

Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority (TCTDA)

Board Meeting Minutes

January 25th, 2024

8:30 am

Call to Order

I. Welcome

The following members were present at the meeting: Isaac Allen, Lauren Wise, Nory LeBrun, Larry Chapman, Madeline Magin, Chair Dee Dee Perkins, Dionne Hodgson, and Jessica Whitmire. Dana Antonuccio attended virtually as a member of the public.

The following staff members were present at the meeting: Clark Lovelace, Virginia Watkins, and Mollie Gordon. Transylvania County Finance Director Meagan O'Neal, County Attorney Lindsay Underwood (virtually), Market Connections Account Executive Mark Johnson, Market Connections President Karen Tessier, Assistant System Administrator Jason Cox, Human Resources Program Manager Kate Hayes, and 3 members of the public were also present.

Chair Dee Dee Perkins presiding declared a quorum was present and called the meeting to order at 8:31am.

II. Public Comment

Chair Dee Dee Perkins opened the floor for members of the public to participate in public comment.

Rebecca Suddeth representing the Transylvania Heritage Museum spoke on an upcoming marketing campaign for the Museum running April 1st to the end of June. Information will be broadcast on three radio stations in the Asheville area generating 78,000 impressions. There will be 30-second ads promoting the historical groups in the county and other historical destinations/events that people can learn about such as the Mountain Legacy Exhibit, Preservation Month and the Appalachian Folk Festival. She mentioned that the TDA had never done a marketing plan that promoted Transylvania County as a historical destination, and she will be planning on putting in a grant request in the next few weeks with more details. She thanked the board for their time and the dialogue.

III. Agenda Modifications

There was one agenda modification. Larry Chapman requested to show a short video at the end of the meeting. Larry Chapman moved to approve the agenda as presented, seconded by Jessica Whitmire, and unanimously approved.

IV. Consent Agenda

Isaac Allen moved to approve the consent agenda as presented, seconded by Dionne Hodgson, and unanimously approved. The following items were approved:

- a. Minutes from January 4th, 2024, Board Meeting
- b. Contracts
- c. Partner Funding List

V. Presentations

- a. Financial Reports – Meagan O’Neal

Transylvania County Finance Director Meagan O’Neal presented the Financial Report for the TDA through December 2023. This included 5 months of revenue and 6 months of expenses. Year to Date (YTD) sales are a little over \$1 million and expenses are around \$792,000. Occupancy Taxes are up 19% over the prior year month and 3.5% YTD. Expenses are roughly 30% of budget and the YTD net profit is around \$227,000. Including approved funding for tourism-related expenses, the TDA has allocated 88% of the expenses to administrative spending and 12% to tourism-related expenses, out of a minimum 2/3 and allowed 1/3 respectively. There was an estimated fund balance of \$1.7 million and there have been 10 vendors to receive over \$10,000 from the TDA this year.

Lauren Wise moved to approve the Financial Reports as presented, seconded by Larry Chapman, and unanimously approved.

- b. Office / Staff Report – Clark Lovelace

Clark Lovelace provided an update on recent TDA operations. He cautioned the board that revenue increases are not what others in Western NC are seeing and it probably is not a trend that we will expect for the rest of the year. He reiterated that the quarterly report is the best way to stay up to date on all TDA happenings and noted that Market Connections will be presenting in a bit if there are any questions on the marketing section. Any questions on the rest can be addressed now or directly with him at a later date. There were none. He gave kudos to Mollie, Virginia, and Mark for their efforts on their parts of the report.

Clark shared a slide reflecting the materials that Sally Burnett delivers within Transylvania County each month to 150 locations on a contract basis.

Clark also referenced questions that board members had at the previous meeting about attendance at committee meetings. He shared a memo from Lindsay Underwood. She stated that board members could attend any committee meetings as a member of the public and participate during public comment but can’t participate in the meeting as a board member if they do not serve on the committee. The question board members should pose is would the speech, when weighed against the work the board does, prohibit the board’s ability to provide services.

- c. Marketing Update – Market Connections

Karen Tessier, President and Chair of Market Connections, provided an update on TDA marketing and introduced Mark Johnson the Account Executive through Market Connections for the Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority. She provided an overview of the second quarter of the fiscal year. She mentioned that Market Connections has focused on a strategic holiday and winter campaign for the shoulder season to encourage visitors despite the weather. They are targeting a slightly older demographic while kids are in school, the goal is to reach niche adventurers. They are also employing brand positions including wellness, romance, sustainability, authentic small town, community festivals, entertainment and lifestyle. They are currently working on spring focuses to roll out to the marketing committee.

Mark Johnson continued the update to the board. He reinforced what Karen mentioned about strategy, Market Connections is using traditional print advertising in materials such as Blue Ridge Outdoors, but they are also utilizing digital to reach a large audience through YouTube, Facebook, etc. They are also utilizing radio advertisements through WNCW of holiday experiences people could have in the area. A partner e-blast for White Squirrel Arcade was sent to 32,500 subscribers and the spotlight was read by almost 10,000 viewers.

Website traffic has been up tremendously over the last year due in large part to Facebook advertising. Top traffic sources were Google, Media One digital ads and Media One Facebook ads. Clark mentioned to the board that building a new website is an extensive process and they are currently looking into what pages people are going to the most to dictate what will show on the home screen. The information from the study will drive what people will see on the new website and it is currently on pace to be unveiled mid-year.

Karen clarified that Media One is a subset of Market Connections focused on digital marketing and that ads appear out of the market so board members likely won't see them unless they're traveling. Mark added that the sweepstakes that was currently running was ahead of last year's numbers and has generated new signups for the e-blast and people have requested copies of the adventure guide. He also discussed other marketing opportunities ongoing with WSPA, NC Weekend, NC TV and others.

Clark added that the TDA is doing more than ever to help partners and would encourage them to give staff good content that can be reshared at no cost. Any tourism-related business or attraction can participate from any area of the county. The Upper Transylvania Business Alliance has been a key partner in the upper area of the county. Mollie encouraged anyone to share content directly to put out or using the #ExploreBrevard. Dee Dee requested that some of the videos be run at the local theater so the local market can see what's being placed beyond Transylvania County because seeing the work the board is doing is important.

Karen closed her presentation by reminding board members that Market Connections would be at the board retreat next month to present trending information and to capture ideas about visitors in the area. She thanked the board for being ambassadors for destination management. She mentioned a few remaining marketing efforts including the trailblazer campaign that shares

Brevard and Transylvania County's story from the perspective of people in the community as well as some upcoming articles in National Geographic and Esquire.

VI. Old Business

VII. New Business

a. Retreat Agenda

Clark opened the discussion by stating that Chris Cavanaugh will be facilitating the retreat and the topics included so far will be a financial overview including fund balance, marketing with Market Connections, an update on the Ecusta Trail, committee updates, locals' perception of tourism, and an update on the Visitor Center. Nory Lebrun asked if the group considered housing to be part of their tourism mission given the challenges of housing in the service industries in the county. Larry Chapman felt it could be related in terms of short-term rentals or impacts on businesses, but he wasn't sure about long-term rentals or housing availability generally. Jessica Whitmire felt that housing was crucial to small businesses but wasn't sure if the TDA could tackle and solve the problem. After continued discussion among board members, it was decided that housing would be added to the retreat agenda as an educational opportunity for board members to learn more about housing-focused work with at the City of Brevard, Transylvania County, and State of NC level. The City of Brevard has partnered with the School of Government on a housing survey and a multi-phase report including a breakdown of needs, who doesn't have housing, targeted areas to increase density, etc. Transylvania County is currently undergoing a similar housing study working with a consultant over the next 8-9 months through a Dogwood grant. Clark was tasked with finding a suitable speaker to discuss housing at the board's retreat.

b. Grant Program Updates

Clark discussed the TDA's grant programs. There are three funding pathways for grants depending on the objectives, but they predominately have similar protocols and criteria. Requests under \$5,000 are reviewed by staff then sent to the appropriate committee for review and a final decision. Grants from \$5,000 to \$24,999 are reviewed by staff and at the committee level before being reviewed by the full board before funds are distributed. Requests from \$25,000 to \$49,999 have similar requirements to the previous category with the additional requirement of an in-person presentation to the board. Requests over \$50,000 must meet the requirements of the prior categories with an additional review by the Board of Commissioners which could take up to two months after the time of the request. Clark mentioned that 10 years ago there was one type of grant available with a cap of \$2,000 and an overall budget of \$30,000. There has been a lot of growth in recent years with the addition of Transylvania Always and then Destination Infrastructure. When the TDA came under the county as a department, there was a recommendation to look at grant protocols and add grant contracts to the process. Sponsorships for for-profit entities were tabled at the time to be consistent with the Transylvania County Nonprofit Funding processes which only included non-profit

organizations. Lauren Wise asked about the exposure of liability and Clark and Lindsay said the review analysis would remain the same, it was more important to administer consistent review criteria for funding requests.

Madeline Magin moved to approve the Grant Program Updates as presented including funding to for-profit organizations, seconded by Jessica Whitmire, and unanimously approved.

c. Funding Request – The Pisgah Conservancy

The Pisgah Conservancy has put a Transylvania Always grant request into the TDA for a trail improvement project along the Estatoe Trail. Virginia Watkins presented the grant information because the Transylvania Always committee did not meet in January and the request needed board approval. She mentioned the TDA has been a supporter of Pisgah Project Day in the past and the grant application includes recognition as the lead sponsor. While the trail has been battling over 10 years of rot and decay along the boardwalks and bridges near the Davidson River access, the request would fund fiberglass replacements of half of the bridges and 100 feet of boardwalk and 62 feet of trail. The project would raise the replacement structures with brake points for water runoff and would maintain a natural look. The request was for \$43,270. Pisgah National Forest owns the property and will be contributing the required 20% match for the grant funds in addition to the Pisgah Conservancy. Board members mentioned that the trail is important both for locals as well as a welcome to Pisgah for the county.

Jessica Whitmire moved to approve the funding application by the Pisgah Conservancy, seconded by Lauren Wise, and unanimously approved. Larry Chapman requested to be on record stating he had concerns about mission creep and the TDA starting to fund ongoing needs. Isaac Allen mentioned he hoped the request was not a foreshadowing of the Ecusta Trail.

VIII. Public Comment

X. Board Member Comments

Larry Chapman had hoped to share the trailer from the Veteran's Battlefield, an NCACC film that was filmed throughout NC, and share that there would be a presentation of the film at the Rogow Room at the Transylvania County Library in February. The trailer can be found: <https://www.veteransbattlefield.com/>

Jessica Whitmire announced that the Upper French Broad River Fest will be the 3rd Saturday in June and Conserving Carolina will be leading the event marketing and a vendor application will be coming soon. She also mentioned there will be a river cleanup on the 3rd Saturday in May honoring Bill Minnich.

Larry Chapman also mentioned that the Veteran's History Museum will be re-opening March 1st and there may be a ribbon cutting for the re-opening.

Lauren Wise and Nory LeBrun shared their thanks for the quarterly report for being comprehensive and a huge help as new board members.

Adjournment

There being no further business Larry Chapman moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Lauren Wise, and unanimously approved. The meeting adjourned at 10:42 am.