



Swain County Tourism Development Authority

Official 2023 – 2024 Meeting Minutes



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07-12-2023 Regular Meeting

- Chairman Wiggins welcomed new board member Kevin Seagle, Chair of Swain County Board of Commissioners. Erin Smith and Jeremiah Wiggins recognized as reappointments to the board. Chair Wiggins then gave the board members the 2023-2024 binders. New in the meeting packets this year will be attendance record.

Marketing projects:

- Onboarding a new graphic designer and project manager for marketing
- Van Wrap will be applied to van July 25, 2023
- Now working with Concord Creative for TikTok and Facebook reels.
- Updating website with new blogs.
- Enhanced Nantahala Gorge page with all there is to do there; access to the river, picnic areas, restaurants, waterfalls fishing guides restrooms, along with rafting and. ziplining.
- Rebranding the aquarium campus and its three attractions: Aquarium, Fly Fishing Museum, and Farmers
- Market. Also, this will be a microsite site on ExploreBrysonCity.com.
- **Branding and promotion** of the term “fly fishing capital of the south”
 - Fly Fishing Museum
 - Aquarium
 - Information on all creeks, rivers, lakes
- Branding and logo design for the new water park.
- Google Analytics and Public Relations reports attached.
- Rita Jones gave an update on the Strawberry Jam Race expenditures final tally.
- Rita is also working on getting a DOT sign for the 4-lane relative to the Fly-Fishing Museum.

May occupancy tax report is \$153,284.98.

- Chairman Wiggins introduced David Huskins from Smoky Mountain Host to talk about the Corridor Study from Wesser Creek to Dillsboro and the 2% occupancy tax that is in Raleigh. Kevin Seagle left the meeting at 1:45 p.m. Eugene Shuler requested that the board change the time of the TDA meetings to help all the members that have businesses open during the day. Eugene made a motion to move the TDA board meeting to 2nd Tuesday of the month at 5:30 p.m. Seconded by Andy Bhakta. All in favor. Motion carried.

Regular Meeting 08-09-2023

This meeting was called to order at 12:05 p.m. by Chairman, Jeremiah Wiggins.

No Pledge of Allegiance due to location and no flag available.

Prayer was given by Cheryl Taylor.

Changes to the agenda: None Public Comment: None Erin Smith made a motion to approve the meeting minutes for 07/12/2023. Cheryl Taylor seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

- Kurt Angel from Deep Creek Services, spoke to the board about creating a plan for the other existing EV charging stations that the TDA has in storage. Kurt's recommendation was to set them up on any Swain County owned property that may be available with easy power hook-ups. Commissioner Seagle will be working with Kurt to see about getting the spaces needed at other Swain County facilities for these stations.

Marketing and Public Relations:

- 2024 Visitor Guide Planning underway.
- Van Wrap completed and is parked at Visitor Center.
- Mary Anne and Selena working on the Microsite for Fly Fishing Capital. Will get with Eugene to work on the verbiage before launching.
- Updating website with new blogs.
- Branding and logo design for the new water park is on hold, pending direction from county manager. The Rec Park Director has a logo and would like to get together with the county manager and Mary Anne.
- Tiktok
- Mary Anne gave a marketing update from VisitNC which is the state tourism office.
- Paper map sales are booming. Sales of maps are up 20-30% over the last year, according to a cartography firm in Charlotte. The Wall Street Journal commented on the fact that this is happening due to cell phone batteries dying, no cell signals, and the fact that a smartphone will lead you the quickest route somewhere therefore, missing sights along the way.
- Need to talk to Eugene about the brown DOT sign.
- **June occupancy tax report** is \$199,025.53.
- Chairman Wiggins brought up a discussion regarding the change of TDA meetings. After much discussion Shannon Lackey made a motion to move the meetings back to 2nd Wednesday of each month at 9:00a.m. at the Administration Building. Erin Smith seconded the motion. No vote taken. Shannon rescinded the motion, then put a new motion in. Shannon Lackey made a motion to put the TDA meetings on 2nd Wednesday of each month at 12:00 noon at the Swain County Administration Building. Erin Smith seconded this motion. All in favor. Motion carried. Chairman Wiggins then went over the Rules and Procedure Policy for the TDA. Jeremiah made a motion on this policy with a change of the TDA meeting day to 2nd Wednesday of each month at 12:00 noon at the Swain County Administration Building. Shannon Lackey seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

09-13-2023 Strategic Planning Session

- Chairman Wiggins gave an overview of recent state legislation. The TDA may need to put more information out on the website and have the finance subcommittee look over some of the policies and procurement policies.
- Shannon Lackey made mention of need for an in-house phone at the Aquarium for emergency purposes. This will be looked into by staff. Shannon also mentioned he would like to have the Fly-Fishing Museum sign relocated to the top of the building rather than side of the building which is where it is at the present time.

10-11-2023 Regular Meeting

- Executive Director Mary Anne Shea gave a list of long-term goals that board members had sent to her via email. The board discussed strategic goals that they would like to pursue over the next 3-5 years. Mary Anne will assemble these in priority order for the next regular meeting, including but not limited to:
 - Event planner
 - 4-Corner project at the Heritage Center
 - Light Show at Event Park
 - More updated Downtown
 - Swimming at Finger Lakes
 - Economic Development w/ County Commissioners
- The board would like to send a letter to the Swain County Commissioners asking to partner with them to hire an event planner sharing of cost if possible. The board would like to send along with the letter a job description of the job and who they would report to.

Short Term Projects:

- Waterwheel for Grist Mill at Aquarium Campus
- New Sign for Fly Fishing Museum that is visible from the road
- EV charging stations - determine where on county property to install the remaining units.
- Pickleball Courts - improve the courts that exist.
- Brown Sign for the Fly-Fishing Museum - work with Chris Lee at Department of Transportation

10-11-2023 Executive Session

- Begin potential search for an Executive Director to replace Mary Anne Shea who is retiring as of December 31, 2023.

10-11-2023 Special Zoom Meeting

- This meeting was called to order at 12:03 p.m. by Chairman, Jeremiah Wiggins via the Zoom platform.
- Mary Anne Shea gave a recap of a phone call she and Chairman Wiggins had on September 20 regarding her retirement on 12/31/23. She asked for a Succession Planning Committee to be formed to plan for hiring, training, and ongoing plans for a new Director. Volunteers for this committee are Erin Smith, PattiJo Taylor, Jeremiah Wiggins, and Shannon Lackey. That committee will meet via Zoom next week to review job qualifications, job descriptions, salary range, and job posting. Jeremiah stated that he will speak to the county manager about the salary range before then. General qualifications discussed include the requirement of a college degree, 3-5 years marketing experience in social media, public relations, and strategic planning.
- Discussion ensued regarding the hiring of an Event Planner. An event planning committee was established with board members Erin Smith, PattiJo Taylor, and Cheryl Taylor. Mary Anne will write a job description and job requirements for the position and send it to committee members prior to their first committee meeting the following week.

11-08-2023 Regular Meeting

- Nate Bowen, Engineer from the Town of Bryson presented a synopsis of the work that the town has planned for the next couple of years for downtown water/sewer and streetscape. For the beautification piece the TDA would like to have a person sit in on that part of the plans if possible. Sam Patillo, the town manager, would like to have someone from the TDA on board also.
- Mary Anne spoke about the 2% being approved by the state legislature.

Brief Executive report:

- a. Halloween Candy was a big success
- Downtown Christmas décor getting many accolades
- c. The Visitor center broke attendance records in October. Over 6,500.
- d. Continual growth on our website; a downward trend for competing websites
- e. TV segment planning underway for Thanksgiving weekend. Air date 12/23/2023.

11-08-2023 Executive Session

- **Event planning committee** spokesperson Cheryl Taylor spoke about the parameters of this job description. This person will report to the Executive Director.
- Executive Director committee spokesperson is PattiJo Taylor. PattiJo spoke that the director will report to the TDA board.
- Chair Wiggins made a motion to separate TDA human resources from Swain County for the purpose of raising the pay scale for employees. PattiJo Taylor seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried. Board members came to a consensus on the salary range for two positions:
 - Annual salary range for Director: \$55,000.00 to \$75,000.00
 - Annual salary range for Event Planner: \$40,000.00 to \$55,000.00
- Shannon Lackey made a motion to approve paying the GAP on Mary Anne retirement for up to \$15,000. Erin Smith seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Discussion on talking with Jackson County about an EIN number and Articles of INC for TDA.

12-13-2023 – Regular Meeting

- Changes to the agenda: Chair Wiggins added to the end of regular meeting to discuss and vote on the Strawberry Jam race for 2024.
- Erin Smith made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from: 1. 11/08/2023 Regular Meeting 2. 11/08/2023 Executive Session Janene Lancaster seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried

Report

- Fly Fishing Capital Logo and Branding launch by the end of January 2024 2.
- Visitor Guide launch by the end of January. 3.
- Small Town Christmas featuring Bryson City December 2023. Air date 12/23/2023 4. Talked about the importance of having a Christmas Light Show for 2024. 5.
- HR Update – We are going to work through the transition under the guidance of Craft HR in Asheville with the help of the county finance office.
- EIN in progress
- **Occupancy tax for October** is \$211,840.30
- Jeremiah brought up the Strawberry Jam race for 2024, whether the board would like to do this event again. The board came to a consensus that the race needs to be held for at least one more year

1/10/2024 – Regular Meeting

- Pineapple PR is waiting on the statistics on the episode of Small Town Christmas. This episode will air each year with other prior year episodes.
- Pineapple PR monthly report is attached via email.
- 2024 Visitor Guide is now at the printer.
- The Fly-Fishing Capital microsite has launched. You may view it at www.flyfishingcapital.com.
- Pineapple is looking for fly fishing Instagram influencers to help promote it.
- The Visit App has launched on our website and is available to visitors on their mobile devices.
- We are experiencing rapid growth on our website's statistics due to search optimization.
- December occupancy tax is \$169,676.03 an increase of 8% over last year, and 78% over 2019.
- Status on Event Planner Hiring, committee recommends readvertise the job under a different title.
- Beautification committee gave report on light show proposal from Mosca.
- Placement of remaining EV Charging stations, Kevin Seagle will work with Kurt Angel on this project.
EIN number is now in place for TDA.
- Craft Hr Solutions for April 1st implementation.
- The board discussed having an MOU with Swain County for the event park for a term of 10 years. Especially if they were to decide to purchase the Christmas light show from Mosca. It was decided to present to the Swain County commissioners at their meeting on Jan. 23 the MOU from Swain County to the TDA for a 10-year period.
- Erin Smith then made a motion to buy the Christmas Light Show from Mosca at the cost of \$481,443.00 pending the approval of the MOU from the county commissioners. Eugene Shuler seconded this motion. All in favor. Motion carried. Quote: JGM-011024-B1. Mary Anne and Rita left the meeting at 1:20p.m.

1/10/2024 – Executive Session

- This meeting was called to order by Chair Wiggins, under G.S.143—318.11(a) Executive Session at 1:20p.m. Chairman Wiggins opened discussion on the hiring of the Executive Director position. After much discussion it was decided by the board to repost the Executive Director position to run ads until January 31, 2024. Then, do the interviews the week of February 5, 2024. The final decision will be made at the February 14, 2024, board meeting. The board was all in agreement on this time frame. Chair Wiggins made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Shannon Lackey seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

2/14/2024 – Regular Meeting

- Jay Mallas from Mosca Designs presented the updated version of the 2024 Christmas Light Show.
- Eugene Shuler made a motion to approve the cost of Mosca to install the light show for \$175,000.00. PattiJo Taylor seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Rita Jones gave an update regarding the HR for the TDA employees that is to be implemented as of 04/01/2024.
- 2024 Visitor Guides to be delivered any day
- Pineapple PR monthly report is attached via email.
- Marketing focus is on spring break and summer travel. Many cabins are already booked for June and July.
- Due to having a new Christmas Light show for 2024, we will start promoting it so people will go ahead and book their cabins and Polar Express tickets before they sell out.
- We have partnered with the state tourism office to host 6 adventure travel leaders in June from AdventureElevate North America 2024.
- We are currently 2 months behind in budget planning due to director transition. The March meeting will be held at Mckinley Edwards Inn as we have done in the past. A suggestion would be for the board to look at the needs at event part for parking, electricity, and other improvements.

Expenditures for light show:

- Light Show: \$481,442.00
- First Year Expenses: \$265,000
- Total: \$746,442.00

3/13/2024 – Budget Meeting

- Calley Elliott spoke about the retirement part of the human resources for the TDA. Cally recommendation was that the TDA have an escrow account for the surety that has to go to the Local Government Employees' Retirement System.
- Erin Smith made a motion that the Tourism Development Authority have in place an escrow account to cover all the employees' retirement that are full time employees. Cheryl Taylor seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Acting chair, Shannon Lackey made a motion to accept the North Carolina Local Government Employees' Retirement System (LGERS) on behalf of the Swain County Tourism Development Authority. Erin seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Mary Anne Shea introduced the new executive director Sarah Conley to the TDA board. Sarah spoke about how excited she was to be on board the TDA.
- Mary Anne spoke about having Western Carolina come in and be a partner with us at the Appalachian Rivers Aquarium. A team will be coming on March 22, 2024.
- Eugene Shuler made a motion to hire Lisa Bryan as the Event Manager for the TDA at a salary of \$45,000.00 plus benefits. Janene Lancaster seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Janene Lancaster made a motion that all TDA employees wear a uniform shirt. Andy seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Eugene made a motion to accept the bid from Naturally Green Landscaping, for \$33,466.00 for the flower boxes that sit on the street. Janene Lancaster seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- A motion was made by Janene Lancaster to approve \$11,500.00 for the flower baskets on the upper and lower bridges. Andy Bahkta seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Janene Lancaster made a motion to give Rita Jones the title of TDA Manager, with a pay increase to \$23.50, which will be retroactive from January 01, 2024. Andy Bhakta seconded the motion. All in favor Motion carried.

4/24/2024 – Regular Meeting

- Jeremiah Wiggins asked that the entrance fee for the Strawberry Jam Race be lowered or waived for children at East and West Elementary Schools wishing to run in the race but can't afford the entrance fee. Jeremiah made a motion for the TDA to pick up the cost of the shirts for the children at East/West Elementary Schools, and that the entrance fee be waived. Janene Lancaster seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Karen Wilmont spoke about getting Chamber Funding for the 2024 Freedom Fest. The amount that is being requested is \$14,500.00. The board will look at the funding proposal and get back to her at the May meeting.
- Pineapple Public Relations gave an update of all that they have done for the TDA marketing and public relations for the last year. Also, an outlook for the upcoming physical year.
- **Website statistics** for March are strong traffic from Google organic and social media.
 - Visitor totals are up for the Aquarium for March.
 - Mary Anne is continuing working on the DAM project, double checking listings and link information.
 - Complete audit of the rack cards for our area.
 - Marketing contracts are up for review in preparation for the budget.
- **Budgeting:** FY 24/25 Budget is about 85% done. A Marketing meeting is set for May 2 and the Finance committee meeting is set for May 6. We may need a 2nd meeting in May or June on the budget.
 - Bank balance: \$610,727.20.
 - Containers for Light Show Storage: \$15,836.00
 - Escrow/Surety for LGERS: \$111,055.00
 - Payroll Account set up with 2-month reserve \$60,000.00.
- Janene Lancaster made a motion to put into a payroll reserve account \$60,000.00. Andy Bhakta seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Event Planning Hiring Committee renamed –Exploratory Event Plan Committee
 - Pausing search for Event Planner, focusing on Event Park upgrades needed
- Sarah had a meeting with Lottie to discuss the event park MOU. Talked about adding a water reservoir to help with the water situation. TDA would like Lottie to set up a meeting with Mr. Coggins to have a plan for the property that is needed for use in the upcoming Light Show. TDA feels the meeting should be set up by the County Manager due to the County owning the land at the event park.
- Naturally Green Landscaping has begun getting baskets on bridges and the boxes for the flowers ready. The encroachment has been submitted to Brian Shuler.
 - Downtown Christmas contract with Gabe is based on last year's budget, proposal for a snowman for the corner at Relax Inn.
- Shannon Lackey brought before the board a rendering of a sign that he would like to have put at Bryson City exit 67; at the island where the veteran flag is on Veteran Blvd. The sign is a stone structure with a Bryson City logo for the TDA and Park signs. Size is 60”h x80”w; rock base is 66”hx180”w. Signarama to make the sign is \$7,276.00; Collins Masonry to make concrete pad and do the rock work needed is \$13,450.00. Total cost being \$20,726.00. Shannon made a motion to put this money into the budget for 2024/2025 for this sign, upon permission from the DOT of

encroachment on their property. Janene Lancaster seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.

5/8/2024 – Regular Meeting

- Executive Director, Sarah Conley presented the proposed copy of the 2024/2025 Budget Ordinance for the Swain County Tourism Development Authority. Total proposed budget being \$2,045,059.00.
- Jeremiah Wiggins made a motion to put into Advertising & Marketing \$50,000.00 for signage that the TDA is looking into purchasing in the next year. Andy Bhakta seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- The board would like to present a new MOU for the event park to the Swain County Commissioners for their June 4, 2024 meeting. As Swain County owns the land with heavy investment from the TDA, the new MOU would clearly reflect the following:
 - The Tourism Development Authority is allowed access to the event park for the next 10 years for the Christmas Light Show for the months of October, November, December and first half of January each year. For all other events the TDA will request usage of the property through the County on a needed basis.
 - The TDA will be responsible for compensation of any labor utilized during TDA sponsored/managed events.
 - TDA will be monetarily responsible for any event park property upgrades needed for TDA sponsored/events. In doing so no fee's will be applied for usage of the event park.
 - Inclusion of storage of the containers of the Christmas show be allowed to stay on the County property at no fee to the TDA.
- Some of the board members expressed an interest in acquiring a more robust MOU or lease for the Heritage Museum and also the Aquarium, and the Fly-Fishing Museum. The board would like to see a 100-year lease from Swain County for these three buildings.
- Cheryl Taylor made a motion to give to the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, for the Freedom Fest the amount of \$8,662.27. The amount that was asked for was \$14,500.00. The amount reflected is the request less the cost of generators in which the board encourages the chamber to use the County as a resource to rent their generator. This also includes a show of receipts shown before getting a check for this amount. Jeremiah Wiggins seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- The board would also like the Exploratory Event Committee to set up a meeting with Karen Wilmont and Chamber Board President to discuss further the expectations regarding funding requests and for the next year for the Freedom Fest. The board expressed a desire to see a more robust entertainment line up and discussed several recommendations for next year's lineup.

6/12/2024 – Regular Meeting

- Social reporting for summer traffic is picking up.
- Working on final contracts for media flow and content calendar for fiscal year.
- Met with regional TDA directors discussing Occupancy Tax patterns for surrounding counties. Also,
- discussed the closing of the Fishing Hatchery and ways to advocate awareness of these effects with have on the fishing industry in our area.
- Christmas Light Show marketing rolling out.
- Finalizing the final layout of the light show path at event park.
- Met with GSMR to discuss Red White and Steam Street festival July 3-5
- April occupancy tax was \$128,244.80 which is trending down from previous years.
- Met with HR Craft to complete the SCTDA Employee Handbook.
- Completed the Benefit Handbook and enrolled the 5 full-time employees.
- Completed a mock payroll run with ADP getting ready for July 01.
- Met with Lottie to put into place the transition of employees from county to TDA.
- Completed personnel files for all employees.
- Jeremiah Wiggins gave an updated report on the Strawberry Jam Race and his perspective on it regarding adding elementary school children. Jeremiah also brought up a request for funding in the amount of \$5,000.00 for the Swain County High School Cross Country Track Team state rings. This is due to them helping with the Strawberry Jam Race for 2024. Interim Chair, Shannon Lackey made a motion to the TDA approve the \$5,000.00 for the Swain County Cross Country Track Team state rings.
- After much discussion the board made the decision that for the TDA to support the giving of the \$5,000.00 there should be some requirements put into place going forward. The current coaches Ian Roper and Keith Payne should come before the TDA Board ask for the money, not a TDA Board member. The track team members fill out contracts with the TDA for 334 hours to be worked at any TDA function where volunteers are needed. The current track coaches are the keepers of the contract hours for each member that is sponsored by the TDA.

7/10/2024

- Introduction of all New Board Members: Commissioner Phillip Carson, Sr, Adrien Litzau, Robin Fronrath and Andy Bhakta.
- Distribution and review of the 2024-2025 TDA Binders. Also, went over the TDA Rules and Procedure Policy. Erin Smith made a motion to approve the Rules and Procedure Policy for 2024-2025 for the TDA Board. Andy Bhakta seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Selena has been updating all photos and listings on website.
- Printed out 4th of July specialty events calendar.
- Smoky Mountain Christmas Light Show Spectacular Page is up and running.
- Meeting with Our State to begin outline for featured article for end of August.
- Working with Concord Creative on updating campground features and photos.
- Hosted Adventure Elevate for 2-day Bryson City promotion.
- Hosted Visit NC Social Media Team for extended weekend.
- Working on County wide Bike Trail rack card.
- May occupancy report is \$213,849. Great month
- The downtown Christmas Light contract with Gabriel has been secured for 2024.
- Event Property: A proposal was brought to the board regarding things needed at the event park as follows:
 - 3 12' ceiling cooling fans cost \$4,199.00 each
 - 4 Loads of #89 Stone \$950.00 each load
 - Electrical 50-amp Boxes for food trucks (4) \$11,169.50 (Poppens do the electrical)
 - Wiring for fans & lighting for the food trucks. \$500.00
 - Total expenditures for this is \$28,066.50
- Andy Bhakta made a motion to approve the amount for \$24,916.50. Due to a discrepancy in the cost of the fans once the order was put Sarah approved the \$3,170.18 difference for the fans. Janene Lancaster seconded the motion, wanting us to also look into getting some cooling stations. All in favor. Motion carried.
- Finalized and published Employee Handbook
- Finalized ADP enrollment for Payroll Account and ran our first independent payroll.
- Met with Lisa in County payroll to coordinate reporting of sick leave and paid time off process.
- Met with full-time and part time staff to review all policies and procedures and time sheet process.
- Gathered Emergency contact information & medical emergency forms from all employees.
- Posted all NC Labor & OSHA Law information at Visitor Center and Aquarium.
- 2024/2025 Budget Amendment, LGERS which is the employee retirement system has upped the amount of contribution from employers. It went from 7.6% to 13.65% starting July 01, 2024. Cheryl made a motion to approve the additional percentage contribution for LGERS retirement for the full-time employees. Erin Smith seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion carried.
- The MOU for the Aquarium/Fly Fishing Museum was discussed once again. A new MOU will be written up for the meeting in August to look at and approve or redo. The board would like to have something in writing stating that they will be more than willing to pay for any expense up to \$5,000.00. After that amount they would like the county to go 50/50 for any expense.