

**Town of Blowing Rock  
Tourism Development Authority  
Minutes – November 22, 2010**

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Monday, November 22, 2010 at 10:00 a.m. in a regular meeting held at The Best Cellar. Present were Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Dean Bullis, Phil Pickett, Rob Dyer and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Nicole Norman. Executive Director Tracy Brown, Assistant Director Amanda Lugenbell, and Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Charles Hardin were also present.

Vice-Chair Lynn Drury was out of state but participated via telephone.

**Call to Order**

Chairperson Kent Tarbutton called the meeting to order and welcomed the members.

**Approval of Minutes – October 5, 2010**

Chair Tarbutton entertained the approval of the October 5, 2010 meeting minutes. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Bullis to approve the October 5, 2010 meeting minutes as presented. Unanimously approved.

**FY 2009-10 Annual Audit Report**

Chair Tarbutton then introduced TDA Auditor Jason Carpenter of Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. to review the FY 2009-10 audit.

Auditor Carpenter stated that the report came with a clean opinion and that the audit complies with the Governmental Accounting Standards Board 34 requirements. Mr. Carpenter stated that the TDA ended the fiscal year with \$223,740 in net assets compared with \$292,777 in FY 2008-09. The year-end unreserved fund balance totals \$142,976.

Upon receiving no questions, he stated that should any member have questions about anything in the audit after their review to please give him a call.

After a brief discussion, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Dyer to accept the FY 2009-10 Annual Audit Report as presented. Unanimously approved.

**(Attachment #1)**

The Authority thanked Auditor Carpenter for his audit report and he departed the meeting.

Chair Tarbutton then entertained approval of the FY 2010-11 Audit Contract with Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. for Authority consideration. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Dyer to adopt a FY 2010-11 Audit Contract with Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. for \$3,500 (same price as FY 2009-10) as presented. Unanimously approved. **(Attachment #2)**

## **Financial Report**

Chair Tarbutton introduced Finance Officer Nicole Norman and requested she review the FY 2010-11 Occupancy Tax collections and Financial Statements to date.

Finance Officer Norman reviewed the FY 2010-11 Occupancy Tax collections fiscal year-to-date through October 2010. She stated that occupancy tax revenues for July-October were up approximately 17.51% (or \$56,474) compared to the same period in 2009, with one entity not yet reporting for October. For the month of October 2010, occupancy tax revenue was up 18.65% (or \$17,177) compared to October 2009, with one entity not yet reporting for October.

Ex-Officio Member Norman then briefly reviewed the monthly financial statement stating that revenues and expenses were in line with projections for the period. She once again noted several budget concerns discussed at the previous meeting regarding a clerical error of \$24,000 in the adopted FY 2010-11 Budget, the newly established jointly funded Events Coordinator position, and the Smith Travel Focus Group Survey, totaling approximately \$31,000 in additional expenses.

Chair Tarbutton stated that the consensus of the Authority was to continue to monitor the situation throughout the year and cutback where possible. Also, he advised that occupancy tax revenues and the pending closure of the Visitor Center (lease payment reduction) may help to cover the expenses.

The Authority briefly discussed the positive occupancy tax impact of the newly remodeled Holiday Inn Express and the gradual reopening of the Green Park Inn.

## **Visitor Center**

Chair Tarbutton began by stating that the NC Department of Transportation, due to the pending US 321 Widening Project, had made an offer to purchase the Visitor Center property and the Town had accepted the offer. Mr. Hildebran stated NCDOT would likely close on the property after the first of the year and that the building would have to be vacated in the spring of 2011, likely 90 days or so after closing.

Mr. Tarbutton recognized Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Charles Hardin for any comments. Mr. Hardin stated that after meeting last week with Chair Tarbutton and TDA Executive Director Brown the desire would be to continue operating in a joint effort. He also advised that a temporary location might need to be identified depending on the timeframe.

The Authority briefly discussed a variety of locations and possible collaborative efforts. Various locations/options were mentioned: the old Robbins House (Park Avenue), White Pictorial Museum (Memorial Park), Ice House (Maple Street), Boone/Watauga TDA & High Country Host effort, Edgewood Cottage (Main Street), Blowing Rock Art & History Museum (Main Street), Tanawha Building (Valley Boulevard), High Country Cabinets (Valley Boulevard), Liz Claiborne (Valley Boulevard), Glenwood Condo

(Valley Boulevard), etc. Issues such as access, ADA compliance, parking and costs were mentioned.

The Authority discussed cooperative regional efforts with the High Country Host and Boone/Watauga TDA's. Chair Tarbutton advised that those groups have discussed a jointly operated visitor center and various ways to collaborate on collateral, marketing, fulfillment, call center, etc.

Several questions were identified for determination of future operation –

- 1) Does the TDA desire to continue to offer a Visitor Center?
- 2) If yes – does the center need to be located in or near Blowing Rock?
- 3) Would the operation of a Visitor Center be operated by the TDA or in a joint collaborative effort?
- 4) Would the center be located Downtown or By-Pass?
- 5) Would the TDA rent or purchase a facility?

After some discussion, the Board responded to the questions as follows:

- 1) Yes, the Authority desires to offer a Visitor Center.
- 2) The Authority prefers to have a Visitor Center presence in Blowing Rock. If a regional cooperative effort is located in Blowing Rock, the Authority wants to maintain a Blowing Rock identity.
- 3) The Authority prefers to work cooperatively with the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce.
- 4) A Visitor Center facility can be located either Downtown or on the By-pass.
- 5) The Authority can rent or purchase a facility (via the Town).

The Authority agreed to explore all options for a future location for a visitor center.

Chamber Executive Director Hardin departed the meeting.

### **Closed Session**

Per NC General Statutes 143-318.11(a)(5) discussion of terms/position regarding real property, motion by Member Pickett and second by Member Bullis, the Authority entered closed session at 11:15 a.m. Unanimously approved.

At 11:45 p.m., the Authority reentered open session.

The Authority recessed for lunch at 11:45 a.m. and return to session at 12:45 p.m. Vice-Chair Drury rejoined the meeting via telephone at this time.

### **Marketing Efforts**

At this time, Executive Director Brown updated the Authority on TDA marketing efforts and presented the following highlights.

#### *Advertising/Articles/Publications*

- Use of more electronic media
- Following Focus Group Study recommendations in advertising
- Working with Boone and Watauga TDA's on co-ops
- Working with State of NC – *Saveur* and *Garden and Gun* advertorials valued at over \$28,000 and \$15,640 respectively
- *Our State* - Tarheel Town feature valued at \$120,000
- Upcoming ads include Winterfest and Choose and Cut
- Weather Channel on location created numerous inquiries
- Facebook presence is strong and growing

#### *Collaborations*

- Blue Ridge Parkway 75<sup>th</sup>
- State of NC – Nature's Own Bread Sweepstakes
- High Country Host/TDA co-ops
- Event Coordinator partnership with Chamber of Commerce

#### *Website*

- BlowingRock.com is the #1 DMO (Destination Marketing Organization) site in the High Country
- Updating website platform

#### *Collateral*

- Update of materials is ongoing as businesses change out and information changes

#### *Tracking*

- Tracking via web visits, interest cards, zip code

#### *General Communication/PR*

- Continue use of the Tattler Weekly Newsletter
- Maintaining good working relationships with all DMO's

#### *Group Sales*

- Starting to make a comeback. Work with State and event planners.

#### *Amenities/Rates*

- Blowing Rock skews higher Average Daily Rates than surrounding areas
- New Holiday Inn Express is competing with Boone flag hotels
- Working on packages with all lodging establishments via website and attraction packaging

Chairperson Tarbutton thanked Mr. Brown for his update.

The Authority discussed the importance of tracking for fulfillment. Mr. Brown stated that most marketing pieces use unique web domains and landing pages and/or telephone numbers. Also, some publications provide for unique tracking as well.

Mr. Tarbutton also stated that most forecasts expect increased rates over occupancy in 2011.

### **Infrastructure Support**

Ex-officio Member Hildebran provided an update on infrastructure-related TDA expenditures.

#### *Parking*

He advised that the American Legion Parking Structure was operational and the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum Parking Facility was underway, with completion expected sometime late next summer.

#### *Streets/Sidewalks*

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported that Phase I of the Downtown Streetscape improvements were complete and that Phase II would begin next spring. Phase II includes the area located in front of Town Hall and the Library and at Memorial Park. As part of this phase, the NC Department of Transportation had agreed to fund drainage improvements in front of Town Hall as well.

#### *Restrooms*

Ex-officio Member Hildebran mentioned that the new Robbins Pool Project included year-round public restrooms at Broyhill Park. He stated that the new Blowing Rock Art and History Museum parking area included public restrooms as well, with footers being currently poured.

He mentioned that pursuant to the Retail Strategy Report, the Retail Strategy Committee had encouraged downtown merchants to open their restrooms to their customers.

#### *Master Signage Plan*

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported that an additional directional sign had been placed at Main Street and Maple Street (The Rug Company) to inform visitors of retail, dining and lodging in the North Main Street area. He also advised that a new restroom sign had been placed on Park Avenue informing pedestrians coming from the American Legion Parking Facility of the Memorial Park restrooms. Also, an additional information kiosk is planned at the new Art & History Museum once the building project is complete.

#### *Holiday Decorations*

Member Pickett expressed a desire to have additional garland decorations along North Main Street.

Mr. Hildebran informed the Authority that Vice-Chair Drury had assisted the Parks and Recreation Department with updated holiday decorations planning. Due to limited funding, the focal point of all decorations was the heart of downtown.

Last year, new light pole bows were purchased in the central downtown area. This year

new light pole bows were purchased for all remaining decorated poles.

Ms. Drury agreed to explore additional garland decorations in the 2011 budget cycle as TDA funding allows and as approved by the Authority.

### **Event Activities**

The Authority discussed their role in development/coordination of special events and the marketing partnership with events via providing advertising/marketing/public relations support. Executive Director Brown reminded the Board that in order to better execute events they recently provided funding for a part-time events coordinator in concert with the Chamber of Commerce.

Mr. Brown discussed the importance of coordination among all parties when planning, developing or holding events and that communication was paramount.

It was the consensus of Authority members to continue to advertise/market and provide public relations support for events that increase lodging occupancy in Blowing Rock. The Authority agreed to continue their policy of not funding general grants to individual organizations.

The Authority expressed concern that TDA marketing funds were used to supplant event funding which in reality allows event organizers to provide donations to outside parties. As such, the Authority agreed to develop an application process/form to provide detailed information on how event profits are used and if grants funds are distributed. A March deadline for July 1 funding was suggested. Mr. Brown agreed to follow-up on the matter.

### **Update of TDA Strategic Plan**

Ex-officio Member Hildebran advised that he failed to forward the current Strategic Plan for review in the agenda packet. He stated that he would follow-up and email the plan to the Authority members.

Chairperson Tarbuton encouraged members to review the plan and be prepared at the April meeting with suggestions/recommendations for strategic goals for the upcoming year.

### **Downtown Retail Strategy Report - Update**

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported that the Downtown Retail Strategy Steering Committee continues to meet monthly to work on elements of the study. Recent results include:

- Domed trashcan lids had been delivered and placed on cans downtown. (Member Bullis mentioned that the lid needs a slight modification so that the waste does not get caught in the opening. Mr. Hildebran responded that staff is aware of the issue and would be making the modification in the near future.)
- Town Center zoning has been established and additional requirements will be considered over time.

- Downtown Parking Ratios have been amended and lessened.
- An Electronic Citation Unit has been purchased for downtown parking enforcement and a courtesy ticket program has been implemented.
- New downtown planters have been purchased and placed.
- New Dog Waste Receptacles have been purchased and placed throughout downtown.
- The Town has approved a permit for placement of cellular whip antenna boosters which should eventually aid cellular coverage in town.
- The Blowing Rock Historical Society is reviewing the possibility of a Downtown National Registry Historical Designation.
- The Blowing Rock Art & History Museum is assisting with guidelines for art on public property.

Executive Director Brown stated that the Retail Strategy authors – HyettPalma had recently commended the Town on the actions taken to date to implement the elements of the study.

### **Other Business**

Chair Tarbutton raised two additional issues for Authority consideration – 1) Horse Carriage Rides and 2) Downtown Shuttle Service.

The Authority discussed the recent request from Bridger Medlin to Town Council for a permit for downtown horse carriage rides. Though the permit was denied, several merchants have expressed a continue interest in downtown carriage rides. Also, Mr. Medlin has had preliminary conversations with the Park Service about possible rides in the Cone Estate. After some discussion, it was the consensus that due to traffic problems, minimal route options and minimal loading/unloading areas that Authority did not support carriage rides downtown but would support rides on Park Service land.

The Authority discussed the potential for a downtown shuttle service during peak season weekends and during high traffic events. It was the consensus to investigate the costs of providing shuttle service during weekends in July and October and during special events. TDA staff will contact Air Haven Shuttle Service in Boone (and AppalCart) to gather costs estimates and further explore options and report back to the Board.

Chair Tarbutton also requested Authority members to prioritize their top three items for the TDA Strategic Plan and bring their suggestions to the April meeting for further discussion.

### **Next Meeting**

Chair Tarbutton reminded the Authority that the next schedule meeting is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 5, 2011 and acknowledged the likely need for a special meeting to solidify a visitor center location.

### **Adjournment**

With no further business, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Dyer to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chair Tarbutton adjourned the meeting at 2:10 p.m.

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Kent Tarbutton, Chair

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Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

**Attachments**

**#1 – FY 2009-10 Annual Audit Report**

**#2 – FY 2010-11 Audit Contract**