

Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Retreat Minutes
The Beacon Butcher Bar
Tuesday, April 18, 2023

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair
Tony Gray
Lisa Cooper
Tina Houston
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: Kim Rogers
Brad Moretz

GUESTS: Eric Woolridge, Destination by Design
Elisha Brown, Boone TDA
Tim Futrelle, Boone Mayor/TDA
Sheri Moretz, Boone TDA
Brian Crutchfield, Boone TDA
Tara Brossa, Boone TDA
Jordan Sellers, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Wendy Patoprsty, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Ileana Frascone, Miles Partnership
Vince Tatarian, Miles Partnership

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

Financial Matters:

i. Occupancy Tax Charts

Occupancy tax collections are falling, as expected, after the historically high collections in 2021 and 2022. The county is still up 1.32% over the previous fiscal year, while the towns of Boone and Blowing Rock are slightly down compared to the previous fiscal year. The prior fiscal year was also up (collectively) compared to the extremely high collections in 2021, so these numbers falling is not something to be worried about at the moment. The Boone TDA will have a decrease in occupancy due to Appalachian State University utilizing a hotel for transfer students. Chairman Vincent requested to see Beech Mountain occupancy tax collections, and Wright mentioned he also is aware the town's collections are declining.

ii. Fund Balance

Watauga TDA fund balance is between \$8 – 9 million, with most of that consisting of marketing funds and around \$2 – 3 million of infrastructure funds. Mr. Tilley will provide more information and exact numbers in the May board meetings. Revenues and expenditures are tracking as planned, so the fund balance is expected to grow at the end of this fiscal year as well.

iii. FY 23/24 Budget Process and Timeline

The TDA is planning to expand staff and office space in the upcoming fiscal year, which will be included in the budget. A draft budget will be presented to both boards at their respective May meetings. These proposed budgets will be voted on during the June meetings.

Middle Fork Greenway & Blue Ridge Conservancy Updates

Wendy Patoprsty, Director of the Middle Fork Greenway for Blue Ridge Conservancy, updated the board on the current status of the Middle Fork Greenway including completed parks and what's coming in the next year or two. She highlighted how the funding that the TDA has already provided has been used to leverage an additional \$5.1 million in grants and other funding. She also requested an additional \$700,000 for Boone Gorge Park construction, the Tweetsie Connector, and section 3 design.

Jordan Sellers, the Northern Peaks Trail Coordinator for Blue Ridge Conservancy, also addressed the board and provided an overview of the Northern Peaks Trail project and how the conservancy is approaching trail building. The trail is currently being built primarily in Ashe County, but will eventually connect Boone to the Jeffersons.

Presentation from Miles Partnership

Vince Tatarian and Ileana Frascone from Miles Partnership, the TDA's advertising agency, reviewed the past fiscal year's mix of advertising and the performance of certain digital and print placements. They also reviewed several unique OOH opportunities Explore Boone pursued in the past year. Reviewing some of the data that has been collected, they also discussed emerging markets and strategies for the future, plus they presented a secondary sustainable travel campaign to the board.

Imagine Watauga / Infrastructure Discussion

Eric Woolridge, with Destination by Design, updated the board on the Imagine Watauga planning progress. The plan is wrapping up and will have been presented to both the Boone Town Council and Watauga County Commissioners by May. Eric also discussed the Winkler Creek Reservoir property, which is owned by the town of Boone and located in Watauga County District U. The property offers opportunities for beginner mountain bike riding and multi-use trails. Eric provided updates on the Boone TDA side of the Imagine Watauga plan, including Boone Gateway signage, the Boone Greenway, Boone Jaycee Park, and Daniel Boone Park. Eric also showed examples of beautifying downtown intersections and parking areas. To wrap up, he presented a 10-year outlay for the county projects identified in the plan, including the budget.