

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, held at the Hotel Indigo board room on:

December 13, 2023

Be it remembered that on the 13th day of December, the Board Members of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission met in person at the Hattiesburg Hotel Indigo board room. Frank James, Chairman of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission, called the meeting to order at 12:10 p.m. The following Members of the Board were found to be present:

PRESENT

Melanie Archer
Frank James
Dr. Joe Paul
Bonnie Warren
Anthony Harris
Michael Marks

ABSENT

Shawn Lowrey

ALSO PRESENT

Marlo Dorsey, Management
Kristen Brock, Staff
Paige Robertson, Staff
David Ott, Counsel

Citizens Forum

With no members of the public present, Citizens Forum was not held.

Minutes from Previous Board Meetings

After full review and upon motion by Bonnie Warren, duly seconded by Michael Marks, there was unanimous favorable vote of the board to approve October 2023 meeting minutes as presented.

Financial Report

Dorsey presented the financial report. Included was a document with updated tax receipts for the commission's 2% special hotel levy. For the first two months of FY24, collections are down 8% YOY which was anticipated in the budget due to a reduction in hotel revenue due to national forecasting models with pandemic recovery and inflation. A 12-month overview of tax revenue from October 2022 to September 2023 was also presented, showing hotel collections down 5.52% over the last twelve months, while restaurant collections are 3.53% higher in comparison to the previous year.

Claims dockets for the months of October and November 2023 were presented. A listing of all expenditures for the regular FY24 budget and round 2 of the Tourism Recovery Fund (TRF) was provided in full detail by line item, which were all budgeted expenses. After a full review of income and expenditures and upon motion by Melanie Archer, duly seconded by Anthony Harris, there was a unanimous favorable vote to approve the documents as presented.

Reconciled balances of all Hattiesburg Tourism Commission assets through October 31, 2023 were presented, showing a total balance of \$3,831,506.69. Included on the report were details of each account with financial institution, current interest rates, and maturity dates listed. The overall balance includes ARPA funds from round 2 of the Tourism Recovery Fund (TRF), as awarded to the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission by the Mississippi legislature, which is being accounted for separately at Hancock Whitney Bank in a checking and money market sweep account. All accounts have been reconciled by accountants at McArthur, Slay, & Dews, PLLC.

Dorsey presented a FY24 statement of financial position provided by the accountant, which is in line with the board-approved budget. After full review and upon motion made by Michael Marks and duly seconded by Dr. Paul, there was unanimous favorable vote to approve the budget update as presented.

Old Business

Dorsey provided an update on round 3 of the Tourism Recovery Fund (TRF), administered through the Department of Finance and Administration. Visit Hattiesburg's application has been submitted, and an approval followed by allocation distribution is expected in the next several weeks.

Dorsey also provided an update on Hattiesburg's plans to open a Welcome Center using funds awarded by the Mississippi Main Street Association's Revitalization Grant. The seller of 300 Hardy Street has accepted the City of Hattiesburg's option offer for purchase of the building, which will be presented to City Council next week. Following that, an appraisal and survey of the property will be completed. The final grant recommendations will be presented for approval to the Mississippi legislature in the upcoming session, at which time the project may begin.

New Business

Dorsey presented an updated agreement for mutual support services and cooperation between Downtown Hattiesburg Association (DHA) and the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission (HTC). The Tourism Commission voted in August to provide a one-time financial contribution to help fund the hiring of a second DHA staff member who is now employed full-time. As such, a modified agreement was presented, outlining that DHA staff will now provide their own marketing and communications services but HTC will continue to provide all payroll functions including health insurance and other agreed upon employee benefits. DHA will no longer pay HTC for marketing services as in previous years due to the growth of both organizations as well as DHA now having two full-time employees and ARPA project funding of its own. Upon full review of the agreement as presented, Anthony Harris made a motion to approve the modified agreement and a one-time \$25,000 staffing contribution to DHA. Duly seconded by Melanie Archer, there was unanimous approval by the board.

Kristen Brock presented a Sales & Visitor Services update overviewing current groups being served by the department and recent sales efforts. More than 6,000 event attendees have been serviced through Red Carpet Services in 2023. A report outlining activity at the 2023 Travel South International Showcase was presented, along with plans to develop the international trade market in Hattiesburg. Brock met with 38 travel planners from 11 countries earlier this month at the showcase.

Brock also presented October through December Tourism Grant Program activities and 2023 HAPA year in review, which outlined seven new large-scale permanent public art projects and several awards and accolades. An internal review document with updated Mississippi Miss Hospitality logos was presented, including a 75th anniversary design.

Paige Robertson presented the board with marketing and communications updates. An analytics overview of website and social media visitation showed significant growth in digital exposure in key markets for Hattiesburg. Top website users in 2023 came from the Dallas market, versus Birmingham being the top user market in 2022. Visit Hattiesburg's social media channels reached more than 1.5 million users in 2023. 2023 also saw 373,013 total website users versus 60,000 when current leadership was hired in 2017.

An overview of current marketing campaigns and public relations efforts was also presented, including four updated tourism videos which will be targeted geographically in key markets focused on baseball, culinary, art, and outdoors. Also included was a one-year update on the Hattiesburg GeoTour, which has seen 7,000 visits by more than 650 users and remains the only official Geotour in Mississippi.

Using round 2 Tourism Recovery Funds (TRF), an advertising agency has been selected to update the Freedom Summer Trail assets in time for the 60th Anniversary of Freedom Summer 1964. Logo options were presented and discussed, with Dr. Paul recommending VH work with Josh Winters in USM's history department to update records. Also with TRF funds, Hattiesburg-based RARE ad agency is working on an updated brand audit and identity for Visit Hattiesburg. The refreshed look will be launched along with a new website in spring 2024.

Dr. Paul exited the meeting at 1:16 p.m. Quorum was still met.

Dorsey announced that Communications Manager Maddie Englese recently completed AI certification for communicators and marketers. Highlights from the course were shared with the board.

Being no other business, and upon motion by Bonnie Warren, duly seconded by Melanie Archer, the meeting was adjourned at 1:23 p.m.

Hattiesburg Tourism Commission:

Frank James, Board Chair

Marlo Dorsey, Executive Director