

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – September 6, 2005

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, September 6, 2005 at 8:00 a.m. in a regular meeting. Present were Chairperson Bernard Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Lynn Drury, Keith Tester and Phil Pickett and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. TDA Interim Executive Director Lindsay Galvin was also present.

Call to Order

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

Approval of Minutes – August 2, 3, and 15, 2005

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the August 2, 3, and 15, 2005 (including the August 3, 2005 closed session) meeting minutes. Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Pickett to approve the August 2, 3, and 15, 2005 (including the August 3, 2005 closed session) meeting minutes. Unanimously approved.

Financial Report – Occupancy Tax Proceeds

Finance Officer Margaret Pierce then reviewed monthly financial statement and the FY 2005-06 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through July 2005. She stated that July revenues, totally \$109,671.54, were up compared to July 2004.

Report - Visitor Center

Chairperson Keele and Member Tester updated the Authority on the status of various projects at the Visitor Center.

Center Layout

Based on tours of other centers and staff recommendations, all brochure racks are to be relocated to the front room of the building. A sitting area with television/video capability will be located adjacent to the fireplace. The center room will house a computer and telephone area for visitors.

The changes in layout are scheduled to take place in mid-September and will coincide with the Blowing Rock Art and History Museum rotation of the art display.

TV/Monitor

Staff has received quotations on costs for a flat screen television to be placed above the fireplace. The television would allow guests to view a Blowing Rock tourism video or the weather channel. Quotes are in the range of \$1,200 to \$1,500.

Computer System

David Sechrist, of Sechrist Consulting, has examined the Visitor Center computer system and network and has recommended various changes to include new software as well as a server. The computer system design would permit the Chamber of Commerce to access the tourism ACT database.

Telephone System

Staff has met with Appalachian Technologies to reprogram the Visitor Center telephone system to improve customer service. The proposed cost of the reprogramming is in the range of \$500 to \$750.

Security System

Staff has received quotations on costs for a security system for the Visitor Center. The low bid was from Creekside Electronics. The proposed cost of the system is \$1,300.

Other

Chairperson Keele advised that other minor improvements had been made to the Visitor Center, such as acquiring a door closure, umbrella stand, etc.

Motion by Member Drury and seconded by Member Pickett to authorize expenditures of up to \$9,000 to cover the recommended Visitor Center improvements with the funds to be reallocated from Personnel Salaries. Unanimously approved.

Report - Advertising/Marketing/Web site

Member Drury and Vice-Chair Tarbutton updated the Authority on the status of various projects of the Advertising/Marketing/Web Site Committee.

Grant Request

The Advertising/Marketing/Web Site Committee made a recommendation on a proposed FY 2005-06 grant funding request, and advised that additional support may possibly come from advertising partnerships via the TDA marketing campaign.

Blowing Rock Stage Company

Requested \$11,500 for advertising

Recommendation: \$4,500

Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve \$4,500 in funding to the Blowing Rock Stage Company. Motion unanimously approved.

July 4th Fireworks

Requested additional \$1,500 for July 4th Fireworks (split with BR Country Club)

Recommendation: Place on hold at this time.

Ex-officio Member Hildebran stated that the parties would seek other funding alternatives, such as a sponsorship for the fireworks.

Advertising Plan

Member Drury provided the Authority with a proposed Co-op Advertising Plan as well as a Cooperative Marketing Survey, developed by the marketing sub-committee. (**Attachments #1 & 2**)

Member Tester stated that local co-op opportunities provided more impact for most retail establishments and that larger out of the area marketing probably needed more of a message advertisement. Vice-Chair Tarbutton concurred but also suggested that attractions, events and things to do in the co-op ads provide that message.

Member Drury stated that the TDA would provide the overall banner for the co-op ads, which would help reduce the costs for the local merchant/hotel/restaurant to advertise.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton agreed and stated that with the TDA supplementing a co-op campaign financially with an image piece, local merchants could participate with specific ads creating an economy of scale.

Member Tester encouraged the Committee to make merchants aware of the co-op opportunities and, if possible, share the banner theme/layout with them.

Chairperson Keele suggested that the Committee continue to look at new marketing areas, such as Hilton Head and Charleston, S.C. Vice-Chair Tarbutton advised that the Committee was considering Charleston, S.C., and possibly Florida and Ohio.

Member Drury reminded the Authority that the Advertising Plan was a moving document and would be adjusted as ad opportunities and special events arise.

WC&T Agency - Dave Tomsky

Member Drury stated that the Committee had interviewed several public relations firms about representing the TDA, and the Committee recommended retaining the firm of Wilson, Coman & Taylor of Asheville, N.C. Member Drury introduced Dave Tomsky, Director of Public Relations with WC&T, and requested he give a brief overview of his background and the firm.

Mr. Tomsky reviewed his professional background with the Authority – 2 years with Asheville Chamber of Commerce, 9 years as Media Relations/PR Director with Grove Park Inn, former Lt. Colonel U.S. Marine Corp., Masters Degree in Print Journalism and Media Relations from University of Southern California. He advised that WC&T is a regional advertising/marketing firm that has experience in destination marketing.

Mr. Tomsky stated that his firm would produce a press kit and market the town to his travel writer contacts with the goal of “putting heads in beds”. He explained the difference between general advertisements and public relations – with ads being controlled and biased, and PR being independent and an implied endorsement. He advised that public relations would allow you to shape your message.

After a brief discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Vice-Chair Tarbutton to approve a Public Relations 12/mo. contract with WC&T for \$13,500. Motion unanimously approved. (**Attachment #3**)

TDA/Chamber Joint Marketing

Member Drury advised that both groups are working together and meetings would be forthcoming to discuss the visitor inquiry process, web site and the 800-toll-free number.

Web Site – Nancy Santay

Member Drury stated that the TDA focus this year was on increasing the hits to the web site and search engine priority rank. She then introduced Nancy Santay (Cabin Fever), a member of website sub-committee, to discuss recommendations for the TDA web site. Ms. Santay discussed the following recommendations:

- Refine unique key words to improve hits
- Refine text on the page with key words
- Recommend utilizing optimization search engine assistance (Submitnet 60-day trial period free)
- Recommend utilizing an email marketing newsletter (Constant Contact)
- Link to more sites
- Encourage more activity to improve rankings
- Recommend merge of web sites to www.blowingrock.com (TDA, Chamber and Merchants Association)

Member Drury advised that all the recommendations were within the \$7,000 appropriated in the FY 2005-06 budget for web site enhancements. The Authority thanked Ms. Santay for her efforts so far on this project.

Video - Tom Santay/Jim Smith

Member Drury introduced Jim Smith (Village Inns of Blowing Rock), a member of sub-marketing committee, to discuss a video opportunity for the Authority.

Mr. Smith stated that the Village Inns (Village Inn, Hillwinds Inn, and Ridgeway Inn) had a video produced by Tom Santay on Blowing Rock and the area. He advised that the Village Inns have agreed to share the video with the TDA to utilize in marketing Blowing Rock. He stated the video could be modified and placed on the TDA web site, placed in the Visitor Center, mailed out to potential guests and viewed as a virtual tour of Blowing Rock.

The Authority then viewed the video. **(CD Video Attachment #4)** Tom Santay, a local resident and film student at N.C. School for the Arts, produced the short documentary film.

Authority members praised the video and the potential of the video in the TDA marketing efforts. All members thanked the Village Inns for their generosity in sharing the video with the TDA.

Chairperson Keele requested that the Member Drury and Vice-Chair Tarbutton explore the potential use of the video and report back to the Authority in the near future.

Master Signage Plan

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reviewed with the Authority the proposed Phase II signage plan. **(Attachment #5)** Phase II proposes new directional and downtown welcome signage for the Town of Blowing Rock. The proposed locations are on Valley Boulevard at Business U.S. 321 and on entrances into downtown. He advised that Town staff was working on NCDOT approval for the signage placement. He also stated that Southwood Corp. was reviewing designs to make the leaf emblem interchangeable with other emblems so that it could be changed out over time.

Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded Member Pickett to endorse Phase II of the signage plan and to request the Town Council approve the plan. Motion unanimously approved.

Mr. Hildebran advised that he would forward the Phase II plan to the Town Council for final review and approval.

Discussion of Watauga County Occupancy Tax

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reviewed with the Authority the feasibility of out-of-town hoteliers that are located in close proximity to the town to be included in Blowing Rock tourism efforts. He stated that the N.C. General Assembly had approved legislation that allows Watauga County to implement up to a 6% occupancy tax on overnight room accommodations located outside the incorporated areas of the county.

At the time this issue was initially brought up, the Town expressed an interest to the County that the lodging establishments located just outside of the corporate limits of Blowing Rock would probably prefer inclusion in the Blowing Rock TDA efforts. County Manager Rocky Nelson has informed the Town that the County would likely take up the occupancy tax before the end of the year and suggested that the Town and TDA take formal action to request adjacent hoteliers inclusion in the Blowing Rock TDA efforts.

TDA Vice-Chairperson Kent Tarbutton stated he has had preliminary discussions with the four-(4) close-by lodging establishments to seek their interest in becoming affiliated with the Blowing Rock TDA. Alpine Acres Motel, Blowing Rock Lodge, Roaring River Chalets and the Inn at Crestwood have all expressed interest in this effort.

Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded Member Pickett to approve to the request, and recommend that the Town Council pursue this matter with the Watauga County Board of Commissioners and request Watauga County to explore the feasibility of out-of-town Blowing Rock area hoteliers be included in Blowing Rock tourism efforts. Motion unanimously approved.

Report – Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce

Chairperson Keele welcomed Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Charles Hardin to provide an update on Chamber of Commerce activities.

Mr. Hardin stated that the Chamber was developing a customer service educational program with the High Country Host and Appalachian State University for next spring. He discussed the ongoing struggles of the Delta Connection airline service from Hickory and their low passenger numbers, as well as, the continued concern for a possible move by Tweetsie Railroad.

Mr. Hardin reminded the Authority of upcoming Chamber events – a Gallery Stroll (9/20), Art in the Park (9/10), Cruise-in/Jam-in (10/7), and a Concert in the Park (9/11 and 9/24). He also distributed a brief report on the demographics/economic impact of the August 19, 2004 Cruise-in/Jam-in Event. (**Attachment #6**)

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Hardin for his attendance.

Report - TDA Executive Director

Chairman Keele stated the next item on the agenda was a report from the TDA Executive Director. Interim Executive Director Galvin provided a TDA Executive Director Monthly Report for Board review (**Attachment #7**). Ms. Galvin discussed the daily and monthly Visitor Center traffic report with the Authority. She mentioned that the Visitor Center has two new part-time employees.

She announced that the Visitor Center had implemented a registry for visitors to sign and that staff would follow-up with a thank you post card.

Other

Member Drury informed the Authority that the TDA placed advertisement in the *Charlotte Observer Art Activity* guide this past weekend.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that the Authority had received an invoice for \$1,401 from the Blowing Rock Merchant's Association for collateral maps ordered by the former TDA director in the spring. Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Pickett to make payment to the Merchant's Association for the maps. Motion unanimously approved

Vice-Chair Tarbutton advised the Authority that he would be out of town for the October meeting.

Jim Smith expressed concern about a television interview with a Town Council member over the Labor Day weekend that discouraged travel to Blowing Rock. The Authority reiterated that TDA should be the primary media representative for tourism in Blowing Rock.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Drury to adjourn the meeting. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele adjourned the meeting at 10:15 a.m.

Bernard Keele, Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachments

#1 - TDA Possible Co-op Plan

#2 - TDA Cooperative Marketing Survey

#3 - Wilson, Coman & Taylor Contract

#4 - Village Inns Video

#5 - Master Sign Plan Phase II

#6 - Cruise-in/Jam-in Report - August 19, 2005 Event

#7 - TDA Executive Director Monthly Report