



MEETING MINUTES

Jackson County Tourism Development Authority

Board of Directors Meeting

August 15, 2024 (Thursday) @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 Ms. Orr, Vice Chair. Mr. Fletcher joined the meeting remotely after the call to order.

- **Members in attendance:** Executive Director Nick Breedlove; Daniel Fletcher, Chair; Ashlie Mitchell, Secretary; Megan Orr, Vice Chair; Board Members, Craig Smith, Mandy Cantrell, Trevor Brown, Robert Jumper, Mark Jones, Julie Spiro, Susan Gregory and Mandi Cantrell
 - **Members absent:** Darlene Fox
- Others in attendance:** Cheryl Osborne, Minutes Clerk, John Kautz, BGRM; Aneska Walrath and Gina Stouffer, Lou Hammond Group; Lance Hardin and Bill Horton, Highlands/Cashiers Land Trust; Callie Moore, Mountain True; Jane Mauer, Smokies Life (formerly Great Smokies Mountains Association)

Approve Agenda

MOTION: *Craig Smith moved to approve the agenda. Robert Jumper seconded. Motion carried.*

Public Comment

Ms. Mauer presented an update on visitation at GSMNP, which is down 8% this year over last year.

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 – No comments.

Review and Approval of June 19, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Minutes of the June 19 meeting are available on the JCTDA website. They were also attached to the agenda for this meeting. No comments were made.

MOTION: *Craig Smith moved to approve June 19, 2024 meeting minutes. seconded. Robert Jumper seconded. The motion carried.*

Review and Approval of June 30, 2024 and July 31, 2024 Financial Reports

Ms. Fox was absent. Mr. Breedlove presented the financial report as follows. Highlights for June include Occupancy Tax collections \$185,535.54 with penalties of \$46.04 and YTD collection totals of \$2,209,585.44 which is 83.38% of the budget. Airbnb collections totaled \$58,742.61. The Home Away and VRBO total was \$20,581.86 and the VACASA, NC total was \$6,111.20. 77 accounts reported rentals for May rentals (increase of 1 account from last year). Collections were down 1.60% from the same period in 2023. The June 30, 2024 cash balance is \$279,054.08 with investments totaling \$3,450,000.00. June expenses were \$175,751.85 with FYTD expenses totaling \$2,305,999.52 with encumbrances of \$2,905.80 for a combined total of \$2,308,905.32, equaling 65.20% of the budget.

Mr. Breedlove presented the financial report as follows. Highlights for July include Occupancy Tax collections \$276,502.15 with penalties of \$187.50 and YTD collection totals of \$276,102.15 which is 11.06% of the budget. Airbnb collections totaled \$61,243.62. The Home Away and VRBO total was \$54,945.86 and the VACASA, NC total was \$7,178.47. 92 accounts reported rentals for June rentals (increase of 11 accounts from last year). Collections were down 3.06% from the same period in 2023. The July 31, 2024 cash balance is \$307,075.65 with investments totaling \$3,450,000.00. July expenses were \$202,020.88 with FYTD expenses totaling \$202,020.88 with encumbrances of \$156,000.00 for a combined total of \$1,762,020.88 equaling 10.44% of the budget.

MOTION: *Robert Jumper moved to approve the June and July financial reports as presented. Julie Spiro seconded. The motion carried.*

Review and Approve Budget Amendment

This budget amendment increases the Website Projects line item by \$65,000 for the SimpleView redesign of the TDA website. The website redesign will feature user-friendly book direct links to hotels in the area for booking reservations. The redesign should be complete by March or April 2025.

There will also be a brand refresh associated to align with the redesign of the website which will be done by BGRM. The "Play On" logo has been used for the past 12 years and is due for an update.

Funds in the budget amendment will offset the expenditure.

Mr. Smith commented that he would be happy to provide input into the design of the new logo.

MOTION: *Craig Smith moved to approve the budget amendment. Mandi Cantrell seconded. The motion carried.*

Approve Simple View Contract

The SimpleView Contract is a standard Jackson County vendor contract for the website redesign as described in the above budget amendment.

MOTION: *Craig Smith moved to approve the Simple View Contract. Daniel Fletcher seconded. The motion carried.*

Occupancy Tax Rate Discussion

A discussion points summary was included with the agenda for this meeting. Mr. Breedlove discussed the background for considering increasing the occupancy tax rate. Counties in the surrounding counties in the state have increased or are increasing their tax rates to 6% from the current 4%. Mr. Breedlove discussed the importance of increasing the occupancy tax to fund marketing and capital projects in Jackson County and the increase is the best path forward to keep marketing budget strong and invest in large-scale capital projects. Mr. Breedlove has spoken to a Mr. Patel in Dillsboro, owner of four properties, who is in favor of the increase. Mr. Jones has full support for the initiative and has lobbied within the county commission for the increase.

Craig Smith is supportive of the 6% tax increase for tourism-related projects in Jackson County, citing growth and demand drivers in the area. Ms. Cantrell is torn on the issue, emphasizing the need for a real focus on demand drivers and smart use of the extra 2% revenue. Mr. Fletcher expressed concerns about the impact of the occupancy tax increase on other lodging partners in Cashiers, concerns about guests who have made reservations at the 4% rate then are told that the rate has increased at checkout time, causing alienation of travelers.

Mr. Breedlove expressed the need for urgency on the matter since the county commissioners could decide to increase the occupancy tax without input from the JCTDA and Mr. Jones, who is an advocate of the increase, will be leaving the commission at the end of this year. The timing is also right so that the TDA could implement the rate change in July of 2025 if approved now.

Robert Jumper and Ashlie Mitchell agree that the increase will be beneficial.

MOTION: *Robert Jumper moved to request to the county commission to raise the occupancy tax rate to 6%. Craig Smith seconded. Motion carried. Daniel Fletcher said he abstained from the vote, and was reminded he had a duty to vote under our bylaws and voted nay on the proposal, citing personal reasons.*

Grant Request – Mountain Heritage Day

Mountain Heritage Day Festival, which will be celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2024, is requesting \$7,500 to provide funds for promotion, shade tents, port-o-johns and courtesy shuttles at the festival.

The increased amount was requested as a result of hosting a band during the evening with the goal of increasing overnight stays. The TDA has traditionally funded \$2,500, except for last year, when \$5,000 was granted. The Executive Committee recommends funding \$2,500 this year and analyzing the overnight stays generated by the concert.

MOTION: *Robert Jumper moved to approve the Mountain Heritage Day Festival grant request in the amount of \$2,500. Craig Smith seconded. The motion carried.*

Grant Request – District 4 Conservation and Eco-Tourism Plan – Callie Moore (Mountain True)

Lance Hardin and Bill Horton of Highlands/Cashiers Land Trust and Callie Moore from Mountain True gave a presentation regarding the grant request for \$40,000 to produce a study that will develop a plan with recommendations to develop a Long-Term Conservation Plan for Jackson County District 4. District 4 encompasses the townships of Caney Fork, Canada, River Mountain, Hamburg and Cashiers. The community need that will be addressed is the preservation and expansion of high-value natural, cultural, and scenic resources, including eco-tourism opportunities.

Mr. Hardin explained that the Urban Land Institute study recommended a conservation plan in the Cashiers area to manage and balance development pressures and growth while retaining the environmental treasures and the rural and small-town character.

Bill Horton outlines a year-long process to review Jackson County's codes and ordinances, identify weak spots, and develop policy priorities for the county commission.

Jackson County funded this initiative with \$80,000. The Executive Committee agrees with the grant request.

MOTION: *Daniel Fletcher moved to approve the grant request from District 4 Conservation and Eco-Tourism Plan in the amount of \$40,000. Ashlie Mitchell seconded. The motion carried.*

JCTDA Director's Brief

The Director's Report was included in the email for the agenda for this meeting. Mr. Breedlove presented the report highlights as follows:

- One of the biggest challenges facing the JCTDA is filling vacant board seats. There have been 2 vacancies on the board for over 2 years. There have been properties bought by the same owner which limits the field of eligibility for candidates. There is also a challenge with attendance with existing board members, so a larger pool of potential candidates is helpful. Mr. Breedlove then gave recommendations to enlarge the candidate pool based on recommendations from the Executive Committee.
- The above recommendations will be contained in the occupancy tax increase legislation.
- Tourism numbers are up. There will be articles in local newspapers announcing this news.
- The new digital NC Trail Guide is out and includes Sylva's outdoor recreation areas. Mr. Breedlove showed the Trail Guide section on Sylva.

- Ms. Stouffer from Lou Hammond Group recapped the LHG PR activities for the past 2 months.

Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Director Report

The Director' report was included in the agenda for this meeting. Ms. Spiro presented highlights and updates as follows:

- Locally made soap is available at the Chamber.
- Concerts on the Creek attendance has increased over the attendance from last year.
- A brief update on the 107 business relocation project was given. It was noted by Mr. Breedlove that there is a website NC107.com on-line for information on road construction.

Cashiers Chamber Directors Report

The report was included in the agenda for this meeting. Ms. Gregory presented the report. Highlights are as follows:

- The Cashiers Greenway Ramble was opened. The Ramble starts behind the Chamber and is a one-mile loop with lighting and wi-fi.
- Business After Hours is on-going.

Updates from Individual Board Members

Mr. Smith announced that there will be a concert on Saturday at 2:00 PM at Whiteside Brewery.

Announcements

Mr. Jumper will be representing the TDA at Bridge Park ribbon cutting and the installation of a plaque in honor of the JCTDA investment in the upgrade of the Park.

Adjourn

MOTION: Robert Jumper motioned to adjourn. Craig Smith seconded. Motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:38 PM by Ms. Orr.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held September 25, 2024 in person at JCTDA headquarters unless otherwise posted.



Ashlie Mitchell, Secretary
Jackson County TDA Board
Approved: October 16, 2024