



## **NORTH CAROLINA TRAVEL & TOURISM BOARD**

### **MEETING MINUTES**

March 17, 2020

**BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:** Sally Ashworth, Stephanie Brown, Mike Butts, Christopher Chung, Secretary Anthony Copeland, Representative Kevin Corbin, Senator Chuck Edwards, Representative Holly Grange, Senator Rick Gunn, Joe Pierce

**BOARD MEMBERS VOTING BY PROXY:** Mike Hawkins, Richard Moore, Sharon Sexton

**BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:** Jim Beley, Rolf Blizzard, Jonathan Fussell, Lynn Minges, Lee Nettles, William Traurig

**LIAISONS, STAFF AND GUESTS PRESENT:** Isabel Villa Garcia, Guy Gaster, Scott Gilmore, Adam Glaser, Bryan Gupton, Lex Janes, Karen Johns, Brooks Luquire, Wit Tuttell, Heidi Walters

Mike Butts, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 10:33 am. Due to COVID-19 the meeting was done remotely.

#### **WELCOME/COMMENTS FROM THE CHAIR**

Butts welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for their time. The Ethics Statement in accordance with Executive Order No. 35 was read aloud. Roll call was taken of board members present, quorum was met.

#### **EDPNC UPDATE**

Chris Chung, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), provided an update to the board. The impact of COVID-19 is being felt across the entire EDPNC, and Chung addressed steps being taken as a result. The Existing Industry team is developing a list of companies expected to experience supply-chain or workforce issues as well as companies who could potentially assist in the growing need for medical products. Keeping companies informed of disaster-recovery funds and other resources available will be important going forth. Project activity within Business Recruitment has predictably stalled.

#### **COMMERCE UPDATE**

Secretary of Commerce Anthony Copeland provided the Commerce update, noting that Governor Roy Cooper would soon be announcing a new executive order in response to COVID-19. The order will close NC restaurants to dine-in customers – specifying take-out and delivery orders only, as well as expand unemployment insurance to workers affected by COVID-19. Commerce is taking measures to prepare for the imminent rise in unemployment.

#### **VISIT NC UPDATE**

Wit Tuttell, Visit North Carolina (VNC), provided an update detailing VNC's response to COVID-19. A travel advisory has been posted on VisitNC.com since the start of the outbreak and partners are receiving daily updates. COVID-19 has been a significant traffic disrupter, with VisitNC.com traffic down

double digits in February and March. Extensive research is being done on the visitor mindset. Are people willing and receptive to travel messages and how best to deliver them is the primary focus. VNC's annual tourism conference, Visit NC 365, has transitioned to a virtual conference – set for March 30. The co-op advertising plan is being revamped and will be announced at the conference. Visit NC 365 will also include crisis PR and crisis research sessions.

Tuttell reported year end commercial lodging data for 2019, noting occupancy, room rates, RevPAR, revenues, demand, and supply were all up. VNC will be utilizing room demand projections from Smith Travel Research going forward. Tuttell announced an addition to the VNC team - Allison Schult has been brought on as a full-time consultant for the next year. Schult will work to ensure Visit NC is observing best practices and is prepared for the future.

### **LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

Representative Kevin Corbin and Senator Rick Gunn provided an update to the board, stating that the General Assembly is prepared to respond – financially or otherwise, when the need arises.

Representative Holly Grange noted that the General Assembly has been kept well-informed, which has alleviated some of the fears their communities are facing. Rep. Grange described the drastic effects the outbreak is already having on Wilmington's economy. Rep. Corbin voiced the same concerns within his own districts - the lack of tourism will have a tremendous impact on those communities.

Butts noted the resiliency of the tourism industry and its ability to bounce back once visitors can confidently feel safe. Isabel Villa Garcia, NC Restaurant & Lodging Association (NCRLA), voiced concerns regarding many restaurant's ability to reopen once the COVID-19 situation ends. Stephanie Brown agreed, stating that without grants half of their tourism products will never exist again. Tuttell described the assistance needed as two situations – first the immediacy, in which businesses can't get visitation and need help to survive. The second begins once people can visit again. This will be an extremely competitive time and one in which businesses will need help getting that message out.

Sen. Gunn commented that the focus should be on the immediate situation and should take precedent over other state initiatives. He reiterated the commitment of all legislators to make good decisions going forth and to keep North Carolinians as healthy as possible. Rep. Corbin noted how essential the rainy-day fund will be to the recovery and that the legislature is making a bipartisan effort to get the state through this. Butts thanked the legislators for their encouraging words and support.

### **WELCOME CENTER UPDATE**

Bryan Gupton provided the Welcome Center update. The Welcome Centers have closed and are referring people to the 800 and 511 phone numbers for travel information. They may reopen April 1, though that may change. The Charlotte Welcome Center will have a new look once it's reopened. The I-40 and I-95N Welcome Centers renovations are complete and plans for National Travel and Tourism Week are being altered. The Call Center may experience a lockdown at some point as the prison currently has suspected cases of COVID-19.

**INDUSTRY UPDATE**

Isabel Villa Garcia provided the NCRLA update. Keeping restaurants and hotels informed remains a priority. A list of items that could help restaurants and hotels policy-wise is being worked on. Helping restaurants transition to delivery services and assisting with permits has been a priority. The restaurant and lodging sectors are seeing a tremendous impact. Garcia thanked the legislators for their continued support.

**CLOSING**

A nominating committee comprised of Sally Ashworth, Stephanie Brown and Joe Pierce was formed to provide a recommendation regarding board chairmanship. The next board meeting is scheduled for May 19. The meeting was adjourned at 11:20 am.