

## **MINUTES**

### **Town of Blowing Rock**

### **Board of Commissioners**

**March 6, 2007**

The Town of Blowing Rock Board of Commissioners held their annual meeting with the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) on Tuesday, March 6, 2007. Immediately following, Council concluded their annual departmental meetings. Attending were Mayor J.B. Lawrence, Commissioners Bobby Ball, Keith Tester, Terry Lentz, Rita Wiseman and Tommy Klutz. TDA members included, Chairperson Bernie Keele, Vice Chairperson Kent Tarbutton, Keith Tester and Lynn Drury. TDA member Phil Pickett was unable to attend. Others in attendance were Town Manager Scott Hildebran, Finance Director Margaret Pierce, TDA Director Tracy Brown, Town Engineer Doug Chapman, Public Works Director Johnny Lentz, and Town Clerk Sharon Greene.

#### **Call to Order**

Mayor Lawrence called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m. and welcomed those in attendance.

#### **Council/TDA Annual Meeting**

Mr. Bernie Keele, TDA Chairperson began by stating how happy the TDA Board was to have Tracy Brown as the new TDA Director and what a good job he was doing. Mr. Keele also stated that occupancy tax for the past 19 consecutive months had continued to increase. Council also received a handout showing monthly occupancy tax totals up to the present time. **Occupancy Totals Attachment #1**

Mr. Keele discussed the proposed wayfinding signage program which would include new directional signs and kiosks to be placed throughout several areas in town. He stated that a map of all businesses in town would be placed in the kiosks at no cost to the merchants.

Mr. Keele informed Council that the TDA and Chamber of Commerce website had now been combined improving navigation of both sites.

He also advised the Blowing Rock area had been honored in several publications and that Ms. Lynn Drury and Kent Tarbutton were continuing to work on the advertising campaign promoting the Blowing Rock area in conjunction with Marketing Consultant Mr. Dave Tomsy.

TDA plans for the upcoming year were discussed next, with Mr. Keele stating the town needed economic development plans. He stated the village character of Blowing Rock could change quickly especially if small locally owned motels were unable to continue to stay open. Members of the TDA felt that small motels were at a disadvantage due to the demand for higher-end amenities that larger hotels had to offer and the increase in people coming to the area staying in condominiums.

Mr. Keele also expressed a need for more parking which is a main priority of the TDA.

Mr. Keele again stated how excited the TDA Board was about the upcoming year and with the leadership they now had.

Commissioner Wiseman commended the TDA on the job they were doing and stressed Council's desire to assist them in any way they could.

Commissioner Klutz expressed his concern for older motels and the cost that would be incurred by the owners for renovations to keep up with real estate costs in Blowing Rock. Mr. Keele stated that people were looking for places to go that had upscale facilities, larger rooms and great dining and there was a lot of competition.

Commissioner Ball stated someone needed to be in charge of economic development for the Town. Commissioner Tester stated the Chamber of Commerce was in the process of getting a group together with respect to economic development but before a specialist could be hired to assist in this issue the town needed to know exactly what they wanted. There were three major issues that needed to be focused upon; the need for more upscale facilities, more things to do, i.e. events, and getting merchants to work together with regard to events.

Commissioner Tester stated downtown Blowing Rock needed to be treated as if it were a mall with all businesses being one unit. He felt the Chamber of Commerce should be the one to work on that.

Mr. Keele stated that someone needed to create an interest for merchants to want to stay open later and more on-going events were needed to draw people to Blowing Rock.

Commissioner Tester stated that other organizations needed to be included such as the Art Center, etc. as well as merchants working together on this effort. Mr. Keele felt there was a conflict of interest since the Chamber had so many outside members that they also promoted, not just Blowing Rock businesses, with money being the biggest reason and the TDA had offered to help with funding. Commissioner Klutz felt it was pertinent that the Chamber work together with the economic development group.

Mayor Lawrence inquired if a portion of occupancy tax funds could be used in a revolving loan process for small motel owners to do renovations in order for them to increase their occupancy rates, which in turn would mean higher occupancy tax. Commissioner Tester agreed this was a good idea and a good way to maximize how TDA money is spent. Town Manager Hildebran stated the town might be able to work with High Country Council of Government or Advantage West to get planning assistance on this issue.

Commissioner Wiseman commended the TDA on their many hours of hard work and for the progress they had made. She also advised if there was anything that Council could do to assist them to please let them know. Mr. Keele stated their top priority was parking and asked that Council continue to pursue this.

Mr. Tarbutton spoke of the positive results in getting the TDA and the Chamber to work together since Tracy Brown had become the TDA director. Commissioner Klutz asked Mr. Brown how well things were progressing in that respect. Mr. Brown stated a meeting had taken place that day with TDA members and Chamber members and he thought they were making a lot of progress.

With no further business to discuss the joint meeting between Council and the TDA adjourned at 4:45 p.m.

At this time, departmental meetings resumed with Town Engineer Doug Chapman and Public Works Director Johnny Lentz. Public Works Director Lentz and Town Manager Hildebran began with updating Council, stating with the recent loss of an employee that they recommended the position be eliminated and the money for the position be utilized towards increasing contract labor \$9,000.00, and the remaining \$18,500.00 of the eliminated position salary be distributed between current employees. They felt this would have a positive effect on employee moral and allow for better utilization of staffing especially during the winter months.

Town Manager Hildebran stated if the town used more contract labor in certain areas, this would free-up employees to do the jobs they needed to do. Commissioner Wiseman advised even with contract labor, supervision by the town would be needed.

After some discussion, Town Manager Hildebran stated he would like Council's endorsement regarding the eliminated position and distribution of salary (\$9,000 increase in contract labor) with the remaining \$18,500.00 distributed to current employees. Commissioner Wiseman made a motion to approve the elimination of the public works position and redistribution of salaries, seconded by Commissioner Ball. Unanimously approved.

Commissioner Tester asked if more contract labor was used, would it reduce the number of full-time employees and cut costs. Mr. Hildebran responded yes and that contract labor would give full-time employees time to do things that needed doing, such as sidewalk work, painting roads, etc. Commissioner Tester stated that he had received complaints regarding sidewalks in town and that work was needed for safety purposes.

Mr. Lentz stated that he needed to identify residents that were not connected to sewer and would start doing that in the near future.

Commissioner Wiseman inquired when patch work on pavement would be done on Birch Street. Mr. Lentz stated that he would reevaluate the list of streets on the pavement study that was done a few years ago to see which areas needed attention.

Town Engineer Doug Chapman spoke with Council regarding several CIP engineering projects such as installation of sidewalks on Ransom Street, Morris Street and Chestnut Drive. He stated the town had easements for the Morris Street portion, but would need to acquire them for the Ransom Street and Chestnut Drive portion. Commissioner Klutz stated that Ransom Street residents were very receptive of a sidewalk when it had been promised years ago. He stated the needed right-of-ways might deter their desire. Commissioner Lentz stated that he had never heard a sidewalk promised for that area. Commissioner Ball advised installation of sidewalks on Ransom Street would be difficult because of the ditches along the road. Mayor Lawrence suggested the possibility of Ransom Street be made into a one-way street to hopefully help alleviate some problems with sidewalk installation. Commissioner Tester agreed this may be a feasible idea.

Commissioner Wiseman inquired as to why the town was considering sidewalks on Ransom Street, Morris Street and Chestnut Drive, and not in other areas of town such as Mayview, Laurel Park etc.

Mayor Lawrence responded the residents of these areas wanted a sidewalk and the areas were more conducive for sidewalks.

Commissioner Tester felt with the installation of sidewalks in these areas, it would set precedence for other areas. Public Works Director Lentz advised that a lot of money was needed for sidewalk upkeep; that approximately \$500,000.00 was needed at the present time for the sidewalks already in town and sidewalks required a lot of maintenance. Mr. Chapman stated that it would cost approximately \$110.00 a foot to install a sidewalk on Ransom Street. Council agreed to continue to study this issue.

Mr. Chapman also updated Council regarding the Streetscape Plan, stating that he would meet with the person that replaced Kip Turner at N.C.D.O.T. to see what they would agree to as far as location of trees along Main Street.

The proposed parking facility planned for the American Legion area was discussed next. Mr. Chapman stated the corners for the facility had been laid out and soil borings would be done next in order to move forward with the planned facility.

Drawings for the proposed museum parking facility on South Main Street were presented to Council for their review. Commissioner Klutz stated the museum was going to be a nice building, but he felt it would detract from the appearance of town in that area. Mr. Hildebran reminded Council the parking plans were not final, just several alternative plans to give an idea as to how the museum would look with the parking facility alternatives. Mr. Hildebran stated that Council needed to narrow down the parking alternatives so that BRAHM can move forward with their plans for the museum and parking facility. Commissioner Tester felt that a rendering was needed to see how the proposed project would relate to the Presbyterian Church. Commissioner Klutz voiced that he would like for the museum to look like the older portion of the Presbyterian Church, he felt it would be very attractive. Commissioner Ball stated the rendering of the museum was a very nice design and if it was built like the church, people would think it was part of the Presbyterian Church. After further discussion, it was consensus of Council that the Alternative #2 parking option was the best option for the parking facility as it relates to the museum project and the area for which it is planned. Alternative #2 proposes a surface level and one elevated level with both levels entering off Chestnut providing approximately 95 spaces. **Alternative #2 Parking Option - Attachment #2**

Mr. Chapman stated the Storm Water Study Master Plan would be done by the first of April and a work session would be needed to discuss it, then Council could adopt it during the May Council meeting if everything went as planned.

Mr. Hildebran stated the on-going implementation of the Capital Improvement Plan for the Water Treatment Plant would continue.

Council inquired as to how long it would be until the parking facility at the American Legion would be finished. Mr. Chapman stated the project could be out for bid within the next three or four months.

Town Manager Hildebran asked that Council review some proposed changes in user fees for events; such as weddings, etc. held in the Broyhill Park Gazebo, Davant Field Pavillion. He stated that Parks & Recreation Director Jennifer Brown had compared fees at surrounding facilities and the fees needed to be adjusted, however; Mrs. Brown recommended the deposit for these areas remain the same. A motion was given by Commissioner Ball, seconded by Commissioner Tester to approve the proposed increase in user fees. Unanimously approved. **Parks & Recreation User Fees Attachment #3**

Town Manager Hildebran also advised that the local bill requested by Council had been filed with the General Assembly allowing the Town to join the State Employees' Comprehensive Major Medical Plan. He advised the Town had only a 30-day window in which to change insurance companies if necessary. He stated the current medical insurance as quoted was increasing approximately 20 percent this fiscal year.

Next, Mr. Hildebran reviewed a comparison of salaries at other Police Departments in surrounding areas. He stated that based on the survey, the Town was within a normal range with other departments with ASU, Watauga County and Boone leading the way. He also stated the Town had a better longevity pay system, better insurance with lower co-pays, etc., and salaries overall were in range with most surrounding departments.

Commissioner Ball asked that Mr. Hildebran look into a salary comparison for the Fire/Rescue Department.

Mr. Hildebran reminded Council of a reception for Volunteer Board members to be given in their honor before the March meeting at 6:00 p.m.

Commissioner Klutz recommended the town inquire about leasing the lot directly behind the Village Pharmacy for extra parking. Mr. Hildebran advised this property was located in the flood plain. Commissioner Lentz stated that access would have to cross private property and that would prevent use.

## **Adjournment**

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned at 6:15 p.m.

Mayor \_\_\_\_\_

J.B. Lawrence

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_

Sharon H. Greene, Town Clerk

**March 6, 2007 Meeting Attachments**

**Occupancy Tax Totals #1**

**Alternative Parking Option #2**

**Parks & Recreation User Fees #3**