

WARREN COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

COMMITTEE: TOURISM

DATE: AUGUST 6, 2015

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

SUPERVISORS MERLINO
KENNY
DICKINSON
CONOVER
FRASIER

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

SUPERVISORS WOOD
VANSELOW

OTHERS PRESENT:

REPRESENTING THE TOURISM DEPARTMENT:

PETER GIRARD, CREATIVE DIRECTOR
JOANNE CONLEY, ASSISTANT TOURISM COORDINATOR
KEVIN B. GERAGHTY, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
SARAH MCLENITHAN, DEPUTY CLERK OF THE BOARD
FRANK E. THOMAS, BUDGET OFFICER

SUPERVISORS BROCK

STROUGH

TAYLOR

MICHAEL CONSUELO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LAKE GEORGE REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

FRED AUSTIN, FORT WILLIAM HENRY

DON LEHMAN, *THE POST STAR*

MOLLY GANOTES, LEGISLATIVE OFFICE SPECIALIST

FOR ALL OTHERS, PLEASE SEE ATTACHED SIGN-IN SHEET

Mr. Merlino called the meeting of the Tourism Committee to order at 10:14 a.m.

Mr. Merlino advised this was an informal meeting of the Tourism Committee and there would be no agenda; he commented the meeting would be solely for discussion of ideas for the future of the Warren County Tourism Department.

Privilege of the floor was extended to Frank Dittrich, Warren County Lodging Association, who passed out copies of the 2015 Consulting Study Scope Document prepared by the Warren County Lodging Association, a copy of which is on file with the meeting minutes. Mr. Dittrich began by thanking the Committee and the Tourism Department for allowing them to participate in today's meeting. He stated that the Warren County Lodging Association was not directly solely at Lake George, but rather all of Warren County in terms of their interests and goals. He noted that the Association consisted of a series of hoteliers from within Warren County.

Mr. Dittrich advised the Lodging Association was asked to prepare a detailed Request for Proposal (RFP) to look at a series of consulting firms with the purpose of evaluating and check pointing fundamental benchmarks to determine the status of tourism in Warren County relative to a peer groups. He notified the opportunity was to have the consulting firms respond to the RFP and share their uniqueness in terms of their specific expertise with respect to tourism. Mr. Dittrich commenced a review of the 2015 Consulting Study Scope and gave brief information on what each point entailed for tourism.

Mr. Merlino thanked Mr. Dittrich for his presentation and noted that he, and the other hoteliers members of the Warren County Lodging Association, followed the Smith Travel Report, which benchmarked hotel performance against local markets, using it as a revenue management tool. He advised while reviewing this information he had noticed the submission of information from Warren County hoteliers was lacking; he added this would be a good area to get the local chambers of commerce involved in, to obtain more information from the hotels in Warren County. He stated the Tourism Department sent out fillable reports questioning how many rooms were rented in a certain range and whether or not business was down from previous years. He reported at the end of 2014, Warren County had received in excess of 100,000 more inquiries than they had in 2013 and questioned what they needed to do to capture all the inquiries. He said that while he was grateful for all the interest, they needed to find a way to get these inquirers to visit as Warren County had a lot to offer.

Mr. Merlino noted that the Tourism Department staff was working hard on rebuilding and starting fresh.

Chairman Geraghty suggested having traffic studies done; he noted traffic near Northway Exit 23 in Warrensburg had been backed up mid-week recently and he advised he could not remember the last time this had happened on a Wednesday night. He stated he believed conducting a study on traffic counts to determine whether drivers were staying in the area or driving through the region would be an important contribution. Mr. Merlino noted all the towns seemed to be busy, but he was not sure whether this meant visitors were renting houses or staying in campgrounds; he pointed out there was not any representation from the local campgrounds at the meeting.

Mr. Dittrich opined there must be a disconnect, if people were visiting the area, but not staying. As for mid-week occupancy, he advised reportings reflected occupancy was down during the weekdays, but picked up on weekends.

Mr. Brock noted they had seen a decline in the sales tax figures and he asked whether they should be collecting better data or consulting a tourism expert. Mr. Dittrich replied better data provided for better decision making. He noted sales tax was a key element to the health of the County and he said a fair amount of research had been compiled for a high level RFP, so as to determine a firm's expertise.

Mr. Taylor suggested inviting the Warren County EDC to the next meeting of the Tourism Committee as the EDC was also concerned with conducting a traffic study.

Fred Austin, Fort William Henry, stated he had sat in a meeting with a principal from a consulting firm where they had discussed marketing for Williamsburg, PA. He noted a few days later he had read an article on marketing for museums. He opined there should be County Museum Reference that showed the location of museums in Warren County, as well as others located in the surrounding Counties.

Mr. Dittrich advised the key to having these studies performed would be to have one large study completed by a single consulting firm, such as for the traffic and museum studies.

Michael Consuelo, Executive Director, Lake George Regional Chamber of Commerce & CVB, noted he believed there to be many components that still needed to be collected. He stated the amount of traffic that was coming into the area was dreadful, and the Chamber did not have enough people to gather information as to where visitors were going.

Mr. Kenny stated he was in favor of having a study completed and noted he had talked with Mayor Blais, Village of Lake George, whose opinion was that 2015 was the best summer ever for Lake George. He added that sales tax figures were not down, and in fact, were up .09% while occupancy tax revenues were up 14% from this time last year. He added he was in disagreement with leaving the position of Tourism Director vacant for a number of reasons, such as it not having an impact on the Budget as the salary was paid for out of Occupancy Tax, as well as because he believed the position would inevitably be filled. He stated tourism drove the economy of Warren County and to leave the position vacant sent a bad message to the public. Mr. Kenny said he believed at the next meeting they should bring in representatives from attractions, as well as hotels.

Mr. Strough questioned whether Mr. Dittrich had any governance structure he believed would apply for Warren County. Mr. Dittrich answered he felt there were many different ways to organize, lead and manage. He stated the County had an obligation to oversee tourism from an occupancy tax point of view. He advised this approach was different in every County, and as an example, he explained Essex County worked with the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism (ROOST) who was also responsible for the tourism activities in adjacent counties such as Hamilton County. He noted ROOST Reports included

comprehensive data which could be found on the Essex County website.

Mr. Strough noted he had been approached by a few of the larger hotels and attractions about working with a professional consulting group and the Warren County Tourism Department. Mr. Dittrich stated that this factor should be included in the studies, as well as how other counties were excelling, such as in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania which was a close comparison to Warren County.

Mr. Merlino quoted statistics from the Smith Travel Report from the last four weeks, noting that from July 5th to the 11th it appeared room rentals in Essex, Saratoga and Warren Counties were down by varying amounts and this trend continued into the week of July 12th -18th.

Mr. Dittrich stated that things to compare in the study would be near term statistics as well as long term trending.

Jeff Bartone, of the Six Flags Great Escape Lodge, noted there was a need to know where these percentages were coming from geographically, such whether they pertained to overnight stays or day trips.

Mr. Dickinson noted he agreed with Mr. Kenny in regards to the outline for releasing an RFP and stated he felt that everything being considered would need to be discussed further at a future date. Mr. Dickinson opined it was important to have the RFP in place before a Tourism Director was hired and he thanked Mr. Dittrich for sharing his expertise with the Committee. He asked Mr. Dittrich if he would release the RFP in the manner presented and Mr. Dittrich replied affirmatively.

Mr. Brock noted when he had mentioned sales tax being down he was referring to a time in the winter when it was brought to the attention of the Committee that people were spending more time shopping online than at the stores. He suggested that they included something relating to this issue in the RFP as well. Mr. Dickinson stated he felt these types of issues would all be included in the RFP.

Following a brief discussion, motion was made by Mr. Dickinson, seconded by Mr. Kenny to refer the RFP to the Purchasing Department to be completed.

Mr. Conover stated he would feel more comfortable if the Tourism staff reviewed the RFP specifications with the EDC before bringing it back to the Tourism Committee for review and approval.

Following further discussion, motion was made by Mr. Dickinson, seconded by Mr. Kenny and carried unanimously to refer the suggestions provided by the Lodging Association to the Tourism Department to be reviewed with the EDC to move forward in creating an appropriate RFP which would be brought back to the Tourism Committee for final review and approval.

Peter Girard, Creative Director for the Tourism Department, asked if there were time frames the Committee wanted this to be accomplished in. He explained this work could take sometime to accomplish and he questioned how the follow-through would be accomplished, as well as whether there would be a transition period and how far they could let this go before making an impact. He stated they were considering the comments of a lodging association group which indicated statistics were down, while other local businesses were advising business was great; Mr. Girard said his concern was the difference in information, as well as the fact that they were seeking immediate information results while it could easily take until January before any RFP results would be returned and it may be 2017 before any changes were implemented.

Mr. Conover stated this was why he had suggested that the Tourism staff meeting with EDC representatives to get the things moving faster and to look at all elements of the RFP before returning

to Committee.

Mr. Girard advised currently the Tourism Department was down one staff member and they were taking on more responsibilities to make up the difference. As well, he noted they were preparing new initiatives for 2016, such as revamping their television ads for next year requiring that they film in August in order to get the product in place. He stated he was concerned with waiting for the data to be collected and implemented and he was also concerned that the RFP would result in their going in a different direction.

Mr. Merlino noted they were moving forward in the Tourism Department and had already made four or five changes, including developing a new logo and altering the way email blasts were handled. He stated he was aware of how the media had projected the Department, but he noted this was a good team that worked well together. He agreed the Department needed a Director, but said he wanted to keep the Department working together as a team for the time being.

Mr. Dickinson noted that no matter when a Tourism Director was hired there would be a transitional period and he opined that in a year's time they would be able to adjust. Mr. Girard stated this would be a lengthy process and he wanted to make sure that nobody expected results to be achieved overnight.

Mr. Consuelo opined the Tourism Department should go about their business and continue the work being done for the businesses within Warren County. He commended Mr. Girard and the Tourism Department on their hard work on behalf of the Lake George Regional Chamber of Commerce & CVB.

Mr. Merlino said they desired to receive continuous information from both Messrs. Consuelo and Dittrich. He stated that the team in the Tourism Department had been working up to seven days a week in the last month in order to keep things moving and trying new things that had not been done before and he was fully confident in the staff's efforts.

A brief discussion ensued.

As there was no further business to come before the Tourism Committee, on motion made by Mr. Dickinson and seconded by Mrs. Frasier, Mr. Merlino adjourned the meeting at 11:12p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Molly Ganotes, Legislative Office Specialist
As transcribed by Samantha Hogan, Secretary to the Clerk of the Board