

## **Ocracoke Township Tourism Development Authority Board Meeting Minutes**

Monday, November 20, 2023 9:00 am

**Present (Voting):** Kenny Ballance (Chair), Susie O'Neal Rockel, Lisa Landrum, Jennifer Esham (remote) and BJ Oeschlegel

**OTTDA Staff:** Helena Stevens, Cynthia Carver-Calvitti  
Hyde County Commissioner, Randall Mathews

### **I. Call to Order**

Chair Kenny Ballance called the meeting to order at 9:00 am

### **II. Approval of OTTDA Board Meeting Minutes – September 15, 2023**

Susie motioned to approve the September 15, 2023 minutes. Lisa seconded. Motion passed.

### **III. Avenir Bold Advertising Update**

Tom Hickey gave a presentation on social media trends, including:

- Text-only posts are more popular on platforms like Mastodon and Twitter's Blue Sky. Meta's Spaces app saw a lot of initial downloads, but usage has declined.
- Longer 2-5 minute videos are making a comeback.
- Shares are becoming a more important metric than likes/comments for evaluating post engagement.
- Telegram is emerging as a potential "super app" for messaging and social media.
- TikTok continues to be the birthplace of viral video trends.
- AI tools will assist social media managers but not fully replace humans.
- YouTube Shorts is continuing to grow as a platform for short video content.

Some broader digital trends were also discussed:

- More digital and streaming TV/video content and measurement options are becoming available. This presents opportunities for marketing.
- "Generative AI" tools like ChatGPT can create content but still require human oversight and strategy.
- Cryptocurrency use continues to evolve across social platforms.
- Concerns persist around misinformation and "deep fakes" enabled by AI. Brand trust and safety are paramount.
- Digital and streaming video platforms are becoming more affordable marketing options than traditional TV, providing better measurement capabilities to track campaign performance.

- Privacy regulations and enforcement actions are increasing, likely impacting digital marketing and requiring brands to be more thoughtful with consumer data.
- E-commerce platforms like Amazon and Walmart now allow targeting ads using their first-party shopper data, making this very valuable. Reliance on third-party cookies is declining.
- New self-service ad platforms from Amazon and Walmart aim to challenge Facebook and Google's dominance in digital advertising. This makes digital ads more accessible to smaller businesses.
- Artificial intelligence is playing an increasing role in marketing and commerce. The founders of prominent AI firm OpenAI (developer of ChatGPT) departed the company, moving to work at Microsoft instead. This has significant implications for AI development.  
(see attached PowerPoint presentation)

#### **IV. Financial Discussion/Hyde County**

##### **a. FY23/24 Ocracoke Occupancy Tax Collection Summary**

Jeff Dippold could not attend the meeting, so Helena Stevens read the financial summaries.

In October 2023, the TDA received \$55,953 in occupancy tax collections. This was \$3,301 greater than the \$52,652 collected in October 2022. For the first third (4 months) of the 2023-2024 fiscal year, total collections were \$338,915. This represents a 5.8% increase compared to the \$320,316 received in the first third of fiscal year 2022-2023.

##### **b. FY 23/24 Ocracoke Occupancy Tax Collection Projection**

To maintain a conservative forecast approach, assuming the collections for the remainder of the fiscal year at 95% of the collections for the corresponding months in fiscal year 2022/23, the TDA can project collections of approximately \$497,000. Using this approach, total projected collections for FY2023-2024 are approximately \$497,000. This projection is \$7,000 greater than the \$490,000 originally budgeted for the fiscal year. In summary, occupancy tax collections were higher as of October 2023 compared to the previous year. Accounting for seasonality, they project continued growth in collections for the year compared to last year's actuals, landing around \$497,000 total for the fiscal year ending in 2024.

#### **V. New Business**

##### **a. Welcome BJ Oeschlegel**

New board member BJ Oeschlegel was welcomed. Her appointment was made official at the Hyde County Board of Commissioners meeting on October 2, 2023. She replaces retiring board member Martha Garrish. Helena reminded board members to use their visitocracokenc.com email addresses in future correspondence. Helena will coordinate getting BJ and Cynthia's email addresses with visitocracokenc.com extensions by the next board meeting.

##### **b. NCTIA Membership/Conference Update**

The Ocracoke TDA joined the NCTIA (North Carolina Travel Industry Association) at the Professional level. The NCTIA membership was recommended to help lobby for local tourism issues like ferry runs and budget. Helena attended the NCTIA Conference in Raleigh with Commissioner Matthews. They actively engaged with senators who support pro-tourism initiatives to advocate for Ocracoke's interests, discussing issues such as ferry funding, dredging, and the importance of tourism. Notable senators at the event included Senator Vicki Sawyer, Senator Todd Johnson, Senator Michael Azera, Senator Jim Perry, and former Senator Kirk deViere. Helena underscored the importance of sharing noteworthy information with Visit NC's PR group at [media@visitnc.com](mailto:media@visitnc.com) about developments on Ocracoke. This strategic communication ensures that Ocracoke remains on their radar and contributes to ongoing collaboration for the benefit of Ocracoke's interests.

#### **c. FY24/25 Budget Planning**

The board determined that the Budget Committee for FY24/25 will be Lisa, Susie, and Jennifer.

#### **d. Excess funding usage**

In August 2023, \$14,000 of additional revenues beyond initial projections for the year were identified. The board needs to consider potential uses for excess revenues. A consideration is that an additional tram stop will be added this year in front of Ride the Wind. This expansion will necessitate new signage at all stops and, if feasible, the installation of a shelter at the new stop. This, in turn, will require additional funding not initially accounted for in our budget planning for 2024/2025

#### **e. Future of the Pony Herd**

Kenny reported a pony died this past week, bringing the total number of the Ocracoke pony herd to 11. Past numbers are usually between 15 and 17, with one time the herd grew to 22. A discussion took place on why the NPS does not want to increase the herd. All agreed the ponies are a cultural asset for Ocracoke. Kenny suggested writing a letter of support for increasing the herd. A NPS meeting is scheduled for November 29th to discuss the herd. Kenny made the motion to write a letter of support only after he learned of the outcome of the upcoming meeting. The motion to wait before writing an official letter of support and questions was approved and will be revisited at the next meeting in January.

#### **f. New Tram Stop**

DOT approved a new tram stop to be installed at the corner of HWY 12 and Silver Lake Drive, in front of Ride the Wind Surf Shop. A shelter and new signage at all other stops will be needed to include the

new stop. Funding for the new tram stop could potentially come from the \$14,000.00 overage gained during fiscal year 23/24. The decision will be revisited at the next TDA board meeting scheduled in January.

#### **g. Fletcher O'Neal Letter**

Kenny reported the TDA board received a letter from Mr. Fletcher O'Neil, written by Kelly Shinn, regarding constructing a privacy fence between Mr. O'Neil's property and the adjacent parking lot. The letter asks the TDA to pay for building this fence. A discussion sympathizing with Mr. Fletcher O'Neal's privacy concerns noted that the TDA only rents the property from Jesse Spencer and has no control over privacy concerns. Mr. Fletcher needs to communicate with the property owner. Helena offered to find out if Jesse received the same letter from Fletcher and report back to the board. Once the board has a clearer understanding, it can decide how best to respond to Fletcher. The issue is tabled until the next board meeting.

### **VI. Old Business**

#### **a. Island Inn Update-Ken DeBarth**

In May 2018, the OPS purchased the Island Inn properties for \$795,000. After subdivisions and sales, we financed \$620,000 through a mortgage split equally between this board and the Occupancy Tax Board, paid up through June 2024. Additionally, OPS secured \$127,000 in outside grants, and this board awarded OPS a further \$127,000 beyond mortgage contributions.

As of November, volunteer fundraising for landscaping totals \$51,003. Restoration and landscaping costs so far are \$317,322, bringing total project expenses to \$535,548. Of that amount, \$127,000 came from off-island sources, underscoring this project's value to residents and our tourism economy. OPS still needs substantial local support to complete the project however.

#### **b. EV Charging Station Project**

The EV Charging Station Project continues in the early stages of discussions. Buxton has a charging station. The board needs more information, such as the best location for one and where the funding will come from. Commissioner Mathews agreed to speak with NPS superintendent Dave Hallac about possible places within the park service property. Susie will reach out to private businesses investors for start-up monies and both Commissioner Mathews and Susie will network with others on how best to move forward with the EV charging station project here on Ocracoke. Helena agreed to ask smaller, popular destination places how they are tackling EV Charging stations. Discussions are to be continued at the next meeting.

#### **c. Lighthouse Road Signs**

Board member Lisa reported Sharon has one of the DOT-provided signs that was found after Dorian. Commissioner Mathews will speak with the DOT about more signage. The recommendation was made to add directions to Springers Point on the walking map.

## **VII. Executive Director's Report**

We are continuing weekly planning calls with our Avenir Bold agency for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. We also hosted travel writers' and bloggers' familiarization trips in September and October, including with The Washington Post and National Geographic, to showcase Ocracoke.

We are reprinting 110,000 additional walking maps and directories for 2023-2024 with updated listings for \$19,300. Helena will attend the TravMedia trade show in January 2024 and the Visit NC Tourism Conference in March in Greenville and the Southeastern Tourism Society trade show in Little Rock. The New Bern Airport column wrap design is complete. Regarding the VisitOcracokeNC website, we continue securing blog posts and updating business openings and closings. We had a feature in a 25,000 circulation German equestrian magazine resulting from hosting a German media group. Our social media follower counts are increasing, now over 20,000 on Instagram, and 25,000 on Facebook. Administratively, Cynthia Carver-Calvitti is our new assistant handling minutes and other related TDA tasks. I'm also renewing insurance policies, updating state databases, processing invoices, responding to inquiries, and managing social media.

## **VIII. Public Input/Questions/Comments**

No comments

## **IX. Next Meeting Date**

January 19, 2024

## **X. Adjourn**

11:30 a.m.