

Minutes
Page County Tourism Council
Regular Meeting
Oct. 11, 2023

Members Present

Karen Riddle, Chairwoman / District 2
Randy Howan, Vice Chairman / District 3
Brittany Montgomery, District 1
Bart Price, District 4
J.D. Cave, At-Large

Staff Present *

Nina Fox, Economic Development and Tourism Director
English Henry, Economic Development and Tourism Specialist

** Communications and Marketing Coordinator Rebecca Armstrong of the Page County Economic Development and Tourism Department joined the meeting by phone.*

Others Present

Gina Hilliard, Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce President
Bill Huffman, Director of Marketing and PR for Luray Caverns
Jackie Fox Wood, Luray Downtown Initiative Program Director
Paula Kibler, Luray Downtown Initiative President

Call to Order

Chairwoman Riddle called to order the regular meeting of the Page County Tourism Council at 4:02 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2023, in the Board of Supervisors' Room, located on the second floor of the Page County Government Center at 103 S. Court St. in Luray.

Adoption of Agenda

Vice Chairman Howan **moved** that the tourism council adopt the Oct. 11, 2023 agenda with an amendment that two items be added to the agenda under "new business": the discussion and consideration of creating an events committee and the discussion and consideration of scheduling a public forum. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Montgomery and unanimously passed.

Action Matters

Approval of Meeting Minutes

Fox noted that the Page County Tourism Council canceled its September meeting. A **motion** made by Vice Chairman Howan to approve the meeting minutes of Aug. 9, 2023 as presented, seconded by Councilwoman Montgomery, unanimously carried.

Billboard for Downtown Luray fine dining

Fox reported that she recently spoke with Jim Sims, General Manager of the Mimslyn Inn, who indicated

that he would like to advertise fine dining in Downtown Luray on an existing billboard located just west of Luray, near the intersection of Battlecreek Drive and Route 211. Fox reported that a one-year contract states that the Mimslyn will cover the cost of the billboard — advertising the Mimslyn Inn, Watch and Warrant and the Chop House Bistro. Sims is requesting \$1,000 in Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) revenue to cover a one-time fee.

Councilwoman Montgomery **moved** that the Page County Tourism Council recommend that the Page County Board of Supervisors allocates \$1,000 in TOT revenue to cover a one-time fee associated with a one-year billboard advertising agreement showcasing fine dining in Downtown Luray. The motion was seconded by Vice Chairman Howan and unanimously passed.

Old Business

PR update

Fox reported that a contract with Kathy Moore of Moore PR to help with Google Ads and other advertisements and marketing efforts has reached about \$10,000 of a \$25,000 agreement. Fox noted that staff and Moore have worked to identify visitor demographics. She reported that the majority of visitors to pagevalley.org access the website via a mobile device, with social media driving traffic to the website. She added that many of the website users visit the site while they are already in Page Valley, looking for things to do while they are here. Fox added that the tourism council's marketing committee — consisting of Fox, Riddle, Morton, Armstrong and Hank Overton — meets on the fourth Monday of every month.

Fall ad review

Fox led a review of several fall ads, including a native travel ad on northernviriniomag.com; a full-page and half-page ad in Virginia Living Magazine's July/August and September/October issues, respectively; monthly banner and mobile footer ads on virginia.org; and newsletter ads through two email deployments by the the Shenandoah Valley Travel Association. She noted that advertisements and other marketing efforts continue to underscore Page Valley's designation of Cabin Capital of Virginia. Fox reported that new magnets featuring a QR code advertise things to do in Page Valley and that the magnets will be distributed to industry partners. She noted that the towns of Luray, Stanley and Shenandoah have agreed to used their earmarked TOT allocations for fiscal 2024 toward kiosks that will feature maps, QR codes and other visitor information, and that she is working now on a request for proposals.

Industry partner and visitor newsletters

Fox reported that an industry partner newsletter on Oct. 4 was sent to more than 200 Page Valley partners. Chairwoman Riddle underscored the importance of sharing information with the public and noted she was “curious if there is any other way to get it out to more people because it is powerful.” Fox noted that staff members have worked through several initiatives to increase visitor newsletter subscribers to more than 4,000.

Fox reported that an email marketing campaign in cooperation with Vista Graphics on Sept. 26 sent Page Valley's fall visitor newsletter to 340,000 high-income households in Northern Virginia, Raleigh, Richmond and Virginia Beach; 53,780 people (15.82%) opened the emails and 5,704 (1.68%) went directly to pagevalley.org. A second deployment on Oct. 3 was sent to 53,355 openers from Sept. 26; 7,734 (14.5%) opened the email and 1,350 (2.53%) went directly to pagevalley.org.

Proposed Page Valley Cultural Center and Business Hub discussion

Fox told council members that she was scheduled to give a presentation to the Page County Board of Supervisors during the Board's Nov. 6 work session regarding the proposed cultural center and business hub. Noting that the tourism council in April voted to earmark \$200,000 in TOT funds to potentially research, develop and execute a plan for the proposed cultural center and business hub, she emphasized

that the request must be approved by Supervisors and that no funding has been spent or allocated toward the potential project. Instead, she continued, \$200,000 in TOT revenue collected during the previous fiscal year had been earmarked, or, “set aside” to potentially use if Supervisors allocated those funds.

Council members discussed negative community feedback surrounding the proposal — chiefly via third-party Facebook “group” pages — including the circulation of misinformation among community members. Chairwoman Riddle clarified that “in April this group decided to earmark \$200,000 in the case that Supervisors wanted to move forward with this.” Fox said that the majority of community feedback via calls to and conversations with staff were supportive of further evaluations.

Fox added that a tourism management plan adopted by Supervisors in 2021 highlighted several key goals, including evaluating a need for a new visitor center, particularly based on visitor traffic studies. “We realize year after year after seeing some of the numbers and traffic how much we are missing out in the community on tourists who travel past Luray but not to Luray,” Fox said, noting that many visitors travel between Shenandoah National Park and Luray Caverns without venturing into Downtown Luray or the towns of Stanley or Shenandoah.

Fox reported that representatives from the Virginia Tourism Corp. recently voiced support of the potential cultural center and business hub and touted a similar project in Southwest Virginia that has “been successful while stopping silo effects.”

Council members discussed legislation regarding TOT and the differences between TOT collected by counties and towns; the importance of maintaining transparency in the community; and a shared commitment to continue promoting Page Valley and its three towns and the community of Rileyville as a premier overnight destination while serving industry partners and bettering the community.

New Business

August SEO report

Council members reviewed August’s SEO report for pagevalley.org, which indicated a 41.4% increase in organic traffic compared to July. The website saw 8,905 active users in August and 8,864 engaged sessions. Chairwoman Riddle noted that all of the website’s listings and content are overseen and created by staff.

TDC Q3 report

Fox reported that she, Henry and Armstrong recently met with The Downtown Creative for a third-quarter review and that quarterly meetings with the vendor are used to discuss the effectiveness of social media campaigns, as well as video and photography-driven content captured by TDC. Fox added that Henry leads the charge on all visitor social media posts each month. She noted that TDC continues to capture photos of local cabins as part of one of Page County’s ARPA-funded projects, coordinated by Henry, and that plans are underway to begin capturing exterior and interior photos of local merchants, shops, eateries and restaurants in Luray, Stanley and Shenandoah.

Social media discussion

Fox reported that the Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce recently relinquished its visitor Facebook and Instagram pages to the county. The council discussed pros and cons of merging the chamber’s pages with the county’s pages versus rebranding the pages — one as “Virginia’s Cabin Capital” and the other as “Visit Page Valley.” The council by consensus unanimously agreed to merge the pages in order to more effectively and cohesively market Page Valley and all of its offerings.

Events committee discussion and consideration

Henry reported plans to form an events committee, structured similarly to the council's marketing committee, to research and potentially organize a large-scale event in the county. Councilwoman Montgomery and Councilman Cave volunteered to serve on the committee. Henry noted that she plans to also include two community members.

Public forum discussion and consideration

Council members discussed holding a public forum to give presentations and answer community questions regarding marketing initiatives, TOT, the roles of the Page County Tourism Council, staff roles and more. The council by consensus directed staff to move forward with scheduling the community forum. Chairwoman Riddle recommended that council members "all get involved reaching out to businesses and community organizations."

Director's Report

Fox noted that all major points were covered during the meeting. Councilman Cave asked about the status regarding establishing a meat processing facility in Page County. Fox reported that the EDA's ag subcommittee continues to work to identify a location.

Open Public Comments

Kibler commended the idea of holding a community forum and asked that the council work to accommodate community members' schedules when scheduling the event. She inquired about the proposed cultural center and business hub, including drawings/renderings, square footage estimates/costs and insurance expenses. Fox noted that no specifics had been determined and that funding that the tourism council recommended earmarking would cover formal planning and start-up costs if approved by Supervisors.

Wood said she'd "learned a lot and heard a lot" about the proposed cultural center and business hub and that now she "had a lot of questions." She noted that the Town of Luray owns the train depot where the Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center is located, along with a small train museum and LDI's office. She expressed concern about operational costs at a new cultural center and business hub. She suggested the tourism council and/or staff issue a community survey regarding the proposed cultural center and business hub similar to surveys conducted by the Town of Luray.

Wood noted event listings on pagevalley.org and asked how to submit an event. Council members shared information with Wood about submitting an event and other industry partner resources featured on pagevalley.org and Chairwoman Riddle encouraged Wood to share the information with business owners and community leaders.

Council Members' Time

Referencing social media feedback, Councilwoman Montgomery asked fellow council members if they had considered streaming/recording monthly meetings. Chairwoman Riddle said that she was against streaming or recording the meetings, as in-person attendance encouraged community engagement. She added that if the tourism council was an elected group of officials — opposed to appointed members of an advisory group — she would support streaming/recording. Vice Chairman Howan said that if community members are interested, he encourages them to attend the council's meetings. Council members noted that meeting minutes are posted online. Chairwoman Riddle noted that the consensus so far was that the group not change its meeting procedures and that members absent from the October meeting should weigh in at another time.

Councilwoman Montgomery asked if fellow tourism council members had considered "announcing the meetings ahead of time?" Henry reported that the tourism council's schedule is posted each January to the county's webpage and included on the calendar featured prominently on the site's homepage calendar.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 6:01 p.m.