

HAMILTON COUNTY TOURISM, INC. BOARD OF DIRECTORS
37 E. Main Street, Carmel, Indiana
March 1, 2024
Minutes of the Regular Meeting

Attending in Person:

Norman Burns, Michael Balcom, Bob Dubois, Scott Spillman, Mark Truett, Jeffrey Brown, Chris Stice, Andrew Newport.

Also in Attendance:

Brenda Myers, Sarah Mathews, Mike Thibideau, Carl Daniels, Laura Kelner, Tina Rodgers, Sarah Buckner, Ashley Ledford, and Karen Radcliff; Anne Poindexter, legal counsel. Guests attending included Emily Reynolds and Toni Dickover from the Nickel Plate Heritage Railroad/Nickel Plate Express.

I. Welcome

N. Burns called the meeting to order at 8:33 a.m.

II. Approval of February Annual & Regular Meeting Minutes

A. Minutes of the 2024 Annual Meeting —A. Newport moved to approve the minutes; M. Truett seconded. Motion passed;
B. Minutes of the February 2024 Regular Meeting -- approval—J. Brown moved to approve the minutes; M. Truett seconded. Motion passed.

III. Financials and Metrics Consent Agenda

B. Myers noted that the financials and metrics have been proposed as consent agenda, although questions are permitted and encouraged. The financials and metrics are provided to the Board in advance of the meeting. She noted the new TravelClick report and some concerns about March hotel occupancy, but overall revenues appear to be strong. B. Lynn outlined his budget report. There were no questions. J. Brown moved that the financials and visitor metrics be approved. C. Stice seconded. Motion passed.

IV. New Business

A. Nickel Plate Heritage Railroad Update & Consideration of Loan Conversion to Grant -- Executive Director E. Reynolds and Board member Toni Dickover were invited give a status update on Nickel Plate Heritage Railroad/Nickel Plate Express (NPX) operations Both thanked the board for the significant financial support over the years. The most recent significant improvement included \$50k renovation of a lounge car. Four additional tables were added which increased capacity from 40 to 56 people. Lounge cars are normally the first cars to sell out and provide NPX with a good source of revenue. This car alone grossed \$500,000 in ticket sales alone in 2023 or ten times the investment. T. Dickover reported record breaking sales in 2023 with 23,000 total passengers over 173 rides, an increase of 7,000 passengers YOY. Train rides featured a variety of themes and several different price points. The highest ticket price was \$200/person for a NYE train. The team purchased quad-seats “rail bikes” for 1-2 hour excursions allowing the organization to operate during the weekdays when the train does not run. NPX purchased a locomotive they previously leased. The group would like to improve railroad with upgrades, intersection improvements, and new railroad ties. There is an effort to build a long range Vision Plan in 2024, and the group has contracted with Andrew Bradford to facilitate. The group is expecting future track and bridge repairs and would like to improve HVAC in train cars. The board thanked the visitors for their ireport and congratulated them on their success. They then left the meeting. B. Myers asked the board to consider converting the loan to a grant. A. Poindexter reported to the board that the Port Authority is still involved and inspects and regulates the rail line. Unless repairs are done, on the bridge over Morse Reservoir, the train must regulate speed below 10mph which it is doing. It also is not currently using the bridge over the White River in downtown Noblesville. The primary need is tie replacements – the two structures are sound. S. Spillman and A. Newport were curious about the Train’s ability to draw overnight visitors. B. Myers acknowledged that currently the train is a small room night generator, although continues to market and package out of area. Approximately 2% of their visitors stay overnight and 30% of visitors are day trip visitors from outside Hamilton County. At a realistic goal of 30,000 passengers a year, that translates to 600 hotel rooms. But the attraction is working to connect with hotels for packages, especially for the Reindeer Express holiday ride. There being no further questions, A. Newport moved to convert the loan to a grant effective immediately. J. Brown seconded. The motion passed and A. Poindexter noted she would create a simple resolution for signatures to provide to the railroad and for record keeping.

B. 2024 Tourism Gives Grants – S. Buckner presented information on proposed Tourism Gives grants for the current year. She reported that the Tourism Gives grants were revamped to focus on HCT’s focus on destination stewardship. Grant applicants were asked to align their grant requests to fit the four “Ps” of Inspire Hamilton County: People, Place, Planet & Prosperity. There are three new grant applicants for 2024: 1) Jackson Township holiday village (place); 2) Serve Noblesville diverse cultural food experience fair (people); 3) Fishers Art Center (place). Last year, Conner Prairie received a reduced gift because of the Promised Land as Proving

-
Ground grant, but it was determined by staff to increase the Conner Prairie gift in 2024 due to the size of its impact. Total grant funds awarded is still not at pre-covid levels, but it is an increase over last year and should be over pre-covid numbers in 2025. J. Brown moved to accept all grant requests with the exception of proposed grants to Hamilton County Parks, Conner Prairie and the Center for the Performing Arts due to declared conflicts. C. Stice seconded and these grants passed.
M. Truett moved to accept Hamilton County Parks grant. S. Spillman seconded. C. Stice abstained. Motion passed.
M. Balcom then moved to accept Conner Prairie's grant. M. Truett seconded. N. Burns abstained. Motion passed.
N. Burns moved to accept The Center for the Performing Arts grant request. B. DuBois seconded. M. Truett abstained. Motion passed.

V. Old Business

A. BEST Fund Updates – K. Radcliff reported the BEST research project is officially completed with the publication of the BEST Master Plan. Copies were distributed to board members, who congratulated HCT on a job well done. Radcliff noted that this master plan is already at work with the investment fund application process launched and available on VisitHamiltonCounty.com/BEST. Meetings with the cities to identify projects are schedule for the following week. Meetings with non-profits will be scheduled soon. B. Myers noted that she is working with B. Lynn to build out revenue projections and project investment scenarios. M. Balcom will represent the board on the BEST Review Committee beginning later this month.

B. Nickel Plate Arts/Noblesville Creates – While there is no definitive news, B. Myers and K. Radcliff did meet with Noblesville Creates and there are signs of progress. But likely this item will need to be managed later this summer.

C. Workforce Initiatives Update -- M. Thibideau gave an update on Invest Hamilton County operations. He thanked V. Dora and J. Brown for supporting new hospitality training sites with Janus. The pilot tourism workforce training projects with Janus and the Hamilton County Department of Corrections have caught the attention of other economic development agencies nationwide. The flexibility and seed support have been key in the early success with both programs. Invest has been able to raise \$1.9M in grant revenue to expand programming largely due to the early initial investments. Currently the program has placed 7 people into positions. The jail program will change slightly to become general soft skills training, and a new training program for maintenance workers will begin which will help hotels and attractions. For every dollar invested by HCT in workforce development, Invest is matching with another \$2 with grant income.

D. CEO Search Updates – N. Burns summarized the search progress to date. Last fall, a small task force created and distributed an RFP for an executive search firm. N. Burns acknowledged B. DuBois for the heavy lifting on this part of the project. B. DuBois commented that the search firms were very impressed with HCT, the budget, and the work of the organization. This will be a very attractive position to many. Five firms submitted proposals and the task force will interview two. N. Burns asked the board for a motion to allow the executive committee the authority to contract with a search firm up to \$75,000. A. Poindexter will review the contract before signing. C. Stice moved that the officers be authorized to negotiate the contract. M. Truett seconded. Motion passed. After selecting the search firm, the Board will make up a search committee to include one county commissioner, one county council, at least one tourism commissioner and other HCT board members. N. Burns will send another letter to update key stakeholder groups on the progress.

VI. Staff Reports

A. Hamilton County Sports Authority Rebranding Request – C. Daniels reported on the completion of a strategy plan for the Hamilton County Sports Authority. It includes three primary areas of focus: 1) Build a brand; 2) Build event capacity; 3) Be a community advocate for sport tourism. With final dollars remaining from the ARPA account, Carl asked for an increase in the sports budget to begin building the brand and provided rationale as to why it was important. Others spoke up to its importance include K. Radcliff and B. Myers. This will include reimagining the identity, new logo and graphics, production for sales and marketing materials, new video and photography. The total requested is \$170,000.

B. Myers then noted there are other budget amendment requests, also covered by the planned surplus in the budget:

City Nation Place Americas -- B. Myers also reported HCT offered to host a sponsored study trip to the City Nation Place Americas conference in Houston in May. Response has been much greater than anticipated. Traveling with the group in addition to HCT, Invest HC and the HCCF are three mayors, two deputy mayors, two city council memers, three city economic development officers, a county commissioner and a county councilor. The participation exceeded expectations and rather than curtail the trip as HCT is short of funds despite generous donations of combined \$15,000 from the Hamilton County Community Foundation and Invest Hamilton County. This is the best attended study trip to date, and B. Myers asked for an additional \$9000 from ARPA to supplement the Destination Development budget to pay for the additional participants. S. Spillman will represent the Board on the trip as N. Burns is out of town for another conference.

-
Finally, B. Myers also asked for additional dollars due to a slight increase in attorney fees. With new policies and reviews needed, the attorney has been busier than expected.

S. Spillman asked with the change in the HCSA branding if we will need to account for additional digital marketing and web fees to make needed branding changes. A. Ledford reported that HCT is currently going through an entire website overhaul, and the timing should work out to replace HCSA branding at no charge. HCT's Simpleview contract also gives HCT a number of complimentary support hours that should also help with the digital changes needed.

The budget changes mean it will still be a net positive budget after ARPA dollars are utilized. Total additions to the budget are \$186,000 from ARPA.

C. Stice moved that the budget be amended as proposed and V. Dora seconded. Motion passed.

B. Total Solar Eclipse 2024 Final Update – S. Buckner updated the board on the upcoming total solar eclipse, which Hamilton County is in the totality zone. HCT expects a number of day trip visitors due to a large number of population centers within a day's drive of central Indiana. The national estimate is 600,000 total for Indiana. While still not sold out, Hamilton County's hotel occupancy is pacing 10% ahead of the state. We continue to communicate to the community all safety and entertainment plans. Hamilton County will have six official viewing locations that have been advertised heavily. There are 22 total viewing locations. To provide for a festival atmosphere, HCT has produced branded viewing glasses, signs, banners, window clings, posters, fliers, murals, and six oversized viewing glasses sculptures to act as selfie stations. Everything will get delivered in the next few weeks.

N. Burns thanked the staff and board for a remarkable meeting with great reports.

VII. Adjournment – J. Brown moved that the meeting be adjourned at 10:04 a.m. S. Spillman seconded. Motion passed.