

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – February 27, 2006 Planning Retreat

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Monday, February 27, 2006 at 8:30 a.m. in a special meeting at Chetola Resort. Present were Chairperson Bernie Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Phil Pickett, Lynn Drury, and Keith Tester and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. Incoming TDA Executive Director Shawn Miller and Interim Executive Director Lindsay Galvin were also present.

Call to Order

Chairperson Keele called the meeting to order and welcomed the members to their inaugural TDA Planning Retreat.

Due to the planned absence of several TDA members and the formal arrival of the new TDA Executive Director in late March, the Authority decided to cancel their March 7, 2006 regular meeting and meet again on April 4, 2006 at 8:00 a.m.

TDA - REVIEW

The Authority reviewed the following items:

TDA Charter

The Authority reviewed the TDA Enabling Ordinance and TDA By-laws and discussed their prescribed duties and responsibilities. They discussed the importance of periodically reviewing the scope of the Charter to insure compliance with their actions.

In accordance with the TDA Charter, it was the consensus that the annual tourism planning/goal setting meeting with the Town Council be scheduled on April 11, 2006 at 6:00 p.m., just prior to the Town Council regular meeting.

TDA Strategic Plan

The Authority reviewed their 2004 Strategic Plan and their accomplishments to date and agreed to focus on following areas of emphasis:

Understanding of the Tourism Market – review Crown Communications’ comments; review ASU marketing study data, Chamber of Commerce Art in the Park Study, Tanger Outlet information and other N.C. TDA tourism studies.

Demonstrate Measurable Growth/Tracking – review Visitor Center tracking information; utilize specific 800 #'s and internet domains during promotions; require readership request response information if available, as well as utilize Smith Travel Research data.

The Authority stressed the importance of participation of every lodging establishment in the Smith Travel Research project and agreed to continue to educate the community. The Board requested that the STAR report be included in their monthly packet. Comparable markets mentioned for study were: Brevard, Hendersonville, Waynesville, Highlands/Franklin, and Black Mountain.

Infrastructure Support – The Board discussed the importance of infrastructure support, including joint efforts with all entities providing tourism-related assistance, i.e. downtown parking, signage, beautification, etc.

Tourism Promotion to Fill the Off-season Gaps – The Board discussed new events and venues such as the Blue Ridge Wine Festival, Mitford Days and the Hayes Performing Arts Center as examples of ways to fill tourism gaps.

Town Comprehensive Plan Compliance – The Board discussed the importance of staying within the boundaries of the Town Comprehensive Plan.

Strategies – The Board discussed several strategies, including development of quality events, mid-week activities and implementation of satisfaction surveys of the visitor experience. It was the consensus that a positive visitor experience is the key to the future of Blowing Rock tourism

Data Collection – The Board discussed the need for retail sales data for municipalities under 5,000 in population in order to track success and compare with other tourism markets. It was agreed to contact the State of N.C. Travel and Tourism Department to assist in obtaining this information. The Authority also discussed working with other tourist destinations similar to Blowing Rock that have year-round populations below the 5,000 population threshold.

Occupancy Tax Collections/Financial Status - Budget

Finance Officer Margaret Pierce reviewed occupancy tax collections for the previous years since an increase in the tax rate to 6%. Calendar Year 2005 showed an increase of 7.63% over Calendar Year 2004. Ms. Pierce also advised that expenditures for the year were in line with projections.

Due to the economic volatility of tourism, the Authority agreed to work toward a 50% budget fund balance.

Executive Director & Board Roles/Responsibilities

The Authority reviewed the roles/responsibilities of the TDA as well as the Executive Director. The Board viewed the Authority as the Board of Directors, focused on policy and vision and the Executive Director as the Chief Executive Officer, focused on day to day operations.

The Board requested that the new Executive Director Miller review the E.D. job description and report back to the Authority with any suggested changes. The Authority, in concert with the new director, agreed to establish a work plan and a formal performance measure system for the director position. Executive Director Miller also agreed to develop a job description for the Assistant Director for Board consideration.

TDA - FUTURE

TDA/Chamber of Commerce Relations

With the hiring of a new Executive Director, the Authority requested new Executive Director Miller review existing operations and make recommendations on staffing, including the use of volunteers in the Center.

The Authority discussed the need to continue to improve the working relationship with the Chamber of Commerce, especially in event planning. The members of the Authority agreed to become more involved in Chamber activities and committees.

Grant Procedures Improvement (Event & Marketing Partnerships)

The Authority reviewed the current event and marketing partnership grant procedures. It was the consensus of the Authority to revamp the partnership process due to the fact that the current process does not meet the needs of the Authority or the requesting party. Suggested improvements included – a greater involvement by the TDA on the front-end in partnering requests, quarterly worksessions to review and discuss events/marketing opportunities and specify defined roles, and an event planning budget process which would reserve partnering funds for use throughout the year.

After much discussion, the Authority requested new Executive Director Miller to tour similar N.C. tourism agencies and review their event/marketing process and come back to the Board with recommendations. A tentative worksession was scheduled for May to meet with prospective partners.

Marketing Plan – What Now?

Member Drury reviewed two FY 2006-07 TDA Advertising proposals and a publication list with the Authority (**Attachment #1**). She advised that the co-op opportunities offered during FY 2005-06 had limited success. In FY 2006-07, co-op opportunities would be limited to AAA – *Go Magazine* and *Our State Magazine*, and would be offered in concert with High Country Host.

Tentative advertisement markets include – Charlotte and Raleigh newspapers, AAA - *Go Magazine* in NC & SC, AAA - *Going Places* in Florida, *AARP Magazine* in Florida, *Southern Living* Travel Guide, and web-based advertising via Visit NC and Google. Targeted markets may possibly include one of following - Hilton Head, Charleston and Columbia, SC and Orlando, Florida. All advertisements would include event-oriented information.

The Authority agreed to pursue the more aggressive ad plan option and stressed the need to continue to utilize public relation services. Member Drury stated articles on Blowing Rock would be or have appeared in *Charlotte Taste Magazine* and *Women's Day Magazine*. She also mentioned that a reporter based in the Tampa, Florida area would be in the area in the near future. All of these articles are a result of the TDA public relations consultant.

The Board complimented that work of Dave Tomskey, Director of Public Relations with Wilson, Coman & Taylor and agreed to consider additional funding in the FY 2006-07 budget.

Improvement of Website

Interim Executive Director Galvin advised that the integration of the TDA and Chamber websites was continuing and that a launch date was less than two weeks. Other issues to be followed-up on include - an interactive map, web post card capability, professional photography, and inclusion of the TDA video.

Special Events Involvement

The Authority discussed their role in development/promotion of special events and the need to become more involved in order to insure quality activities for visitors. The Board requested that new Executive Director Miller develop relationships with all events in order to gauge the participation needed by the TDA.

The Authority agreed to continue to monitor this issue and their future role.

Lodging Stock Maintenance/Improvement

The Authority discussed the importance of maintaining quality accommodations for visitors to Blowing Rock. The Board agreed to continue to explore its' role in this area.

Short-term Rentals

The Authority briefly discussed the issue of short-term rentals and the impact of limited in-town areas for home rentals. Due to the Town Comprehensive Plan policy statement to preserve neighborhoods by prohibiting short-term rental expansion in single-family zoning districts, the Authority decided to not pursue the issue.

Video

Interim Director Galvin stated that she had a final draft of the new TDA tourism video (offered by the Village Inns and Chetola Resort) for the Board to review. She informed the Authority that the video had an overall segment and was also broken into sections (lodging/restaurants/retail), including a listing of all Blowing Rock lodging/restaurants/retail at the end of each respective section.

The Authority suggested that Appalachian Ski Mountain be added to the video.

Reception

The Board tentatively discussed a reception to welcome new Executive Director Shawn Miller and recognize the efforts of Interim Executive Director Lindsay Galvin for Tuesday, April 4, 2006 from 4-6 p.m. at the Visitor Center.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Drury to adjourn the meeting at 3:10 p.m. Motion unanimously approved.

Bernard Keele, Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachment

#1 - TDA Advertising Proposals & Publication List