

TOURISM ADVISORY COUNCIL
REGULAR SESSION
SEPTEMBER 1, 2015

The Tourism Advisory Council met in Regular Session on Tuesday, September 1, 2015, 4:00 p.m. in the Derek D. Daniels Conference Room of the Athens Partnership Center with the following members present, to-wit:

Mike Coston
Chet Patel
Rae Priestley
Deanne Boswell
Virginia Reeder

Philip Rodriguez, City Administrator
Sherri Skeeters, Tourism Coordinator

others present: Bob Miars, Jim Bob Warren, Ron Welch and Monty Ingram;

Constituting a quorum at which time the following proceedings were enacted, to-wit:

ROLL CALL

Chairman Coston did a roll call of the Tourism Advisory Council members; Brad Smiley and Toni Clay were absent.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No action was taken.

CHAIRMAN OF TOURISM ADVISORY COUNCIL

A. STATUS REPORT ON TOURISM ADVISORY COUNCIL'S
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOTEL OCCUPANCY TAX FUNDING FOR
FISCAL YEAR 2016

Chairman Coston updated the TAC on the recommendations presented to the City Council on August 24, 2015 to fully fund the requests received from the two entities (Athens Teenage Baseball Association and the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Complex). He said that the City Council approved TAC's recommendations for FY2016 funding as it was presented to them.

PRESENTATION FROM BOB MIARS, CHAIRMAN OF THE HENDERSON
COUNTY REGIONAL FAIR PARK COMPLEX, REGARDING A MARKETING
CONCEPT TO PROMOTE TOURISM FOR THE CITY OF ATHENS

Chairman Coston called on Bob Miars, Chairman of the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Complex, to begin his presentation to the TAC. Mr. Miars passed out information he had

prepared for TAC members and thanked the members for the opportunity to present and for the funding to purchase additional stalls. Mr. Miars gave a brief bio about his past experiences and how it lead him to the Athens area where he has lived since 2001. Mr. Miars said he has been serving on the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Board since 2007.

Mr. Miars said that one of the concerns of the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Complex has been the marketing philosophy of the Athens Tourism Department. Mr. Miars said that Athens is a destination location and that it does not have the historical significance, cultural, entertainment, sports, recreation; a person has to have a reason to come to Athens. Mr. Miars asked what are the major tourism venues that Athens has to promote tourism, which he went on to state is the town square, fiddlers contest, excellent park system with the Cain Center, Texas Parks and Wildlife's fish hatchery, Trinity Valley Community College and the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Complex. Mr. Miars said that over the last ten years, the Complex has been booked 50 weekends out of the year and that the board feels they are the #1 tourist draw for Athens.

Mr. Miars explained the history of how the Complex has received funding in previous years, including the hotel occupancy tax they received from the City in 2009. He went on to explain the downturn of the economy in 2009, which resulted in the loss of about 20 shows (a 40% loss of income to the Complex), followed by the loss of HOT funds they were receiving from the City. After further explanation, Mr. Miars said he doesn't believe they are getting the return on their \$1 million investment. He went on to say that our focus has been on trying to get individual visitors to Athens and our focus needs to be changed to attract groups, associations or events that are going to bring large numbers with them.

CONSENT AGENDA;

- A) CONSIDER APPROVING MINUTES OF THE JULY 14, 2015 SPECIAL SESSION AND JULY 29, 2015 SPECIAL SESSION.

A motion was made by Virginia Reeder, seconded by Deanne Boswell to approve the Consent Agenda. The motion carried unanimously.

DISCUSS RESIGNATION OF DARLENE FORSHAGE FROM THE TOURISM ADVISORY COUNCIL

Chairman Coston informed TAC members that Darlene Forshage had asked to resign as an alternate member of the board. No other comments were made.

DISCUSS EVENT LISTING GUIDELINES

Sherri Skeeters updated the TAC on the event listing guidelines and explained that when the Department of Tourism added the capability to submit events through the website, there became

a need to have guidelines in place. Mrs. Skeeters said that staff is looking at updating the guidelines asking a two-part test set of questions, does the event bring in people from out of town and does it keep locals in town. Mrs. Skeeters went on to say that the idea is to broaden the guidelines more so that the department can list events that are of interest to visitors coming in and not excluding events that could be a draw for tourism. Mrs. Skeeters also made the TAC members aware that there is a link available on the events calendar for people to submit their event information, which does go through an approval process. Mr. Rodriguez said that once the guidelines are updated, staff would engage the other groups to find those out so that we can try to get it listed.

DISCUSS LISTING AREA ATTRACTIONS

Mrs. Skeeters said that several people have mentioned adding to the attractions that are listed on the Department of Tourism's website. She said that all of the attractions in Athens are listed and the only one listed in a neighboring town is the NY-TX Zipline. Mrs. Skeeters said that when she and Mr. Rodriguez met, it was discussed including attractions within a realistic drive time (45 minutes). She said that Tyler's Tourism lists attractions in other cities on their website such as Henderson and Canton. Mrs. Skeeters mentioned some nearby attractions that had already been mentioned such as Purvis Creek State Park, the blueberry farms. Mrs. Boswell mentioned that there is a strawberry farm about three miles out across the rest stop called Beaver Family Farms, where you can pick your own. She said that they only have a few acres but thought they produce the majority of the Texas crop. Mr. Rodriguez suggested highlighting a different theme every quarter such as strawberries, wineries, sports, etc. that take place at different times of the year; help people make easy choices. He also suggested itineraries such as a girl's weekend, click to find 10 things related to a girls weekend; get outside month and list outdoor activities; work with Tourism Advisory Council to identify themes to market each month. Mrs. Reeder suggested partnering with other activities going on in the community to encourage people to stay overnight for multiple days. Chairman Coston suggested having an itinerary of other activities going on in the area such as the basket factory in Jacksonville or the Tomato Festival, ride the train in Palestine, etc. and come back to Athens; people are looking for an easy way to plan a trip. There is value in partnering with other cities. Mr. Rodriguez suggested creating an inventory of the things that are in our area that the TAC can decide on what and how to market it. Mrs. Boswell suggested asking what do you like to do on weekends, what do you like to do with your family, what are three things that are really cool in Athens? Mr. Rodriguez suggested surveying the community via Survey Monkey to get their input.

DISCUSS TOURISM ADVISORY COUNCIL'S IDEAS FOR TOURISM GOING FORWARD

Chairman Coston suggested coming up with a list of attractions that TAC members are aware of that are everyday to bring back the next time we meet to get as many attractions as we can on our list of attractions; then we can discuss our ideas of tourism going forward whether it's the fair park or the arboretum, an art walk, winery tours, strawberry farms, etc. and then we can put it all together and work on our goal for tourism. Mr. Rodriguez said that there is great opportunity for us to capitalize on the fact that we are so close to Dallas/Ft. Worth that we could become Dallas' playground. Athens didn't pop out as a place to visit when looking at places to go for the weekend. Mr. Rodriguez encouraged the TAC to look at the weekenders as our bread and butter; Athens needs to be at the forefront from a marketing standpoint to get them here and spending good dollars. The Texan Theater is a good example, Mr. Rodriguez said he wants TAC to help the City think through what we could do with it to make it a true destination that could be a venue for art, music, live outdoor theater productions in the summer so that it becomes an attraction. What can we do to step up everything that we've talked about thus far as a community and as far as tourism goes. Mr. Rodriguez wants us to make our attractions, events, venues so attractive that people have no choice but to come to Athens. When people get here will they find what we're selling, through our advertising, will they discover that Athens is as special as we think it is? We're missing out if people come and they're not connected to what's going on here. We need to bolster the attractions to make Athens one of the hottest places to venture out of Dallas to go play, be outside, slow down and enjoy. Visitors coming here need to be able to experience something they can't experience elsewhere. What do we need to do to create that type of excitement for our visitors? The opportunity is there, we just need to bring some strategy to it and Mr. Rodriguez said he thinks the Texan Theater would be a great project to start with to make it unique and uniquely Athens. Chairman Coston agreed and said that everyone, a lot of the rural communities, have some sort of museum or that type of thing for example but we need to have something that no one else has or make it more unique than any other city. Mrs. Boswell mentioned, going back to the Texan, that there are a lot of "pop up" attractions such as the children's museum in Palestine and possibly using the Texan as a "pop up shop" for art, strawberries for the weekend, book sale; do we have enough things here that will draw people in? Mr. Rodriguez said that if downtown is going to become a destination, it needs to center around food, drink, music.

DISCUSS DEVELOPING METHOD FOR MEASURING RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)

Chairman Coston said that he intentionally skipped item nine on the agenda, discuss developing a method for measuring ROI, due to the amount of time needed to discuss it.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIZENS TO EXPRESS ITEMS OF CONCERN

Chairman Coston called on Ron Welch and he stated that from his observation, what Mr. Miars was talking about is to target the advertising to a group that you're trying to get their interest specifically rather than broad advertising and that he thought Mr. Rodriguez was saying the same thing except he was talking a group of people i.e., families. Mr. Welch suggested using a direct mail service to target a particular zip code for instance. Monty Ingram said that if the largest bulk of people at one time are coming to the fairgrounds, that it seems that if that group of people could be marketed to come back to town when it's not a rodeo event and if we'd like them to do things while they're here, is there any effort made to educate them while they're at the fairgrounds as to what to do? They are more or less a captive audience and we want to entertain them while they're here plus we'd like them to come back. Could you target the people that come to the fairgrounds to do a direct mail, Mr. Ingram asked. Mr. Miars said they are currently trying to collect addresses from the promoter/organizer. Chairman Coston mentioned something as simple as putting up a kiosk about the arboretum, fisheries, zipline. Mr. Miars said that they sell signs to Athens' businesses and that if we could get creative about putting signs in the four ramp entrances to visit these venues, the fairgrounds would be willing to do it at no charge. Mrs. Boswell said that it would be hard for a small business to afford to pay for a sign, that the large chains can afford; and that there has to be a way to market the small things, the businesses that are not chains, that are unique to Athens and that may be something that we can think about as a group to help them market all the cool, fun, different things that we have that are going to keep people coming back. Mr. Miars mentioned the idea of bundling for certain time periods, maybe those activities are listed i.e., things to do this week or things to do this month in Athens. Rae Priestley mentioned she needed to pull up the calendar and have it at the winery for her guests coming in from Dallas that want to know where they can go next. Chairman Coston said that earlier it was mentioned that kiosks do not work but he said that they do work, that's what the Texas travel centers are. Mr. Miars said that maybe a kiosk strategically placed at the show office would work.

A motion was made by Rae Priestley, seconded by Deanne Boswell to adjourn.

PASSED AND APPROVED THIS THE 3rd DAY OF NOVEMBER, 2015.

Mike Coston, Chairman

ATTEST:

Bonnie Hambrick, City Secretary