

**Watauga County District U  
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes  
Watauga County Recreation Center – Poolside Meeting Room  
Tuesday, May 14, 2024**

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

ABSENT: Tony Gray – Vice Chair

GUESTS: Brad Moretz with App Ski Mtn, Charlie Brady with Blue Ridge Conservancy

**Call to Order:** *The meeting was called to order by Chairman Vincent at 8:33 a.m.*

**Approval of the May 14, 2024 board meeting agenda:**

*Lisa Cooper, seconded by Kim Rogers, moved to approve the May 14, 2024 board meeting agenda.* VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

**Approval of April 16, 2024 board retreat minutes:**

*Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the April 16, 2024 board retreat minutes.* VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

**Approval of April 4, 2024, called Zoom meeting minutes:**

*Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the April 4, 2024 called Zoom meeting minutes.* VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

**Approval of March 12, 2024 board meeting minutes:**

*Lisa Cooper, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the March 12, 2024 board meeting minutes.* VOTE: AYE – 5 / NAY – 0

## **Monthly Financial Update:**

### i. Occupancy Tax Report

Watauga County District U occupancy tax collections remain up nearly 6% for the FY23/24 year compared to the previous fiscal year. Blowing Rock collections are also up over 8% compared to the previous year. Boone collections were down in March, almost 11% year-over-year, while the fiscal year is still up a little over 1%.

### ii. Revenue and Expenditure Report

Wright noted that the payroll line item is not updated on the Revenue and Expenditure report. Several line items under operational expenses are over budget, most of which pertain to the new property renovations and utilities. The board might need to approve a budget amendment at the next meeting.

## **New Business**

### i. Health & Dental Insurance FY 24/25

Wright is working on getting insurance renewal estimates from insurance companies. Humana increased a little less than \$5 for the new fiscal year. Blue Cross and Blue Shield has estimated a 9.5% increase for this fiscal year but has not received the full quote yet. Those renewals will need approval at the next meeting.

### ii. Liability and Property Insurance FY 24/25

The Association of County Commissioners provides the liability and property insurance for the TDA. The board requested Wright get an additional quote based on raising the deductible to \$5,000 where applicable.

### iii. Weekend Visitor Center Hours

After comparing several visitor center hours throughout the state and region, Wright recommends opening the new downtown office as a visitor center on Saturdays. To staff the visitor center on the weekends, either the administrative/guest services position could work Tuesday – Saturday or part-time help could be hired. Wright also noted that he and Matt have discussed adding a panic button to the front desk, especially for folks who may be staffing the office alone.

### iv. Football Game Parking

Wright mentioned plans to create parking passes for Football games for the lower parking lot for the upcoming parking season and possibly sell season parking passes for game days.

v. Imagine Watauga Plan

If the Watauga County TDA officially adopts the Imagine Watauga plan, securing grant funding should be much easier for the projects laid out within the plan. The board wanted to review the plan and request Eric Woolridge attend the next meeting to answer their questions about the official adoption.

**Preliminary FY 2024/2025 Budget Review**

Wright laid out the preliminary budget and discussed each category with the board of directors.

**Tourism Outreach Report**

Individual physical Visitor Guide requests increase year-over-year in March and April. Bulk visitor guide distribution has begun and 74.5 cases have already gone to regional visitor information centers. E-newsletters for March and April showed great engagement and growth, but new Gmail requirements are going into effect and may affect open rates. Hope reviewed the number of partner accounts and pages on the website and the recent tourism partners' newsletter, which had great engagement. Hope also recapped website analytics from GA4 for March and April.

**PR/Social Media Report**

Emily reviewed recent media coverage of the Boone area, including an article in *Garden & Gun* about Valle Crucis, coverage in *Travel + Leisure*, *Men's Journal*, and a couple of articles in *Essence Magazine*. Lou Hammond Group has created a 90-day plan, a crisis communications plan, and two fact sheets for Boone. Several influencer and media trips are upcoming. Emily also recapped social media highlights and metrics for organic and paid social.

**Executive Directors Report**

i. Marketing & Promotion Update

The MerleFest traditional stage sponsorship had a very successful year with great weather. The NC Welcome Center managers recently visited with High Country Host to experience the area. Wright joined the group for dinner and gave them Explore Boone swag. The Miles partnership team is working through the next fiscal year's media plan. EDPNC will be hosting its annual board meeting in Boone, and Wright will be taking them to see Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park as an example of a great tourism infrastructure project that benefits both tourists and residents. Office renovations are moving along and are expected to be completed around mid-July.

**The board entered a closed session at 9:22 am.**