

Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County TDA / Explore Boone Office
Tuesday, November 18, 2025

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair
Missy Harrill
Tony Gray
Lisa Cooper
Tina Houston (virtual)
TDA Staff:
Wright Tilley
Emily Neeley
Hope Thingelstad

GUEST: David Ray, Blue Ridge Conservancy

Call to Order: *The meeting was called to order by Chairman Vincent at 8:29 a.m.*

Approval of the November 18, 2025 board meeting agenda:

Tony Gray, seconded by Lisa Cooper, moved to approve the November 18, 2025 board meeting agenda. **VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0**

Approval of October 14th, 2025 board meeting minutes:

Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tony Gray, moved to approve the October 14, 2025 board meeting minutes. **VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0**

David Ray entered the meeting.

Monthly Financial Update:

i. Occupancy Tax Report

Latest data on fall occupancy is encouraging. October was still down by a small percentage.

ii. Revenues and Expenditure Report

Reported expenditures and revenues are as expected. It should be noted that the expense for “worker’s comp” is annual. Categories are as they should be. Some line items may change by a small amount. Draft of audit from the CPA and the County office has been received. Requested information was provided to them. The audit should be finalized by the end of November 2025, at which point it goes to LGC for approval. Wright met with the County office to review numbers due to a discrepancy between TDA’s numbers and what was provided by Wendy

Patoprsty of Middle Fork Greenway. Everything was reviewed and corrected. The final audit will provide fund balances for infrastructure. Those final numbers should be ready by the January 2026 meeting.

New Business:

i. Meeting Schedule for 2026

Matt and Wright have suggested that the annual retreat meeting be moved to January 13 for the upcoming year. It will be held at the Explore Boone offices. If there are any suggestions for topics to discuss at the January retreat meeting, submit those to Wright. The September meeting date will change from the second Tuesday to the third Tuesday. This is due to a scheduling overlap of a tourism conference that same month.

Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tony Gray, moved to approve the meeting schedule changes for 2026.

VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

ii. Blue Ridge Conservancy (BRC) Report by David Ray

State grants are still being pursued for this year. Boone Gorge Park is under construction on pace with expectations. The stream restoration planning for Angler Park is underway. Private and public partnerships are very encouraging. Fundraising for Howard Knob is ongoing; a matching gift challenge plan is underway. BRC closing on the Howard Knob land is still scheduled for December 12. Funds will still be needed after that date to continue with finishing the park. The BRC would like to have future conversations with the TDA regarding development funding. Wright interjected that the county is still having input and discussions about operating hours for the county park. David shared that there is a plan to have onsite parking on this newly purchased land.

iii. Sports Commission (SC) Structure

Annual contributions to the SC occur from this board and the Boone TDA board. This fiscal year has not been billed as to date. For consideration to this board is the structure as to where the SC should be housed. Currently, it is under the Boone Chamber. Having the SC under the TDA would allow for more input on the focus of the SC. There are opportunities that are worth pursuing in bringing sports related events to the area. Encouraging overnight stays in regards to these events is still a priority. The SC director position could be refined further as to set hours, meeting attendance, and priorities for the position. Note; it is currently a part-time position. Board member acceptance of housing the SC under the TDA seems generally positive, with future discussions to come on this topic.

iv. Gift for Cleaning Person

Board agreed that a holiday monetary gift card for the person who cleans the Explore Boone offices is an appropriate gesture. Amount: \$200.00

PR/Social Media Report

Emily reported that October was a great month regarding media placement and mentions. Coverage of the Ghost Train at Tweetsie was very popular. The Art of Living Retreat Center continues to grow in popularity and has seen media attention from various outlets and publications. PR pitches for the end of October and early November have generated great interest in ski resorts and holiday related travel. Social media posts continue to have sustained engagement, with paid interaction costs remaining very reasonable. Emily attended a large media event in Atlanta in October that allowed for continued building of relationships with travel writers and media influencers.

Tourism Outreach Report

Hope reviewed visitor guide request statistics. The requests for guides remained consistent. The direct requests via the website form have increased, but the overall requests were down due to some delays from social media delivery. However, since October of 2024, we have seen substantial growth in the requests for visitor guides. The new design for the guide is making great progress, and we should see a complete first draft of the guide next week before Thanksgiving. In-person visits to our center here have continued to grow, with October seeing the most for the year. Our e-newsletters are showing good engagement and subscriber rates. Our website has a new “FAQ” page and also some new listings for hiking trails. Website engagement remains good.

Executive Directors Report

Wright reported on his recent attendance to the NC Travel Association Meeting in Wilmington, NC. It was a good conference overall. NC “ranked as” the 6th most visited state in the nation. It also has one of the lowest amounts of funding. NC runs the risk of losing its position in this standing if the legislature decides not to give funding appropriations to Visit NC. A session at this conference on the topic of Occupancy Tax was informative. The session helped to confirm that this TDA is utilizing occupancy tax appropriately.

Update on the Boone TDA; there has been a long process ongoing concerning the by-laws. They have been approved by the Town Council. The results are aligned with our goals overall. Term limits were added, and also the Town now appoints both the Chair and the Vice-Chair positions. (Before it was only the Chair.) Two board seats expired in October and two in November are set to expire. The board would like to get the appointment dates in line with a yearly calendar to avoid irregular roll-offs. With this in mind, four seats were extended to June of 2026 to facilitate this calendar objective.

Progress is continuing at Howard Knob Park. It is looking great so far. The construction is still awaiting the arrival of the steel for the overlook portion. No confirmed date for this has been made available.

The jiu-jitsu tournament event “Good Fight” was held on November 2 at the Recreation Center. It was good event overall, but did not generate much in the way of overnight stays.

Hope and Wright have been looking at products for better data collection. This is an ongoing effort to improve data retrieval and reporting. One company being considered can mine credit

card data. This information could be helpful from a tourism standpoint to shed some light on how visitors are spending money while in the area.

New in advertising are the promotions in South Florida. Promotions for winter sports and activities in our area include car wraps and airport advertising. Miami airport and airports in Charlotte, Raleigh and Nashville have winter related advertising running. There are Travel and Advertising Shows coming in Florida, NY and DC. These are consumer shows. Also, November paid content in *Our State* magazine was added.

Closed Session

The board entered closed session at 9:47 am on a motion from Lisa Cooper, with a second from Tony Gray. Motion passed unanimously.

The board came out of closed session at 9:58 am with a motion from Tony Gray and a second from Missy Harrill. Motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:58 am.