

**Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County Administration Building Conference Room
Tuesday, August 8, 2023**

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair
Kim Rogers
Missy Harrill
Tony Gray
Brad Moretz
Samantha Brown, Watauga County Finance
Wright Tilley, TDA Executive Director
Hope Thingelstad, TDA Director of Tourism Outreach
Emily Neeley, TDA Director of Social Media and PR

ABSENT: Lisa Cooper

GUESTS: Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Four Eggers, Eggers Law Firm

Call to Order: *The meeting was called to order by Chairman Vincent at 8:28 am.*

Approval of August 8, 2023 board meeting agenda:

Tony Gray, seconded by Kim Rogers, moved to approve the August 8, 2023 board meeting agenda. VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

Approval of June 13, 2023 board meeting minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Brad Moretz, moved to approve the June 13, 2023 board meeting minutes. VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

Approval of June 23, 2023, called board meeting minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Kim Rogers, moved to approve the June 23, 2023, called board meeting minutes. VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

Closed Session: G.S. 143-381.11 (a)(3)

Tony Gray, seconded by Brad Moretz, moved to open the closed session at 8:32 am. VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

Tony Gray, seconded by Brad Moretz, moved to close the closed session at 8:57 am. VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

Monthly Financial Update:

i. Revenue/Expenditure Report

The end of the FY 22/23 revenue/expenditure report shows all budget categories under budget. The revenue category was still missing June occupancy tax collections, so that amount will grow to well over budget and will carry over to the fund balance.

ii. Occupancy Tax Collections

Blowing Rock occupancy tax collections for June had not been reported as of meeting time, but Boone and Watauga collections were up for that month. Wright suspects rates drove that more than actual occupancy. Year-over-year collections for the fiscal year were almost flat.

New Business

i. Choose & Cut Request

The Watauga County Christmas Tree Association requested \$5,900 in marketing funding for the 2023 season.

Tony Gray, seconded by Missy Harrill, moved to approve the 2023 Choose and Cut sponsorship request.

VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY - 0

ii. MerleFest 2023 Sponsorship

The 2024 MerleFest Sponsorship, which the TDA has seen a lot of success at over some years, will be \$10,000 total, to be split between the Boone and Watauga TDAs.

Tony Gray, seconded by Brad Moretz, moved to approve the 2024 Merlefest Sponsorship of \$5,000.

VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY - 0

iii. Cove Creek Project – First Draft

Matt and Wright met with Eric at Destination by Design to discuss the previously decided board priorities. Current fiscal year funding does not include much funding for Cove Creek in the current fiscal year, but plans could move ahead with projects there. Destination by Design put together an estimate of probable costs for Cove Creek revitalization projects at the Historic Cove Creek School. Board members were mostly interested in tourism-related elements of the plan, such as the museum and stage for Doc & Rosa Lee Watson MusicFest.

Tourism Outreach Report

Visitor Guide requests have remained strong in June and July, for both requests for physical guides and online views. Bulk visitor guide cases are still going out to local and regional visitor

information outlets as they are requested. 11 cases of adventure guides have gone out to local attractions so far in 2023, with one redesign needed from Destination by Design for the Paddle Trail guides. E-newsletter subscribers have continued to increase, almost to 13,000 subscribers in August. Open rates and click-through rates have been extremely well-performing over the summer. Finally, plans for the Discover Watauga Tourism Summit are underway. The meeting will be on November 9th at 11 a.m.

PR/Social Media Report

Emily reviewed recent media mentions of the area, including articles in *Southern Living Magazine*, *Wine Enthusiasts Magazine*, and *Garden & Gun*. *Blue Ridge Country Magazine* and *National Geographic* also had features about the area in July. There have been two recent influencer visits hosted by Explore Boone, and Emily will be accompanying the associate editor of *Our State Magazine* on a visit in late August. Emily also reviewed organic and paid social media metrics and top-performing posts.

Executive Directors Report

i. Marketing & Promotional Update

The visitor guide will be completely redesigned this year, due to rising costs of the 4x9” size guides. The guide will be slightly larger and have new content elements and listing designs. Wright will be attending the ESTO conference in late August. Also in late August, we’ll have Sam Dean in town getting new summer shots of restaurants, shops, and river activities. One of our Miles Partnership creative team leaders will be staying in the area for several weeks in October with his family. They’ll be able to take new photos of App State games and, hopefully, fall color.

ii. Infrastructure Update

Destination by Design is finalizing plans for the picnic shelter and fence at Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park. A trail builder will be in the area this autumn and hopefully will be able to cut the new trail to Crab Orchard Falls, which would be a big win for the Year of the Trail. DOT encroachment agreements are ready for signatures for phase II, which will need to be pre-audited and signed by both Wright and Matt. Each sign and location will be attached to the agreement, which will include all signs for the area except on Highway 105 (due to the construction project there).

The meeting was adjourned at 10:06 am.