



NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAIN TOWNS OF CASHIERS,
CHEROKEE, DILLSBORO AND SYLVA

To: TDA Board
From: Nick Breedlove, TDA Executive Director
Date: May 20, 2022
Subject: Monthly Director's Brief

The below is a recap of activities that I sent out to about 700 community partners in our regular Partner Connect Update. I believe it sums up our activity over the last few months well:

- 1) This summer, the JCTDA opens its first cycle for the new Tourism Capital Project Fund (TCPF). The TCPF reinvests visitor-paid room tax back into the community for its residents' benefit. The projects funded by this program will appeal to those who live here and those who visit. Through this program, we make Jackson County and our communities a more vibrant place to live, work and visit. Applications for this calendar year are due August 1. The projected allocation for projects in fiscal year 2022-23 is \$750,000.
- 2) Leisure travel demand is unprecedented this fiscal year with total accommodation sales reaching \$56 million yielding \$2,248,595 in occupancy tax fiscal year-to-date. The additional occupancy tax funds generated are fueling the Tourism Capital Project Fund. Like many mountain destinations in the region, we're mindful that we are seeing a massive surge of visitors and that equates to impact on our beloved places. We remain focused on sustainability efforts to lessen the environmental impact of tourism on our communities.
- 3) Jackson County leads visitor spending only second to Buncombe County in the 17-county western NC region. Visitors spent \$292 million in Jackson County last year, depositing about \$801,917 per day into local cash registers. Visitor spending supports \$84.5 million in worker paychecks. Visitor spending has increased by \$40 million in just four years. We're cognizant of the impact of increased visitation and our marketing and communication plans are prioritizing messaging for the high-value, mindful visitor who contributes more to our community, economically and otherwise.
- 4) Our 'Secret Season' campaign is working! In 2017, we saw on average 30-percent occupancy in January. As part of our strategic plan, we made a push to people here during what we used to call our 'slow season' (January-March). Now we market it as our Secret Season – a time when the air is crisp, clean, and cool; when you have your favorite restaurants all to yourself without a wait, lodging rates are more affordable, and you have the trails all to yourself. Fast forward a few years, and we're averaging about 42-percent occupancy in January. Visitation during this timeframe helps every small business in our community during a slower time.

- 5) Jackson County was recently featured in Appalachian Regional Commission Videos to tell the story of arts, culture, and tourism in North Carolina. The [first video](#) features Dogwood Crafters and the Green Energy Park, and the [second video](#) features fly fishing with Tuckasegee Fly Shop and rafting with Dillsboro River Company.
- 6) We are strengthening our ties to local food producers in support of agritourism. With the help of a Western Carolina University internship, we were able to source listings for the [VisitNC Farms app](#) highlighting local food producers, restaurants, farmers' markets, and more. Launching this week is the Vacation Supported Agriculture program which connects visitors to a bag of fresh local produce ready for them when they arrive, thanks to WNC Farm to Table.
- 7) Sylva is now home to North Carolina's first [Certified Nature Forest Therapy Trail](#). After an almost two-year certification process, Pinnacle Park was certified with the designation, which only a handful of parks in the United States hold. Brochures and a QR code are installed at the entrance to the park, which offer a self-guided tour. We worked with Southwestern Community College's Dr. Mark Ellison to obtain the certification. Studies show that a focused session lasting fifteen minutes in nature lowers blood pressure, anxiety and stress and boosts the immune system. Check it out on your next hike!
- 8) Our new 2022-23 Visitor Guide is on stands now. Check it out online [here](#). Please contact the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce for bulk pickup of guides or the Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce. Also new is our 2022 Fly Fishing Trail Map. We listened to concerns from residents about litter in public restrooms and updated our guide accordingly with an emphasis on Leave No Trace®. Click [here](#) to view the new FF Trail Map!
- 9) Our Ale Trail pass launch was a success. We've seen people 'hop' along the Ale Trail from 23 states. Visitors and residents can take advantage of the Brew Hop Pass. Here's how it works – check in at four of our breweries within a year and earn a free branded pint glass! Click [here](#) to learn more.
- 10) Visitor safety – we recently enhanced our existing waterfall safety measures to help people visiting from out of state know what we as residents know – not to climb or wade in water above waterfalls; it can be deadly. Every social media post with waterfall imagery now has a written safety advisory in the caption. We've also incorporated 'Bear Wise' tips on our safety page as well. Click [here](#) for the **Safety Page**.
- 11) We funded a \$10,000 grant to Friends of Panthertown Valley for trail counters to better understand visitation trends in the almost 10,000-acre backcountry wilderness area. As part of our sustainability efforts, we want to assist the organization with understanding which trails are being heavily utilized (and might need more attention), which entrances are being most used, and more. This data will help establish a baseline for Friends of Panthertown and the U.S. Forest Service. Also, in sustainability efforts, we continue to financially support the Tuckasegee River Cleanup, Trail Maintenance at Pinnacle Park, and the Keep Our Mountains Clean and Green initiative.
- 12) We believe in strategic planning for the future of our communities. The JCTDA issued grant funding to the Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce, who spearheaded bringing a group of experts here from the renowned Urban Land Institute to study growth, opportunities, and challenges in the Cashiers area. Responsible growth is key in every community but especially for Cashiers. Their full report is online [here](#).

- 13) New lodging coming to Jackson County – The Kessler Group last week closed on their purchase of 25 acres behind the Farmers Market. The Cashiers Village project will feature a 90-100 room lodge, retail space, a conservation area, glamping sites, employee housing and a new event venue. See the entire plan [here](#).
- 14) We've had a great year with our new Public Relations firm. Lou Hammond Group took over the Jackson County account last year and they hit the ground running and continue to provide unparalleled service to us. Their work drives significant spending as a result of placements in national outlets such as [Travel + Leisure](#), [Matador Network](#) and [Travel Pulse](#), as well as regional publications like [Southwest Georgia Living](#), [Greenville Journal](#) and [Chattanooga Times Free Press](#). As a result of their work over the past 10 months, editorial coverage of Jackson County has reached an audience of over 411 million readers and resulted in an estimated advertising value of ~\$2 million.
- 15) If you're on TikTok, so are we! Here's the [link](#). We are prioritizing video content. Our goal in producing more original content is to get great content out to our visitors to in turn drive more spending at your business. Our channel launched this spring and we're posting regular updates along with Instagram reels highlighting beautiful places in Jackson County.
- 16) Mentioning social media, our employee Caleb, who manages our social media platforms, has been hitting it out of the park. Social media is the number one driver of traffic to our website. Last year, we reached 41.6 million people on Facebook and 2.8 million on Instagram.
- 17) We continually refine and work on our website to better serve visitors. In 2015 when I started in this role, we had 32,000 website sessions that entire *year*. In the last 30 days, we've had 54,000 website sessions and we're on track to hit over half a million sessions this year. The website continues to be a great way to showcase the best of our county – and it's built for residents and visitors. If you have friends or family coming into town and you're looking for something to do, we have every trail, waterfall, and trip itineraries you could ever need. Check it out.
- 18) How many people come to Jackson County each year? This is one of the top questions I get. In 2020 we had approximately 1,180,000 overnight visitors to Jackson County.
- 19) Lastly, thank you all for your support. It's been an incredibly busy last year for us, and we couldn't do it without the amazing partnerships in this community. We're so thankful for our amazing Board of Directors, our Chamber of Commerce Directors, Julie Spiro and Stephanie Edwards, our Economic Developer, Tiffany Henry, our county departments, our educational institutions, and our countless restaurants, shops, accommodations, and more. I'm always amazed at how well everyone in this community works together for the betterment of all. Our continued success is due to you.