

Town of Blowing Rock

**Tourism Development Authority**

**Minutes – April 1, 2008**

**The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, April 1, 2008 at 8:30 a.m. in a regular meeting. Present were Chairperson Bernie Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Phil Pickett, Keith Tester, and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Nicole Norman. Executive Director Tracy Brown, Assistant Director Amanda Fife and Dave Tomsy, of WC&T, were also present.**

Member Lynn Drury was out of the country.

**Call to Order**

Chairperson Keele called the meeting to order and welcomed the members.

*Approval of Minutes – December 4, 2007 and March 12, 2008*

*Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the December 4, 2007 and March 12, 2008 meeting minutes. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve the December 4, 2007 and March 12, 2008 meeting minutes, with a correction to read “(even in Asheville, less visitors in winter months)” on page 4 of the December 4 minutes. Unanimously approved.*

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Chairperson Keele suggested that due to value of the goals and actions established at the planning retreat, that Executive Director Brown create a checklist of action items from the December 4<sup>th</sup> TDA Planning Retreat for Board follow-up.

#### *Financial Report*

Chairperson Keele introduced Finance Officer Nicole Norman to review the FY 2007-08 budget to date.

Finance Officer Nicole Norman then reviewed the monthly financial statement and the FY 2007-08 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through February 2008. She stated that February revenues (excluding 1 establishment payment), totaled a gross of \$33,522.76, and was slightly down compared to February 2007. The collection enforcement process is underway. She also advised that revenue and expenditures for the year were in line with projections.

#### **Budget Amendment**

Ms. Norman reviewed a proposed budget amendment for the Authority's consideration, which allocated co-op ad (\$10,531) and copier (\$461) revenue reimbursements. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Tester to approve the budget amendment as presented. Unanimously approved. **(Attachment #1)**

#### **Operations Activity Report**

Executive Director Brown reviewed the Operations Activity Report on Visitor Center activities - web site usage, telephone and email requests, walk-in traffic, etc. **(Attachment #2)**.

Executive Director Brown discussed –

- Visitor Center Staffing – overall in good shape, will consider merits and & cost of living adjustments in upcoming budget process.
- Visitor Center indicators as compared to the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2006/07 – telephone, emails and walk in traffic down; brochure mailings and web use are up. Internet use provides information that once required a call or a formal request.
- Website – taking steps to update and improve the look.
- Marketing – due to fuel prices and economic conditions, looking to more regional marketing efforts (4-6 hour drive time). Held brief discussion on the Asheville market area and the consideration of piggybacking on their visitors, consideration of secondary markets for ads. Based on visitor market data, suggested to continue to focus on Raleigh, Greensboro and Charlotte areas.
- Media – TDA will be guest on FOX Charlotte News Rising to promote Wine Festival.
- Hotel Meeting – Discussed recent efforts by Ray & Melissa Pickett and the possibility of hotel packaging.
- Visitor Guide – update underway.
- Recent Publicity – US Airways Magazine, RFD television, UNC-TV, Weather Channel, Governor’s Conference award for Ken Cham. Key is relationship building with other media players and travel writers.
- TDA *Tattler Newsletter* – still getting great reviews.

## **WC&T Update**

- Dave Tomsy advised the TDA staff is doing a great job, and the *TDA Tattler Newsletter* is providing great information to the frontline staff. He echoed the need for an updated website.
- Discussed the 3-tier approach being utilized –
  - 1) Local story ideas – press releases for the local press to tell the TDA story.
  - 2) Regional Releases – press releases/stories on periodic events.
  - 3) Big Fish – working with travel writers and big media to get major press; i.e. Weather Channel, UNC-TV, etc.

- Mr. Tomsy encouraged the Authority to stay the course during an economic downturn and suggested packaging of rooms during the week (3 for 2). However, he discouraged “discounting” and “low rate” ads due to maintaining a high quality market.
- OTHER – The Authority briefly discussed the lack of interest and organization support for the Gallery Strolls. The discussion then proceeded to the lack of a downtown merchants group and overall coordination of downtown events, operating hours and overall retail strategy.

The Authority thanked Executive Director Brown and WC&T Consultant Dave Tomsy for their work on behalf of the TDA.

### **Economic Development Discussion**

Chairperson Keele then introduced the topic of economic development, stating that the Town needed some direction on the future of the downtown market.

Member Tester stated that the TDA spends money to promote Blowing Rock and shopping in the village – however, the trend is going away with new real estate offices replacing retail space. He also advised that the upscale stores are going away. He suggested that the TDA must focus on sustaining business community, as our competitors also have great scenic views. He encouraged a focus on caring and nurturing of the retail community.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that many retailers cannot afford the rent, so the TDA must act if no one else does.

Chairperson Keele stated that downtown has an overabundance of real estate offices and not enough retail to support our visitors. He recommended that we need someone to study the issue.

Ex-officio Member Hildebran stated that he and Member Tester had discussions several months earlier about the need for market study from a sound and experienced firm that would provide a complete review of the issues that confront Blowing Rock.

Director Brown advised that Appalachian State University was initiating a focus group of retailers and consumers to gather data to better define our market.

Member Tester responded that it was critical to have someone experienced with a small town tourist economy and someone that can develop a transition plan that can be implemented very quickly. He mentioned some of the efforts taken in Asheville that have enhanced their downtown. Member Tester ended by saying that we must have everyone organized and on the same page to achieve results.

Chairperson Keele stated that the competition for business was great so Blowing Rock must have a niche in order to limit loss of retail shops.

Mr. Tomsy shared similar concern. He stated that the natural attributes are here, but the Town must maintain the retail shopping to remain competitive.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton recommended retaining a good consultant with experience and that the TDA can help in funding the plan.

Member Tester briefly discussed some readings provided by Brian Crutchfield about the creative economy based on our environment – build the local economy around our uniqueness, such as local artists.

Mr. Tomsy concurred and suggested that Blowing Rock strive to maintain the uniqueness of the Town.

Member Tester followed by stating that Blowing Rock must preserve the village atmosphere, not so much historic, but the experience and character of the community.

After a short discussion, Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Pickett that the TDA and Town of Blowing Rock jointly agree to hire an experienced downtown consultant to study economic development issues in the Town Center and that Town Manager Hildebran and TDA Executive Director Brown serve as primary contacts for the selection process. The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Newspaper Racks**

Ex-Officio Member Hildebran advised that the modular newspapers racks have arrived and would be installed in the next week.

Chairperson Keele asked Mr. Hildebran to review the planned locations of the racks. Mr. Hildebran responded that the three locations were Gossip Park, the Post Office and adjacent to the Pictorial Museum. A fourth location may be considered at a future date. He also stated all current outdoor newsracks in the Central Business District would be required to be removed by May 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **Master Signage Plan Update**

Ex-Officio Member Hildebran advised that the new information directory kiosks are scheduled to be delivered in the next week or so. The kiosks will be placed at Memorial Park and at the Maple Street Parking Lot. Also, a directory panel would be made available to Tanger Outlet for display.

Two additional kiosks will be constructed after July 1 for placement at the new American Legion Parking Facility and at the new Blowing Rock Art & History Museum.

The Authority expressed their excitement for their installation.

### **Public Restrooms**

Ex-Officio Member Hildebran updated the Authority on the status of proposed public restrooms at the Ice House building. He stated that a design had been completed and an estimated construction cost was being formulated. A draft lease for the building will be developed for Authority consideration at the May meeting. The Blowing Rock Stage Company has had discussion with Executive Director Brown about a joint use of the building – front portion for display of visitor information/stage company tickets as well as a concierge area.

Mr. Hildebran also stated public restrooms are being considered at the new Robbins Pool Complex and in the proposed Blowing Rock Art & History Museum parking facility.

### **Chairperson Selection Process**

Chairperson Keele informed the Authority that Town Council had requested TDA input on the succession of the chairperson of the Authority. He referred to Member Tester for further direction. Member Tester stated that during the infancy of the TDA the Town Council wanted to insure stability of the organization. However, with a proven executive director on staff, the Authority now had less a need for day to day oversight and more of a need to focus on strategic planning and the budget. He then advised that the Town Council wanted input from the Authority on the selection process of the chairperson as new appointees come on board in the future.

After a brief discussion, motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Pickett to recommend to the Town Council that the Vice-Chair succeed the Chairperson for a recommended 2-year term. Unanimously approved.

### **Other**

Executive Director Brown briefly updated the TDA on trends observed at the recent N.C. Governor's Conference on Tourism such as separate TDA/Chamber of Commerce organizations. He stated that the proliferation of TDA's and state occupancy tax statutes had accelerated this transition. He mentioned that Brevard had divided their once combined agency into two separate organizations, with one focused on tourism promotion and one focused on business needs.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that our organizations (TDA and Chamber) have begun the healing process here as well.

### **Reschedule Meeting Date**

Due to scheduling conflicts, the Authority agreed to move the Tuesday, May 6, 2008 regular meeting date to Monday, May 12, 2008 at 8:30 a.m.

### **Adjournment**

With no further business, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Tester to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele adjourned the meeting at 10:15 a.m.

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Bernard Keele, Chairperson

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Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary



## **Attachments**

**#1 – Budget Amendment**

**#2 – Operations Activity Report**