

WARREN COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

COMMITTEE: TOURISM

DATE: MAY 29, 2015

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

SUPERVISORS MERLINO
KENNY
DICKINSON
CONOVER
WOOD
FRASIER

OTHERS PRESENT:

PAUL DUSEK, COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR
AMANDA ALLEN, CLERK OF THE BOARD
FRANK E. THOMAS, BUDGET OFFICER
SUPERVISORS SEEBER
TAYLOR
MICHAEL SWAN, COUNTY TREASURER
DAVID STRAINER, TOWN OF QUEENSBURY RESIDENT
DON LEHMAN, *THE POST STAR*
THOM RANDALL, *ADIRONDACK JOURNAL*
CHARLENE DiRESTA, SR. LEGISLATIVE OFFICE SPECIALIST

COMMITTEE MEMBER ABSENT:

SUPERVISOR VANSELOW

Mr. Merlino called the meeting of the Tourism Committee to order at 10:49 a.m.

Motion was made by Mr. Dickinson, seconded by Mr. Conover and carried unanimously to approve the minutes of the previous Committee meeting, subject to correction by the Clerk of the Board.

Copies of the agenda were distributed to the Committee members; *a copy of the agenda is on file with the minutes.*

Commencing the agenda review, Mr. Merlino presented two resolution requests on behalf of the Tourism Department, as follows:

- ▶ request for a contract with Benchmark Printing, Inc. in an amount not to exceed \$6,964 to print 80,000 copies of the 2015 Fall Brochure during a term commencing July 1, 2015 and terminating July 31, 2015; and
- ▶ request to amend Resolution No. 585 of 2014 to change the name of the vendor from Light & Power Communications, Ltd. (L&P Media) to Aeon Nexus Corporation.

Pertaining to the 2015 Fall Brochure, Mr. Merlino advised that Benchmark Printing, Inc. had been the lowest responsible bidder and this project would be completed for less than the amount budgeted. Concerning the request to amend Resolution No. 585 of 2014, he explained that John Daniels, President of L&P Media, Ltd., had indicated that the company had merged with Aeon Nexus Corporation and an amendment to the resolution was necessary to change the name of the company.

Motion was made by Mr. Kenny, seconded by Mr. Conover and carried unanimously to approve the requests as presented. *Copies of the resolution request forms are on file with the minutes and the necessary resolutions were authorized for the June 19, 2015 Board Meeting.*

Mr. Merlino noted there were no referrals or pending items. He said a brief executive session was required and he asked Paul Dusek, County Administrator, to state the reason; Mr. Dusek informed the executive session was necessary to discuss the employment history of a particular person.

Motion was made by Mr. Dickinson, seconded by Mr. Kenny and carried unanimously that executive session be declared pursuant to Section 105(f) of the Public Officers Law.

Executive session was held from 10:51 a.m. until 10:56 a.m.

Supervisors Thomas and Wood entered the meeting during the executive session.

Upon reconvening, Mr. Merlino noted that no action had been taken during the executive session.

Mr. Merlino announced that Kate Johnson, Director of Tourism, would be retiring effective June 29, 2015. In anticipation of Ms. Johnson's retirement, he continued, he and Mr. Dickinson had met with some of the local business owners and members of the Chambers of Commerce over the last month. He apprised that he planned to meet with the Tourism Department staff members to hear their ideas pertaining to the future of the Department. He noted the Tourism Department would run smoothly until January 1, 2016 and there was no reason to rush into a decision. He advised he had been working in the tourism industry for the last 30 years and he intended to become more involved with the day-to-day operations of the Department.

Mr. Merlino explained that some local business owners had expressed concerns with the way in which the County advertised. He commented that the County Treasurer had recently reported a 7% increase in occupancy tax collections and a decrease in sales tax collections; he noted some of the business owners believed the only reason there was an increase in occupancy tax collections was because they had raised the room rates due to a decrease in tourism.

Mr. Merlino explained that when people responded to an advertisement, information and brochures were sent to them based on their interests. He said names and addresses were shared with local business owners but email addresses were not. He indicated the possibility of discussing whether or not the Department should change the policy on the sharing of email addresses. He said he had purchased tires recently and had shared his email address in order to save 2% and as a result he received 2 emails each day for 7 days per week. He stated the concern with sharing the Tourism Department email subscriber list was that those people would be bombarded with various emails and as a result they would want to be removed from the subscriber list.

Mr. Merlino advised the Tourism Department had improved their technological capabilities upon the hiring of Peter Girard, Creative Director, and they continued to improve those capabilities through contracts, such as the social media manager contract with Trampoline Design, LLC.

Mr. Merlino informed that he wanted to wait until the first week in July to make any decisions regarding the future of the Tourism Department. In July, he continued, the Committee should discuss the possibility of contracting with a consultant firm to determine what the next steps should be. He said he hoped the Committee would determine the next steps by September of 2015 and possibly release an RFP (Request for Proposals) for a Tourism Director and/or consulting firm at that time. He indicated the possibility of being able to attract a very experienced Tourism Director through the RFP process. He said some Supervisors had expressed the need for a Tourism Director that lived locally; however, he continued, he felt an experienced tourism director would know how to promote tourism and he did not feel it would take them long to learn about the area.

Mr. Merlino apprised that Ms. Johnson had done a great job as the Director of Tourism. He said she had worked for the County for 25 years, 20 of which had been with the Tourism Department.

Mr. Dickinson thanked Mr. Merlino for the time and effort he had put into this decision, as well as for inviting him to participate in the discussions with local business owners. He opined that Mr. Merlino was correct in his thoughts about how to proceed and he felt that Mr. Merlino had paid a lot

of attention to what the business owners had said. Mr. Dickinson stated the local business owners had indicated that they wanted the County to take the opportunity to look at the current operation of the Tourism Department and determine the best way to move forward. He said the local business owners had presented a lot of great suggestions and he felt it was essential to keep them informed going forward. He apprised the business owners felt that a professional tourism consultant would provide insight on the Tourism Department.

Mr. Merlino said the majority of the general public was not aware that the Tourism Department was not funded in the Warren County Budget but instead was funded 100% through occupancy tax collections. He noted that other disbursements from occupancy tax collections included the amounts allocated to the individual Towns and the Special Event Funding. He commented that most people did not understand that all of the occupancy tax collections could not be utilized for advertising due to the other items which were funded. A brief discussion ensued.

Mr. Kenny stated he was in favor of evaluating the Tourism Department but he suggested that the vacant position of Director of Tourism remain funded within the Departmental Budget. Mr. Merlino responded the position would remain funded and he reiterated that he intended to become more involved with the day-to-day operation of the Department. Mr. Merlino said a few small changes would be made in the Department following Ms. Johnson's retirement. He stated that a new Director of Tourism would need to be in place by January 1, 2016 regardless of whether it was determined that the position should be filled by an individual or a company.

Ms. Seeber stated it was great that the Board of Supervisors was open to the concept of making changes within the Tourism Department and looking at an innovative way of addressing the tourism needs. She said she was pleased that the input of local business owners was being sought. She indicated that Don Lehman, of *The Post Star*, had the opportunity to attend the Intercounty Legislative Committee of the Adirondacks Meeting on May 28, 2015 to witness Warren County Supervisors discuss with other Counties how they were using their occupancy tax funds. She advised she had recently visited Myrtle Beach where they were using touch screen computers for coupons and special offers for tourists and she said this was a creative way to spend occupancy tax funding. She stated that Ms. Johnson had done a very good job as the Director of Tourism but it was nice to hear that the County was open to the possibility of change.

Mr. Merlino informed he had requested Robert Blais, Mayor of the Village of Lake George, to provide a list of all of the upcoming events to be held at The Festival Commons at Charles R. Wood Park in order for them to be included in an email blasts to the subscriber list of more than 130,000 people. He commented that new email blast software allowed for immediate release of email blasts.

Paul Dusek, County Administrator, stated that it would be necessary to develop a scope of services for the RFP and he asked if the Committee would want to review the scope of services before the RFP was released to ensure everyone was in agreement; he also asked the timing for the release of the RFP. Mr. Merlino reiterated that he wanted to wait until after July 1st and Mrs. Frasier agreed it was best to wait until then. Mr. Dusek asked if the RFP should be prepared before July 1st to allow the Committee members time to review it for consideration at the July Tourism Committee Meeting.

Mr. Dickinson said he agreed there was not a rush to make a decision and he advised that the key to the success of the Tourism Department would be in how the RFP was drafted. He said the Committee should spend some time on the development of the RFP and should solicit some input from local business owners. Mr. Merlino agreed and reiterated that there was no hurry because the remainder of 2015 was covered as far as promotions. He said he would be in the Tourism

Department Office on a daily basis. Mr. Dusek asked if a draft version of the RFP was desired and Ms. Wood suggested a draft version of the RFP be prepared for review at the July Committee Meeting and if revisions were necessary they could be approved at the August meeting. She noted this would give the Committee sufficient time to make revisions, advertise and interview the individuals and/or firms. Mr. Merlino said that any suggestions for the draft RFP could be emailed to him or Mr. Dusek. He noted the possibility that it would be necessary to have two Committee Meetings in July. He reiterated that all of the fall and winter advertising was already in place and there was no rush to make a decision.

As there was no further business to come before the Tourism Committee, on motion made by Mr. Dickinson and seconded by Mr. Conover, Mr. Merlino adjourned the meeting at 11:14 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Charlene DiResta, Sr. Legislative Office Specialist