

MINUTES OF THE HATTIESBURG TOURISM COMMISSION BOARD MEMBERS & MANAGEMENT

Minutes of a regularly scheduled meeting of the Board Members of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission of the City of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was held at the Hattiesburg Train Depot and virtually via GoToMeeting on:

November 3, 2021

Be it remembered that on the 3rd day of November, the Board Members of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission met in person at the Hattiesburg Train Depot and via teleconference for those unable to attend in-person due to Covid-19 gathering restrictions. Frank James, Chairman of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission, called the meeting to order at 11:47 a.m. The following Members of the Board were found to be present:

PRESENT

Frank James
Fei Xue, Ph.D. (virtual)
Melanie Archer
Michael Marks
Shawn Lowrey
Bonnie Warren
Anthony Harris

ABSENT

ALSO PRESENT

Marlo Dorsey, Management
Kristen Brock, Staff
David Ott, Counsel
Shawn Harris, Tourism Partner

Citizens Forum

Marlo introduced Shawn Harris to present a partnership proposal to the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission. Harris provided an overview of geocaching, a growing tourism niche that has been identified as a safe, family-friendly travel opportunity. The presentation indicated that there are greater than 6 million active geocachers worldwide, with 1,000 residing within 100 miles of Hattiesburg. Harris proposed that VisitHattiesburg join as a partner to create a customized GeoTour for Hattiesburg on the Geocaching App and market the activity to future visitors.

After full discussion and upon motion made by Bonnie Warren, duly seconded by Melanie Archer, there was a unanimous favorable vote to adopt the GeoTour as a program of VisitHattiesburg and provide initial funding in the amount of \$10,000.

Harris stayed as a guest for the remainder of the meeting. With no further public guests present, citizens forum was adjourned.

Minutes from Previous Board Meetings

After full review and upon motion by Michael Marks, duly seconded by Melanie Archer, there was unanimous favorable vote of the board to approve August 2021 meeting minutes.

Financial Report

Marlo presented the financial report. Included was a document with updated tax receipts for the commission's 2% special hotel levy. As of October 31, the report showed year-to-date revenue at \$800,970, including a \$101,113 check for July 2021 hotel stays, a record monthly hotel tax collection for Hattiesburg. The most recent three months of hotel tax revenue are the largest in the city's history and the first check of FY2022 is \$90,845.95, a 43% year-over-year increase.

The claims dockets for the months of August and September 2021 were presented. Budgeted expenditures were provided in full detail by line item, including two charges for disaster relief hotel stays that will be reimbursed.

Reconciled balances of all Hattiesburg Tourism Commission assets through September 30, 2021 were presented with a total balance of \$1,957,243.03. These funds include TRF, umbrella accounts, and recouped funds from previous years' tax collections. The loan for round 2 of PPP funding has been forgiven. Included on the report were details of each account with financial institution, current interest rates, and maturity dates listed. All accounts have been reconciled by accountants at McArthur, Slay, & Dews, PLLC.

Dorsey also presented a closeout budget for FY2021. The FY2021 budget originally forecast for a 30% reduction in income due to an expected steep decline in hotel sales tax. Due to a strong tourism recovery campaign and increased visitation, the budget year closed 164% over projections, with an estimated net income of \$251,874.

After a full discussion and upon a motion made by Melanie Archer and duly seconded by Michael marks, there was a unanimous favorable vote to approve the financial update and FY2021 budget closeout as presented.

Marlo then presented an FY2022 budget analysis. Because of the strong financial position the commission ended 2021 with, she recommended an increase of the previously approved FY2022 marketing budget by an additional \$50,000. After full discussion, Anthony Harris made the motion to approve the budget increase. With a second by Michael Marks, the board unanimously voted to amend the FY2022 budget as presented.

Old Business

The board was provided with VisitHattiesburg's annual report for FY2021. This report, along with the FY2020 report and audit previously approved by the commission, were presented to the Hattiesburg City Council in October as legislatively mandated. After full review of the document and discussion among the board, Michael Marks made a motion to approve the FY2021 report as presented. Duly seconded by Shawn Lowrey, there was unanimous favorable vote to approve the motion.

New Business

Kristen provided a brief overview of year-over-year tax revenue updates and current sales efforts, as work continues to bring group business to Hattiesburg. A year-over-year overview of hotel and restaurant tax levies shows that hotel collections are up nearly 33% for the year while restaurant collections are 9.3% higher than the previous year, thanks in part to the high number of group sports events hosted in 2021 along with the return of leisure travel to Hattiesburg. For the first time since the pandemic began, two large-scale conferences with 400+ attendees were held in Hattiesburg during the month of October with more events on the books for 2022. Brock also returned to in-person sales trade shows to promote Hattiesburg's sports, outdoors, and convention markets at TEAMS and Sports ETA.

Marlo shared updates on VisitHattiesburg's marketing strategies. A full marketing plan for FY2022 was presented along with an analytic overview of current campaigns. Reviewing FY2021 marketing and public relations results, tourism recovery funds along with allocations from the FY2021 operating budget allowed campaigns to reach more than 2 billion potential visitors. Examples of previous and upcoming marketing materials were provided in the board packet for review.

Dorsey also shared a report from USTA Travel Economics, showing a cumulative update on September 2021 travel in the United States. For that month, Mississippi finished as the number one tourism market in the entire country, with Hattiesburg's strong performance contributing to that recognition.

Brock presented a Programs & Promotions update, beginning with Hattiesburg Alliance for Public Art's recent and upcoming projects, including a 200+ foot mural on the Longleaf Trace tunnel and holiday pop-up art in Downtown Hattiesburg. She also provided an overview of October's HBURG Restaurant Week, which saw the greatest number of restaurant participants in the program's history and received significant press coverage.

An update on FY2022 Tourism Grant Program recipients was presented to the board, showing 100% of the budgeted \$25,000 annual allocation being awarded to 17 recipients. With several additional events contacting VisitHattiesburg for funding and many months remaining in the fiscal year, the board discussed adding additional funds to the FY2022 Tourism Grant Program. After full discussion, Melanie Archer made a motion to increase the TGP budget for FY2022 by \$10,000. Duly seconded by Shawn Lowrey, there was unanimous favorable vote to approve the motion.

The board was shown three Mississippi Tourism Association awards recently presented to VisitHattiesburg, including Tourism Promotion of the Year, DMO of the Year, and the first ever Tourism Resiliency Award.

Being no other business, and upon motion by Michael Marks, duly seconded by Anthony Harris, the meeting was adjourned at 1:07 p.m.

Hattiesburg Tourism Commission:

Frank James, Board Chair

Marlo Dorsey, Executive Director

