

Henderson County Tourism Development Authority Board Meeting

May 26, 2026

1:00 pm

Henderson County Welcome Center Conference Room

Board Members present: Richard Rhodes (Chair), Julie Hall, Travis Bonnema, Roy Dickerson, Joe Dinan, Mike Burnette, Steven Brown

Others: Sabrina Rockoff, attorney; Michelle Owens, Debi Smith, Ashley Downer, Randall Cox, Mikayla Johnson (remote); Kristen Murphy (remote); Clifford Meeks

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by the Chair at 1:01 p.m.

Public Comment: The Chair called for public comment.

Clifford Meeks spoke about increasing overnight stays in Hendersonville and Henderson County by discussing the Virginia Rails with Trails program. They are expecting a 30% increase in overnight stays once they have a dinner trail up and running. Mr. Meeks thinks the HCTDA should do something similar here with the railroad tracks from Zirconia to the South Carolina State Line which are about to become a bike path. He discussed the federal government and state government options for railroad rights of way. Mr. Meeks suggested a dinner trail would be a good usage of the railroad tracks mentioned above.

The Chair thanked the guests for being present today.

Consent Agenda: Mr. Burnette made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda containing the following items:

TDA Board Meeting Minutes from the April 2026 meeting

Monthly Marketing Updates

Mrs. Hall seconded the motion, and the motion carried unanimously. Mr. Bonnema asked if the events funding agenda item should be considered before the budget approval. Ms. Owens and Mr. Rhodes explained that the amounts in the budget are what are available and that the board will then be deciding whether to expend those funds on particular items.

Marketing Update – Marketing Strategy FY27: Kristen Murphy from Paradise Advertising & Marketing provided the marketing update, which included marketing strategy for FY27. Ms. Murphy began by explaining the work Paradise has done in the past to develop the marketing strategy for the HCTDA, including looking at the data regarding travel and overnight stays for several years. Paradise wanted to evaluate what is changing, what is working and

what needs to evolve. The overall objective is to generate demand and strengthen visitation. The strategy is designed to increase occupancy tax by \$200,000 year over year. Ms. Murphy discussed the competitive nature of the travel industry and the competitive set for Henderson County. Paradise discussed four Macro Travel Trends shaping FY27: experience first, meaningful travel, outdoor escape, and AI discovery. She noted that marketing efforts need to lead with an appeal to available emotional experiences and that today's travelers are seeking authenticity, connection, and slower-paced environments for vacations. Ms. Murphy highlighted that demand continues to grow for outdoor recreation, and this means assets like the Ecusta Trail have become more necessary and strategic. She also discussed the growing importance of AI travel planning, acknowledging that approximately 40% of users are utilizing AI-assisted tools to plan their trips. The FY27 recommendations are based on research and data from a variety of sources and historical performance trends. The process of the creation of the FY27 strategy included five main questions: What seasons represent the greatest opportunities for growth? Which origin markets are generating the highest-value overnight visitors? How much in advance are travelers planning their trips and when should campaigns activate to capture early intent? Which audience segments require earlier inspiration and upper-funnel awareness before moving into consideration? What types of storytelling, themes and experiences are resonating most strongly with target travelers? She touched on key strategic insights: Longer stays drive revenue with STR guests generating substantially higher stay value than hotel guests, fall and holiday travelers are planning significantly earlier than historical data, awareness matters more – travelers are comparing more destinations earlier in the process and searching for the best places for a specific experience rather than looking up a specific location, and seasonal experiences win –holiday and seasons are the strongest and most differentiated trip drivers.

Based on this information, the FY27 represents a strategic shift to demand creation focus. This includes a greater emphasis on upper-funnel awareness media tactics; a focus on creating future demand, not just capturing existing demand; expanding consideration earlier in the planning journey; and, inspiring higher-value travelers with earlier seasonal storytelling. Ms. Murphy emphasized that the strategy is still a full funnel strategy, but with an emphasis on the upper funnel.

The FY27 strategy will continue to use the paid, owned, shared, earned approach through an integrated marketing ecosystem. The FY27 has 6 strategic priorities: Increase Upper-Funnel Awareness, Grow Shoulder Season Demand, Align Co-op with Destination Storytelling, Lead with Seasonal Emotional Storytelling, Support High-Value Overnight Visitation, and Execute with Integrated PESO Strategy.

This month's presentation is focused primarily on the "why" of the FY27 marketing strategy. The next presentation will look more to campaigns, media approach, messaging, creating direction, timing and other details.

Paradise will be in-market the last week of June to capture spring and summer hero brand photography and videography. The focus will be on outdoor adventure and the Ecusta Trail. The summer campaign will extend through July with the Apple + Fall campaign launching in July. The holiday season creative campaign is already in development. Ms. Owens thanked Ms. Murphy and her team for taking the time to take a step back and giving the background review to make sure everyone is aligned.

Finance Report: Mr. Cox presented the March 2026 financial report. Mr. Cox reported the net collection numbers through March 2026. Expenditures are down, but some of the decrease is based on timing. March 2026 collections are up 14% over March 2025 however activity is down 5%. The increase is due to the increase in occupancy tax. Mr. Bonnema clarified that activity is down in part because Henderson County had higher than usual activity in 2025 due to workers and volunteers after Hurricane Helene. Mr. Burnette asked about comparators from other WNC counties.

Mr. Burnette moved to approve the financial report as presented. Mrs. Hall seconded the motion, and the motion carried unanimously.

FY27 Budget

Public Hearing on FY27 Budget: Following the posting of the proposed Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget in accordance with applicable law, the Chair opened the public hearing on the proposed Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget at 1:36 pm. The Chair called for speakers on the budget. Seeing none, the Chair closed the public hearing for the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget at 1:36 p.m.

Mr. Bonnema clarified that nothing changed in the proposed budget from April to May 2026.

Mr. Rhodes moved that the Authority approve the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget as presented. Mrs. Hall seconded the motion, and the motion carried unanimously.

Events Funding. Ms. Owens reminded the Board of the changes over time with grant and other sponsorship dollars available within the budget. She reminded the Board of the Hunden report and the Board's decision to ask Henderson County to the meeting to discuss the Berkley Park lighting project.

Ms. Smith described the funding recommendations for FY27 based on events and other funding requests that have been funded in prior years. The Winter Ramble amount increased

by \$12,000 from last year. All of the other recommended amounts are the same. The proposed budget included:

Downtown Hendersonville - \$55,000

Friends of Laurel Park - \$4,000

Winter Ramble Event - \$42,000

Flat Rock Playhouse - \$20,000

Ms. Hall moved that the Authority approve funding as follows as a tourism-related expenditure and find that each is designed to increase the use of lodging facilities, meeting facilities, or convention facilities in the County and to attract tourists or business travelers to the County, such approval contingent upon the execution of the appropriate agreements as determined by the Executive Director:

Downtown Hendersonville - \$55,000

Friends of Laurel Park - \$4,000

Winter Ramble Event - \$42,000

Flat Rock Playhouse - \$20,000

Mr. Burnette seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

Destination Development Plan: Berkeley Park Sports Complex:

Ms. Owens introduced Chris Todd, Assistant County Manager for Henderson County, who was invited by the Board to present the Berkeley Park Sports Complex lighting project for funding consideration. Mr. Todd pointed out how the Sports Complex meets many of the priorities outlined in Ms. Murphy's report regarding the FY27 Marketing strategies, including strong overnight visitation with shoulder-season demand.

Mr. Todd reminded the Board that the Hunden Study highlighted sports as one of the four major opportunity areas for Henderson County and a high priority direct driver for tourism. Mr. Todd described the importance of the number of fields available at the Berkeley Park Sports Complex. The Sports Complex has four high quality FIFA-sized turf fields that will be able to host large regional tournaments that increase overnight stays and local spending. It is centrally located and able to host sports such as soccer, lacrosse, and flag football. The flat rectangular nature of the fields is very adaptable to different sports. There are also plans to build 6 tennis courts, the minimum needed for college tournaments. The historic field will also be used for a variety of community events.

Mr. Todd walked the Board through the site plan and explained the importance of the artificial turf on the fields for shoulder season play. The turf does not have crumb rubber, which makes it safer and able to maintain cooler temperatures.

Mr. Todd then explained the budget for the Sports Complex. The current unfunded portion of a \$17 million project is \$1.675 million. The County has used \$11 million in ARPA funding; \$5.5 million in County general funds; \$310,000 in donations and \$365,000 in grants. The largest percentage of the grants is from the tennis association for the tennis courts, and Mr. Todd anticipates receiving a total of \$350,000 - \$400,000 in local donations for the complex. Construction is underway with completion scheduled for November 2026. Mr. Todd also updated the Board on the grants the County has received and the outreach the County has done to raise money for the project.

The bases and conduit for the lights are in the ground. The \$1.675 million represents the lighting and the poles. The request is for sports lighting and not safety lighting, which is already included. The request includes lighting for all of the facilities within the Sports Complex. The Berkeley Ballfield is a historical site and is part of phase II. An anonymous community member is willing to seed the restoration project of the Ballfield. The lighting is a part of the restoration project so the infrastructure for the lighting in the ballfield is already set.

Mr. Todd explained the opportunity presented by the FIFA Cup in the US this summer. There is expected an influx of new fans and tournaments as the FIFA cup generates energy around soccer in 2026, similar to interest following the last North American FIFA Cup in the '90s. The Commissioners are committed to having tournaments in the park. The types of tournaments available are currently limited by the lack of lighting. Hunden estimated that the lighting would bring in over \$33 million in additional spending over the next 30 years.

Mr. Todd requested from the HCTDA \$1,675,000 over 3 to 4 years contingent on a final grant agreement being signed. He thinks this would be a similar concept to the Ecusta Trail. Mr. Todd noted the Ecusta Trail was an investment the HCTDA paid for, and we are already seeing dividends. He pointed out that the HCTDA money was helpful in securing federal grants for the Ecusta Trail project. He believes the same will happen if the HCTDA provides funding for the lighting.

Mr. Dickerson asked about the current weather in the last week impacting the project. Mr. Todd indicated no damage or impact on cost or time because of the rain. Mr. Burnette asked about the County's payment obligations for the lighting project and how that compares to the request for the HCTDA to pay over 3 to 4 years. Mr. Bonnema asked about a five-year time frame for payment. He also asked what would happen if the HCTDA did not

pay for the lights. Mr. Todd answered that the County would need to find another supporter, and the project would most likely be significantly delayed. Mr. Bonnema also asked about use by residents of the fields compared with tournament use, and how many tournaments would be needed to bring in revenue. Mr. Burnette clarified that soccer would be more of a tournament driver than the one softball or one baseball field. Mr. Todd agreed and pointed out that the tennis courts could also bring tournaments and that the soccer fields can be used for a variety of sports tournaments. Chair Richard Rhodes asked who would be responsible for booking the tournaments. Mr. Brown asked about the biggest competitors for the desired tournaments. Mr. Bonnema asked about when the park would open with the lighting. Mr. Todd said if the Board decides today about a grant, the lights would be ready to open at the same time. Mr. Bonnema asked about building tournament requirements into the grant agreement. Mr. Todd and the Board discussed options for accountability within the agreement.

FY Funding Approvals

Chair Rhodes moved that the Henderson County Tourism Development Authority fund the lighting project for Berkley Park through a grant to Henderson County in the amount of \$1,675,000 to be funded over four years payable in four payments of \$418,750 annually, contingent upon the availability of such funding in each applicable year, and only in accordance with the terms of an appropriate agreement to be negotiated by the Executive Director. In so moving, the HCTDA finds that the Berkley Park lighting project is a tourism-related expenditure that is designed to increase the use of lodging facilities, meeting facilities, or convention facilities in the county and to attract tourists or business travelers to the county. Ms. Hall seconded the motion.

Mr. Burnette said he wasn't ready yet to decide and thought other options should be looked at. He also expressed his concern about bringing in the tournaments.

Mr. Bonnema asked about the timeline for lights.

Mr. Bonnema brought up a five-year timeline, which would allow for plenty of money to cover other things and write into the agreement accountability on the tournaments.

Ms. Hall said that she has had 8 people book for baseball tournaments. That and the Hunden report gave her the confidence to support the project.

Chair Rhodes then amended his motion as follows: the timeline to make the payments is five years instead of four and to add a requirement that the agreement encourage tournaments. Mr. Dickerson seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

New Business:

Ms. Owens discussed the need for a time in June for the hospitality celebration to honor the heart of hospitality award winner and outcoming board members. She proposed instead of having the June Board meeting, having the hospitality celebration on June 23 at noon.

Chair Rhodes moved that the June Board Meeting be cancelled in lieu of having the hospitality celebration on June 23 at noon; Ms. Hall seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

Closed Session: Ms. Hall moved for the HCTDA to go into closed session pursuant to North Carolina General Statute 142-318.11(a)(2), to prevent the premature disclosure of an award recipient; pursuant to North Carolina General Statute 142-138.11(a)(1), to prevent the disclosure of information that is privileged and confidential pursuant to the laws of North Carolina or not considered a public record within the meaning of Chapter 132 of the General Statutes; and pursuant to North Carolina General Statute 142-138.11(a)(3) to consult with an attorney retained by the Henderson County Tourism Development Authority about matters with respect to which the attorney-client privilege between the HCTDA and its attorney must be preserved. Mr. Burnette seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously. The Board went into closed session at 2:37 p.m.

The Board re-entered open session at 3:01 p.m.

Mr. Rhodes moved to create a Volunteer of the Year Award to be given annually at the same time as the Heart of Hospitality Award to be open to any individual who volunteers (without compensation) for a hospitality organization or event. Mr. Burnette seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

Adjournment: Burnette moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Dickerson seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 3:03 p.m.

Next Meeting: HCTDA Board Meeting July 28, 2026 at 1:00 p.m. at the TDA Welcome Center.