

**Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County Administration Building
Thursday, March 14, 2023**

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair
Kim Rogers
Brad Moretz
Wright Tilley, TDA Executive Director
Hope Thingelstad, TDA Director of Tourism Outreach
Emily Neeley, TDA Director of Social Media and PR

ABSENT: Tony Gray
Tina Houston
Lisa Cooper

GUESTS: Alex Gotherman, Destination by Design
Michael Clapp, Stich Design Shop
Adam Sebastian, Stich Design Shop

Call to Order: *The meeting was called to order by Chairman Vincent at 8:39 am.*

Presentation by Destination by Design and Stitch Architecture

Alex Gotherman, the landscape architect with Destination by Design, updated the board on the \$350,000 PARTF accessibility grant that was recently awarded for improvements to Howards Knob Park. Destination by Design estimated the project will cost around \$1.4 in total. He then presented the outline for the upgrades, including additional parking and handicapped spots, a tranquility garden, and an accessible trail through the center of the park. Adam Sebastian and Michael Clapp from Stich Design Shop architectural and design firm presented to the board of directors three basic options for the accessible viewing platform at the park. The board decided to move ahead with a circular overlook design that includes additional elements, like stairs and railings, underneath the platform for additional access and viewpoints. The board also requested the design team to look at additional parking options to accommodate more visitors, plus natural-looking retaining walls.

Monthly Financial Update

i. Occupancy Tax Report

Watauga County District U occupancy tax collections are starting to trend down from historically high post-pandemic collections. Watauga collections are still up 2.87% year over year, and Boone is down -0.85% compared to the previous year. Blowing Rock is down -3.60%. Mr. Tilley informed the board that one Boone hotel is going to be completely rented out by Appalachian State University, meaning that the entire hotel will not be collecting occupancy tax since the rental will be longer than 90 days.

ii. Expenditures/Revenue Report

Most line items are tracking as expected. The educational conferences, travel, and promotional items line items are predicted to go over budget, but no budget amendment is expected to be required for budget categories.

New Business

i. Wayfinding Phase 2 Signs Bid

As the number of signs in Phase 2 is currently not finalized, Mr. Tilley plans to use a similar contract for the project as Phase 1, but only including a per unit total. The contract will also include a “not to exceed” amount. Mr. Tilley also recommends removing the bond fee from the contract for Phase 2. The board has already voted on the bid, so no further vote is required.

Tourism Outreach Report

Hope Thingelstad presented the Tourism Outreach Report to the board. She outlined physical visitor guide requests and unique online views in February. The majority of bulk visitor guide distribution has been completed for the year, while adventure map distribution will start to ramp up in the spring and summer. E-newsletter subscribers and open rates remain strong, and click-through rates are also showing improvement. Finally, she outlined the current number of pages and accounts currently on our website and included the engagement from the most recent partner newsletter.

PR & Social Media Report

Emily Neeley outlined the Public Relations & Social Media report. There was a good mix of print and digital media coverage regarding the area for the past couple of months. Emily also outlined the top posts for Instagram and Facebook and include the social media metrics for the past few months, which included an all-time top-performing post. Emily also had an opportunity to pitch to national journalists at the recent Visit NC conference.

Executive Directors Report

i. Marketing Update

Miles Partnership is working on new advertisements for both the Inspiring Awe Since 1849 campaign and the Sustainability campaign. Good Grit Magazine will be featuring the area on the cover in June. Miles Partnership is also wrapping up the Brand Anthem video, which will hopefully be ready for the board to see at the April board retreat on April 18th. March Madness advertising will continue after last year’s success. Mr. Tilley would also like to continue supporting the Doc Watson Music Fest at the historic Cove Creek school after the festival’s comeback last year.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:58 am.