Town for the Town to use those funds toward the project. She further advised the Town has used some of the funds toward the project.

Member Tarbutton asked about if the project would be on private property. Ex-Officio Fox advised the Town's proposal would be within the right of way, not on private property.

Member Walker asked for clarification about the previous concept project sketch from last September's meeting. He held up the drawing and asked "isn't this what we voted on".

Mr. Fox explained the project was originally voted on by the Board to give to the Town for a Gateway concept. Two concepts were created during those years toward that particular entrance. What came about before the Board in September of 2019 was outside of that original vote which was made years back to move the funds over to the Town. Essentially the money left the TDA and went to the Town in 2015, which was five years ago. He explained the Town spent approximately \$40,000 to \$50,000 with two concepts from two different entities. What was voted on in September by the Board was actually outside of the money that was moved over to the Town from the TDA. Ex-Officio Member Fox reiterated the money hadn't been with the TDA for five years and there seemed to be a little misconception of that. Member Walker thanked Ex-Officio Fox for his clarification.

Member Gupton advised as he understood it, the total cost of this project Mr. Hardin was referring to was roughly the \$450,000 amount proposed by the Chamber/Village Foundation.

Mr. Hardin stated that was the high end before the Board had revised the project again. Member Gupton advised he didn't realize it had been revised again, the last data point he had and the monies of the Town were roughly \$280,000 with a gap that still needed to be filled. Which was proposed at the last presentation.

Mr. Fox restated for clarification; the money obviously was with the Town since 2015. A couple of attempts were made by the Town Council and Town staff at that point, leading up to Council retreat. At that time there were requests made by several Town Council Members to look at the entrances, not only there, but other entrances and somewhat "abandoning" the term "Gateway" and looking at all the entrances so that is when the misunderstandings all came about, the December to January time frame. He further advised during the January retreat; staff presented a pretty "rough sketch" of what that could look like and would kind of mirror what has been done at other locations already in Town. In February a little more polished, still not yet finished, draft of what that could look like in the proposed areas was presented.

Member Tarbutton advised he understands the money was a concern and he had to "take his hat off" to the Council Members for not starting something without all the all the funds in place. He further asked if the additional funds could be raised if the Council would be interested in doing both.

Member Powell advised she felt she was "in the hot seat" and she wasn't answering any questions because it was a Council as a whole decision. She explained Council had been presented with three different plans and to really understand the whole process she advised all to go back and read the minutes from those meetings. She further advised that was the best way to understand the thoughts and feelings of each Council Member, not to read websites or opinions of others, but read the minutes. Member Powell advised she felt if she were to explain

her opinion might overshadow the other Council Members opinions and she would rather not do that. Member Powell commented she was well aware that Council's decision wasn't "a popular one," but they could have also voted to not have anything.

Member Tarbutton advised he completely understood and would be glad to go back and review the minutes for his own personal knowledge. He further stated he was not trying to put Member Powell on the spot or condemn the decision, he was just curious if the money were raised if that would have made a difference.

Mr. Fox advised he was speaking for the Council as a whole, from the September to February time frame the money set aside already wasn't really a concern. The concern was trying to get a better understanding where the remaining funding was going to come from. He explained the original amount was around \$300,000 to begin with, but after a few failed attempts at a design the amount remaining is around \$261,000. He further explained that what it got down to was what would make up the \$190,000 gap, the assumption was then it would be the TDA one third money which is Town infrastructure money. Some sides liked the grand gateway approach and some sides didn't like that approach. What it came down to with Council was trying to look at all sides and make a compromise verses the decision to do nothing. He advised it was Council's way of trying to find a middle ground for a project and everyone's views of it.

Member Tarbutton advised he really applauded the effort as well as appreciated their reasoning and decision.

Member Powell stated sometimes the hardest part is making a decision and having to live with the decision and the opinions around it.

Member Gupton advised with the upcoming joint meeting with the Council and budget timeline, he has learned the definitions of the two thirds, and one thirds and what each is supposed to be used for. He further advised in his opinion, one of the aids in making decisions is having a priority list that everyone agrees on, both the TDA Board and the Council. He explained with a list of priorities for infrastructure needs, when requests come, the list can be reflected against and could help in making decisions to reflect that. He felt it would then help rethinking every decision. He further stated he looked forward to working jointly to come up with a priority list for the one third money.

Member Powell asked if Mr. Fox would send the Board Council's priority list from the Retreat. He advised he would be glad to.

With no further comments or questions, Mr. Hardin thanked the Board for their time. He advised he would like to also apologize to the Board for wasting their time in September and again in December. Mr. Hardin explained he wasn't aware until it was just mentioned that the money had been moved over to the Town back in 2015. He advised that was the first he had ever heard that. He as well as the Chamber thought that was TDA money all along which is why they had come before the Board with the request of what Gateway would be best fit. Mr. Hardin apologized again to the board. **Chamber of Commerce PowerPoint – Attachment A**

- **Middle Fork Greenway Update**

Ms. Wendy Patoprsty with the Middle Fork Greenway presented an update on the progress of the Middle Fork Greenway project. **Middle Fork Greenway and Blue Ridge Conservancy PowerPoint – Attachment B**

- **Financial Report – Occupancy Tax Proceeds Update**

Ex-Officio Member Nicole Norman stated occupancy tax collections through January of this FY '19 - '20 was up 11% or \$83,200 compared to last FY.

The Board discussed for new board members information and reviewed Occupancy Tax collections.

Ms. Norman reviewed expenditures. And reviewed a report for a budget adjustment. Ms. Norman explained the TDA adopts the budget based on function; major categories of direct tourism promotion, tourism infrastructure, general services and administration. She explained if staff moves funds within those functions that it can be done operationally. She further explained that if that is done, then it is reported back to the Board. Ms. Norman stated if funds were being moved within two different functions, she would then bring a full amendment to the Board for review and approval. Ms. Norman advised with this adjustment, Mr. Brown proposed covering the kiosk screen repair in the amount of \$9,505 with advertising funds, which is all the same function and can be done that way and just bring the report back to the board.

The Board briefly discussed kiosk function and the value of the kiosks.

- **FY 2020-21 Budget Direction and Discussion**

Mr. Fox reviewed briefly the Town's top ten priority list that was created at the January Town Council Retreat. He reviewed the items that apply to TDA as well; playground replacement, entrances, sidewalks, Legion Hill project and crosswalks. Mr. Fox advised the playground was identified as a priority for Council to be replaced before the summer gets busy. He further advised at the upcoming March Council meeting a group from Parks and Recreation staff, along with a few citizens and staff members will be presenting renderings of a design for a new playground for Council's consideration. Mr. Fox advised staff has been working on a way for the TDA to partner with the Town on funding with the one third funds. He further advised the possibility of the Town and TDA discussing further at a later date the possibility of partnering together to help maintain the Town's public spaces a little better; bathrooms, picking up trash, washing trash cans etc.

The Board discussed the request to partner 50/50 with the Town to assist in funding the playground if approved by Council. Ms. Norman reviewed the financials which would ultimately consist of \$150,000 from current year funds and \$150,000 from next FY funds.

Member Powell advised Council is ready to "get some things done".

After further discussion Member Gupton advised when he looks at an economic equation in Blowing Rock and the quality of life equation in Blowing Rock, he sees tourism that includes seasonal residences, vacationers and day visitors. He further advised to him, there are three

pieces and we as the TDA/Town as far as attracting the best type of customer and should look at it through that prism. Member Gupton explained he felt historically it's been looked at from the vacation and day trip visitor lens, but the seasonal resident piece was missing. He further explained that is what motivated him to get involved, to make sure to look at the balance. He advised he says that to make sure to protect the quality of life, the value of Real Estate and continue to attract the legacy that have made the Town the way it has been for years.

After further discussion with Ms. Norman about the financials. Member Gupton made a motion to approve the concept of funding the playground equipment with the one third tourism infrastructure money comprised of \$61,000 already transferred to the Town, approximately \$100,000 from the current year budget if surpluses that are projected are earned and \$150,000 out of the FY 20-21 budget subject to the budget review, seconded by Member Tarbutton. Unanimously approved.

- **Operations Report**

Executive Director Tracy Brown reviewed the third quarter operations report via PowerPoint.
Third Quarter Update– Attachment C

Other

None

EXCUTIVE SESSION

None

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to discuss, Member Gupton made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 6:20 p.m., seconded by Member Tarbutton. Unanimously approved.

TDA Chairman, Dean Bullis

Town Clerk, Hilari Hubner

Attachments

Chamber of Commerce PowerPoint – Attachment A

Middle Fork Greenway and Blue Ridge Conservancy PowerPoint - Attachment B

Third Quarter Update - Attachment C