



## Explore Lawrence

Board of Directors Meeting

January 31, 2025

Present: Drew Gaschler (chair), Kim Anspach, Executive Director, Heather Shull, Tina Tourtillott, Heidi Champagne, Luis Ruiz, Kirk Goodman, Emily Peterson, Andrew Holt

Absent: Anthea Scouffas, Amber Sellers

Staff: Allison Calvin, Director of Marketing, Ruth DeWitt, External Affairs and Sales Operations Manager (note taker)

Drew called the meeting together at 1:06 PM

### MINUTES/FINANCIALS:

The board approved the minutes of the December meeting (board retreat) without changes. (Heidi, Heather)

Kim shared a preliminary financial report. The numbers are not final from year's end, but expect those in February. She is adding lines for the Mobile Visitor Center (more below)

Kim also shared accounting issues with the board. The accountant missed the 990 filing and \$30,000 of bills in December. She is obligated to self-report and pay the fine herself on missing the 990 filing. Kim has discussed the issue with the Executive Team, who recommended developing an RFP to find a new accountant. Kim will develop the RFP.

If any board member has a recommendation for a good contact to send the RFP, she would appreciate it.

Kim will be auditing the year-end financials and making sure things are on track.

The board accepted the financial report.

### REVISED BUDGET 2025:

Kim presented a revised budget for 2025 that included a specific section for the Mobile Visitor Center to better track expenses and grant spending.

The accountant suggested adding a line #7650 with sublines for MVIC expenses. Sublines are: recurring expenses, maintenance, registration. Line 7650.2 for van purchase, amortized expenses for it to even out expenses over the year. The grant application will be reflected in line #8200 and also reflect savings from moving out of the 812 Mass St location. Payroll for staffing the MVIC will be reflected, but on a separate line.

The board needs to approve the revised budget, which will be sent to the city to update our agreement.

Allison presented a policy change for marketing sponsorships, which are reflected in a change in the marketing lines. She proposed shifting \$22,000 out of sponsorships into digital marketing for events. The TGT grants and the Unmistakable Lawrence marketing grants were redundant, and a better use of our funding was to boost the grantee's marketing through our paid digital efforts for a higher return than giving them money to spend on marketing themselves.

The board approved the revised budget changes – new lines in for the MVIC and switch in marketing lines. (Heidi and Emily)

#### **STAFF REPORTS:**

##### **Marketing Report:**

Marketing continues to see a rise in engagement. The 2024 year-end results produced 13 million impressions, with a 1% click rate (an average for tourism). Impressions were 1,8 million in 2023, far exceeding the goal of 358-778K.

E-news continues to grow. There were 3,200 passport users and 4,700 check-ins in 2024.

A travel writer who came on a fam trip ended up doing an article in USA Today that nominated Free State Brewery as one of 10 top brewpubs in the country.

We are sponsoring the TBEX conference in Wichita in the fall. TBEX is considered one of the world's premier travel writers conference.

The board asked Allison about using an alternative to Tik Tok if it is banned. She said there are looking into YouTube shorts.

Details of audience engagement and year-end numbers are in the marketing report.

##### **Mobile Visitor Center:**

Ruth and Allison have conducted three feedback group meetings to learn what partners could use from a MVIC. They are hearing a desire for more of an experiential connection rather than a brochure rack on wheels! Local partners are also interested in making retail partnerships work. Ruth and Allison continue to develop design ideas with input from design firms.

The timeline currently is: the contractor has a build in front of ours, but once he starts on ours it should take about 4 weeks to complete. We need to get design concepts to him.

812 Mass Street is finished with the lease on March 31. We're closing the doors at the beginning of March and will spend March cleaning out and getting things moved over to the Carnegie Building. We met with the city's sustainability office about recycling items, donation sites, and trash pick up.

The landlord ok'd the lease ending in March, but raised the rent 10% to shorten the year.

##### **Restaurant Week:**

There will be a project report when the final numbers come in – but the week was successful by preliminary results. More than 58 locations participated and over 258K views were specific to

Restaurant Week on the website. Emily gave a report and thanked Allison and Laurel for all their hard work on it, and there were big improvements over last year. She mentioned adding the badge to the listing that the menu was available for several reasons. Users liked knowing a menu was listed and it prompted restaurants to get their menus in. Laurel got a shout out for generating terrific visual content.

### **Sales Team Report:**

Sales exceed the goal on Economic Impact generated for the city, in spite of revenue falling a little short of the goal. Kim and Laura are working on new goals that better reflect the sales team's work. New reports will include service reports and assists in addition to leads. The 2025 sales plan will be presented at the February meeting.

Laura has chosen her tradeshow and conference schedule for 2025. She'll be attending Small Market Summit in Branson, Going on Faith conference in August, and Small Market Meeting in Buffalo NY. She is looking into sharing these opportunities with some of the hoteliers once the budget implications are clear.

### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT:**

#### **Annual Report:**

Allison has started the annual report. We are waiting on financials from the end of the year since they are on an accrual schedule.

#### **Visitors Guide:**

Allison is already starting on the 2026 visitor guide, working with Sunflower and Side Studio for new graphics.

#### **Board Action:**

Kim passed out board Conflict of Interest forms. [Asked each member to sign and return.](#)

Kim requested board approval to sign the annual agreement with the City to access TGT funds, operating funds, and the bid fund. [Approved](#) (Tina, Emily)

Kim also requested board approval to enter into an agreement with Kansas Tourism for the grant funding for the Mobile Visitor Center. [Approved](#) (Emily, Heidi).

#### **Board Committees:**

Now with the new board in place, Kim shared the initiative to form board committees to expand our reach beyond the board members. The background is that eXplore Lawrence had requested a bylaws change to expand the board, but it was not approved by the city attorney. While they continue to work through that, Kim suggested forming various committees to engage stakeholders beyond board reach. She asked for board members to consider serving on a committee of interest, not to exceed three board members, per KOMA requirements. The committees are:

Mobile Visitor Center feedback group – members will meet on an as needed basis to develop the concept, and operations of using the MVIC. (This group is chaired by Allison)

Summit planning committee – members will meet as necessary to plan the 2025 Summit, planned for September 4. (This group is chaired by Ruth)

Organizational Health committee – members will focus on bylaws, City funding agreement, and other operational issues to ensure eXplore Lawrence remains strong.

Advocacy Committee – members will formalize an advocacy plan working with elected officials to communicate our shared community value to the City of Lawrence and Douglas County.

Sales Strategy and Collaboration – members will develop and evaluate sales operations, opportunities, and challenges, and determine strategic and valuable ways to use the bid fund to realistically target teams and conferences to come to Lawrence.

Board committees will be getting underway Q2.

Ex-officio members and not counted among board members, and therefore don't affect the KOMA requirements.

### **TGT Report:**

Looking over the TGT collections for 2024, they are slightly down from 2023, which was the highest year on record. Given KU football wasn't in town all fall, to see receipts down by 3%, is not a cause for alarm.

The STR end of year showed a pretty flat year, occupancy was up nearly 4%, but ADR was down slightly.

Kim shared that there are preliminary discussions about increasing the TGT rates. She passed out a memo that details what TGT collections have been, uses of TGT, and what our rates are compared to other communities. We found that Lawrence is on the low end of surrounding communities at 6% and our rate hasn't been increased since 2010.

Luis mentioned that initial increases in TGT would help to pay expenses related to World Cup, as no funding is currently available. He said the increased funding could be a legacy that allows Lawrence to spend in ways to increase tourism.

Luis is using the research to draft a memo to the City Manager, and the sooner these discussions happen, the sooner it can go before the Commissioners.

There were various reactions from the board, but overall they are looking forward to the discussion. The main concern is that the funding go to support tourism activities. Hotels are on the front line of this, as they interact with the people paying and asking about the increase.

Amber shared that there are not funding proposals in the statehouse that involve World Cup. The funding that passed last year was it. There could be something that comes up at the last minute, but right now there are no discussions.

Board members considered this a good opportunity to work with the City to increase funding, and also find a way to relate this to the City's KPIs and cement the value of tourism in those efforts.

No one on the board is interested in this becoming a way to supplement budget shortfalls at the City level, that the mission of the TGT tax remain forefront.

Kim and Luis ensured these discussions would continue. We plan to discuss this more with the hotels at the Director of Sales meeting scheduled for February 20. We'll report their reaction back after that meeting.

**ADJOURNMENT:**

Next meeting is February 28. 1:00 Carnegie Building.

Drew requested a motion to adjourn (Heidi, Heather). The meeting adjourned at 2:05 pm.

Respectfully submitted,  
Ruth DeWitt