



BLOWING ROCK

Tourism Development Authority

Year-End Report 2016

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The mission of the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is to develop and promote travel and tourism to and within the town of Blowing Rock by executing a strategic marketing plan with the goal of increasing the number of overnight guests and extending the traditional tourist season.

2016 In Review

From the Director:

As a destination, Blowing Rock again experienced growth in traffic and sales in 2016. A midyear survey of Blowing Rock businesses found that 61% of respondents saw an increase in sales and traffic as compared to the same period in 2015. A similar survey after Thanksgiving said that 75% of respondents had better traffic and sales than the year before. According to Smith Travel Research and VisitNC, hotel and motel occupancy across the state saw an increase of 3.4% in 2016, while the average daily rate (ADR) for rooms increased by 3.6% (to \$98.88). Demand for rooms drives ADR and both have been on the upswing since 2009.

The tourism industry faced several challenges throughout 2016, both across the state and regionally. From HB2 legislation that stirred public relations and perception controversy for destinations early in the year, to Hurricane Matthew that hit during the most visited month of the year and caused widespread damage and disrupted travel, regional issues were varied. Local concerns like a lack of snow in the first and last quarters, the Highway 321 construction, and Legionaries Disease cases at a local hotel added to messaging and perception challenges. Fires near Blowing Rock on the heels of the devastating fires in Gatlinburg called for additional efforts in monitoring and responding to questions from the visiting public. Still, the travelling public visited.

Blowing Rock is fortunate to be located on the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP) and the Tourism Development Authority has continued to work to leverage relationships to the town's benefit. The National Park Service celebrated its 100 th anniversary in 2016 and as a result of the positive public relations outreach and partnerships, visitation to the BRP increased 2.5% year over year. There was a dip in international visitation to the region and according to the office of international travel at VisitNC, was due mostly to the negative exchange rate with the dollar.

2016 saw even more new lodging product coming into the market through Airbnb, Home Away, Flip Key and VRBO. These outlets add to offerings and the appeal of Blowing Rock, and ultimately the bottom line: revenue. Many younger travelers look for the unique spaces and experiences that these products and business models offer. Blowing Rock is fortunate to see interest from both investors and users of these products.

Looking forward, the TDA will continue to work with lodging and tourism partners to increase visitation and overnight stays in 2017 by utilizing new technology and media opportunities. Highway 321 construction coming into Blowing Rock is looking better than ever before and should be completed by the height of summer traffic, at least in town, while the portion just south of town may create unique challenges in communicating with visitors. The Blue Ridge Parkway should continue to benefit from the 2016 centennial celebration well into 2017 and beyond. Blowing Rock and the entire region will be a part of the continued interest and growth. The economy is strong and travel & tourism in Blowing Rock and across the High Country should continue to reap the benefits.

Tracy Brown
Director, Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority

2016 in Review

Notable in 2016

- Revenue exceeded \$1 million for first time ever (+15% over 2015)
- Voted Happiest Town in the Blue Ridge by readers of Blue Ridge Magazine
- Cover photo on Blue Ridge Digest
- Attended several networking events
- Hosted Live and Learn Weekend with Our State Magazine
- Fall Color Update video went viral with 2.6M+ views
- New professional images for marketing
- Moved offices to Chamber and cut expenses
- Earned media in Travel and Leisure, US World News, LA Times, USA Today, Yahoo
- Less than optimal ski season



2016 Board Members:

- Dean Bullis, Chair
(Tourism Representative)
- Rob Dyer, Vice Chair
(Lodging Representative)
- Lianne Mattar
(At-large Representative)
- Doug Matheson
(Council Representative)
- Lorry Mulhern
(Lodging Representative)

TDA staff provides a report to its board on a bi-weekly basis to keep members informed of activities.

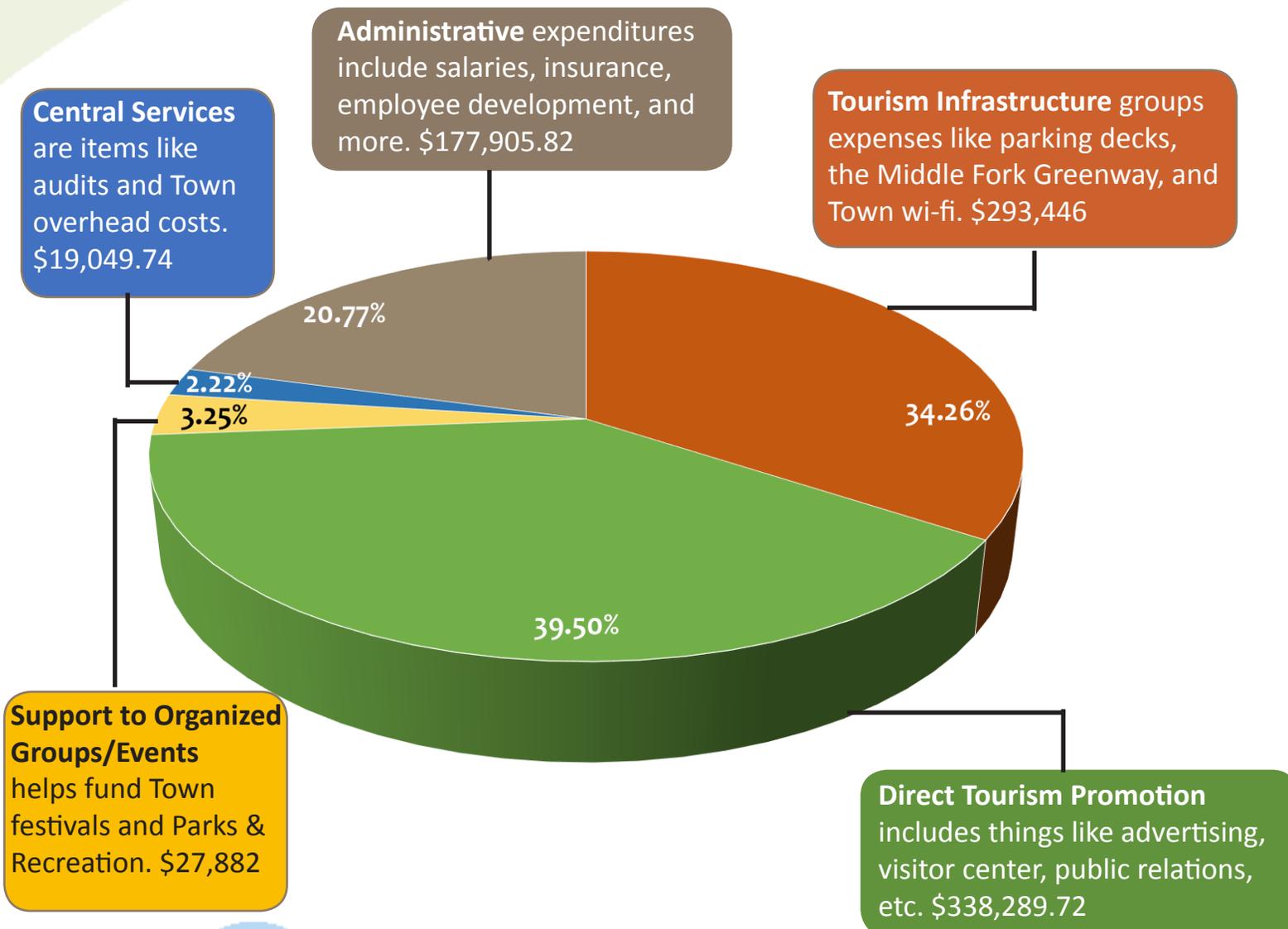


Budget & Expenditures

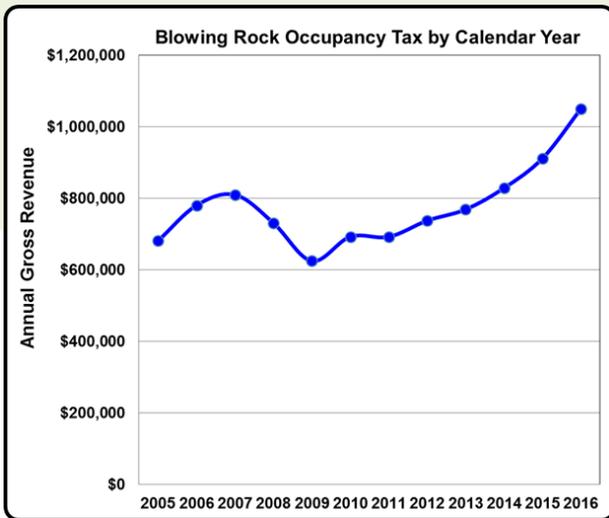
According to TDA Bylaws, the Authority shall use two-thirds of the funds remitted to it by the Town Council to promote travel and tourism in Blowing Rock and shall use the remaining one-third of the funds remitted for tourism-related expenditures.

Expenditures Overview

The expenditure of revenues is budgeted with the TDA mission in mind. Expenses are assigned to five categories.



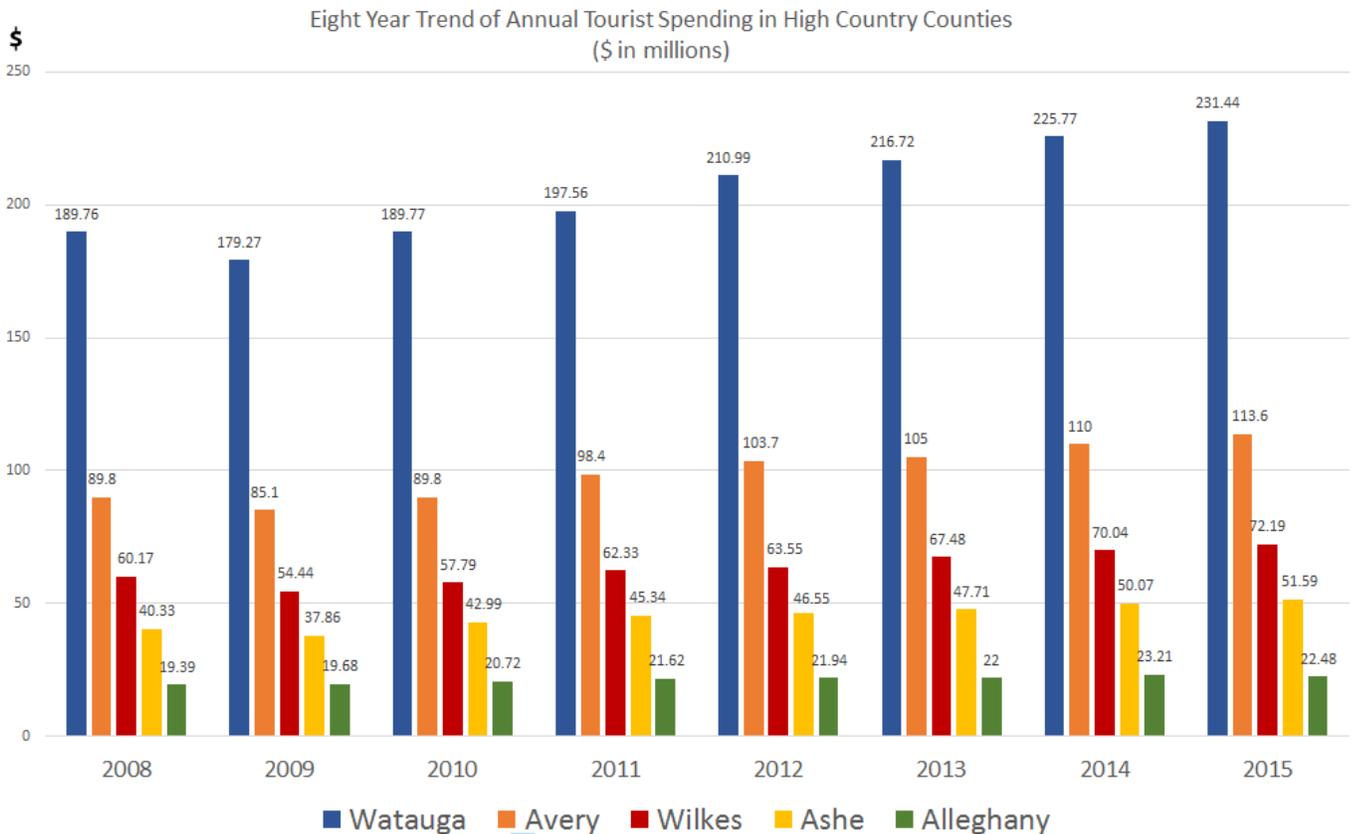
Revenues & Impact



The TDA is funded by a 6% occupancy tax that is paid by visitors that stay in overnight lodging. 2016 saw an increase of 15.2% over 2015. The trend on this graph represents an average annual increase of 5% since 2009.

Gross occupancy taxes in 2016:
\$1,050,704
 Direct sales at lodging businesses:
\$17,511,749
 Total local economic impact:
\$52,535,247

Tourism in Blowing Rock has a large economic impact on Watauga County, which continues to be a leader in tourism spending in the High Country.



Source: Western Carolina University

Marketing & Advertising

Ads like these were placed throughout 2016 in media like:

WNC Magazine

Pandora.com

Charlotte Magazine

Small Market Meetings

Blue Ridge Outdoors



A new collection of photos for advertising and editorial use were contracted in 2016. Local photographer Todd Bush created images for outdoors, family, and girlfriend getaway promotions.



Marketing & Advertising

The Blowing Rock TDA advertising schedule includes a mix of print, billboards, radio, digital, and media contests.



Blowing Rock's top feeder markets are Charlotte, The Triangle, and the Triad. Advertising locations are determined through research on travel patterns and demographics.

- 12** campaigns, including major events, Girls Getaways, Outdoors, & more
- 35** different media outlets used for ad placements
- 10** billboards in three different Designated Marketing areas along major travel corridors



Major advertising campaigns are one of the ways the TDA provides event support for events in town.

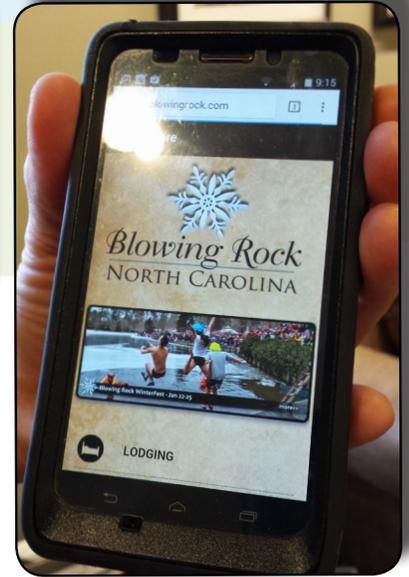


- In 2016, TDA advertising campaigns targeted Millennials as part of outdoor promotions.
- Extra promotions were scheduled for Savor Blowing Rock as it was the first year for the festival's new name.
- Leveraged media, placed with trade or bargains other than budget expenditures, are used whenever possible.

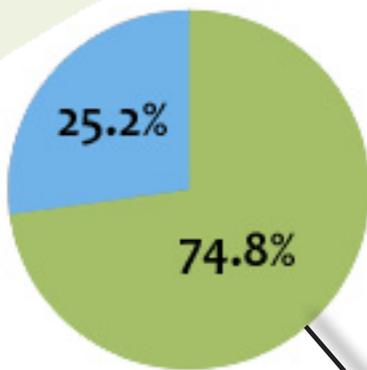
Website & Social Media

www.BlowingRock.com 2016 vs. 2015

12% increase in sessions
(+2.76% in NEW sessions)
39% increase in mobile acquisition



Researched and began redesign of www.blowingrock.com to utilize new content and SEO. The TDA continues to work to keep Blowing Rock Tourism relevant and ahead of the curve when looking to engage potential visitors in the digital arena.



Website visitors in 2016, shown as new visitors (green) and returning visitors (blue).

460,748 Sessions
347,698 Users
2,057,740 Pageviews
4.47 Pages Visited Per Session
on www.BlowingRock.com

Social Media Mission: Engage our current visitors present on the platforms, and give them share-worthy material to attract new visitors.



Facebook is our oldest social media platform, and had 45,016 at the end of 2016.

Blowing Rock's Instagram feed more than doubled its number of followers in its second year.

Email Marketing in 2016

- Blowing Rock has over 7,000 active contacts in our email database. Contacts sign up on their own on www.BlowingRock.com.
- Seven email blasts were sent in 2016, ranging across seasons, events, & topics. Features included WinterFest, Savor Blowing Rock, Symphony, Fall Color, Ski Season, and more.
- Average open rate for our emails was about 37%. Typical open rates for travel & tourism mailers are around 16%, according Constant Contact (the email management company the TDA utilizes).

Website & Social Media

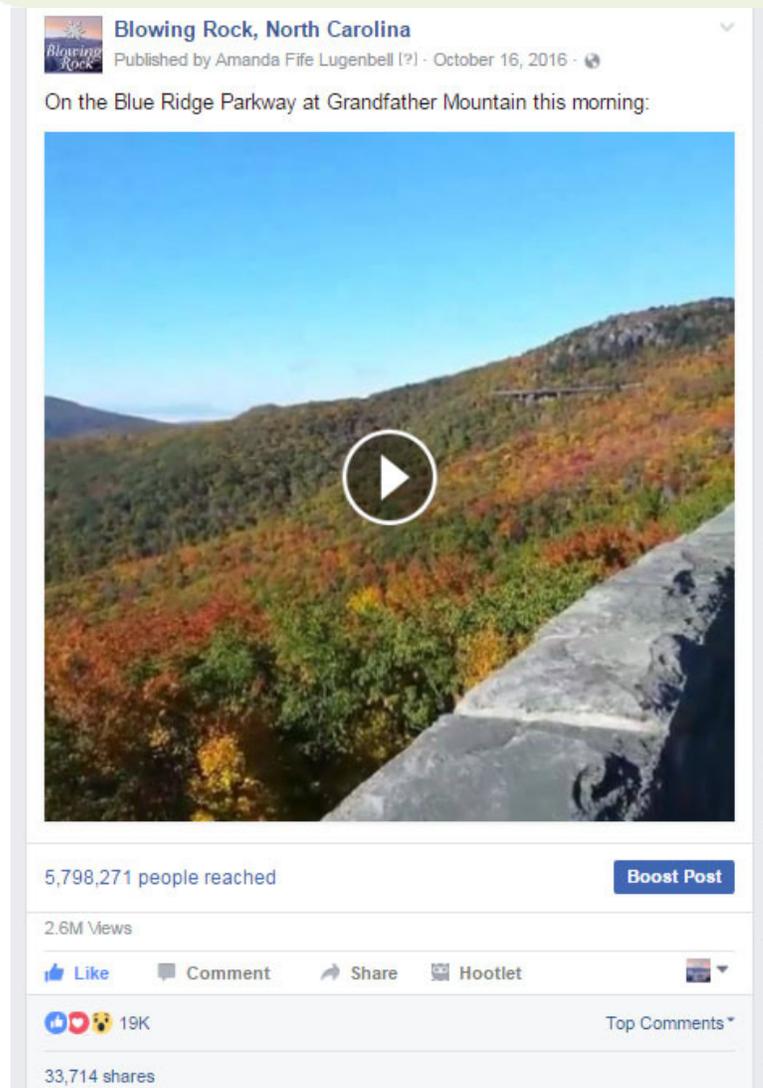
In 2016, Blowing Rock TDA began the work of planning and designing a responsive website.

Responsive Web design suggests that design and development should respond to the user's behavior and environment based on screen size, platform and orientation. The practice consists of a mix of flexible grids and layouts, images and an intelligent use of CSS media queries. It means that the site will look great on everything from a desktop computer to an ipad to a smartphone.



The new site design will be complete in 2017.

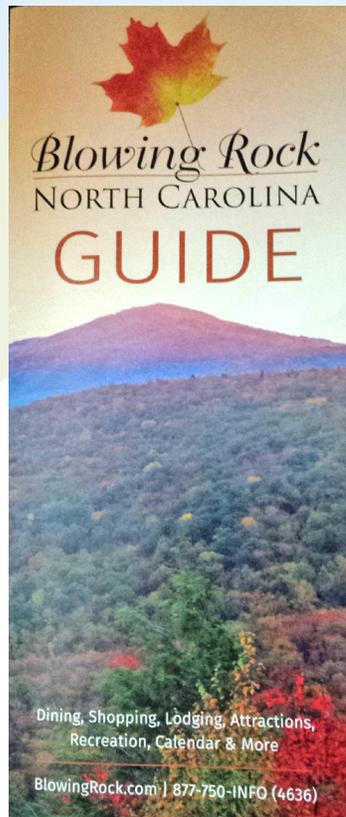
Our social media following saw a very large spike after a short fall color update video went viral. Interaction is always high for spring flora information and winter weather updates as well.



5,798,271 people reached
2.6M views & **19K** reactions
33,714 shares

Operations & Internal Communications

The TDA moved from BRAHM to the Robbins House with the Chamber of Commerce in June. There, the TDA supports Chamber efforts to maintain a visitor center presence while saving substantial operational funds and redirecting those funds to advertising and media.



The Blowing Rock Guide is our main printed informational piece.

75,000 were printed and distributed.

Each year, the Blowing Rock TDA creates several additional pieces in-house to be printed for distribution, including the Blowing Rock Community Calendar, brochures for visitors, and a number of event posters.

Surveys

The TDA conducted 3 surveys of local businesses- lodging, retail, restaurants, and attractions- to get feedback on seasonal and event traffic and sales.

A survey of attendees to Savor Blowing Rock was also coordinated, which gathered valuable research on our event visitors.

The Tattler, in its tenth year of distribution in 2016, gives **weekly updates** on local happenings and news that affects tourism-related businesses in Blowing Rock. The newsletter is now sent with an email management program and has an open rate consistently near 40%, higher than the membership organization average of 26%.



Hemlock Inn and Suites	828.295.7987	Availability all 3 nights
Hillwinds Inn	828.295.7660	Availability all 3 nights
Holiday Inn Express	828.295.4422	Availability all 3 nights
Homestead Inn	828.295.9559	Availability all 3 nights
Meadowbrook Inn	828.295.4300	Availability all 3 nights
Mountaineer Inn and Log Cabins	828.295.7991	Limited Availability, Rooms & Cabins, all 3 nights
Ridgeway Inn	828.295.7321	Availability Thur.(close at 4pm)/Closed Fri./Very Limited Sat.
The Inn at Ragged Gardens	828.295.9703	Closed T & F / Limited Sat.
Jenkins Rentals	828.295.9888	Limited Availability*
The Village Inn	828.295.3380	Availability T & F / Limited Sat.

Weekly availability information continues to be collected at the Visitor Center. This is sent to hotels prior to each weekend so that visitors can be directed to available vacancies in Blowing Rock instead of being sent to neighboring towns.

Community & Media Relations

23 press releases produced,
plus several media alerts

6 travel writers hosted

1 Blue Ridge Parkway AAA Tour

95 confirmed media placements,
representing an estimated
“earned media” value of over
\$100,000

In 2016, Blowing Rock was featured in

- Our State Magazine**
- Travel and Leisure Magazine**
- US News and World report**
- USA Today**
- LA Times**
- UNC TV NC Weekend**
- Sarasota Magazine**
- VA Tech Save Our Towns** among others.

Local

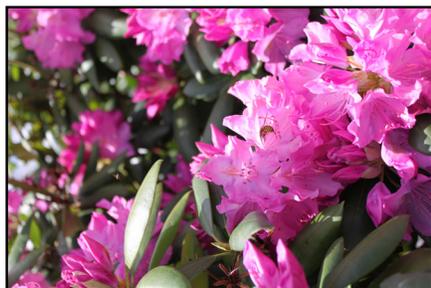
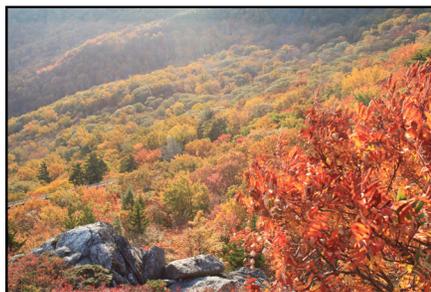
Guides and maps continue to be available at the kiosk locations. Posters, calendars, and local event information are displayed for use by visitors and residents.



Plans were made in 2016 to update two of the kiosks to feature interactive digital displays. This will bring a new level of information to these locations.

Seasonal

Daily Fall Photo postings continued in 2016 for the eighth consecutive year. Communication between the TDA and several weather stations remained good in 2016, as reports on fall color and winter conditions were relayed.



Networking

Blowing Rock TDA attended several events and conferences to stay up-to-date and friendly with industry contacts in 2016.

- Visit NC 365 Tourism Conference in Cherokee
- AAA Travel Fam Tour across WNC
- Leadership, Experience, & Development (LEAD) Conference at Western Carolina University
- Southeast Tourism Society Fall Forum in Birmingham, AL
- Southeast Tourism Society Marketing College, Dahlonega, GA



Partnerships are key to being a successful destination in today's competitive environment. The Blowing Rock TDA continues to strengthen long lasting relationships while building new partnerships throughout the region. In 2015 participation on boards, work with research groups, and hosting guests all played a part in maintaining partnerships, like those with these regional organizations:



Plus: The Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce, Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, Boone Tourism Development Authority, Boone & Blowing Rock Area Lodging Association, Appalachian State University, Grandfather Mountain, Tweetsie Railroad, Appalachian Ski Mountain, The Blowing Rock, Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show Foundation

Blowing Rock TDA Board

2016 Meeting Dates:

April 4

May 2

June 6

July TBA

October 3

All Meetings at 3:30pm

Town Hall