

Tourism Development Authority

Minutes – January 11, 2007 Planning Retreat

The Town of Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority met on Thursday, January 11, 2007 at 9:00 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. TDA Executive Director Tracy Brown was also present.

Call to Order

Chairperson Keele called the meeting to order and welcomed the members to the TDA Planning Retreat and reviewed the proposed meeting agenda.

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 2006 showed an increase of 6.44% over Calendar Year 2005, excluding the month of December 2006. Ms. Pierce also advised that expenditures for the year were in line with projections.

The Board briefly discussed the need for analysis of the revenue patterns. Issues that effect occupancy revenue include: the school year calendar, enforcement of the 28-day rental policy, total room count, weather, national trends – such as Average Daily Rate & Occupancy, etc.

The Board also compared their occupancy revenues to the Town of Boone and concluded that they were similar and suggested that retail sales tax collections be evaluated. 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 Representative Cullie Tarleton to sponsor legislation to provide sales tax collection data for municipalities under 5,000 in population.

Marketing Efforts

Advertising/Articles/Publications

Member Drury briefly reviewed the FY 2006-07 TDA Advertising plan and a publication list with the Authority (**Attachment #1**). She advised that Heidi Lusk was the primary architect of the ad campaign. All advertisements have been oriented toward event information.

She advised that the co-op opportunities have had limited success. The Authority discussed utilizing the High Country Host and the Chamber of Commerce for primary co-op advertising and the TDA focusing on more regional efforts. They also discussed the utilization of strategically placed billboards.

The Board agreed to divert marketing funds allocated to *Marquee Magazine* instead of *Metro Magazine*.

Tracking

The Board stressed the need to track the success of marketing efforts – i.e., utilize specific 800 #'s and internet domains during promotions, and usage of readership request response information if available.

Members also suggested utilizing visitnc.com as a way to track via internet hits.

WC&T

The Authority emphasized the need to continue to utilize public relation services. Member Drury commented on all the Blowing Rock articles in publications and that this was a result of the TDA public relations consultant. The Board complimented the work of Dave Tomsy, Director of Public Relations with Wilson, Coman & Taylor and agreed to continue use of their services.

Website

Executive Director Brown advised that the integration of the TDA and Chamber websites' had greatly improved the visitor website. He stated that he needed to acquire training to maintain the website. The Authority agreed to pursue an e-newsletter, follow-up with local merchants on web content and to continuously update and strengthen website-lodging packages.

The Authority also discussed the need of the Chamber of Commerce to coordinate downtown merchants – i.e., themes, programs, operating hours, etc. to enhance marketing potential.

Collateral (Visitor Guide, Map, Pamphlets, etc.)

The Authority agreed to finalize the production of the Visitor Guide and requested Director Brown to follow-up on the matter.

The Authority agreed to produce a Blowing Rock Visitor Map and requested Director Brown to return with a proposal for same in the near future (similar to the Manhattan map)

The Authority suggested that Director Brown investigate the need for more brochures during the interim period until the Visitor Guide is completed.

Market Research/Survey Data

Vice-Chair Tarbutton reviewed the final local market survey with the Authority. He reviewed various data collected during event and non-event periods. (**Attachment #2**)

Most survey respondents found Blowing Rock to be affordable and providing good to excellent quality. Most respondents had income levels above \$75,000 or greater. Market areas included – Charlotte; Greensboro; Raleigh; Hickory; Fayetteville; Atlanta, Ga.; Greenville, S.C.; Columbia, S.C. and Asheville.

The Authority agreed to continue to perform local market research to understand our visitors needs.

Art in the Park

The Board expressed some concern with the Art in the Park product due the survey data, which seems to show the event negatively impacts downtown merchants. The Authority also stressed the need for higher end quality art merchandise during the event.

General Communications

The Authority discussed the need to provide monthly information on TDA activities to the area newspapers – *Blowing Rocket*, *Watauga Democrat*, *Mountain Times*, and *High Country News* – to improve communications.

Visitor Center Operations

Staffing

Executive Director Brown recommended operating hours to include Sunday 12 – 5 p.m. from May to October and extending hours on Friday and Saturday to 6 or 6:30 p.m. He also stated that additional part-time staffing would be needed as seasons' change and possibly the addition of a new full-time administrative assistant.

Mr. Brown also discussed training for all front line staff.

Equipment

The Authority expressed support for acquisition of the necessary equipment to provide visitors with a professional tourism center, i.e. – copier, building background music (Muzak), logo floor mats, baby changing station, regional map display, more wall informational signage displays, etc. They advised Executive Director to proceed with those recommendations.

Mr. Brown also recommended more integration of the telephone system to provide seamless customer service and the addition of background music with a seasonal/selling message for on-hold customers.

Building

Mr. Brown reported that overall the building was in good condition. He stated he would follow-up on basic building maintenance and landscape needs with the town and privately contract for work as needed.

The Authority suggested that Mr. Brown continue to review the staffing, equipment and building needs and include recommendations in his upcoming business plan.

Infrastructure Support

Parking Funding

The Authority pledged to continue to support the funding of additional parking. They discussed support of the concept for two (2) smaller facilities and better distribution placement such as at the new Art & History Museum site and the American Legion site. Also, the Authority requested the town look at the feasibility of cooperative lease arrangements with downtown churches for parking.

Streets/Sidewalks

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported that McGill Associates is currently developing a downtown streetscape plan which would provide guidance on streets/sidewalks in the Town Center. They hope to present their initial concept of the plan at the upcoming Town Council Retreat.

Restrooms

Ex-officio Member Hildebran discussed the potential of using the town-owned old Ice House building for upgraded public restrooms. He advised that the building is currently rented to the Blowing Rock Stage Company and that both parties may be interested in using the building as a public restroom and visitor information display area. He stated he would follow-up on the issue.

Mr. Hildebran also updated the Authority on the Town grant application for funding for the Robbins Pool Improvements. He stated that the approximately \$1,000,000 project would include public restroom facilities adjacent to the Broyhill Memorial Park parking area. The restrooms would be available for use year-round. Also, a cover picnic area, splash play area and additional playground equipment would be included in the improvements. All of the elements would be available for use by our tourism visitors.

The Board welcomed the improvements and also mentioned the need for public restrooms toward the south end of Main Street as well.

General Visitor Amenities/Personnel-Related Costs

The Board touched on the fact that visitor events create additional costs to town infrastructure and town personnel-related costs, such as police, emergency medical, public works and general maintenance. They suggested that the various events consult with the town during the event development stage to insure equitable arrangements are made. The Board also reiterated their continued support of funding for town infrastructure.

Master Signage Plan

Ex-officio Member Hildebran reported on progress to install new regulatory signs throughout town and on the planned information kiosks. He advised that the Town had received approval from the N.C. Department of Transportation for the regulatory signs and construction was underway. The signs should be installed in the next 6 to 8 weeks. The kiosks are being designed for summer installation in Memorial Park, the parking on Maple Street and at the American Legion, and Tanger Outlet Shoppes.

Authority members requested the completion of the kiosks at the earliest convenience.

Event Activities

Development and Involvement

The Board discussed several strategies, including development of quality events, mid-week activities and continued 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. The Board also discussed the issue of funding event programming.

The Authority discussed their role in development/promotion of special events and the need for a coordinated effort of various groups in order to insure quality activities for visitors. The Board requested that Director Brown develop relationships with all event coordinators in order to gauge the participation needed by the TDA. Mr. Brown stated he would begin with individual meetings with event organizers. The Authority agreed to continue to monitor this issue and their future role.

Grant Allocations (Event & Marketing Partnerships)

The Authority reviewed the current marketing partnership with events via providing advertising/marketing/public relations support. The Authority agreed to continue to access their role in supporting events through partnerships.

After much discussion, the Authority requested new Executive Director Brown to investigate the matter and review other TDA event/marketing processes and come back to the Board with recommendations.

Event Funding Requests

Director Brown shared two funding requests from the Chamber of Commerce – Wine Festival and Mitford Days, \$10,000 and \$15,000 respectively. (**Attachments #3 & #4**) The Authority discussed the current funding allocated to marketing/PR and the TDA role of being a marketer of events.

The Authority requested that Director Brown obtain more detail on the requests. Also, the Authority reiterated their policy of not providing cash grants but providing advertising/marketing assistance.

Winterfest Radio Spot

Director Brown presented two (2) new 2007 Winterfest radio advertisement spots that will be aired in Raleigh and Charlotte markets. The spots were included in the FY 2006-07 TDA marketing budget.

Economic Development

Tourism Planning Assistance

The Authority discussed the importance of support to lodging, dining and retail businesses. The Board suggested that this was probably a Chamber of Commerce role but agreed to continue to explore the issue. Also, agencies such as SCORE, Appalachian State University, Caldwell Community College and the Watauga Economic Development Commission may play a vital role as well.

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.

Transportation

The Board discussed providing alternative transportation during Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day via a bus. Vice-Chair Tarbutton offered the Authority the use of the Chetola 27-seat bus for those occasions at no charge, as a way to gauge usage. The TDA would only have to provide a driver, fuel, and insurance.

The Authority was informed that the Chamber of Commerce had leased a trolley bus for nine (9) days this year for such events as Art in the Park, Mitford Days, and the Wine Festival. Costs for trolley rental are in the range of \$1,100 to \$1,200 a day.

Other

Government Rate

Vice-Chair Tarbutton suggested that the Authority work toward getting U.S. Congressional approval for an increase in the government overnight lodging rate. The Board agreed to seek this effort and make contact with their federal representatives for the necessary study.

Business Market

The Authority discussed marketing the area for business retreats as a way to increase weekday overnight stays.

(Avian Influenza) Bird Flu

The Authority briefly discussed (Avian Influenza) Bird Flu and steps the TDA could take to minimize tourism disruption to the area and ways to make the area a safe environment.

Contingency Planning for US 321

The Authority discussed developing a contingency plan for the U.S. 321 widening scheduled in the coming years to mitigate any tourism effects due to the construction.

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.

TDA Strategic Plan

The Authority briefly reviewed their 2004 Strategic Plan and their accomplishments to date and agreed that that the plan was outdated. The Board discussed the importance of staying within the boundaries of the Town Comprehensive Plan.

At the request of the Board, Member Tester agreed to update the plan and bring a draft back to the Board for review.

Based on the direction and vision provided at this retreat, the Board requested that Executive Director Brown begin development of a business plan for FY 2007-08 for review.

The Authority members agreed to assist Mr. Brown as needed.

Authority Meeting Schedule

Chairperson Keele briefly discussed the establishment of a standard meeting schedule. The Authority agreed by consensus to approve the following meeting schedule – Quarterly, in January, April, July, and October and in May and June for budget purposes. All meetings except a TBA planning retreat meeting, would be held on the first Tuesday of the month and begin at 8:30 a.m.

Adjournment

With no further business, motion by Vice-Chair Tarbutton and seconded by Member Pickett 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

#2 - Data Survey

#3 - Funding Request (Wine Festival)

#4 - Funding Request (Mitford Days)