



MEETING MINUTES

Jackson County Tourism Development Authority

Board of Directors Meeting

May 15, 2024 (Wednesday) @1:00 p.m.

98 Cope Creek Rd., Suite D

Sylva, NC 28779

Call to Order/Roll Call

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Mr. Fletcher.

- **Members in attendance:** Executive Director Nick Breedlove; Daniel Fletcher, Chair; Ashlie Mitchell, Secretary; Megan Orr, Vice Chair; Board Members, Craig Smith, Darlene Fox, Julie Spiro, Trevor Brown, Robert Jumper, Mark Jones, Susan Gregory and Mandi Cantrell
- **Members absent:** Julie Spiro
- **Others in attendance:** Cheryl Osborne, Minutes Clerk; Kara Addy, TDA Social Media Manager; Carter Long, Aneska Walrath, and Madison Kosater, Lou Hammond Group; John Kautz and Mark Hartzell, BGRM

Approve Amended Agenda

MOTION: Ashlie Mitchell moved to approve the amended agenda. Trevor Brown seconded. Motion carried.

Public Comment

None

Recognize Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and County Commissioner

Daniel Fletcher, Chair – Had no comments.

Megan Orr, Vice Chair – Had no comments.

Ashlie Mitchell, Secretary – Had no comments.

Mark Jones, County Commissioner – Was pleased to see such a well-attended meeting.

Review and Approval of April 17, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Minutes of meeting is available on the JCTDA website. They were also attached to the agenda for this meeting. No comments were made.

MOTION: Megan Orr moved to approve meeting minutes. Trevor Brown seconded. The motion carried.

Review and Approval of April 30, 2024 Financial Report

Ms. Fox presented the financial report as follows. Highlights for March include Occupancy Tax collections \$127,754.55 with penalties of \$5.00 and YTD collection totals of \$1,888,833.76 which is 75.55% of the budget. Airbnb collections totaled \$53,770.44. The Home Away and VRBO total was \$12,176.87 and the VACASA, NC total was \$4,221.49. 72 accounts reported rentals for March rentals (increase of 5 accounts from last year). Collections were up 0.33% from the same period in 2023. The April 30, 2024 cash balance is \$161,567.68 with investments totaling \$3,750,000.00. April expenses were \$168,174.69 with FYTD expenses totaling \$1,776,436.56 with encumbrances of \$21,790.44 for a combined total of \$1,798,227.00, equaling 50.78% of the budget.

MOTION: *Trevor Brown moved to approve the April financial report as presented. Ashlie Mitchell seconded. The motion carried.*

Review and Approve Contracts

BGRM (Rawle Murdy)

The BGRM total contract amount for advertising in FY 2024-2025 is \$859,351.00. This agreement is standard from last except for an increase, which will be explained during the BGRM presentation.

Lou Hammond Group

The total Lou Hammond Group contract amount for public relations for FY 2024-2025 is \$121,000 which is broken down as \$78,000 in agency fees, an increase of \$10,000 for PR projects this year bringing the total for projects to \$40,000 for bringing more media representatives and content creators to Jackson County.

Love Communications

The total Love Communications contract amount for SEM advertising is \$188,600.00, an increase over last year. This is a standard local government contract.

Smoky Mountain News

The total contract amount for Smoky Mountain News for printing the 2025 Visitor Guide is \$1,500.00, which is the same as last year. Several years ago, Mr. Breedlove negotiated to receive a portion (\$10,000) of ad revenue back reimbursed to JCTDA.

Zartico

The total contract amount for Zartico for providing lodging data is \$55,000. There is savings of approximately \$5-6,000 from last year's contract due to negotiation of the scope of the agreement.

Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce

The total contract amount to the Cashiers Area Chamber for services, Visitor Center space and office supplies for FY 2024-2025 is \$102,761.05, which is an increase of 3% over last year due to general cost increases, cost of living increases and inflation. The requirement for a restroom has been removed since public restrooms will be available at The Village Green.

Jackson County Chamber of Commerce

The total contract amount to the Jackson County Chamber for services, Visitor Center space, copier lease, and office supplies for FY 2024-2025 is \$115,974.91 a 3% increase due to general cost increases, cost of living increases and inflation.

CoStar

The total contract amount to CoStar for data services for FY 2024-2025 is \$11,600. The CoStar data will provide information about past and future occupancy and industry trends. Mr. Breedlove and Tiffany Henry of Jackson County Economic Development are the licensees for the information because of the wealth of data provided about commercial real estate.

Tembo Hospitality Group

The total contract amount is \$55,600, an increase of 15% over last year, due to an increase in the amount of work that the TDA is asking them to do. Tembo is responsible for short form videos, which has greatly enhanced the social media presence.

Mr. Jones asked if there was a total amount of the contracts. Mr. Breedlove answered approximately \$1.5 million. There was a brief discussion of how the data provided is targeted.

MOTION: *Trevor Brown moved to approve the BGRM, Lou Hammond Group, Love Communications, Smoky Mountain News, Zartico, Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce and CoStar annual agreements as presented for FY 2024/2025. Ashlie Mitchell seconded. Motion carried.*

A separate motion for the Tembo Hospitality Group is needed since Craig Smith abstained from voting because of a conflict of interest.

MOTION: *Megan Orr moved to approve the Tembo Hospitality Group Agreement for FY 2024/2025. Trevor Brown seconded. Motion carried.*

Draft Budget Presentation

Mr. Breedlove and Ms. Fox presented the draft budget, detailing significant increases in the following areas while maintaining a conservative overall figure. Each board member received a detailed proposed budget for FY 2024/2025. Key budget highlights are as follows:

- Pages 13-14 of the proposed budget contains details of each line item. Mr. Breedlove explained each item that increased significantly, i.e. double-digit increases.
- Projection of occupancy tax collections meet current FY of \$2.5 million. It is anticipated that there will be flat growth of the above amount until July when a 2-4% increase will occur. Total budget is \$3,117,372.00 which includes occupancy tax, penalties, ad revenue, investment earnings, and fund balance transfers to fund capital projects.
- The tourism capital projects fund is budgeted at \$650,000.00 to reflect expressed interest from two projects.
- The budget proposes a cost-of-living adjustment for employees of 6.5%, reflecting the fact that the employees have not received COLA for the last two years; 6.5 percent accounts for COLA increases of 3.1% and 3.4% per year respectively.
- The miscellaneous category shows a 47.46% increase due to the purchase of promotional items (which need to be ordered every few years, as needed) and photo licensing to build a photo library.
- Travel has increased 45.83% reflecting increases in educational and social media conferences in addition to actual costs of airfare, registration, and lodging. It also includes sponsorship of Outdoor Economy Conference at \$2,500.00 in Cherokee.
- Postage has increased significantly; therefore, it is projected that the increase is 38.76%, an increase of \$11,892.00.
- Ad firm media increased 90.56% or \$266,848.00. The reason for the increase is that the ad budget has been under programmed and under funded since 2018, before High Hampton's closure and COVID. The increase will keep the ad budget competitive and bring overnight stays to Jackson County. The cost of email campaigns is increasing 83.33%.
- The budget for website projects is increasing 216.8% or \$27,100. In 2015 there were only a few thousand visitors to the website. Last year the number of visitors to the website was 700,000+. We are investing heavily in the revamping of our SEO strategy and using AI tools to deliver the best information to enhance the website visitor experience.
- Grants increased 38.1% to fund a public art grants and funding for sustainable tourism initiatives. Grant programs will be developed in the new fiscal year.
- Ad form miscellaneous increases 53.77% to account for BGRM travel and website tech tools (ALLIAI for SEO and AssessiBe which is a tool that helps websites become accessible to people with disabilities by automatically adjusting their content to meet compliance standards like the ADA and WCAG - Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). The category also includes the photo licensing fees for Carvertise, which allows ads showing Jackson County photos on for hire automobiles in the Atlanta and Charlotte areas.

This proposed budget is a draft and board members are encouraged to read and direct any questions or concerns to Mr. Breedlove. The final budget will be voted on in June.

There was a discussion on Breedlove's director note about examining the occupancy tax rate in Jackson vs. neighboring counties. Breedlove said other surrounding counties in WNC have a tax rate of 6% and the board should consider its competitiveness as additional funds generated could potentially fund community projects through the TCPF program. Mr. Breedlove notes that discussion of this will be a item for the board in the coming year.

JCTDA Director's Brief

Mr. Breedlove presented the report highlights as follows:

- Ms. Addy earned a Professionals in Destination Management Certificate. Kara will lead efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of the TDA workforce, including the participation in training and professional development.
- Training and lessons learned to improve marketing communications will be a priority in the coming year.
- Hotel occupancy in May was down slightly from 2023.
- New kiosks are coming Friday which are designated for Sylva (2) and Cashiers (4)
- 120,000 Visitor maps (Cashiers, Sylva, Dillsboro and Hiking & Waterfall maps) are being printed and should arrive in ten days.
- A photo of the Northern Lights that were seen in Sylva and posted on Facebook went viral.

Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Director Report

Mr. Breedlove presented the latest report. Highlights are as follows:

- Visitors to the Chamber increased during April.
- 35 new businesses joined the Chamber in April.
- The Chamber is researching several new retail products since there has been great interest in Chamber merchandise.

Cashiers Chamber Directors Report

Ms. Gregory presented the report. Highlights are as follows:

- The new software is in the process of being debugged and should be on-line in June.
- Burger Week in Cashiers was a success. There was a wrap-up party last week.
- The Cashiers Area Chamber Visitor Guide and Directory are being published.
- Mr. Fletcher asked about the Cashiers Greenway Ramble. There was a brief discussion about the Ramble. Information regarding the Ramble is on the TDA website, and more information will be forthcoming next month as its related to their TCPF application.

Lou Hammond Group Annual Plan Presentation

Carter Long presented the LHG annual plan and achievements of the past year. Ms. Long discussed the future plans in the fields of food and beverage, with a focus on promoting sustainable travel and

attracting higher-spending visitors. The strategy involves leveraging media relationships, a shift from paid influencers to trade content partnerships and maintaining their press release program and promotional partnerships.

Ms. Kosater outlined LHG's plans to showcase the culinary and outdoor attractions, such as experiencing the activities in different seasons, in Jackson County, with a focus on social media partnerships, digital content creation and targeted giveaways and promotions.

Rawle Murdy Annual Plan Presentation

John Kautz and Mark Hartzel presented the annual plan for BGRM, focusing on two specific goals:

- (1) To position Jackson County to compete and win at the highest level among destinations for adventures and experiences in the mountains of WNC.
- (2) Drive accommodations and fill need periods in occupancy.

BGRM will meet their goals by enhancing email data with segmentation and the use of the data to target specific audiences with custom messaging and marketing programs. They will continue the storytelling campaign, evolving the storytelling style from informational to first-person narratives and incorporating more digital and widget-style elements.

There was a discussion on Carvertise.

Social Media Plan Presentation

Ms. Addy gave her report on social media impressions and engagements and updated the board on her goals for FY 2024-2025 which can be found in detail on page 5 of the proposed budget document. The social media report was also attached to the agenda for this meeting.

The audience following for all social media platforms is up 81% since 2023. Video views are increasing. Ms. Addy interjected that it is interesting which videos take off and are very popular. For example, waterfall videos are very popular.

Updates from Individual Board Members

None

Announcements

Mr. Breedlove encouraged board members to attend the next meeting to approve the budget and TCPF grants.

Adjourn

MOTION: *Travor Brown motioned to adjourn. Ashlie Mitchell seconded. Motion carried.*

The meeting was adjourned at 3:09 PM by Mr. Fletcher.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held June 19, 2024 in person at JCTDA headquarters unless otherwise posted.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ashlie Mitchell", is written over a horizontal line.

Ashlie Mitchell, Secretary
Jackson County TDA Board
Approved: June 19, 2024