

Town of Blowing Rock

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – June 7, 2005

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, June 7, 2005 at 8:00 a.m. in a regular meeting. Present were Chairperson Bernard Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Lynn Drury, Phil Pickett and Keith Tester, and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. TDA Executive Director Susan Freshcorn was also present.

Call to Order

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

Approval of Minutes – May 3, 4 and 9, 2005

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the May 3, May 4 and May 9, 2005 meeting minutes (including the May 3, 2005 close sessions). Motion by Member Tester and seconded by Member Pickett to approve the May 3, May 4 and May 9, 2005 meeting minutes (including the May 3, 2005 close session, with the correction of "with" to "without" and meeting ending time of 11:11 a.m.). Unanimously approved.

FY 2005-06 TDA Budget – Public Hearing

Chairperson Keele stated that the TDA would be holding a public hearing on the proposed FY 2005-2006. Chairman Keele then opened the public hearing for comments from citizens stating that the proposed FY 2005-06 TDA budget totals \$627,850.

Chamber of Commerce President Pam Vines stated that she was concerned with the limited funding for events.

Member Drury stated that the advertising plan funding would in essence supplement event funding. She also mentioned that the advertising campaign had not yet been finalized and that it was the hope of the Authority that in addition to image advertisement that the ad campaign also focus on event publication.

Member Tester asked if the Chamber Events Committee had a breakdown of costs of their future events, including both revenue opportunities and anticipated expenditures.

Jimmy Crippen stated that all were just in the initial stages. Mr. Hardin stated most were in just in their infancy but a web site alone could cost up to \$900.

Member Pickett mentioned that the Bob Timberlake had expressed an interest in a Blowing Rock Wine Festival as well as an Auction.

Member Tester and Vice-Chair Tarbutton both recommended that the Authority keep flexibility in the budget for future events.

Dick Gooseman encouraged the Authority to be open to new programs and events that may prove more successful than older events.

Member Tester stressed the importance of evaluation of what was funded last year – with questions such as, did it work?, does it need change?, and how can it be improved?

Member Drury advised that if the advertising and event funding are coordinated and meshed together more money would be available for all requesting parties and should insure an improved tourism marketing of Blowing Rock.

After some discussion, Chairperson Keele recommended that the Authority schedule a workshop on events and advertising. Member Drury suggested that during the special meeting that the Authority define their general advertising plan, and look at both ads and events. It was the consensus to hold a TDA meeting to discuss these items on Tuesday, June 21, at 8:00 a.m.

Charles Hardin stated that the special events budget was in reality \$20,000 since \$20,500 is allocated to the Parks and Recreation Department for special events. Chairperson Keele reviewed the allocation to Parks and Recreation.

Dick Gooseman stated that he believed that the increase in occupancy tax rates to 6% essentially gave the Town a dedicated revenue source for infrastructure and resulted in no more money for tourism – what was the reason for the increase from 3%?

Member Tester stated that question should be addressed to the Town Council. He then reviewed the reasoning why 1/3rd of the TDA funds are allocated to the Town for infrastructure. He reminded the Authority that a citizens group had urged Town Council that the property tax rate should not be used to provide downtown tourism infrastructure and that the occupancy tax provided a mechanism to off-load that burden from local residents and place the burden on tourists.

Ms. Vines stated that it was important to explain and continually inform citizens on the reasons that a portion of TDA funds were allocated to town infrastructure.

Member Tester advised that the 2/3rds of the budget has spending flexibility and the question should be is the Authority allocating that 2/3rds properly.

Hearing no additional comments, Chairman Keele entertained a motion to close the public hearing. Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton, seconded by Member Pickett to close the public hearing on the FY 2005-2006 TDA Budget. Unanimously approved.

Motion by Member Pickett, seconded by Member Tester to approve the FY 2005-2006 TDA Budget as recommended.

Member Pickett commented that he was very proud of the Visitor Center and that the Center was an asset to the Town.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton mentioned that the TDA budget is basically broken into thirds – 1/3 – advertisement/marketing, 1/3 - Visitor Center operations and 1/3 – Town infrastructure.

Chairperson Keele stressed the importance of spending money wisely in order to maximize our tourism efforts.

After a call of the question, motion to approved FY 2005-06 TDA Budget carried unanimously. (**Attachment #1**)

Financial Report – Occupancy Tax Proceeds

Finance Officer Margaret Pierce then reviewed the FY 2004-05 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through April 2005 as well as the May financial statements. Ms. Pierce stated that April revenues were down compared to April 2004 and that she would continue to monitor the remaining months of revenue totals.

Member Tester suggested that a further evaluation of occupancy receipt totals and comparison with last year totals, noting weather, ad placement and the number of operating hotels.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton expressed the continued need to hone ad effectiveness measurement tools. Dick Gooseman requested that the Authority at some point have a general discussion on the effectiveness of advertisement.

Ms. Pierce advised that due to several pending budget issues that the TDA would need a special meeting later in the month to finalize several budget amendments.

Web Site Update

Chairman Keele stated the next item on the agenda was a Web Site Report. Executive Director Susan Freshcorn reviewed with the Authority the top referring domains to www.visitblowingrock.com – msn.com, townofblowingrock.com, and google.com. She stated that staff had been busy adding events and businesses to the web site.

Ms. Freshcorn also advised that Crown Communications was working to complete their requirements under the web site agreement with the Authority by June 30. Pending projects include enhanced "request info" throughout the site, an E-newsletter and a downloadable "fact sheet".

Donna Summers informed the Authority that the search link on the TDA web site was inoperable. Ms. Freshcorn advised that she would follow-up on the matter.

Report – Visitors Center

Chairman Keele stated the next item on the agenda was a Visitor Center Report. Executive Director Susan Freshcorn updated the Authority on the new Visitor Center. (**Attachment #2**) She advised that approximately 50 people attended the VIP Breakfast and over 200 attended the Open House on May 25th. She thanked all sponsors of the events – Chetola, Sonny's, Knights, Kojay's, Park Place Florist, Canyon's, and Storie Street Grille.

Ms. Freshcorn also reviewed the daily and monthly Visitor Center traffic report with the Authority, as well as the 2005 Visitor Inquiry Report.

Member Tester suggested that the report include advertisement dates to correspond with response requests in order to track ad results.

Several lodging establishments mentioned that they were unaware of the Sunday Visitor Center operating hours and requested that the TDA notify all hoteliers of operating hours.

Ms. Freshcorn responded that they would email the operating hours to the hoteliers and advised that a new directional map had been developed and distributed to local businesses.

Member Tester complimented that development of the inquiry report was very informational.

Ms. Freshcorn advised that Bob Timberlake had donated office furnishings, including: lodge table, oval end table, keeping table, cocktail table, leather sofa, leather wing chair, leather ottoman, porch rocker, wing back love seat, bow back chair, rug, mirror, and three prints. Chairperson Keele publicly thanked Mr. Timberlake on behalf of the Authority and advised that he would personally contact Mr. Timberlake to acknowledge his contributions.

Master Signage Plan

Ex-officio Member Hildebran informed the Authority that the Visitor Center signage was scheduled to be installed the week of June 13th-17th. He also advised that the adopted TDA budget included funding for several bypass directional signs.

TDA/BRAHM Sub-Lease

Secretary Hildebran stated that the Town Attorney has reviewed the sub-lease to allow the TDA to sublet a portion of the building to the Blowing Rock Art and History Museum. He advised that BRAHM reviewed the draft sub-lease and suggested several modifications, all of which had been incorporated into the document. BRAHM President Welborn Alexander has advised that the Art and History Museum was satisfied with the proposed lease and would execute the sub-lease upon adoption.

Chamber of Commerce President Pam Vines stated that the Chamber of Commerce was under the impression that the office would be common area. Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that it was his understanding that the kitchen area was to be the common area for utilization as workspace and staff breaks. He also stated that he had approached Executive Director Freshcorn about possibly donating a conference table for the area.

With no further discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve TDA/BRAHM sublease as presented. Unanimously approved. (**Attachment #3**)

Vice-Chair Tarbutton advised that he would follow-up on a conference table for the common area.

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 stated that Art in the Park began the 2005 season in May.

Chamber Executive Director Charles Hardin informed the Authority that the Blowing Rock Chamber and the Boone Chamber of Commerce have had discussions regarding the potential move of Tweetsie from Watauga County.

Mr. Hardin advised that the US 321 Improvement Project had begun and that the blasting continues. He stated that the NC Department of Transportation had followed the road closing agreement that was implemented prior to the initial construction. Overall, he stated that thus far he hadn't heard any complaints from lodging establishments about the construction. Though, several retailers and restaurants have expressed some concern about the effects of the construction on visitors and the negative connotation of the DOT signage.

Mr. Hardin also mentioned the preliminary efforts in a possible auction event.

Ms. Vines stated that the first Cruise-in/Jam-in Event was cancelled due to weather; however, two other events are planned for later in the year. She also mentioned a new event called "The Gallery Stroll" whereby galleries would stay open until 8:00 p.m. on a designated Tuesday each month. The Chamber hopes this effort would lead to other retailers staying open during evening hours during the season.

Jimmy Crippen suggested that event notices be posted at the Post Office and also that each lodging establishment be notified of upcoming events.

Several audience members suggested holding events on Main Street and closing the street. Member Tester encouraged the Chamber to develop an "issues list" of the necessary actions needed to make such a closing possible. He stated that the list would help all parties understand all the ramifications of closing the street for an event and may alleviate potential problems.

Chairperson Keele thanked Ms. Vines and Mr. Hardin for their comments.

Report – Executive Director

Executive Director Susan Freshcorn provided a TDA Executive Director Monthly Report on her activities. **(Attachment #4)**

Ms. Freshcorn advised that staff had prepared the first Quarterly Calendar of Events for distribution in the Visitor Center.

Member Tester asked if the calendar was available on-line and suggested that the on-line calendar link to other event calendars' around the area as a way to provide more information on activities to visitors.

Ms. Freshcorn responded that the calendar is available on-line and that staff would work toward continually keeping the calendar updated.

She then discussed her areas of focus for the month of June – staff training, work plans, web site development and maintenance and hotel packaging efforts.

Closed Session

Upon motion of Member Tester and second by Member Pickett, the Authority convened at 9:55 a.m. in closed session pursuant to - N.C.G.S. 143.318.11 (a)(6) for discussion of personnel issues.

At the conclusion of the discussions, the closed session was adjourned at 10:55 a.m.

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 10:56 a.m.

Bernard Keele, Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachments

#1 - FY 2005-06 TDA Budget

#2 - TDA Visitor Report

#3 - TDA/BRAHM Sub-lease

#4 - TDA Executive Director Monthly Report