

Town of Blowing Rock

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – October 11, 2006

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Wednesday, October 11, 2006 at 8:00 a.m. in a continuation of meeting held on September 29, 2006 at Chetola Resort. Present were Chairperson Bernard Keele, Vice-chair Kent Tarbutton, Authority members Phil Pickett and Keith Tester, and Ex-officio members Scott Hildebran and Margaret Pierce. Authority member Lynn Drury was absent due to sickness.

Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee members present were President Pam Vines, Vice-President Bill Hall, 2nd Vice-President Tracy Brown, Treasurer Barbara Wright and Boardmember Nancy Santay.

Call to Order

Chairperson Keele called the meeting to order and welcomed the Authority members and Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee members.

He stated that the meeting was a follow-up to the earlier joint planning meeting with the Chamber of Commerce Executive Board to discuss a joint tourism-related effort.

Joint Meeting

President Vines stated that the Chamber of Commerce Executive Board had met since the last joint meeting and had some questions regarding a collaborative TDA-Chamber tourism program. She advised that Vice-President Hall would lead the discussion.

Mr. Hall remarked that the Chamber Executive Board as a whole believes that going forward in joint manner makes good business sense. However, the Board did have some concerns. He outlined the twelve (12) concerns (Attachment #1):

- 1) Can the TDA help the Chamber investigate the legality of this action? Will the TDA hold the Chamber of Commerce harmless in possible future resulting legal action?

The TDA suggested that the Chamber consult with the Town of Highlands and the City of Asheville, who have both dealt with this issue. Also, Chairperson Keele recommended that they contact Bill Basham – who had done extensive research in this area.

- 2) What are the boundaries of “Blowing Rock” in the TDA’s opinion? What possibilities exist for annexation for Gideon Ridge Inn? What is the possibility of including properties with the extra-territorial jurisdictions and or the zoning districts? Are there any negotiations with Watauga County and its newly established TDA to bring Yonahlossee Resort, Crestwood, Westglow Spa, Alpen Acres, Blowing Rock Lodge, and Roaring River Chalets into our TDA?

Ex-officio Member Hildebran stated that the Town of Blowing Rock had the Gideon Ridge area currently under consideration for annexation and that action would most likely be taken in the near future. Vice-Chair Tarbutton stated that some initial discussion had taken place with the county regarding including those lodging establishments in the Blowing Rock TDA by some means – informal or formal. Due to the recent establishment of the county TDA, the county TDA board has yet to follow-up on this request. After some discussion, both groups agreed to look at the Blowing Rock School District or the Blowing Rock Fire District as a logical “Blowing Rock” boundary. Also, both groups agreed to continue to work with the county TDA for an amicable solution for including those lodging establishments in the Blowing Rock TDA.

- 3) If the TDA is primarily responsible to the accommodations businesses within the above parameters since they are the collectors of the tax, is the “non accommodation” membership of the Chamber of Commerce at issue? This would include attractions such as Grandfather Mountain, Tweetsie Railroad, Linville Caverns, and Horn in the West; government agencies such as High Country Council of Governments, High Country Host, and the High Country Workforce Development Board, Better Business Bureau; services such as insurance and real estate, HVAC repairs, and electricians; restaurants such as Chick Fil-A and The Gamekeeper; activities such as golf or spa services; and other businesses such as Wilcox Emporium and Boone Ford?

The Chamber of Commerce stressed the value in maintaining these members in case a future partnership with the TDA were to end. The TDA responded that the issue is mainly an “accommodation issue” and that area attractions and services were not an issue. Both groups agreed that the Chamber should explore “associate or auxiliary” memberships and what that would entail.

- 12) Would the TDA be receptive to bringing in an outside consultant to mitigate this relationship and assist in the organizational setup? **(skipped to #12)**

Both groups unanimously agreed to bring in Beth Carden from Brevard to serve as consultant and assist in the merging efforts. Ms. Carden serves as both a Chamber Executive Director and TDA Executive Director.

- 4) When a call comes into the future visitor center requesting a rustic cabin in the woods, where will the travel counselor direct the call?

Both groups unanimously agreed that if no rustic cabin accommodation matching the request can be located in Blowing Rock or within the established "boundary", then calls should be referred to the in-town rental agencies for placement.

- 5) The Chamber of Commerce has another category of members which provides volunteers and retired mentors for many of our activities. Under the current proposal, what would happen to our Residential Members?

The TDA responded that they had no problem with residential members.

- 6) Once the Chamber has disposed of its "out of town" partners and the "in town" members become aware that the TDA is providing absolutely free most of the benefits to that were once provided by the Chamber for a dues investment, what will the TDA do to help the Chamber protect against the downside of in town membership decline? In other terms, will the average small retail or lodging business owner be interested in financially supporting an organization whose primary mission is to mitigate negative impacts?

The TDA suggested that there were many activities that the Chamber could offer its membership, including economic development, planning, government affairs, events and training/education to strengthen and encourage membership. The parties also discussed the possibility of Chamber focusing on regional co-op advertising and the TDA focusing more on the "big picture" advertising outside the region; giving priority to Chamber members in co-op advertising; and possibly the TDA paying membership dues to the Chamber for all in town lodging. Both parties agreed to consult with Beth Carden on this issue.

- 7) Will the TDA insure that the Chamber is held harmless financially when we begin to take stands with the town council? We do not want to go back to the time when the town gave us a portion of the occupancy tax money for running the visitor center and doing the advertising while keeping us under control since we could not bite the hand that fed us?

All agreed that this question was difficult to address. Member Tester encouraged that the Chamber become familiar with the Town's 10-year Comprehensive Plan that includes at least three tourism components. He suggested that they take an advocacy role in making sure that these items were carried out – and that their role should be more active in the planning process, which in most cases would minimize confrontations. Advocacy issues discussed included efforts to assist smaller lodging establishments from being displaced by well-financed developers and support for downtown parking. Vice-Chair Tarbutton encouraged the Chamber to increase residential membership, so if the Chamber members came to a consensus on an issue – they would truly be representing the views of Blowing Rock.

8) What can be done to free up the Executive Director to pursue strategic planning, product development and product maintenance activities?

The TDA responded that this was a Chamber of Commerce organizational issue and that the TDA would fund the Chamber for any services directly provided to the TDA.

9) What can we expect financially for running the visitor center?

The TDA responded that they could share the operational costs for the center with the Chamber over the past two years, but that it was incumbent upon the Chamber to develop a plan for the personnel structure of the visitor center. The TDA also stated that the base operational costs (rent, utilities, etc.) would still be covered directly by the TDA and the Chamber should focus on personnel and management costs.

10) What is proposed time frame for the disposal of our out of town accommodations members? We are under obligation with current membership through 2006 and with our directory through April 2007. Our dues invoices are to go out November 1 for the 2007 per our bylaws.

Both groups agreed to adhere to the proposed timeframe outlined at last meeting for January 1. Also, they agreed to request that Beth Carden come as soon as possible to aid in the process. Vice-Chair Tarbutton suggested that the Chamber could proceed with in town membership renewal as in the past, however, he requested that they hold the out of town renewal requests until such time as the specifics of the joint effort are worked out.

11) Will the TDA provide financial compensation to the Chamber of Commerce for the lost revenues from the out of town accommodations members? How would this be done?

The TDA responded yes and Beth Carden could assist in this effort.

Vice President Hall stated that both groups were in agreement for the most part on all the issues and that all that was needed now was just to nail down the specifics.

Chairperson Keele concurred and thanked Mr. Hall for his work. He urged the parties to get Ms. Carden here as soon as possible to begin to finalize all the issues and to follow-up with Mr. Basham.

The TDA requested that the Chamber develop an interim plan for the management of Visitor Center and come back as soon as possible for formal consideration. Also, the TDA requested that the Chamber develop a long-term proposal for the operation of the Visitor Center. Chairperson Keele stated that the TDA would have to enter into the endeavor under a contractual basis due to governmental audit requirements. Both groups also suggested that the contract include performance goals and measures to insure accountability for both parties – which Ms. Carden may provide assistance in formulating.

Both groups briefly discussed personnel and requested patience during the transition.

Follow-up Meeting

The Authority and Chamber Executive Board then agreed to a follow-up meeting late next week to continue discussions.

The Chamber of Commerce Executive Board departed the meeting.

Other

The Authority briefly discussed improving dialogue with the newspaper in order to inform the community of the TDA tourism efforts, and to convey the ongoing efforts of a partnership between the TDA/Chamber.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Member Tester and seconded by Member Pickett to continue the meeting until late next week at Chetola Resort (with a date and time to be determined) for further discussions with the Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee. Motion unanimously approved. Chairperson Keele recessed the meeting at 9:50 a.m.

Bernard Keele, Chairperson

Scott E. Hildebran, Secretary

Attachments

#1 – Chamber Questions