

Town of Blowing Rock

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – October 7, 2008

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, October 7, 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 was also present.

Member Lynn Drury was out of town.

Call to Order

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

Approval of Minutes – July 1 and September 8, 2008

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the July 1 and September 8, 2008 meeting minutes. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve the July 1 and September 8, meeting minutes. Unanimously approved.

Financial Report

Chairperson Keele introduced Ex-officio member Nicole Norman to review the FY 2008-09 budget to date.

Ms. Norman reviewed the monthly financial statements and the FY 2008-09 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through August 2008. Overall, the first two (2) months of fiscal year 2008-09 were down \$9,685.72 compared to the same period last year. She stated that one

lodging entity had failed to make their monthly tax payment but had filed the corresponding report. Ms. Norman then went through the financial statement with the Authority and advised that expenses were in-line with expectations at this point in the fiscal year.

Executive Director Brown stated that based on comments received from hoteliers the September occupancy tax collections were also down compared to September 2007. He shared several reasons for the decline – no 2008 Mitford Days event, the bulk of the Labor Day weekend falling in August, lack of and cost of gas, and the general economic downturn.

Budget Amendment

Ex-officio Member Norman then reviewed a proposed budget amendment which finalizes year-end FY 2007-08 revenue to the town (\$7,530) based on auditor review for Authority consideration (**Attachment #1**). He stated the additional monies would be applied to parking infrastructure.

Upon motion of Member Pickett and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton, the Authority approved the budget amendment as presented. Motion unanimously approved.

Hayes Performing Arts Center - Update

Chairperson Keele introduced Ginny Stevens to provide an update on the Hayes Performing Arts Center.

Mrs. Stevens thanked the Authority for the opportunity to provide an update on the Hayes Performing Arts Center (HPAC). She stated that the Hayes Center had just completed their second season in their new facility with the support of over 390 donors. In light of the new Downtown Retail Strategy, she requested that the Hayes Center and the TDA explore ways to strengthen their relationship. She informed the Authority that the Hayes Center provided visitors to Blowing Rock with night time entertainment as suggested in the strategy.

Chip Williamson then discussed the previous funding support provided by the Town and the need for local matches to grants, etc. He informed the TDA that the HPAC spends around \$85,000 a year on marketing and had booked over 1,200 room nights for performers, etc. He requested suggestions on ways the TDA and Hayes Center could work more closely together.

Member Tester responded that the TDA might assist with co-advertising and marketing support, but the TDA had made the commitment not to provide lump sum grants.

Executive Director Brown mentioned that a recent article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* was worth \$10,000-\$15,000 if purchased and as earned media was worth much more than an advertisement. He advised that the article included info on the theater and was a result of TDA efforts. He also reminded the Authority that the theater is included in a great deal of TDA sponsored marketing.

Member Pickett asked where the HPAC advertised and where their visitors come from? Mrs. Stevens responded that visitors come from over 40 states and magazines such as *Our State*. Mr. Williamson stated the HPAC produced direct ads, outdoor ads, print ads as well as radio/tv.

Chairperson Keele asked what percentage of visitors come from outside of the NC/SC/TN area? Mrs. Stevens responded that 25% come from outside of the NC/SC/TN area.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that surveys show that the length of stay (nights) increase with theater activities which matches up with the TDA goal. He advised that he was supportive but wanted to hear the retail study results and how the HPAC request blends with the TDA.

Mrs. Stevens stated that HPAC needs TDA help and advice and wants more dialogue.

Mr. Williamson stated that they received funding from Watauga County but received no funding from the Town.

Chair Keele responded that it was the consensus of the TDA to look at the big picture with marketing support and not direct grants.

Member Tester agreed and stated that as a Town Councilmember the \$50,000 provided by the Town Council was a one-time grant paid \$10,000 over 5 years and was not a guaranteed source of

annual funding. He followed up by saying that the grant program was terminated once the occupancy transferred to the TDA and that any town funding would come from property taxes.

Mr. Tester also stated that the only year-round vehicle at this time was for marketing support and that he believed that this was totally appropriate. He stated that it took the TDA 3 years to come to the conclusion that lump sum grants would limit coordinated marketing. He suggested that the TDA could help in funding the marketing gaps and encouraged creative thinking where in-kind ads/marketing could count for a grants match. He stated that the HPAC discussion was very timely as the budgeting process will begin soon and we all need to work together to find the gaps where the TDA can help.

Vice Chair Tarbutton agreed and advised that Member Lynn Drury heads up the TDA marketing committee. He also suggested that the TDA may fund a direct theater ad if coordinated appropriately.

Chairperson Keele stated that he concurred, especially if the marketing was tied to room packaging.

Mr. Tarbutton reminded everyone of the upcoming regional tourism summit which will focus on the benefits of consolidated marketing and its overall impact..

Mr. Williamson stated that HPAC would be happy to work with Executive Director Tracy Brown on the issue.

Chairperson Keele again stated room packaging could be a perfect Blowing Rock entertainment fit. Mr. Tarbutton closed the comments by stating that coordination of marketing by both entities was a great goal.

Mrs. Stevens and Mr. Williamson thanked the TDA for their willingness to work together. Chairperson Keele thanked the Arts Center for their report.

Operations Activity Report

The Authority briefly 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 advised that he provided an Operations Activity Report to the Authority during his last bi-weekly report and that the report summarized most of the current Visitor Center activities.

Mr. Brown then discussed –

- Visitor Center indicators as compared to the 3rd quarter of 2007 – telephone, emails and walk in traffic are down; brochure mailings and web use are up.
- The State of NC occupancy is down 10%, with SE Tourism Society advising down until at least 2nd quarter of 2009.
- Town Council approved the Oasis Shriners Ceremonial for June 5-7, 2009 which should bring many visitors for three days.
- Town was the focus of an *Atlanta Constitution* tourism article, which has resulted in increased info requests.
- Web site update almost complete which modernizes many elements and includes more interactive features. (Mr. Brown provided a web site demonstration to the Authority.)
- The Visitor Center is distributing fall color photos for regional media usage.
- Interactive online training being considered by both the TDA and Chamber of Commerce with a focus on customer service. The Authority suggested that Mr. Brown obtain additional information on the training, especially the need for a vibrant/exciting interactive technology to prevent boredom. (Mr. Brown provided an on-line simulation for the Authority to review.)
- Interactive Virtual Village Tour being considered by both the TDA and Chamber of Commerce which provides a visitor with visual access to the town and businesses that wish to participate for a fee. (Mr. Brown provided a simulation for Authority review.) Executive Director Brown stated that the Chamber agreed to cover the aerial views with the TDA to cover the street views. Each business could participate with interior views for a fee. The Authority expressed a desire for more information – front-in costs and long term costs, maintenance fees, frequency of updates, access to all commercial areas of town, navigation points, etc. It was the consensus of the Authority to proceed with the aerial and street scene views, but requested that additional

information on the overall connectivity of the views as well as costs data for businesses be obtained.

- MTN TV is running a video piece prepared by Tom Santay on Blowing Rock.

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Brown for his report.

Downtown Retail Strategy

Chairperson Keele then began discussion of the Downtown Blowing Rock Retail Strategy 2009. The Authority briefly reviewed the highlights of the strategy and implementation steps.

Upon a motion by Chairperson Keele and second by Vice-Chair Tarbutton, the Authority adopted the Downtown Blowing Rock Retail Strategy 2009 and recommended that the Blowing Rock Town Council accept the report and integrate the strategy into the Blowing Rock Comprehensive Plan. Motion unanimously approved. (**Attachment #3**)

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that once Town Council formally adopts the Strategy, the next step would be for the TDA to commission a Downtown Partnership.

Member Tester concurred stating that the TDA would provide guidance only and the Partnership would be charged with implementation of the Strategy. Due to numerous recommendations, many different groups will have roles to play to make the strategy successful – Town Council, Planning Board, TDA, Chamber of Commerce, BRAHM, Arts Center, individual businesses, etc.

The Authority agreed that a non-biased chairperson of the Partnership was critical for community buy-in. It was the consensus that the Authority would continue the discussion on the Partnership and chairperson selection at their next meeting.

Other

Chairperson Keele requested that the Authority consider changing the meeting date of the January 6, 2009 TDA meeting, due to member scheduling conflicts. After a short discussion, the Authority agreed to reschedule the January 6, 2009 TDA meeting to November 24, 2008 at 9:00 a.m. and at the same time hold their annual strategic planning retreat at Chetola Resort.

Executive Director Brown then informed the Authority of an upcoming High Country Tourism Summit to be held at the Tweetsie Railroad Palace on October 23, 2008 from 3:00-5:00 p.m. A group of experts from the tourism industry will be presenting information and ideas to consider in implementing future tourism efforts – especially to explore joint marketing and promotional strategies. He encouraged all members to attend.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele adjourned the meeting at 10:45 a.m.

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Kent Tarbutton, Vice-Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

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Attachments

#1 – Budget Amendment

#2 – Operations Activity Report

#3 – Downtown Retail Strategy 2009