

Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority (TCTDA)
Board Retreat Meeting
February 22, 2024

Minutes

Board Members Present: Dee Dee Perkins, Jessica Whitmire, Lauren Wise, Nory LeBrun, Dionne Hodgson, Isaac Allen, Larry Chapman, Madeline Magin, Dana Antonuccio

Board Members Absent: none

Staff: Virginia Watkins, Clark Lovelace, Mollie Gordon, Mark Johnson, Karen Tessier, Chris Cavanaugh

Members of Public: Jeff Adams

I. Call to Order & Welcome: Board Chair, Dee Dee Perkins, called the meeting to order at 9:27am and noted a quorum.

II. Public Comment: No members of the public present.

III. Agenda Modifications: Larry made a motion to accept the agenda as presented. With a second from Jessica, the motion unanimously carried.

IV. Discussion Topics: Chris Cavanaugh introduced himself and established parameters for the day's discussion topics.

A. Financial Overview: Clark provided a presentation that included a look back at the last ten years, a look at the current year including where year-end is projected, and an early look at the FY25 budget he developed in collaboration with Dee Dee. One important note is that based on the drop in occupancy tax revenue over the past year, promotional and non-promotional spending increases over the past two years, and the current efforts to provide \$1M in support of the Ecusta Trail, cuts need to be made to expense categories in FY25 to stay within the desired fund balance range once all of the Ecusta Trail funds have been paid.

A discussion ensued. It was noted that income numbers will be impacted by Connestee Falls' new policy prohibiting short term rentals. Dana was concerned about the budget's reduction of funding to support tourism marketing grants and would rather it be raised than lowered. Madeline expressed favor for keeping all grant funding allocations the same as the current year because of the grant program's very visible impact to our community and rather pull needed funds from the marketing budget. Jessica was in agreement with how impactful the TCTDA grant for the French Broad River Blueway Plan and its implementation will be for the county. Nory spoke on the issue of marketing costs that will not go down and was concerned with minimizing the marketing budget.

Part of the discussion included conversation around having flexibility to respond to unforeseen big projects in the future and the process and appropriate time for raising the occupancy tax to 6%.

Clark reminded the board of their statement on state mandated spending levels, which reflected support of efforts to allow up to 1/2 of expenditures to be used for non-promotional tourism-related expenditures, which was developed following last year's retreat. He subsequently joined a task force of WNC destination directors who are interested in having more flexibility with these levels. Through multiple meetings, including input from experts on tourism legislation at the state level, the task force learned that pursuing changes will be extremely difficult at any time and a waste of time this year with upcoming elections and just a short session. The group will stay connected and will look into the possibility of funding to support tourism projects in WNC through the new sports betting revenues.

B. Marketing: Karen Tessier and Mark Johnson with Market Connections gave a presentation on market trends, how content and messaging values are changing, hot marketing trend topics for 2024, tactical marketing trends, social tactical trends, and AI abilities. Nory asked about repercussions that AI searches impact the user and mobile tracking data and apps that report to 3rd parties. Madeline is concerned and cautious about investing in an AI project that is trending now, but may be outdated or become widely available and free in the short-term future. Jessica shared concern around how following digital market trends digitally could leave some of our tourism partners behind and the value of educating and supporting those business owners with basic tips or instruction.

Karen shared the board and staff survey results for prioritizing TDA marketing goals and asked for ideas and insights. Larry asked about the TDA's stands on the growing issue of roads, connectivity and congestion and advocated that the TDA make our concerns on its impact on visitor experience known to local government officials. Jessica spoke on the wayfinding signs in outlying communities. Madeline spoke on the Destination Infrastructure Committee's current efforts on wayfinding and signage. Isaac advocated for reaching out to EV drivers and communicating where the existing spots are located in order to help support and increase their use through wayfinding signage to direct users to locations and adding those locations on the TDA's What's Happening Now website page.

Mollie Gordon presented on social media platforms that we are currently using. Jessica asked about an online or in person lesson or tutorial for tourism partners. Madeline suggested allowing partners to send information to a TDA phone. Larry asked about government policies for social media on business phones. Clark noted that we would look into that if we decide to do anything on a business phone.

C. Ecusta Trail: Clark provided a recap of the development of the trail and the TCTDA's pledge. A discussion was had on where TCTDA funds should be allocated this year and in the future three years. There was consensus that these funds should primarily be used for projects that directly impact trail users. Madeline felt it important to fund user-based experiences, but was not opposed to the first year's allocation going toward engineering expenses. Lauren spoke to the strict regulations that go toward engineering because that's the urgent and first need, and the engineering of the user-based infrastructure like trailheads and bathrooms were not included in the original engineering plan.

Moving forward, Clark will carry this feedback to the City of Brevard and they will present a proposal at next month's board meeting before formally submitting.

10-minute break to get lunch and resume the meeting while eating.

D. Affordable Workforce Housing: Jeff Adams presented on the current state of our local affordable workforce housing and various strategies and programs to address the problem (i.e. new housing developments, housing policy and code, adaptive reuse, preservation/utilization of existing housing stock, land acquisitions and banking.) A discussion by the board followed and no action was taken.

E. Committees:

Transylvania Always Committee: Virginia Watkins presented on the Transylvania Always Committee, whose mission is to be a leader in the effort to take care of Transylvania County's natural resources in order to create a safe and enjoyable user experience and ensure that these assets are here for future generations.

Destination Infrastructure Committee: Clark presented on the Destination Infrastructure Committee, tasked to preserve and enhance the infrastructure and resources that make Transylvania County a desirable tourism destination.

Grant Committee: Virginia presented on the Grant Committee, which is tasked to review Tourism Marketing grant requests. She also explained how each of the three committees discussed so far plays a role in reviewing and approving grant requests in their corresponding grant pathway.

Marketing Committee: Clark spoke on the Marketing Committee's purpose and scope, along with current priorities and activities, such as the marketing plan and new website.

F. Visitor Center: Clark gave a review of last year's board retreat conversation where the board determined that having a visitor center in our destination was worth the investment and the best location for the immediate future is the Chamber building, with the old courthouse as an ideal long-term location. Clark reached out soon after and informed chamber leadership of this determination and a desire for another two-year contract for the operation of the visitor center and an annual contract for office space. For various reasons, including the hiring of a new director, getting verbal commitment and updated contracts has taken a considerable amount of time. Clark is continuing to push for contracts so he can follow our normal contract process of attorney review, TCTDA board approval, and a Commissioner review. He is hoping to have this for the March meeting. A discussion followed about the old courthouse and the county's priority of finding paying tenants in the future.

G. Local TCTDA Brand: Clark highlighted the previously shared results of the University of Georgia study on local perceptions on tourism in our county. Chris Cavanaugh built on that to discuss notable observations and best practices to change negative perspectives. A discussion followed as board

members explored ways to create positive change in the community's perception of tourism. No action was taken.

IV. Old Business: There was no old business to discuss.

V. New Business: There was no new business to discuss.

VI. Public Comment: There were no public comments made.

VII. Board Member Comments: Larry announced the upcoming school board meeting and Veterans History Museum's soft opening.

Adjournment: With a motion from Jessica and a second from Dana, the meeting was adjourned at 3:35pm.

Minutes submitted by Virginia Watkins.

*Advance notice of all meetings has been provided and all TCTDA are open to the public.
A schedule of meetings and minutes can be found at
<https://explorebrevard.com/tct/meeting-schedule-and-minutes/>*