

**Board of Commissioners/Tourism Development Authority**  
**Joint Meeting**  
**Minutes – March 13, 2013**

A joint meeting of the Town of Blowing Rock Board of Commissioners and the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority was held on Wednesday, March 13, 2013 at 4:30 p.m. at Town Hall. Attending were Mayor JB Lawrence, Commissioners Jim Steele, Doug Matheson, Albert Yount, Dan Phillips and Tommy Klutz. TDA members included Chairperson Kent Tarbutton, Rob Dyer, Doug Matheson and Lianne Mattar. Others in attendance were Town Manager Scott Hildebran, Finance Director Nicole Norman, TDA Director Tracy Brown, Assistant Director Amanda Lugenbell, and Town Clerk Sharon Greene.

**Call to Order**

Mayor Lawrence called the meeting to order at 4:35 p.m. and introduced TDA Chairman Kent Tarbutton and TDA Executive Director Tracy Brown.

Mr. Brown began the meeting with a power point presentation. (**Attachment #1**) He reviewed 2012 Highlights:

- Positive Numbers
  - +6 Occupancy Tax Collection
  - +6 Web Site Visitation
  - +27% Visitor Center Traffic
  - Watauga County Ranks 19<sup>th</sup> out of 100 Counties in Tourism
  - \$197.56 million in visitor spending in Watauga County
  - \$18.16 million in State and Local tax revenues generated by travel in the county resulting on tax savings of \$353.77 to each resident
  - Advised that Blowing Rock models occupancy trends of Watauga County and Boone, when considering “apples to apples” comparison (when new properties/rentals are accounted for and 6% tax is applied)
- Full Year in new Visitor Center
  - 22,527 Walk-in visitors
  - Location at BRAHM provides great facility, with ADA compliant restrooms, designated parking and state-of-the-art meeting space
- Marketing Plan
  - Marketing based on exhaustive demographic research
  - Profile shows visitor decision made by 85% of time by female from the following states – NC, SC, Florida, Ohio, Maryland, Tennessee, New York, Georgia, Pennsylvania, & New Jersey. NC Markets include Charlotte, Triad and Triangle.
  - Media Plan targets publications that hit profile – i.e., *Better Homes & Garden*, *Family Circle*, *Oprah*, *Our State and Southern Living*
  - Work with Partners, Watauga County TDA, Boone TDA, High Country Host, NC Tourism, etc.

- Provide marketing promotion for events – i.e., Blue Ridge Wine & Food Festival, Art in the Park, WinterFest, Arts & Antique Show, Charity Horse Show, etc.
  - Earned media plays an important role
  - Target meetings – corporate, associations, weddings, conferences, etc. SMERF focus - social, military, education, religious and fraternal meetings
  - Area has received numerous awards – Prettiest Town in NC, Best Place to Own Second Home, Prettiest Winter Town in America, etc. Private establishments have been honored as well – Green Park Inn, Westglow Spa, Gamekeeper, etc.
- Working Relationships
- Relationships are very important – all tourism entities and venues

Once the presentation concluded, a discussion concerning various topics followed:

All agreed that success in shoulder seasons has been and will continue be difficult.

A discussion on return on investment ensued, i.e., seek ad placement and/or marketing that maximizes best opportunity for heads in beds. TDA Director Brown and Chair Tarbutton discussed how they try to determine if conversions occur (an ad brings in a visitor). Typical ways include: reader response cards from ads, zip code surveys, visitor intercept surveys and focus groups. Both admitted that it is still difficult to tie specific ads directly to an overnight stay. Mr. Tarbutton mentioned new software from Google analytics and ad tracking are new methods being employed to better track success.

Commissioners Steele and Phillips asked about the possibility of TDA's consolidation. Mr. Tarbutton and Mr. Brown responded that each TDA serves different unique areas with different missions. In some areas, we can and do coordinate activities where productive for all parties – i.e., large marketing buys and possible fulfillment of visitor info requests, eventually may not utilize visitor centers as the use of new electronic mediums becomes more common. Mr. Brown and Mr. Tarbutton also stated that all work cooperatively to get visitors to the High Country then we can fight for the visitor once they get here. A day tripper is normally considered living within a 50 mile radius. Quaintness and charm sets the Blowing Rock character apart from other High Country destinations.

The Boards discussed how the Blowing Rock customer had changed over the years. Chair Tarbutton advised travel has changed – days and weekends stays vs. week stays, the importance of activities once you get there, limited high-end lodging, market/product changes and increased competition – all of which make a very complicated issue with many moving parts and an on-going process.

The topic of quality lodging stock was discussed, with the importance of maintaining/upgrading our current accommodations and possibility of the need for an upscale, high-end facility.

Chamber President John Aldridge stated he believed that the town and TDA could help business by focusing on the core downtown appearance and amenities and seeking visitors who can put money into our local economy.

Chair Tarbutton advised that the recent Watauga County TDA Marketing Survey noted that many visitors cited a lack of things to do in the High Country affected length of stay.

A discussion on the correlation between occupancy taxes and sales taxes began. Due to distribution methods of sales tax, it is difficult to make inferences with occupancy tax. All believed that local sales data collection information would be very useful. TDA Chair Tarbutton suggested the Chamber of Commerce might be the agency to collect information from members.

The Boards then discussed the need for coordination of the various players. Mr. Brown stressed the need to continue to follow suggestions from the Hyett/Palma Retail Study. He advised that a Retail Strategy Committee, created as a result of the study, met monthly in the season to help improve coordination among the various parties (Town, TDA, Chamber, Planning Board and key stakeholders).

Mr. Tarbutton stated the key findings from the Retail Study were still prevalent – problems include lack of private restrooms from retailers and the need for improved customer service/relations.

Commissioner Yount stated that Blowing Rock had a good brand. Mr. Brown concurred that most visitors have a favorable impression of Blowing Rock and the brand had been developed and formed over the past 100 years.

Commissioner Matheson expressed concern that Blowing Rock would acquire the reputation of being exclusive when targeting tourism. All agreed there must be a balanced approach.

TDA Director Brown highlighted planned summer studies include assistance from East Carolina University and Western Carolina University on customer profile and tourism economic impact.

The Boards briefly discussed short-term rental. Commissioner Phillips suggested a more detail conversation on the topic by all parties and the possibility of at least some modification of regulations in multi-family areas and during major events/shoulder seasons.

Commissioner Klutz commented that he thought, based on the county occupancy figures, the Town continued to lose revenue by not allowing short-term rentals in town.

Mr. Aldridge cautioned against any modification and advised that data suggests an over-abundance of short-term rentals in the market.

All agreed the topic would be discussed in the future.

Mayor Lawrence thanked Mr. Tarbutton and Mr. Brown and the entire Authority for their work on behalf of the Town.

**Adjournment**

With no further business to discuss, the joint meeting between Council and the TDA adjourned at 6:30 p.m.

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Kent Tarbutton, Chairperson

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Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

**Attachment #1 – 2012 TDA Annual Report Presentation**