

**Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County Administration Building Conference Room
Tuesday, January 23, 2023**

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

ABSENT:

GUESTS: Cindy Randolph

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

Approval of January 9, 2023 board meeting agenda:

The date was changed from January 9th to January 23rd.

Kim Rogers, seconded by Lisa Cooper, moved to approve the January 23, 2023 board meeting agenda. **VOTE: AYE – 6 / NAY – 0**

Approval of November 14, 2023 board meeting minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the September 12, 2023 board meeting minutes. **VOTE: AYE – 6 / NAY – 0**

Approval of November 14, 2023, closed session minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Brad Moretz, moved to approve the September 12, 2023 board meeting minutes. **VOTE: AYE – 6 / NAY – 0**

Brad Moretz entered the meeting.

Presentation from Auditor – Cindy Randolph, CPA

Cindy Randolph presented the 2022/2023 fiscal year audit. The audit was submitted to and accepted by the local government commission. Cindy issued an unmodified opinion on the audit. She included a financial highlights sheet reporting on cash & investments, total assets, fund balance, total revenues, total expenditures, and the change in fund balance for the fiscal year. Cindy, Matt, and Wright also updated the board that Watauga County is currently looking for a new finance director and/or assistant finance director after the previous one left the position.

Tony Gray, seconded by Lisa Cooper, moved to approve the FY 22/23 audit report.
VOTE: AYE – 7 / NAY - 0

Monthly Financial Update:

i. Occupancy Tax Report

Blowing Rock occupancy tax collections have been better than the previous years for the entire fiscal year so far. The town of Boone collections have remained relatively flat. For November the town of Boone collections are not final since the Fairfield Inn and Suites and Comfort Suites payments are late. For Watauga County District U, collections have been about 5.15% higher than the previous year through November.

ii. Revenue and Expenditure Report

The Memberships and Subscriptions line items are over budget for the year due to an increase in the cost of dues for the US Travel Association. Miscellaneous Expenses are also over budget for the year since a few items from the Discover Watauga Tourism Summit were included there. There will be a new line item for this annual meeting in the next fiscal year to avoid that. Overall, Wright believes these sections should not require a budget amendment, but the purchase of the new office building will. Wright mentioned that progress with the Sports Commission has recently not been progressing as quickly as its board of directors had hoped. Wright would like to have the Sports Commission report to the board at this year's annual retreat and reconsider the funding for that commission then.

New Business

i. Update on new TDA Office

The asbestos remediation at the new office building has been completed. Other work on the building has been progressing well. Wright is working closely with Matt and VPC, as well as the WJ Office for furnishings. Permitting and approvals are underway.

ii. New PR Firm Recommendation

After sending out an RFP to several PR agencies and individual professionals, Wright and Emily both agree that one full-service firm would be the best fit for Explore Boone. The Lou Hammond Group has 39 years of experience and 6 nationwide offices, specializing in DMOs. The group's strategic partnerships, influencer and media vetting systems, and stakeholder program are especially valuable to Explore Boone's PR and Tourism Partners programs. This agency would also be on hand in the event of a crisis and would help the TDA complete its crisis communications plan.

Emily provided a presentation for the board of directors to review in detail the group's proposal and reporting mechanisms. Additionally, Wright mentioned that funds could be moved from the marketing agency's budget to this new PR firm in the new fiscal year, so there would be minimal "additional" costs. The Boone TDA board will need to approve this contract as well due to the joint operating agreement.

Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tony Gray, moved to approve the contract with Lou Hammond Group.

VOTE: AYE – 7 / NAY – 0

iii. Annual Retreat Dates/Format

At the November TDA Board meeting, only January and February meetings were approved due to scheduling conflicts. The remaining proposed meeting dates are: March 12, April 16 (Board Retreat, half-day meeting), May 14, June 11, August 20, September 17, October 8, and November 12. Lisa Cooper suggested the Valle Crucis Conference Center as a location for the board retreat.

The remaining 2024 meeting dates were approved by consensus.

PR/Social Media Report

Emily reviewed media coverage and the Explore Boone-hosted trips to the area over the past year. Emily also recapped the media missions she attended and went over social media highlights and metrics for both organic and paid social. In 2024, Emily will be working on onboarding the new PR agency, prioritizing media visits and a FAM trip alongside Visit NC over influencer visits. She will also be working on a new social media internship program and working with local photographers to build the TDA's photo/video library. Additionally, Emily is planning to complete the 3-year STS Marketing College program and will receive the Tourism Marketing Professional certification.

Tourism Outreach Report

Individual physical Visitor Guide requests decreased year-over-year in November but rose in December. Compared to 2022, the 2023 visitor guide requests increased by 12.89%. The 2024 Visitor Guides have been finalized, but due to redesigning the guide there has been a delay in the delivery. Bulk visitor guide distribution will begin in February when they are delivered. E-newsletters in 2023 showed great engagement compared to the industry average. A giveaway hosted in partnership with App State Sports resulted in a growth of several hundred subscribers between November and December. Hope completed a full website content audit in 2023 and is working on completing an accessibility audit and decluttering the asset library in 2024. She is also working on completing guidelines for inclusion on the website for businesses and events.

Executive Directors Report

i. Infrastructure Updates

The Rocky Knob bike park fencing and picnic shelter project is progressing. The Howards Knob park's accessibility improvements and overlook are also underway, and grading has already begun. Wright also updated the board of directors on the plans to hire a new destination development TDA staff member, in addition to a new admin/guest services staff member by the start of the new fiscal year.

ii. Marketing/Promotion Update

Wright provided an update on the efforts that many Western North Carolina DMOs have been working together on to change the legislation regarding the occupancy tax split. The group has been building a case for the state legislature to consider changing the requirements for DMOs to spend only up to 1/3 of its budget on infrastructure development. The group would like DMOs to be authorized to use up to 1/2 of its budget due to the region's need to improve tourism infrastructure inventory. A representative at a recent meeting advised the group to seek out additional funding through the state budget, as the occupancy tax legislation is unlikely to change.

iii. Travel Update

Explore Boone will be represented at an upcoming travel RV show in Florida. Wright recently attended the Blue Ridge Parkway Association meeting in Gatlinburg. Wright will also be attending the Travel and Adventure show in New York in late January and DC in February.

The board ended at 10:13 am.