

**Tourism Development Authority**

**Minutes – October 4, 2005**

**The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, October 4, 2005 at 2:00 p.m. in a regular meeting. Present were Chairperson Bernard Keele, 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.**

Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton was absent.

**Call to Order**

Chairperson Keele called the meeting to order and welcomed the members and guests. He advised that Vice-Chair Tarbutton was out of the country.

**Approval of Minutes – September 6, 2005**

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the September 6, 2005 meeting minutes. Motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Tester to approve the September 6, 2005 meeting minutes. Unanimously approved.

Chairperson Keele stated that Jeff Clark, Executive Director of the Hayes Performing Arts Center, would like to make a few comments to the Authority. Mr. Clark requested time on a future TDA Agenda to update the Authority on the Hayes Performing Arts Center activities. It was consensus of the Authority to place the item on the November TDA Agenda.

**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 August 2005. She stated that August revenues, totaling a gross of \$91,263.12, were up compared to August 2004.

Ms. Pierce also advised that expenditures for the year were in line with projections.

Member Tester asked for a clarification of the occupancy tax revenues. Ms. Pierce reminded the Authority that revenues shown for the month of August were for occupancy in August.

## **Report - Visitor Center**

Chairperson Keele requested that Interim TDA Director Lindsay Galvin update the Authority on the status of various projects at the Visitor Center. Ms. Galvin reported the following:

### *Center Layout*

All brochure racks were relocated to the front room of the building in mid-September and coincided with the Blowing Rock Art and History Museum rotation of the art display. A sitting area was located adjacent to the fireplace. The center room now houses a computer and telephone area for visitors.

### *TV/Monitor*

Quotations were received 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 were in the range of \$1,200 to \$1,500. This item is on hold until additional research is acquired on a wireless product.

### *Computer System*

David Sechrist, of Sechrist Consulting, examined the Visitor Center computer system and network and 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. Staff is moving ahead with this tem.

### *Telephone System*

Appalachian Technologies has completed reprogramming of the Visitor Center telephone system to improve customer service.

### *Security System*

Creekside Electronics has scheduled installation of the security system for the Visitor Center for October 12.

Chairperson Keele stated the layout change looks great and seems to have improved the efficiency of the center.

### **Report - Advertising/Marketing/Web site**

Member Drury updated the Authority on the status of various projects of the Advertising/Marketing/Web Site Committee.

#### *Advertising Plan*

Member Drury reviewed with the Authority the Co-op Marketing Survey results and the TDA Advertising Schedule. She stated that of the 130 co-op surveys mailed – 17 responded with an interest for co-ops ads. Of those responses, 14 of those 17 have placed ads (**Attachment #1**).

She then reviewed the FY 2005-06 Ad Schedule (**Attachment #2**).

Member Tester asked about the breakdown of participation in the co-op ad opportunities, i.e. hotels, restaurants and retail. Member Drury responded that there was a good mix of all three groups.

Member Tester suggested that “North Carolina” be included on any out-of-state ad placement.

Member Drury also advised that there was not much interest in co-op ads in December, January and February.

#### *TDA/Chamber Joint Marketing Website, Map & Directory*

Member Drury presented a proposed agreement between the TDA and Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce regarding improvement to the visitor inquiry process, development of a joint website and single map (**Attachment # 3**).

Jim Smith also suggested the groups consider a one page tear-off map for utilization in hotels, restaurants and retail shops.

After a brief discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Member Pickett to approve the proposed TDA/Chamber Internet & Co-Op Agreement. Unanimously approved.

Chairperson Keele thanked everyone for the work in getting this agreement completed.

#### *WC&T Agency Update*

Member Drury stated Dave Tomsky, Director of Public Relations with Wilson, Coman & Taylor, was finalizing the Blowing Rock Press Kit to be mailed to over 100 travel writers. He is scheduled to attend the November TDA Meeting to update the Authority.

Member Drury advised that she would review the press kit packet and cover letter prior to mailing.

#### *Video & Web Site*

Member Drury and Interim Director Galvin informed the Authority that Tom Santay had begun taping and editing the tourism videos offered by the Village Inns and Chetola Resort for use by the TDA.

Member Tester asked about a time line of merging the TDA/Chamber web pages. Member Drury responded that Nancy Santay, Lindsay Galvin and Heidi Lusk are working on the project and would update the Authority at the next meeting. Interim Director Galvin stated that web hosting in-house was also a possibility.

Member Drury also suggested that they could provide a demonstration of the website at a future meeting

#### *TDA Advertising Role*

Member Drury stated questions had been raised regarding the TDA's advertising strategy and the difference between Co-Op Advertising and TDA-only advertising. She referred to the earlier discussed FY 2005-06 Advertising Plan and the role of both avenues (**Attachment #4**).

Member Drury stated that in Co-Op Advertising the TDA subsidizes a campaign financially by providing an overall image theme banner and allows local merchants to purchase specific ads at greatly reduced costs. This

concept permits the local merchant/hotel/restaurant to purchase ads in out of the area markets by creating an economy of scale.

Member Drury stated that TDA-only ads are more focused on the Blowing Rock image/message and designed to promote tourism visits to the town through attractions, events and things to do and not for promotion of any specific business.

Member Pickett agreed that the TDA should not fund advertisements for a particular business. Jim Smith concurred that the TDA should provide co-op opportunities but should not advertise individual properties.

Member Tester responded that the TDA sets the stage and individual businesses and the Chamber of Commerce play on that stage. He stated that advertising individual properties was not in sync with TDA goals/policies.

Chairperson Keele stated that communication of the TDA advertising strategy was an ongoing educational process. He announced that this month was time for the TDA annual update to the community and that the advertising strategy could be a topic for discussion.

#### *Universal Gold Pass Card*

Chairperson Keele recognized Michael Keibelbeck to discuss the Universal Gold Pass Card program with the Authority.

Michael Keibelbeck stated that he had recently established a new in-town business, Universal Gold Pass. He advised that the business basically packages tourism in the area, utilizing an electronic smart card (a coupon book via an electronic card). (**Attachment #5**)

He informed the Authority that 64 vendors had signed up already and 40 more vendors were in process. The card would provide tracking information and include a database, which would provide valuable local marketing data. He stated he looked forward to the opportunity to work together with the TDA.

Member Tester questioned where and how he planned to market the card. Mr. Keibelbeck responded through tab advertising in hotels, vendor web sites and key word searching utilization. He also mentioned that the concept was franchiseable across the country. Once a customer submits the application and payment of a projected \$35 membership fee, a program benefits brochure with an introductory letter and electronic card would be mailed to the party. Participating locations would place a window sticker in the window of their establishment.

Member Tester asked if he planned to sell the tracking data that was collected. Mr. Keibelbeck responded that a general report would be available to the merchants that participated in the program and that data would not be for resale. He further stated that a monthly or quarterly database newsletter could be produced for those in the program.

He mentioned that he would like to display information about the program in the Visitor Center and that the TDA could possibly purchase the tracking data reports.

Chairperson Keele asked if this program is similar to a program utilized in the Outer Banks. Mr. Keibelbeck replied that Myrtle Beach has a discount program, though they do not use an electronic smart card.

Mr. Keele questioned the privacy of individual information in using the program. Mr. Keibelbeck stated that the reports would be aggregated by zip codes, and would not include personal data.

Member Tester stated that this was an interesting concept, but sponsorship or endorsement by the TDA was not a good idea.

Mr. Keibelbeck stated at this point he was only exploring the opportunity for a relationship with the TDA and suggested the possibility of sharing website links. He further suggested that the Universal Pass program could provide marketing data results similar to Smith Travel but be more localized to the area.

Members Drury and Pickett requested that Mr. Keibelbeck stay in touch with the TDA as this business venture progresses.

Chairperson Keele expressed some concern about “discounting” of the area and what impact that might have on who we attract. He mentioned that Hilton Head, SC had issues with a somewhat similar program several years ago.

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Keibelbeck for his presentation and requested that he keep the Authority informed on program developments.

## Master Signage Plan

Ex-officio Member Hildebran stated that the Blowing Rock Town Council approved the Phase II signage plan (new directional and downtown welcome signage) for the Town of Blowing Rock at their September meeting. Town Staff has ordered the signs, and it is expected that the signs should be erected within the next several months.

Mr. Hildebran also advised that the existing street corner signs are scheduled to be replaced in future phases of the Master Signage Plan with kiosks. He further stated that individual merchants could replace their existing signs during this interim period at their cost. He requested that any one interested in replacing their sign to contact Sonya Long at Town Hall.

## Discussion of Watauga County Occupancy Tax

Ex-officio Member Hildebran stated that the Blowing Rock Town Council agreed to request the Watauga County Board of Commissioners to explore the feasibility of out-of-town Blowing Rock area hoteliers be included in Blowing Rock tourism at their September meeting.

Discussions have been held 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.

Mr. Hildebran stated that it is anticipated that the County would likely take up the occupancy tax and our request before the end of the year.

## 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 continuing work on the 2006 Blue Ridge Wine Festival. He then distributed 2006 Wine Festival, 2006 Art in the Park and 2006 Winterfest rack cards to the Authority for their review. **(Attachment #6)**

He reminded the Authority of upcoming Chamber events – Cruise-in/Jam-in (10/7), Concert in the Park (10/15), and Gallery Stroll (10/18).

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 and increased telephone and website activity. She mentioned that her report included tracking information on brochure usage.

She also informed the Authority of a future tourism exhibition opportunity via *Our State* magazine to be held in June 2006.

Chairperson Keele thanked her for the report.

### **Other**

Melissa Pickett discussed placing menu notebooks in all Blowing Rock hotel rooms. She requested that the TDA consider funding the purchase of notebooks and sheet protectors for the project with anticipation of completing the project by Spring of next season.

Member Tester stated that Sharon Lyles, a tenant in Watership Downs, had approached him about a similar project.

Blowing Rock Chamber President Pam Vines suggested that the new 2006 Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce Directory might also be placed in hotel rooms.

The Authority recommended that Ms. Pickett obtain further information on the concept and return at a future meeting.

### **Closed Session**

Upon motion of Member Pickett and second by Member Drury, the Authority convened at 3:40 p.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 5:10 p.m.

### **Recessed Meeting**

With no further business, motion by Member Pickett and seconded by Member Drury to recess the meeting until Friday, October 21, 2005 at 8:00 a.m. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele recessed the meeting at 5:10 p.m.

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Bernard Keele, Chairperson

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Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

### **Attachments**

**#1 - TDA Co-op Marketing Survey**

**#2 - TDA Advertising Schedule**

**#3 – TDA/Chamber Agreement**

**#4 - TDA Co-Op Ads**

**#5 - Universal Gold Pass Information**

**#6 - Rack Cards (Winterfest, Wine Festival, Art in the Park)**

**#7 - TDA Executive Director Monthly Report**