

Watauga County District U
Tourism Development Authority – Board Meeting Minutes
Watauga County TDA / Explore Boone Office

Tuesday, April 14, 2026

PRESENT: Matt Vincent – Chair

Tony Gray

Tina Houston

Eric Woolridge

ABSENT: Lisa Cooper

Missy Harrill

Brad Moretz

TDA Staff:

Wright Tilley

Emily Neeley

GUESTS: Jordan Sellers and Eric Hiegl, Blue Ridge Conservancy

Call to Order: *The meeting was called to order by Chairman Vincent at 8:32 a.m.*

Approval of the April 14, 2026 board meeting agenda:

Tony Gray, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the April 14, 2026 board meeting agenda.

VOTE: AYE – 4 / NAY – 0

Approval of March 10, 2026 board meeting minutes:

Tony Gray, seconded by Tina Houston, moved to approve the March 10, 2026 board meeting minutes.

VOTE: AYE – 4 / NAY – 0

Monthly Financial Update:

i. **Occupancy Tax Report**

Occupancy tax numbers are down for January and February of this year. From July 2025 to date, Watauga County and Town of Boone show positive numbers; 15.16% and 7.86% increases respectively. Blowing Rock is still showing a negative of 9.25%, which is attributed to loss of inventory. March occupancy numbers will be in by end of April. These figures will be utilized to project next fiscal year's budget; presented at May 2026 board meeting.

ii. **Revenues and Expenditure Report**

Report shows good financial shape though some budget amendments may be necessary before the end of the fiscal year. The Howard Knob Park project will soon be complete and closed out.

A request for a review of the sponsorships category and items therein was made and will be produced and submitted showing specific sponsorship items and amounts.

Old Business

i. Beech Mountain Sponsorship Request

The process of clarifying the branding opportunities and Explore Boone logo usage is continuing. We are defining the right combination of our marketing needs within their event structure to determine the appropriate sponsorship level.

ii. Wayfinding Signage Update

An updated plan for replacing signage was expected and will soon be forthcoming. The pick-up of damaged/downed signs is priority, with replacements to follow soon thereafter.

iii. Howard Knob Update

Wrap up is underway with contractors completing final “punch list” items. There will be an invitation only soft opening planned for some time in May. A media release will follow soon thereafter. A vehicle counter of some type to collect traffic data may be utilized. Ideally, this will be in place when the soft opening occurs and thereafter. A bronze plaque commemorating project participants is being planned, at the request of the county. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) will be drafted by the BRC pending a meeting with the TDA staff to determine specific needs for this document to define roles and expectations for BRC owned land. BRC has selected a trail builder. The preliminary trails design that BRC produced will be refined by the trail builder. Parking lot specific designations are underway also. An engineer is providing a quote for the proper parking lot permitting. Less than an acre will be utilized as a parking site with the number of spaces to be determined. This is in consideration of impact and preservation goals.

New Business

i. Farm Tour Sponsorship Request

The High Country Agritourism Group has requested \$8100 in sponsorship for marketing. The board discussed the request in terms of ROI for this type of event. Even though the data regarding the occupancy tax projections seems low, the board determined that events like this have value in enhancing the visitor experience. Overall promotion of the area in regards to agritourism is recognized as having merit. Marketing efforts to draw out of town visitors to this type of event is worth acknowledgement, while keeping capacity considerations in mind.

Tina Houston, seconded by Eric Woolridge, moved to fund the High Country Farm Tour in the amount of \$8100, with a request for zip code and any other visitor data they can provide.

VOTE: AYE – 4 / NAY – 0

ii. Local Business Complaints

Wright asked for board input regarding a local business entity. Complaints regarding negative experience with this entity have been received in the past and seem to be escalating lately. Explore Boone does not promote this business, nor do adjacent visitor bureaus. This concern is in regards to misinformation and negative visitor experiences that reflect badly on all involved in promoting tourism. It was agreed that the next course of action will be to solicit legal advice.

Tourism Outreach Report

Hope was out at the Meaningful Travel Summit, so Wright presented the report. Visitor guide requests remain consistent for the first quarter of 2026. The new visitor guide is in house now, and guides are being delivered and shipped to businesses and welcome/visitor centers.

E-newsletter subscribers continue to grow. Partner accounts remain strong, and website updates are ongoing. The Watauga Tourism Summit, held at the end of March, was well attended. The new advertising campaign was presented and garnered a positive response. Partner awards were presented at the event as well.

When looking at website analytics and Arrivalist spend data, it was stated that ROI location data would be helpful to see, as well as credit card spending data. In addition to this request, clarification on the data regarding regional ad spends, website engagement, and paid sessions is also needed.

PR/Social Media Report

Emily reported that March was another solid month in promotion of the “shoulder season”. Media coverage has been positive, with area mentions in Forbes and Southern Living magazines. Parade magazine did a feature on the Lovell House Inn, which was the result of a visiting writer who produced the piece on her own. “America 250” and other suitable themes are being explored for the upcoming seasons. Travel writers and influencers are continuing to feature local content. These are paid opportunities that come across as organic to the audience. It is clearly stated that they are advertising, but the format is friendly and experience focused. We do 10 to 12 of these each year. Social media engagement and audience numbers have been consistent, with a post on Troy’s Diner doing very well; reaching 127,000 accounts. Cost per clicks for paid/boosted posts remain below industry standards.

Social media internship interviews are underway, with a candidate to be chosen by the end of the month.

Executive Directors Report

Infrastructure Update:

Howard Knob update is covered earlier under “Old Business” section of minutes.

The Rocky Knob Bike Park received \$17,000 in FEMA funds which will go toward Hurricane Helene damage repair.

Marketing Update:

Wright, Emily and Hope attended the Visit NC conference in Asheville last month. It was an informative conference, with the NC Governor in attendance and speaking to the value of tourism in NC. Wright attended the Southeast Tourism Society board meeting in Atlanta. This board is going through some changes, including a national search for a new CEO.

The new advertising campaign has launched. The media plan is being developed for FY 26/27. This will be presented once it has been finalized. Summer photoshoots are underway. The cost of the photoshoots is divided between Watauga and Boone TDAs. Wright will attend a national destination marketing conference in July. Emily and Wright plan to attend the ESTO conference in August. Registration fees for these conferences will be paid for in this current fiscal year.

Wright presented a first draft of the description for a Destination Development and Sports Tourism position. Following discussion, it was agreed that Destination Development should be a stand along position and we should consider a separate Sports & Events position.

Eric Woolridge left the meeting.

The board discussed local trails within the town limits and town trail access. Considerations for future discussions will include events that incorporate these trails. ADA accessibility will be part of these event discussions.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:28 a.m.