

Montgomery Regional Tourism Development Council

Meeting Minutes

November 19, 2020

Meeting held via Zoom

I. Call to Order

Jason Dowdy called to order the regular meeting of the **MTDC** at **9:23 a.m.** via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions.

II. Present

Lisa Bleakley	Montgomery County Regional Tourism, Executive Director
Irene Kilmer	Montgomery County Regional Tourism, Visitor Relations Manager
Jason Dowdy (v)	Chair- Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, Milestone Development Partner
Sam Bishop (v)	Vice Chair- Christiansburg Town Council
Randy Wingfield	Town of Christiansburg, Town Manager
Luke Brugh (v)	Brugh Coffee Company, Owner
Lauren Colliver (v)	Blacksburg Town Council
Tara Talerico (v)	Hampton Inn Blacksburg/ Christiansburg, Hotel Manager

III. Absent

Heather Browning	Town of Blacksburg, Community Relations Manager
Marc Verniel	Town of Blacksburg, Town Manager
Melissa Powell	Town of Christiansburg, Public Relations Director
Diane Akers	The Blacksburg Partnership, Director
Bob Miller	Montgomery County Planning Commission Liaison
Craig Meadows	Montgomery County, County Administrator
Jennifer Harris	Montgomery County, Public Information Director
Connie Hale (v)	Buffalo & More, Owner
Tom Cupo	The Inn at Virginia Tech and Skelton Conference Center
Cody Thompson (v)	Zeppoli's Italian Restaurant and Wine Shop

IV. Consensus of Agenda

- a. Sam Bishop calls for a motion to approve the consent agenda. Lauren Colliver seconds this motion.

Approval of Minutes: February 27, 2020

- b. Jason Dowdy calls for a motion to approve the August 27, 2020 minutes.
 - i. Sam Bishop makes a motion to approve the minutes from August 27, 2020. Lauren Colliver seconds the motion. All say aye. Minutes approved.

V. Ratification of Email Voting for Letter of Support

- i. Jason Dowdy calls for a motion to acknowledge the email vote for the MTDC to present the Town of Christiansburg Council with a letter of support for Uptown park project. Lauren Colliver makes the motion. Tara Talerico seconds.

VI. Updates

a. STR Report and Trends

- i. Lisa presents the current destination STR reports. Lisa will share the state-wide regional STR reports in the MTDC Google folder.
- ii. The trajectory of occupancy spiked slightly in mid-October and then fell back down. Most traffic has been parents visiting their kids at college, leaf peepers, as well as long-term construction and travel nurses.
- iii. Jason Dowdy mentioned that their visitor traffic was due to fall football up until the weekend of October 23rd and dropped off after that.
- iv. Lisa discusses the importance of the new parks in Riner, Christiansburg, and Eastern Montgomery. Amateur and travel sports are essential for visitation.
- v. The occupancy rates took a dive over Halloween. There appears to be little to any corporate visitation.
- vi. Jason Dowdy shared that they are anticipating another drop in occupancy but are trying to remain positive. It's really difficult right now, even big cities are struggling. Hilton projects that occupancy rates won't recover until the end of 2021, maybe 2022.
- vii. Tara Talerico suggests that we speak with local businesses about spreading the word that our restaurants and businesses are showcasing protocols as a way to attract visitors and help them to feel more comfortable. There may be a training opportunity for improving digital presence and reviews.
- viii. Lauren Colliver suggests that each MTDC member and possibly members of the Chamber could choose three businesses to write reviews for. Luke Brugh agrees with this idea.

b. Operational Overview Since August 27, 2020

- i. Lisa states that all information can be found on the Director's Report.
- ii. Lisa is presenting to the NRV Regional Commission Board about tourism in Montgomery County tonight, November 19th.
- iii. Lisa presents the topic of signage in the area and how it has crossed into local tourism.
 1. Increased signage on the Huckleberry Trail is in the works.
 2. Updating the three historical Civil War signs in the county is also in progress. This has evolved into a county-wide conversation about being inclusive of other parts of the history of that period and enriching the local story.
 - a. Lisa has received suggestions to form an Ad Hoc group to discuss the possibility of this project.
 3. Lauren Colliver mentioned the work being done at the Christiansburg Institute by the alumni and suggested this as something to highlight in the historical sign project. Students at Virginia Tech are working on a display about Christiansburg Institute.
- iv. The tourism office has partnered with a PhD student in the HTM department on a grant focusing on the black traveler. Diversity and inclusion in travel is sparking a lot of discussion right now in the broader travel industry. The work from this grant will help to provide marketing insight for the local program.
- v. The WanderLove grant project is 90% complete. We gained a fair amount of engagement from the branded content articles. The remainder of the campaign will be run in spring 2021.

c. Regional Marketing

- i. The tourism office is working with the other tourism programs in the NRV along with the Regional Commission, to build the Visit NRV travel brand.
 - 1. Visit NRV received a \$20,000 grant from VTC for a year-long sponsorship of PBS programming. We believe the PBS viewer is a solid target audience with which to create awareness for the regional travel destination.
- ii. We partnered with the NRV tourism programs on a business resiliency grant scheduled to launch in January.
- iii. The Visit NRV website will launch by the end of this year.
- iv. Pulaski County has brought Tourism into the county where it recently was housed and managed by the Pulaski Chamber of Commerce.

VII. Discussion

- a. Strategic Plan FY 21-23
 - i. Lisa asks attendees to regularly monitor the FY21-23 Tourism Strategic Plan as the guide for tactics to move the program forward. The plan is accessible through the MTDC Google folder.

VIII. What should we know from around the county?

- a. **Randy Wingfield** – shares that the budget amendment includes the new park. Marketplace is coming along and is projected to finish in 2021. The annual tree lighting is happening virtually on December 10th. The town is doing a drive through Christmas Parade on December 11th at the New River Valley Mall. Randy mentions an additional hotel grant available Blacksburg, Christiansburg, and Montgomery County.
- b. **Tara Talerico** – shares that they are getting more employee applicants which is long overdue as it has been a challenge until late. They are partnered with the United Way for the holiday food drive. Not expecting occupancy to be back to normal until 2022.
- c. **Sam Bishop** – adds that the town put up Christmas lights early to bring some needed cheer.
- d. **Lauren Colliver** – Blacksburg Bucks starts on November 20 through a partnership with the Blacksburg Partnership.
- e. **Luke Brugh** – shares that Brugh Coffee did well in October but business has slowed down quite a bit in November. They're pushing online sales again.
- f. **Irene** – shares that the tourism office's Blacksburg location is scheduled to reopen in February on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday's.

IX. Adjournment

- a. Jason Dowdy calls for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Sam Bishop makes the motion. No second. All Aye.

Minutes submitted by: Lisa Bleakley

Minutes approved by: