Jackson County
MORE PEAK MOMENTS NC

To: TDA Board
From: Nick Breedlove, TDA Executive Director
Date: November 12, 2026
Subject: Monthly Director's Brief

Dear Board Members,

Please find my monthly update below. With no full board meeting in October, several items come to you for action on November 18.

1. **Dillsboro Rail Bike Project** – Jackson County, through Economic Development Director Tiffany Henry, submitted a Tourism Capital Project Fund application requesting $205,160 to purchase 14 motor-assisted rail bikes. Great Smoky Mountains Railroad (GSMR) would operate them on its tracks in Dillsboro. My role has been working with legal counsel on the funding agreement. The Executive Committee has reviewed the request and is forwarding it to the full board for action on November 18.
    a. **The request:** The $205,160 covers 14 Rail Gliders with motor assist, 28 batteries, a starter kit, crating, and an estimated $4,450 in shipping. The County chose motor assist over the $137,850 pedal-only option because it opens the ride to older adults and visitors with limited mobility.
    b. **GSMR's commitment:** VP and General Manager Kim Albritton has committed the railroad in writing. GSMR purchased the former Dillsboro Town Hall at 42 Front Street for $175,000 as the depot and launch base, and will invest another $70,000 in building improvements, rail siding, protective and maintenance structures, security, and power. That is $245,000 of private investment in Dillsboro alongside the request.
    c. **Local support:** The application includes letters of support from Dillsboro Mayor Tim Parris and Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Todd Vinyard.
    d. **Projected return:** The application projects about 15,000 riders and 3,000 room nights over an April through October season, and a 10-year useful life for the equipment.

e. **Funding agreement:** I worked with our legal counsel on the TCPF funding agreement. It has been fully vetted.

This project would give visitors a new excursion that starts in Dillsboro and ends in Sylva.

2. **Public Art Policy, Application, and Funding Agreement** – I drafted a policy, application, and funding agreement so that every public art funding request is evaluated by the same clear, legally reviewed standards. The full policy is attached to the agenda.
    a. **Content standards:** Funded art focuses on native plants, wildlife, natural landscapes, and recognized regional architecture, consistent with how we present Jackson County. The attached policy lists the full standards.
    b. **Local approval first:** The applying town's arts committee or town board must approve the design in writing before it comes to us.
    c. **Before work begins:** Applicants submit color-accurate final renderings and certifications, and all parties sign a project agreement.
    d. **Ownership and use:** Artists keep their copyright unless a work-for-hire or written assignment is signed. JCTDA and Jackson County receive a perpetual, royalty-free license to photograph and use images of the artwork for tourism promotion and governmental purposes.
    e. **Maintenance:** The agreement spells out responsibility and authority for inspecting, maintaining, repairing, and, when necessary, relocating or removing a work.
    f. **Payment and risk:** Grants are paid only as reimbursement after completion, with no upfront or progress payments, and only if the work matches the approved design. Applicants carry indemnification and insurance naming JCTDA and Jackson County as additional insureds.
    g. **Legal review:** I developed the policy in close coordination with legal counsel and all feedback is incorporated. It is final and ready for your consideration.
    h. **Original grant request:** The grant request that prompted this policy is attached to the agenda for your review. Executive Committee has reviewed that application and is recommending it to the full board, provided the applicant uses the new funding policy application and agreement. That allows us to enter into a funding agreement with them. If they return the revised application promptly, the project can stay on track.
3. **Conflict of Interest Policy and Service Rotation Roster** – This updated policy sets clear, objective rules for how we select local providers for TDA operations

and media visits, such as lodging, guiding, and transportation, including when a provider has a connection to a board member.

   a. **How providers are chosen:** Objective selection criteria and a neutral rotation among providers, tracked by staff in a spreadsheet.

   b. **What it asks of board members:** Members with an interest do not participate in and recuse themselves from related decisions, and every member signs an annual acknowledgment.

   c. **Legal review:** Legal reviewed and approved the policy without changes. It is ready for adoption on November 18.

4. **HR Policy Update: Paid Time Off** – The Paid Time Off section of our HR policy has a one-sentence update. It is attached to the agenda and comes to you for a vote on November 18. Employees may already use paid time off before it accrues, up to their annual limit. The new language makes clear what happens when time off goes beyond that limit.
   a. **New language:** "Any time off taken beyond the annual accrual limit will be considered unpaid time off, and deducted from the appropriate pay period in which the time was taken."

   b. **Accruals:** No accrual amounts have changed.

5. **November 18 Board Meeting** – Please reserve 90 minutes for this meeting. The agenda carries the rail bike request and three policy items, and I want to allow time for a full discussion of each.
   a. **Executive Committee:** The committee met in October and again on November 12 to refine the policy documents, so what reaches you has already been through two rounds of review.

   b. **Incoming board members:** Justin Smith and Mary Lanning join the board in December and have been invited to observe this meeting but we expect them in attendance in December. Mary is a longtime TDA board member who served multiple years during our founding period, when I started, and she brings a wealth of experience. Please join me in welcoming them both.

   c. **Board orientation:** I provided a new board member orientation for Justin and Mary so they are ready to contribute from their first meeting.

   d. **Open seat:** We are still in need of an appointment from the Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce (CACOC).

6. **Website and Search Performance** – Our annual SEO report (November 2025 through October 2026) shows DiscoverJacksonNC.com growing in a year when organic website traffic fell about 25% industry-wide.
   a. **Organic search:** Sessions from search rose 11% and engaged sessions rose 25%, meaning more people found us and more of them stayed to plan.

b. **Overall traffic:** The site recorded 1.1 million sessions, up 23%, and the engagement rate improved 36%.

c. **Town pages:** Organic visitors to the Cashiers page rose 330%, Sylva 256%, and Judaculla Rock 103%. These are among the pages I rewrote with Frequently Asked Questions, as shared in my September brief.

d. **Search ranking:** Our average Google position improved from 12.3 to 8, and clicks from search rose 22% for August through October compared with the same months last year.

e. **AI discovery:** Referrals from AI tools such as ChatGPT rose 243%, and our impressions in Google's AI results rose 65% from June to October. Five of the top 10 pages AI surfaces are our town pages.

f. **Partner referrals:** Visitors from search clicked through to our local partners 10,254 times and clicked "Book Now" 1,839 times. Partner referrals rose 12% for August through October compared with the same months last year.

Looking ahead: The report cautions that organic traffic may decline over the coming year as more travelers get answers from AI without clicking through to a website. That is an industry-wide shift, not a reflection of our work. The gains above position us to remain visible in AI-driven search as those habits change.

7. **Dillsboro Billboard** – We have secured a billboard on US 441 a few miles outside Dillsboro, and creative should be up soon. It invites travelers to Dine, stay, and shop (not final messaging). In 2025, 17,500 vehicles passed that location per day. Our goal is to get those travelers off the highway to stop and support the local economy.
8. **Community and Stakeholder Engagement**
    a. **County Commissioners (Oct. 6):** I presented our annual tourism update to the Jackson County Commissioners at their 7 p.m. meeting. The report was well received.

    b. **Town of Sylva:** I delivered our annual tourism update to the Sylva Town Board, which was also well received.

    c. **WCU HT 238:** I spoke to Western Carolina University's introductory Hospitality and Tourism class on tourism and what a destination is. The presentation was well received by the students.

    d. **WNC Pottery Festival (Nov. 7):** I attended the festival and downtown was absolutely packed. This event continues to bring people from all over the country.

    e. **Dillsboro 2027 events:** The Dillsboro Merchants Association (DMA) notified me that it will not hold the Front Street Arts and Crafts Festival or

ColorFest in 2027. The Easter Hat Parade and Lights and Luminaries will continue. The DMA plans to use 2027 to reevaluate how Dillsboro is promoted.

9. **Administration and Finance**
    a. **Occupancy tax:** Collections remain strong following the record figures I reported in September: $591,800.77 for the month and $1,058,397 year to date.

September Occupancy Tax Collections – We saw a large increase in occupancy tax collected in October for September stays. The number of reporting accounts held flat at 99, so the growth came from stronger business at existing properties rather than new ones. The lodging categories below total $385,741.53, up $72,011.23 (22.95%) from September 2025.

Lodging category	September 2025	September 2026	Change	% change
Vacation Rentals	$160,784.54	$201,570.74	+$40,786.20	+25.37%
Resorts	$63,943.31	$86,855.36	+$22,912.05	+35.83%
Motels & Hotels	$69,493.87	$79,627.40	+$10,133.53	+14.58%
Cabins/Cottages/Efficiencies/Chalets	$17,252.71	$15,139.68	-$2,113.03	-12.25%
Bed & Breakfast	$1,837.73	$2,034.51	+$196.78	+10.71%
Campgrounds & RV	$418.14	$513.84	+$95.70	+22.89%

Cabins, cottages, efficiencies, and chalets were the only category to decline. Among the booking platforms, Airbnb and VRBO drove most of the vacation rental growth:

Booking platform	September 2025	September 2026	Change	% change
Airbnb	$86,522.94	$110,675.36	+$24,152.42	+27.91%
HomeAway / VRBO	$28,364.52	$44,987.49	+$16,622.97	+58.60%
Vacasa NC (2025) / VRM NC OPCO (2026)	$6,117.15	$4,789.52	-$1,327.63	-21.70%