

**Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County Administration Building
Thursday, January 19, 2023**

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair
Tony Gray – Vice Chair
Kim Rogers
Tina Houston
Lisa Cooper
Brad Moretz
Samantha Jones, Watauga County Finance Director
Wright Tilley, TDA Executive Director
Hope Thingelstad, TDA Director of Tourism Outreach
Emily Neeley, TDA Director of Social Media and PR

ABSENT:

GUESTS: Eric Smallwood, Watauga County Parks and Recreation
Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Roger Atkins, Mountaineer Ruritan
Mark Trivette, Mountaineer Ruritan & Cove Creek Preservation & Development
Kelly Burkett, Cove Creek Preservation & Development

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

Approval of January 19, 2023 board meeting agenda:

Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tony Gray, moved to approve the January 19, 2023 board meeting agenda. **VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0**

Approval of November 15, 2022 board meeting minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Kim Rogers, moved to approve the November 15, 2022 board meeting minutes. **VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0**

Monthly Financial Update

- i. Occupancy Tax Report

Watauga County District U occupancy tax collections have continued to increase from July through November. Watauga collections are up 7.46% year over year, and Boone is up 1.26% compared to the previous years.

Brad Moretz entered the meeting.

- ii. Revenue & Expenditure Report

Revenues look to be on track for the 22/23 fiscal year. Expenditure categories also look to be on track, but there are a few line items that will exceed what was budgeted. Since categories are still expected to stay under budget, Wright does not anticipate a budget amendment being necessary. The educational/conference expenses will be expanded for Hope to attend the Simpleview conference in April and so Emily can attend the PRSA conference in June. Promotional items line item will also be over-budget since these items will need to be reordered for MerleFest in April.

Imagine Watauga Update - Eric Woolridge

Eric Woolridge provided an update to the board on the Imagine Watauga plan progress. The plan is nearly complete after meeting with dozens of community groups, completing the survey, and focus groups. Eric plans to present the project to County Commissioners in February, the Boone Town Council in March, and present the project to the community in April. He inquired how the board would prefer to present this to the public. Bmembers agreed that an Imagine Watauga Summit (perhaps at the Appalachian Theatre) would be a great introduction to the project. Invites should be extended to several community groups, university groups, and conservancy organizations.

Next, Eric presented the board DBD's illustrative plan for the Cove Creek "village center" area, where there is currently a county-maintained softball field. Community members present at the board meeting agreed to approach the Cove Creek Store owners to see if they were on board for the plan and let Eric know if adjustments need to be made. Eric also showed the board members the illustrative plan for upgrades to the Historic Cove Creek School. The Cove Creek Preservation & Development organization agreed to hold a Saturday music series if the planned stage is built there. Matt and Tina agreed to meet separately with Eric and discuss the prioritization of each project throughout the county included in the plan. At the next board meeting Eric hopes to have Rocky Knob picnic shelter plans to present.

New Business

i. **Stitch Architecture Agreement**

The TDA received one bid for Howard's Knob Viewing Platform from an architect firm called Stitch Architecture. The TDA attorney did suggest one change, which has been revised in the agreement. Eric let the board know the Stitch team is planning to make a presentation with the plan at the upcoming March board meeting.

Kim Rogers, seconded by Lisa Cooper, moved to approve the Stitch Architecture Agreement. VOTE: AYE – 4 / NAY – 0
(Tony Gray stepped out for a phone call during this vote)

ii. **Audit Contract – Cindy Randolph, CPA**

Brad Moretz, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the FY 2022/2023 Audit Contract with Cindy Randolph. **VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY - 0**

PR & Social Media Report

Emily Neeley outlined the Public Relations & Social Media report for 2022. She listed a handful of large national and international media mentions and outlined the 9 travel writer and blogger visits that the TDA hosted over the year. The top-performing posts for the year on Facebook and Instagram were also included in her report. Social Media metrics all looked good for the year. Emily completed 127 Facebook posts, 138 Instagram posts, and 10 Instagram Reels. Next year, she'll be working on posting on TikTok, promoting the Year of the Trail and Sustainability, as well as completing a photography audit and shot list for upcoming photo shoots.

Tourism Outreach Report

Hope Thingelstad presented the Tourism Outreach Report to the board. She outlined the amount of individual visitor guide requests and bulk visitor guide and adventure guide deliveries to local and regional visitor centers. Hope also included the analytics from the past 3 monthly newsletters that went out to almost 12,000 subscribers. Open rates were between 34% and 36%, which is phenomenal compared to the travel industry average of 20.44%. Click-through rates were also reported, which were a little low (between 1.2 – 1.4%) compared to the industry average of 2.25%. There were 545 partner accounts on the website and 162 web pages, which Hope has implemented a monitoring system to ensure each listing and page on the website is up-to-date at least once per year.

The meeting entered a closed session at 9:37 am.