

Town of Blowing Rock

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – March 1, 2005

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, March 1, 2005 at 8:00 a.m. in a regular meeting. Present were Chairperson Bernard Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Lynn Drury and Keith Tester, and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. TDA Executive Director Susan Freshcorn was also present. Member Phil Pickett was absent due to an illness in the family.

Call to Order

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

Approval of Minutes – February 1, 2005

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the February 1, 2005 meeting minutes. Motion by Vice Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Tester to approve the February 1, 2005 meeting minutes. Unanimously approved.

Financial Report – Occupancy Tax Proceeds

Secretary Hildebran reviewed the FY 2004-05 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through January 2005 as well as the financial statements. Secretary Hildebran stated that January revenues were down somewhat compared to January 2004. However, FY 2004-05 revenues should hit the budget target if the next five months revenue reflect last year totals.

Committee Report – Tourism Data Survey

Vice-Chair Tarbutton distributed a copy of the Blowing Rock TDA Tourism Data Survey {Phase I - Fall 2004}, sponsored by the Authority (**Attachment #1**). He advised that the Fall survey had been conducted at Art in the Park and at the Tanger Shoppes On the Parkway. The survey was designed to measure several characteristics of visitors to Blowing Rock and their perceptions of the Town. He shared some of the survey highlights, including:

- Most overnight stays are 3-3.5 nights
- Most visitors would recommend Blowing Rock to a friend
- Most visitors plan to return to Blowing Rock
- Most visitors found Blowing Rock affordable
- Most rated their Blowing Rock experience as good-excellent quality
- Most visitors were between the ages of 36-65
- Most visitors had an educational level of some college-graduate degrees
- Most had an annual family income over \$100,000
- Most visitors came from the Charlotte, Greensboro, Hickory, and Florida areas

Vice-Chairperson Tarbutton advised that additional surveys would be conducted in the following seasons - Spring, Summer and Winter.

Report – Branding /Marketing/Web Site

Executive Director Susan Freshcorn provided a TDA Executive Director Monthly Report on her activities (**Attachment #2**) and updated the Authority on TDA Branding/marketing activities. She stated that the tag line/logo have been included on stationery, voice mail, and all advertisements. The Blowing Rocket has agreed to publish a monthly article entitled "In the Wind", which will provide updates on TDA activities. Ms. Freshcorn also advised that several Blowing Rock hotels have submitted bids to host a NC Association of Conventions and Visitor Bureaus conference.

Chairperson Keele stated that Tim Minor, of Crown Communications, was present to provide a demonstration overview of the new web site and request feedback. Members discussed the layout of the site and provided various recommendations to be integrated.

Mr. Minor advised that letters were sent to all tourism related businesses in Blowing Rock requesting information for a web site listing as well as an opportunity for a link. A "thank you" e-mail was sent to those merchants who responded to the initial request for information for the web site and a follow-up e-mail was sent to those who have yet to respond. He informed the Authority that to date they had received a 45-50% response rate.

The Authority reviewed the web site and recognized that several sections had incomplete or erroneous listings. Since advertisement had been placed, the Authority discussed ways to correct the listings prior to going live with the web site. Members also suggested that a wedding/receptions category be added to the web site.

Chairperson Keele recommended that staff follow-up with a phone call to the businesses who had not responded to alleviate any criticism where possible.

After some discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve going live with the www.visitblowingrock.com web site and have a sub-committee correct all incomplete listings. After discussion, the motion was withdrawn.

Motion by Member Tester to approve going live with the www.visitblowingrock.com web site on the conditions that all incomplete sections are deleted, that a general paragraph on the deleted section is added to the web site and that staff completes the web site within two weeks. Motion died for lack of second.

Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve going live with the www.visitblowingrock.com web site on the condition that only submitted information is placed on the web site. Motion died for lack of second.

Motion by Member Tester to approve going live with the www.visitblowingrock.com web site on the condition that no section is incomplete. Motion died for lack of second.

After a lengthy discussion, motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Tester to approve going live with the www.visitblowingrock.com web site on the conditions - that all businesses that have not responded are contacted within 48 hours, that only submitted information is placed on the web site, and that a site disclaimer is included. Unanimously approved.

Report – Visitors Center

Chairperson Keele announced that demolition on the interior of Visitor Center has begun. He stated that most building trade services had been donated for the renovation by local businesses - Stories Carpet (flooring), Terry Lentz Construction (construction), Bob Timberlake (furniture and interior design), Jeff Long Electric (electrical), Van Norris Plumbing (plumbing) and the Town of Blowing Rock (demolition). David Wagner, an architect from Charlotte, has completed design renderings for the building.

Chair Keele advised that the architectural drawings would be reviewed later in the meeting.

Report – Blowing Rock Arts Center

Chair Keele introduced Arts Center Chairman Chip Williamson to provide an update on the Blowing Rock Community Arts Center project.

Chairman Williamson stated that Hickory Construction had been awarded the construction contract for the Arts Center; and weather permitting, the building should be open in the summer of 2006. He also stated that an Executive Director for the Arts Center should be hired by May 2005.

Mr. Williamson advised that the Arts Center had raised \$7.5 million for the project and wants to work with the TDA on year-round activities. He stated that the Arts Center is excited about working with the TDA and that Ms. Freshcorn would attend the next Board meeting of the Arts Center.

Member Tester asked about a schedule for 2006 Arts Center events. Mr. Williamson responded that they haven't developed one at this time and are waiting on an Executive Director and a more definitive construction timetable.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that there would be opportunities to for the TDA to assist in event advertising. Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Williamson and advised that the TDA stands ready to assist the Arts Center.

Report – 2005 Winterfest

Chair Keele introduced 2005 Winterfest Chairperson Carol Horne to provide an update on the 2005 Winterfest. Ms. Horne distributed a 2005 Winterfest Summary, which outlined of her remarks (**Attachment # 3**). She discussed the 7th Annual 2005 Winterfest and effects of the weather on the event. She stated that Winterfest had utilized the Chamber of Commerce as staff support for the event and that worked out very well. Overall attendance was down; but, Winterfest obtained their basic goals of – 1) bring people to Blowing Rock during a traditionally slow time, 2) cover expenses and donate any balance to charity, and 3) have some fun in the winter. The event donated \$1,500 to the Tolbert Fund.

Ms. Horne advised that the 8th Annual Winterfest will be held on January 26-29, 2006 and she requested continued TDA support of the event.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton thanked the Winterfest committee for their hard work on the events. Member Tester expressed some concern over the long-term future of Winterfest and suggested that the Winterfest committee set aside any carryover funds to cover expected future year expenses.

Ms. Horne responded that they intended to reserve any remaining balances this year, but lower revenues prohibited that at this time. She stated that they have learned over the years from their experiences and this year utilized the Red Cross, Blowing Rock Rotary and ABWA to sponsor/hold events. Ms. Horne advised that they are considering title sponsors for various events to aid in funding those events.

Earle Horne stated that Winterfest was not a 501(c)3 corporation but instead a not-for-profit corporation.

Chairperson Keele asked who was on their board. Ms. Horne responded that they would be electing board members at their March meeting and current committee members include herself, Bob Miller, Bill Rodgers, etc.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton mentioned that funding from major corporations takes time to acquire and most have a lengthy application process.

Charles Hardin then distributed a Winterfest Data Survey with comments received from hotels, restaurants and retail establishments (**Attachment # 4**). He stated, that overall, due to weather the comments from merchants was mixed.

Chairperson Keele thanked Ms. Horne and Mr. Hardin for their reports.

Report – Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce

Chairperson Keele welcomed Chamber of Commerce President Pam Vines to provide an update on Chamber of Commerce activities. She reported that the Chamber - is continuing to host the visitor center until May 1; planning for the 2005 Art in the Park season and annual parades; as well as reviewing new and improved events. Events under review include: Trout Derby (with a fish fry and art contest), and N.C. Symphony, Mitford Days (possibly September 2005 or May 2006), Pickin' in the Park, and High Country Classics (vintage cars).

She also advised that a Chamber Strategic Plan was under development and focused on their new role – focusing on events, economic development and other typical chamber of commerce duties. Ms. Vines stated that their membership was excited about moving to a new building with the TDA but there was some reservation. She concluded by stating that Chamber realizes that the TDA was directing the wind and Chamber of Commerce would be adjusting their sails.

Member Tester mentioned that budgeting for next fiscal year would begin in the near future. He encouraged the Chamber of Commerce to takes steps to apply for event and advertising allocations.

Both Member Tester and Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that even though future events may not be cast in stone that the Chamber continue to look ahead and make the TDA aware of potential funding needs.

Chairperson Keele asked about the membership of the events committee. Ms. Vines responded that herself, Carolina Smith, Melissa Pickett, Donna Turner, Charles Hardin, and TDA Director Susan Freshcorn were all a part of the events committee.

Member Tester recommended that the Blowing Rock Parks and Recreation staff be included in the discussion of events as well. Both Chair Keele and Vice-Chair Tarbutton suggested utilizing Bob Timberlake in the Trout Derby event as he was known as the King of Trout in North Carolina.

Chairperson Keele thanked Ms. Vines for her update and her willingness to work together with the TDA. He mentioned that the TDA has been invited to attend Chamber of Commerce monthly meetings to provide updates as both organizations work to improve communication.

Chamber Executive Director Charles Hardin then reviewed the results of the Art in the Park Economic Impact Survey (**Attachment # 5**). He shared some of the survey highlights, including:

- 54% of attendees were from out of town
- Average travel party size was between 2.12 to 3.18
- 28% believed that the Art in the Park event was fun
- 73% of attendees were female
- Most attendees were over 35 years of age
- Most visitors came from the Hickory and Charlotte areas

Member Tester asked if the any group verifies the financial impacts suggested in the surveys with local businesses. He stated that all the surveys are taken from a tourist-perspective and if you add up all the economic impact studies that have been performed over the past several years, we would have to be in great shape.

Mr. Hardin then distributed an U.S. 321 Widening Update (from Kirby Mountain Road to Blackberry Road) which outlined all mitigation efforts underway (**Attachment # 6**).

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Hardin for his work on this issue and requested that he continue to keep the TDA informed on this matter.

After a brief discussion, the Authority agreed to obtain membership in the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce in order to comply with High Country Host membership requirements. Also, the Authority requested a financial update of all outstanding encumbrances at the April meeting. Secretary Hildebran advised that Finance Officer Margaret Pierce would review the budget in detail for Authority at the next meeting.

Report – Visitors Center Continued

Chairperson Keele reviewed the preliminary architectural design illustrations provided by Michael Murray, an architect from Charlotte, with the Authority. Mr. Keele stated the Visitor Center has a completion date by May 1.

Member Tester requested that the Town Engineer (McGill Associates) review the drainage on the site. He further suggested that Executive Director Freshcorn and Chamber Executive Director Hardin develop a transition plan for the move into the new building. Chairperson Keele echoed the remarks and requested that they prepare a plan for discussion at the April meeting.

TDA/Chamber Sub-Lease

Secretary Hildebran stated that the Town Attorney has drafted a sub-lease to allow the TDA to sublet a portion of the building to the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce; and the sub-lease would be ready for TDA/Chamber review and comment in the near future. Mr. Hildebran advised that the item would be on the TDA agenda for formal consideration at the April meeting.

Other – April Meeting Date

Chairperson Keele stated that the scheduled April 5th TDA meeting date conflicts with the 2005 Governor's Conference on Tourism to be held in Asheville. After a brief discussion, it was the consensus of the Authority to move the meeting date to April 7th at 8:00 a.m.

Other – Council/TDA Joint Meeting

Chairperson Keele reminded the Authority of the joint Town Council/TDA meeting to be held on March 2nd at 5:00 p.m. He advised the meeting would allow the Authority to review the 2004 Annual Report with the Town Council and receive comments on future goals.

Master Signage Plan

Ex-officio Member Hildebran informed the Authority that representatives of Southwood Corp. would be in town later in the week to continue with the master signage efforts. The first priority of Southwood Corp. will be designing a sign for the new Visitor Center.

Mr. Hildebran stated staff should have an update for the Authority in the next several weeks.

Other

Dick Gooseman, owner of the Meadowbrook Inn, suggested that lodging establishments could share occupancy information with the TDA to aid in tourism planning.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that the TDA provided funding to the Chamber of Commerce to acquire new database software. He further advised that as the Chamber becomes more familiar with the software, additional information would be collected and used for marketing efforts.

Next Meeting

Chairperson Keele stated topics to be discussed at the April 7, 2005 meeting included:

- Town Council/TDA Joint Meeting - Meeting Feedback
- Crown Communications – Web Site/Branding
- Visitor Center Update
- Report - Chamber of Commerce
- Report – TDA Executive Director
- TDA/Chamber Sub-lease & Moving Transition Plan
- Master Signage Plan

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Tester to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele adjourned the meeting at 10:55 a.m.

Bernard Keele, Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachments

#1 - Blowing Rock TDA Tourism Data Survey

#2 - TDA Executive Director Monthly Report

#3 - 2005 Winterfest Summary

#4 - 2005 Winterfest Data Survey

#5 - Art in the Park Economic Impact Survey

#6 - U.S. 321 Widening Update

