

HAMILTON COUNTY TOURISM, INC. BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
37 E. Main Street, Carmel, Indiana  
May 3, 2024

Attending in Person: Chris Stice, Jimia Smith, Bob DuBois, Kayla Arnold, Scott Spillman, Jeffrey Brown, Vince Dora and Susan Williams.

Also Attending: Betsy Ekelof, Ashley Ledford, Brad Lynn, Brenda Myers, Sarah Billman, Laura Kelner, Sarah Buckner, Tina Rodgers, Mike Thibideau, Carl Daniels.

Attending Virtually: Karen Radcliff and Ken Alexander.

### **I. Welcome**

S. Spillman started the meeting at 8:30 a.m. by welcoming everyone and noting he would be leading the meeting as N. Burns was attending a leadership conference.

### **II. Minutes of the March 2024 Meeting**

S. Spillman noted the minutes had been sent to all Board members and posted in Boardable. There was one typo noted by C. Stice. With that change, C. Stice moved that the minutes be approved as presented. V. Dora seconded. Motion passed.

### **III. Financials & Metrics**

**A. Visitor & Lodging Reports** – B. Myers provided several charts to demonstrate first quarter 2024 performance.

Overnight visitation was actually down to 73.4% compared to 76% in 2023 but length of stay grew slightly, from 1.6 days to 1.8 days.

Likewise, visitor origins shifted accordingly as did the top POIs visited. Hotel occupancy reflected that decline and stood at 55.1% for the quarter, down 2.5% with no change in inventory, which meant demand also declined 2.5%. Revenue, however, grew as ADR increased 5.8% to \$130. Short-term rentals, however, has consistently grown as has supply, up 56.7% YOY in March. Demand also was up 45.7% and has increased 45.2% for the quarter along with a significant increase in revenue of 44.9%.

**B. Tax Remittance Reports** – B. Lynn reviewed tax remittances for the year which are significantly over budget. Through the May deposit, taxes received from the county for the 5% pool of funds is \$4,889,911.22, which includes a carryover from 2023 in January. January-May deposits have been over every month despite the decrease in hotel demand, driven in part by more short-term rental revenue.

**C. HCT Budget Report** – B. Lynn then reviewed HCT's first quarter budget reports. Through March HCT has brought in \$2,956,014 in revenue against \$2,168,737 in expenses for a net income of \$787,277. All expense line items are on the pace for spending as they should be. On the balance sheet, cash assets in savings and checking total \$3,778,526 as of March 31, 2024. J. Brown had emailed questions to B. Lynn prior to the meeting, primarily about interest rates on investments but said his questions were answered. J. Brown moved that the financial report be accepted as presented. C. Stice seconded. Motion passed.

### **IV. Old Business**

**A. BEST Fund Updates** – K. Radcliff said there will likely be 10 applicants for the first round of the BEST Investment Fund. The Review Committee has heard from 3 applicants – Friends of Hamilton County Extension for an arena project, Friends of Central Pool for a renovation and expansion, and City of Carmel for a Food Hall project. There are two more meetings prior to the August Tourism Commission review of all projects. HCT is doing return on investment analysis through Hunden Partners for most of those that do not currently have such data available. A document was provided with additional background in Boardable.

**B. Westfield Study Update** – K. Radcliff shared some slides from the Westfield entertainment district study that the Board had authorized spending which shows a vision for the area to support Grand Park business. This included areas where tourism attractions and priority developments could occur. The City of Westfield is happy with the results and appreciative of the investment which will contribute to an overall updated comprehensive plan. Discussion took place on

the next Westfield Grand Park related funding, which also will be used for planning purposes. This \$400,000 request was budgeted in 2024's Destination Development budget. B. Myers asked for clarification as to whether City of Westfield will hold the new phase 2 contracts. A. Poindexter asked for clarification for the contracts both in phase 1 and 2. K. Radcliff noted that HCT held the contracts for phase 1 and had NDA's in place with the City. Westfield asked that they hold the contracts in phase 2 with similar NDA / collab arrangements and receive a grant from HCT for the cost. The City would like has an additional architect it wants on the team and would like to separate the financial feasibility contract from the design contract. Hunden Partners will still provide feasibility and some placemaking assistance. K. Radcliff said bring a proposal to the June 2024 Board meeting for review for an outright grant to the City of Westfield to look at a phase two deeper dive of the project, including details of the scope and costs involved. C. Stice asked who owns all the land in the planning area. K. Radcliff noted that it is under control by two cooperative and willing landowners. It was asked whether the Board needs to vote on the study contribution given it already has authorized it in the budget and everyone is positive about the use of the funds to help enhance the Grand Park experience. Although a vote was not taken, there was verbal consensus that a special grant request did not need to be made and the HCT staff could negotiate an agreement with the city of Westfield and proceed. A. Poindexter agreed to the plan.

C. **PSDA Updates** – B. Myers provided a leadership summary of the current situation regarding legislative work to hopefully PSDAs to Hamilton County. A meeting is scheduled with legislative counsel Westfield and Noblesville in June.

D. **2024 Eclipse Report** – S. Buckner provided a summary report of the 2024 Total Eclipse which brought almost 90,000 visitors to the county along with filling 97% of hotel rooms and most vacation rentals, which had more than doubled in number. It was a huge success in part due to careful planning as most businesses and schools either closed for the afternoon or remained virtual.

E. **Sports Branding Update** – C. Daniels provided a sports branding update, authorized earlier in the year by the Board. The team has narrowed the list to two ideas, both of which bridge the gap between the county brand and a distinct sports-focused brand. The brand will be brought to the Board soon.

F. **CEO Search Update** – S. Spillman provided documents on the CEO search which included a summary of past meetings as well as a timeline of activity. It is likely a new CEO won't be on staff until August. The Board will be updated and engaged in the process.

## V. New Business

A. **2024 Sports Grants** – C. Daniels presented a list of proposed sports operating grant recipients, explaining that each of the four city's major sports management non-profits get the bulk of the funds and the balance goes to organizations generating hotel rooms. He added one grant recipient whose officer had been struggling with health concerns. Total distribution is \$55,000. There is an additional \$20,000 available to support other projects if needed. S. Spillman declared a conflict of interest and recused himself from voting. K. Arnold voted that the grants be distributed as presented to the Board. V. Dora seconded. Motion passed.

At this point, S. Spillman asked that the agenda be amended to add another grant request for consideration. C. Stice moved that the agenda be amended and K. Arnold seconded. Motion passed.

B. **Invasives Mural Grant** – S. Buckner explained that one of the destination stewardship programs in 2024 that HCT is supporting is helping the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District amplify its messages about invasive species. These are not only bad for the environment, they are bad for the White River in particular. One of the project components is creation of a "selfie" mural in a public place. The Noblesville Township Trustee's Office on 8<sup>th</sup> Street was proposed as a site because it has high traffic, both in visitors to meetings there as well as in traffic along 8<sup>th</sup> Street. But to avoid having to create a complicated agreement for the mural placement, it was determined it's in the best interest for the Noblesville Trustees to commission the chosen artist directly, which requires HCT to provide a \$2000 grant to the Trustee's office rather than where it is currently budgeted as a contract for a project. C. Stice moved that the funds be awarded to the Noblesville Trustee's office for the project. K. Arnold seconded. Motion passed.

C. **Conner Prairie 2024 Grant** (year of a 2-year pledge) – S. Buckner explained that although a proposal was submitted to the HCT Board in 2023 for a two-year, \$125,000 each year grant for Promised Land as Proving Ground, the new groundbreaking social inclusion exhibition at the museum, but operations was concerned that it was not made clear in the minutes and wanted clarification for the auditor. For clarity and the official record, she asked that the Board also support

the second year of the grant for a distribution of \$125,000. A. Poindexter thought the intent for at two-year grant was clear but noted it would not hurt to reaffirm the second grant for the record. J. Brown moved that the \$125,000 grant to Conner Prairie be distributed as initially proposed. K. Arnold seconded. Motion passed.

**D. 2025 Recommendation for Tourism Commission Appropriations** – B. Lynn presented a forecast report for January-December 2025 innkeepers tax deposits for the 5% Marketing and Promotions Fund dollars. HCT must recommend to the Hamilton County Visitor and Convention Commission at its May 16 meeting an amount to ask for appropriations, including the additional 3%. He provided a breakdown and explanation of why these amounts were chosen.

2024 Appropriations Request -- \$7,700,000

2025 Appropriations Request -- \$9,400,000

B. Lynn said it is anticipated that at least \$1 million more than is budgeted for 2024 will be collected and carried over to 2025, and \$8,400,000 would be collected in 2025. This is driven in part because ADR continues to hold steady, there will be several hundred new hotel rooms open and Taylor Swift’s concert in Indy in November should bring in additional revenue for January, as it will be a citywide event. The early draft HCT budget to accompany the request utilizes all \$9,400,000 of anticipated collections with a net income of \$600,000, giving leeway. After some discussion, the Board suggested the estimate was likely low all things considered and suggested it be increased to \$9,900,000 but not anticipated to be spent necessarily unless goals are reached. C. Stice moved that the proposed appropriations request and accompanying budget be raised to \$9.9 million in lodging tax collections. J. Smith seconded. Motion passed.

**E. HCT Entertainment “Procedure” Introduction** – B. Myers noted the procedure is being introduced for comments and input, recognizing that it’s more lecture than procedure and still leaves things up in the air. Opinions differed somewhat with a collective understanding that these kinds of policy are difficult in an industry that is often considered “lavish” in its entertainment. J. Brown suggested the language might be too tight and difficult for people to follow. B. DuBois praised HCT for a thorough attempt at the policy, noting many DMOs do not have one and this one allows for leeway with common sense requested. S. Spillman echoed B. DuBois’ sentiment in that he has been to trade shows and understands the difficulty in drawing the line. It was suggested that staff members review the policy together and sign and acknowledge that they understand it. The document will be presented again at the June meeting. Additional thoughts were welcomed.

#### **VI. Department Update: Visitor Experience**

S. Billman presented an overview of the more than 125 events the department will support in small and huge ways throughout the year. She showed 3-D items and images from recent events where décor, welcome floor and elevator decals and other event-focused treats were featured. She also noted that the department of 1.5 hosts all of the HCT-led summits such as the partner summit coming up at the Hotel Nickel Plate. And, the department also supports events by coordinating, training and feeding volunteers. C. Daniels commented that he always hears nothing but rave reviews about HCT’s visitor experience hospitality services, and that this is why groups return year after year. Others mentioned the strength of the visitor experience program and quality of service as being a hallmark of HCT and the HCSA.

VII. There being no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned at 10 a.m. C. Stice made the motion and J. Smith seconded. Motion passed.