

**Town of Blowing Rock
Tourism Development Authority
Minutes – November 27, 2012**

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, November 27, 2012 at 9:00 a.m. in a special meeting held in the conference room of the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum. Present were Chair Kent Tarbutton, Vice-Chair Rob Dyer, Authority members Dean Bullis, Doug Matheson, Lianne Mattar and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Nicole Norman. Executive Director Tracy Brown and Assistant Director Amanda Lugenbell were also present.

Call to Order

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

Approval of Minutes – October 2, 2012

Chair Tarbutton entertained the approval of the October 2, 2012 meeting minutes. Motion by Vice-Chair Dyer and seconded by Member Matheson to approve the October 2, 2012 meeting minutes with corrections of “Leann” to “Lianne”, “Blest” to “Best” and “Breath” to “Breathe”. Unanimously approved.

FY 2011-12 Annual Audit Report

Chair Tarbutton then introduced TDA Auditor Jason Carpenter of Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. to review the FY 2011-12 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 \$249,751 in net assets compared with \$222,168 in FY 2010-11. The year-end unassigned fund balance totals \$157,676 compared to \$148,456 in FY 2010-11. Mr. Carpenter commended staff on their accounting efforts during the year to bring the budget into balance in light of the continued uncertain economic conditions.

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 Vice-Chair Dyer and seconded by Member Matheson to accept the FY 2011-12 Annual Audit Report as presented. Unanimously approved.

(Attachment #1)

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

Budget Amendment

Ex-officio Member Hildebran then reviewed a proposed budget amendment which finalizes year-end FY 2011-12 revenue to the town [\$5,600] based on auditor review for

Authority consideration (**Attachment #2**). He stated the additional monies would be applied to US 321 signalization betterments.

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

Financial Report

Chair Tarbutton introduced Finance Officer Nicole Norman and requested her to review the FY 2012-13 Budget to date.

Ex-officio member Norman briefly reviewed the FY 2012-2013 Occupancy Tax collections to date. She stated that collections for the month of October 2012 compared to October 2011 were up by 5.37% or \$5,695, while collections fiscal year-to-date for FY 2012-2013 compared to FY 2011-2012, were up 1.56% or \$5,935. She also noted that the October collection was higher than all previous October collections on record. Executive Director Brown also stated that November occupancy looks strong as well.

Ms. Norman reported that at 40% into the fiscal year revenue and expenditures were in line with budget expectations. She advised that items such as postage & property/liability insurance were above budget expectations at this time. Due to the fact that an annual lump sum payment is made for property/liability & workers compensation insurance, that line appeared above budget.

Executive Director Brown also explained that bulk mailings had been the cause of the postage line item to be up at this time.

FY 2012-13 Audit Contract

Chair Tarbutton then entertained approval of the FY 2012-13 Audit Contract with Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. for Authority consideration. Motion by Member Matheson and seconded by Member Bullis to adopt a FY 2012-13 Audit Contract with Combs, Tennant & Carpenter, P.C. for \$3,750 (an increase of \$250 from FY 2011-12, the first increase since 2005) as presented. Unanimously approved. (**Attachment #3**)

Visitor Center Operations

Executive Director Brown highlighted ongoing items regarding Visitor Center Operations.

- The Visitor Center relocation to the Blowing Art and History Museum (BRAHM) has gone very well.
- Staffing level is good, and recently added Joe Ruppe who replaced Ken Cham who relocated out of town.
- Foot traffic into the Visitor Center has increased greatly since locating in the new Museum.
- A proposed shuttle service utilizing AppalCart has been investigated. After a review of costs, fleet, limited service routes and schedules, it was recommended that the TDA look at alternatives. However, two additional shuttle opportunities have come to the attention of the TDA – bicycle rickshaws (petal and motorized) and a private

shuttle/taxi service utilizing Chevrolet Suburban's. Both services will likely be presented to the Town Council in the near future. It was the consensus of the Board that Executive Director Brown meet with the both potential franchisees and discuss TDA marketing possibilities that would aid their shuttle operations.

Marketing Efforts/ Operations Activity Report

Executive Director Brown briefly highlighted several items from his bi-weekly Operations Activity Report.

- Upcoming Advertising/Print Ads
 - WinterFest
 - Holiday Shopping
 - WineFest
- Collaboration
 - Continue to work with High Country Host and co-op and Mountain Journey project.
 - Continue to serve on Blue Ridge Parkway Association Board.
 - Continue to work with BRP, National Park Service, NC Division of Tourism, and local Chamber's.
- Articles/Publications – WNC Magazine, USA Today, Southern Living Magazine, Points North Magazine
- Website – Mobile smartphone-only DMO mobile ready site in High Country
- Social Media – have highest #'s of Facebook friends of any destination marketing organization in the High Country, active on Twitter
- Collateral
 - Visitor Guide and Maps updated
 - Kiosk maps and listings updated
 - Restaurant guides
 - Accommodations guide
 - Hiking maps
 - Town Calendars
- Tracking
 - Using Facebook
 - Continue to use specific URL's for specific ads, events and promotions.
 - Continue to use reader responses from regional media buys in publications.

The Authority then had a discussion on weather-related issues and ways to improve perception of road conditions related to weather from media.

Chair Tarbutton stated that advertising in the large media markets was very expensive and that the return on investment to rebut media perceptions would be very limited. He

suggested, as well as Vice-Chair Dyer, that continuing to maintain and build relationships with the media was vitally important.

Mr. Brown emphasized that life and safety of the general public was paramount to broadcasters as part of their Federal Communications Commission license. As such, continuing to build on our relationships with the media is critical to maintaining credibility.

The Authority then briefly discussed that hours of operation of merchants had an impact on weather-related perception – i.e., if the majority of businesses are closed due to weather or not open when visitors are in-town that gave guests mixed signals and made them not feel welcomed.

Assistant Director Amanda Lugenbell also reminded the Authority that photographs and webcams distributed to media outlets had an influence on encouraging visits to the area. If the images reflect our beauty and/or clear streets, and media utilizes the photos or webcams, they will let our potential visitors know we are open for business.

Chair Tarbutton thanked Mr. Brown for his report.

Infrastructure Support

Ex-officio Member Hildebran provided an update on infrastructure-related TDA expenditures referring to the TDA Adopted FY 2012-13 Budget which outlined approved expenses.

Streets/Sidewalks

He reported that Phase III of the Downtown Streetscape improvements was recently completed in the area located in front of St. Mary's Church and going north just past Storie Street Grill. As part of this phase, the NC Department of Transportation participated in funding drainage improvements near Chestnut Street.

Parking

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reviewed TDA funding that goes toward debt requirements for the American Legion Parking Facility (2 years remaining) and for the Tiller-Lane Property (5 years remaining) that is the location of BRAHM and the newly constructed parking facility. He further mentioned that once the debt is retired for the American Legion Parking Facility with TDA funding, it is expected that the TDA funding would be applied toward the BRAHM Parking Facility (12 years remaining).

Other

- TDA may be requested to help with some funding for appearance betterments along the US 321 widening project (i.e. landscaping, fence, signalization, etc.)
- The U.S. Park Service-Town Land Exchange for the Town Reservoir should be completed by year-end.
- Town Comprehensive Plan Survey results should be back by the first of the year, which included some questions related to tourism.

- \$565,140 in Wastewater Treatment Plant improvements are underway.
- Town is working with our water maintenance company to market the water tank site for cellular telephone service improvements.
- Blowing Rock Appearance Advisory Commission working with Parks & Recreation to make hardscape improvements to Memorial Park.
- Town accepted a \$142,500 grant from the NC Park & Recreation Trust Fund to make improvements to the American Legion Building.
- Recent annexations added some rooms for occupancy tax collections – Blowing Rock Conference Center (51 bed guest lodge and cottages) and Blue Ridge Vistas (31-unit building with some short-term rental). Also, Appalachian Regional Healthcare post acute care facility project is moving along.

At this time, Watauga County TDA Director Wright Tilley joined the meeting.

The Authority recessed the meeting for lunch at Storie Street Grill at 12:15 p.m. The Authority returned to session and reconvened the meeting at 1:25 p.m.

Event Activities - Update

Executive Director Brown introduced Watauga County TDA Director Tilley and discussed his background. Mr. Tilley has served as Executive Director of the Watauga County TDA since January of 2009. He served as the 2011 Chairman of the International Festivals and Events Association (IFEA). Tilley has more than 25 years of experience in the event and tourism industries. Prior to his current position with Watauga County, Tilley served as President of the Macon, Georgia International Cherry Blossom Festival and the Keep Macon Beautiful Commission. During his career he has also served as Vice President of RCS Productions in Atlanta, a full-service entertainment and event production company; as Recreation and Events Manager for the Jekyll Island Authority Convention & Visitors Bureau; and as an Adjunct Instructor for the Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism at the University of Florida.

Mr. Tilley began by asking “what is the purpose of an event? Is it - educational, a celebration of heritage or tradition, or to showcase the community?” Key components must be – “is the event unique to the area - a niche, adds value – is it worth the time?, is it memorable, does it fit the community, does it have champions, is it what the consumer wants?”

TDA’s and CVB’s relationship – “does it provide direct funding, assist in promotion/marketing, provide media assistance/familiarization tours, or provides staffing. “TDA must find a balance for use of occupancy funds and does it put heads in beds. Professional coordination can assist with packaging the event and extending activities.

Member Dyer departed the meeting due to another commitment.

Local possibilities with greatest potential include – outdoor recreation/sports (cycling, biking, running, fishing, etc), music, and holiday experiences.

At this time, the Authority discussed expanding events such as Mayview Madness 5K Road Race, Trout Derby, Holiday Shopping, etc. Chair Tarbutton requested that TDA Director Brown develop a list of possibilities and survey Board members to rank each event. The Board agreed to meet early next year to follow-up on this discussion.

Mr. Tilley also advised that the County TDA has retained Magellan Strategy Group (Chris Cavanaugh) to conduct research on what events attract visitors to the High Country. Once the research is complete, he agreed to share the results with the Blowing Rock TDA.

Chair Tarbutton and the Authority thanked Mr. Tilley for his information. At this time, Watauga County TDA Director Wright Tilley departed the meeting.

Strategic Plan - Update

Chairperson Tarbutton then led a discussion on the TDA Strategic Plan and any suggestions/recommendations for strategic goals for the upcoming year. (**Attachment #4**)

Strategic items discussed that the Authority has been working on included -

- Expand use of Social Media – blogging/texting/Facebook
- Direct more efforts to Groups Sales. Targeting Groups w/in 2-3 hour drive
- Coordination of marketing with High Country Host partners as well as fulfillment coordination opportunities
- Continually work to enhance communication among hoteliers
- Continue to collaborate with attractions and events – BRAHM, Parkway, Ski Mountain, WinterFest, WineFest, Horse Show, etc.
- Continue to follow-up on shuttle/taxi (public transportation)

Mr. Tarbutton mentioned an upcoming meeting with the Chamber of Commerce to discuss topics such as – event coordinator position, Visitor Center/Chamber location, shared copier lease, and collaboration. He advised that he and Director Brown would keep the Authority informed as the conversation proceeds.

After some discussion, the Authority agreed to continue to review the Strategic Plan and further review event possibilities once a list is compiled by Director Brown after the first of the year.

Chair Tarbutton thanked the members for their input.

Downtown Retail Strategy - Update

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported that the Downtown Retail Strategy Steering Committee continues to meet to work on elements of the study. The next meeting is scheduled for tomorrow, November 28, 2012. The group continues to collaborate on many of the issues discussed throughout the meeting and provides for improved

communication flow. Mr. Hildebran advised that many of the items discussed previously during the Infrastructure Support Report were similar to the downtown report.

Mr. Brown was excused from the meeting.

Employment Agreement Extension

Per his contract renewal date and after a review and discussion of the successful work performance of Executive Director Brown, Member Bullis motioned and Member Matheson seconded to extend the employment agreement of Mr. Brown by three years, until November 27, 2015 at his current salary and to review compensation annually as outlined in the agreement. Unanimously approved.

Per the request of Executive Director Brown, the Authority also agreed to consider outside off-duty employment of the Executive Director as more details become available per Section 14: Outside Activities of the Employment Agreement.

Mr. Brown returned to the meeting and was notified of the Board action.

Next Meeting

Chair Tarbutton reminded the Authority that the next regular meeting is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 2, 2013 and acknowledged the likely need for a special meeting to further discuss future event possibilities once research is complete.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Member Mattar and seconded by Member Matheson to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chair Tarbutton adjourned the meeting at 3:40 p.m.

Kent Tarbutton, Chair

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachments

- #1 – FY 2011-12 Annual Audit Report
- #2 – Budget Amendment
- #3 – FY 2012-13 Audit Contract
- #4 – Strategic Plan