

**Tourism Development Authority**

**Minutes – May 2, 2006**

**The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Tuesday, May 2, 2006 at 8:00 a.m. in a regular meeting held in the Blowing Rock Community Club Room. Present were Chairperson Bernie Keele, Vice-Chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Lynn Drury, Phil Pickett, Keith Tester and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. TDA Executive Director Shawn Miller was also present.**

**Call to Order**

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

**Approval of Minutes – April 4 & 11, 2006**

Chairperson Keele entertained the approval of the April 4 & 11, 2006 meeting minutes. Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Drury to approve the April 4 & 11, 2006. Unanimously approved.

**TDA/Council Joint Planning Meeting**

Chairperson Keele advised the Authority that the annual joint TDA/Town Council Tourism Planning Session went very well and the April 11th meeting minutes summarize the session. Vice-Chair Tarbutton and Member Tester concurred.

**U.S 321 Update**

Ex-officio Member Hildebran updated the Authority on the progress of the U.S. 321 widening construction between Kirby Mountain Road and Blackberry Road. He stated that the project was only 3% behind schedule and nearly a quarter of the 3 ½-year project is complete. He further advised that the contractor has expressed optimism that the 6.57 mile widening project will be complete by August 2008.

## **Financial Report**

Chairperson Keele introduced Finance Officer Margaret Pierce to review the FY 2005-06 budget to date.

Finance Officer Margaret Pierce then reviewed the monthly financial statement and the FY 2005-06 Occupancy Tax collections year-to-date through March 2006. She stated that March revenues, totaling a gross of \$29,911.54, were up compared to March 2005. Ms. Pierce also advised that expenditures for the year were in line with projections.

## **Report - Visitor Center**

Chairperson Keele requested Executive Director Miller to update the Authority on Visitor Center activities.

Executive Director Miller reviewed her Monthly TDA Report, including visitor inquiries and brochure requests. **(Attachment #1)** Member Tester asked if the Visitor Center saw an increase in traffic during the wine festival. Ms. Miller stated that she did not have the data in her possession, but agreed to follow-up with the Board with that information.

### *Smith Travel Research*

Executive Director Miller then discussed the merits of TDA participation with Smith Travel Research. She stated that the annual cost of membership is \$1,900.

Member Tester expressed support for continued participation as the data could provide information on what events create overnight stays.

Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that currently 80% of available rooms are covered by the major hoteliers; however, the TDA needs more participation by smaller lodging establishments. He also stated that it is important to compare the average daily rates with occupancy of rooms. He also advised that the market comparative data was not useful due to the lack participation of similar sized tourism destinations.

It was the consensus to continue to discuss the issue with hoteliers at their next partnership meeting and evaluate the issue later in the year.

### *Staffing*

Executive Director Miller updated the Authority on staffing issues. She stated that ASU intern Jonathan Fagg was graduating and would leave TDA employment. She advised that she had conducted interviews to fill the two part-time positions and would be making hires in the near future.

She stated that the Visitor Center was not equipped very well to utilize volunteer staffing support at this time and she would offer a building layout suggestion later in her report.

She discussed development of a training manual for the utilization of volunteers. The manual will include information about the TDA, Chamber of Commerce, customer service guidelines, etc.

Member Pickett encouraged Ms. Miller to visit the Hendersonville Visitor Center for additional insight on the use of volunteers.

### *Art Program*

Executive Director Miller reviewed the Visitor Center Art Program and the problems that the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum (art coordinator) has encountered with acquiring art from local artists. It was the consensus of the Authority to discontinue the rotating art program after the current display and utilize the art work of Hugh Morton and Bob Timberlake.

### *Center Layout – Lease Amendments*

Based on current space needs of TDA staff, Executive Director Miller requested that the Authority amend the TDA-Chamber of Commerce lease agreement to create an additional TDA office (in the area leased to the Chamber of Commerce across from the Visitor Center Desk) and in return reduce the Chamber of Commerce lease by \$500/month.

Chamber of Commerce President Pam Vines stated that the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors would consider the arrangement at their upcoming meeting, but that a reduction in rent was applicable due to the loss of space.

After a brief discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Member Pickett to amend the TDA-Chamber of Commerce lease agreement with a transfer of Chamber leased space to the TDA with a corresponding \$500 reduction in Chamber monthly rental payment (subject to Chamber Board approval). At the request of Chamber President Vines, the motion was amended to modify the lease to state the late date on rental payment will be the 8<sup>th</sup> of the month. Unanimously approved.

Ms. Miller advised that building modifications would be funded from current year building maintenance appropriations.

Executive Director Miller also requested that the Authority amend the TDA-Blowing Rock Art & History Museum lease agreement to rent additional space (a hallway closet across from the BRAHM Office) to BRAHM and increase their lease by \$100/month.

After a brief discussion, motion by Member Drury and seconded by Member Pickett to amend the TDA-Blowing Rock Art & History Museum lease agreement to rent additional space (a hallway closet across from the BRAHM Office) to BRAHM and increase their lease by \$100/month. Unanimously approved.

#### *Visitor Guide*

Executive Director Miller discussed the need for a more comprehensive and informative Visitor Guide for visitor inquiries. She advised that she is in the process of obtaining costs for such collateral and have the information at the budget worksession for Board review.

#### *Mitford Map*

Executive Director Miller reviewed a request from the Meadowbrook Inn for production of a Mitford landmarks map for use during their planned September 2007 Mitford Experience.

The Authority expressed some concerns about permission to use copyrighted material and identifying private property. Also, the Authority requested more information from the Chamber of Commerce regarding their plans for Mitford Days.

Chamber Executive Director Charles Hardin responded that Mitford Days is scheduled for September 12-16, 2007 and that a meeting with the Mitford book series author Jan Karon would be taking place on May 16<sup>th</sup>. Chamber President Vines advised that the Blowing Rock Stage Company was involved in the planning process and that others would be involved once final authorization is granted from Ms. Karon.

Member Tester and Vice-Chair Tarbutton expressed the need for the TDA to be involved early on in the planning process.

The Authority agreed to not take action on the Meadowbrook request until additional information is made available and the Chamber finalizes plans with Ms. Karon.

### *Website*

Executive Director Miller stated that the integration of the TDA and Chamber websites was continuing and that a launch date would be by the end of the month. She added that the new site will be more functional than the current site and that final data was being collected at this time. The Authority concurred with Ms. Miller that the site was the TDA #1 priority and hoped that the site would be operational prior to Memorial Day.

### *Advertising Plan/Marketing*

Executive Director Miller briefly reviewed upcoming co-op advertisements that would be taking place and pending travel writer visits.

She discussed the need for a media kit for use for travel writers, media inquiries, press packets, etc. Ms. Miller advised she would provide additional information of this item at the budget worksession.

### *WC&T Agency Update*

Chairperson Keele then introduced Dave Tomsy, Director of Public Relations with Wilson, Coman & Taylor, for an update on ad agency activities. Mr. Tomsy advised that he and his family attended the inaugural Blue Ridge Wine Festival and thought that things went well for a first year. He stated that he would share his initial reactions and recommendations on the event with Ms. Miller and Mr. Hardin.

He expressed excitement on the possibilities of Mitford Days and the impact such an event could have on the community. He then advised that he distributed a press release on Art in the Park & the Gallery Stroll. **(Attachment #2)**

Mr. Tomsy then updated the Authority on recent/pending travel writer visits – Melissa Graham (*Biltmore Beacon* in Asheville on the Wine Festival), Eden Foster (*Asheville Citizen-Times & Our State Magazine* on children activities in the region), Mary Anne Gauthier (*Charlotte Taste Magazine* on the Community Arts Center), Anne Greene (*Relaxation Magazine* as a destination for physician meetings), Dominick Lombardi (Arts Writer from New York) and Jonathan Lerner (*Atlanta Peach Magazine* on upscale mountain destinations).

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Tomsy for his efforts as well as Marketing Committee for their work in these issues.

## *Other*

Executive Director Miller suggested that the visitor computer be discarded due to lack of use as well as its condition. The Board concurred with the request.

Walt Reese, with All Access Event Management of Blowing Rock, asked about the best way he could become involved in event planning and possibly requesting TDA funding assistance with events. The Board suggested that he first contact Executive Director Miller and then, if necessary, following up with the Marketing Committee.

## **FY 2006-07 TDA Budget**

Ex-Officio Members Hildebran and Pierce, and Executive Director Miller distributed a copy of the proposed FY 2006-07 TDA Budget for Authority review. (**Attachment #3**). The proposed budget totals \$630,670. Chairperson Keele stated that a budget worksession would be held on May 15<sup>th</sup> at 3:00 p.m. to review the draft document. A public hearing on the proposed budget is scheduled for the June 6, 2006 TDA meeting.

After a brief discussion on town calendar funding, Chairperson requested that the Authority make a commitment on the town portion of the FY 2006-07 budget to allow the Town budget planning to go forward. Motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Drury to approve the town portion (\$265,150, of which \$16,150 administrative/collection costs) of the TDA FY 2006-07 budget, with the understanding that the TDA coordinate the 2007 town calendar. 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 reviewed the inaugural Blue Ridge Wine Festival with the Authority. His comments were as follows:

- Overall the first year event was a success – brought visitors and increased overnight stays
- Have received information request calls from Winston-Salem and Biltmore Estate on the event
- Have been invited to discuss the event at the Western N.C. Wine Festival meeting at ASU
- Attendance – 2,000 estimated – 1,200 actual attendance, including comps
- 925 tickets sold for wine-tasting
- Sponsorship revenue totaled - \$4,075

- TDA funding - \$3,800
- Cooking Classes – 40 tickets sold
- VIP Tasting – 160 in attendance, with 13 tickets sold
- 30% of all tickets sold on website in advance
- Visitors from 18 states, though primarily from Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Eastern Tennessee (Knoxville)
- Financial – Projected budget included \$63,000 in revenue and \$46,450 in expenses
- Actual budget included \$30,000 in revenue and \$54,100 in expenses
- Over budget on tent rental, flooring, show kitchens and food

Overall observations:

- Downtown events did not work
- Weather and Forecast of bad weather did help attendance
- Restaurants and hotels received increased sales
- VIP reception cost too much
- Seminars – provided no revenue
- Cooking classes had low attendance due to time/date
- The event will grow
- Plan to move event back a little later in April
- Budgeted \$10,000 in profit and lost \$24,000

Member Tester asked – Did we bring people to Town?

Did we advertise in the right markets?

How do we make it better?

Responses - - Market event as limited time offer/Book earlier

- Later date in April may improve attendance
- Focus on N.C., S.C, and Tennessee markets
- Move billboard money to targeted marketing
- Possible target areas - wine clubs, culinary clubs, etc.
- Consider Pinehurst, Hendersonville and Asheville markets

Chairperson Keele thanked Mr. Hardin for his attendance.

### **Adjournment**

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

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Bernard Keele, Chairperson

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Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

### **Attachments**

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

**#2 – TDA Press Release on Art in the Park & the Gallery Stroll**

**#3 – Draft FY 2006-07 Annual Budget**