



BLOWING ROCK

Tourism Development Authority

Fiscal Year-End Report

2021-2022



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.

Inside:
2021-2022 Overview
Budget
Advertising
Web & Social
Operations
Public Relations
Partnerships

2021-2022 In Review

The Blowing Rock tourism community thrived throughout F/Y 2021-2022, continuing trends that followed the easing of Covid-related travel and gathering restrictions in 2020. The Blue Ridge Parkway and other attractions and events were completely open in our area, dispersing visitors in more normal patterns. Although traffic was still very strong, we did not see the overwhelming numbers and congestion we did just a year before.

Because the pandemic created abrupt changes in travel patterns and excessive demand in 2020 and 2021, many view 2019 as the most recent “normal” year in tourism. Most tourism related businesses, in all segments, reported sales and bookings higher or at the same level as 2019, our biggest year on record until post pandemic FY 2020-2021. At the same time, nearly half of all local hospitality businesses report inadequate staffing. This trend has created frustration for both businesses and consumers.

New construction on Short Term Rental (STR) properties ramped up over the past year. Airbnb and VRBO rentals continue to grow as well. At years end, Blowing Rock had 237 listed STRs with just 31 of those properties being rental companies or hotels. Individual property rentals represent 47.8% of the occupancy tax revenue.

During F/Y '21-'22, the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority (TDA) hired Roger Brooks International to work on a Sustainable Tourism Management Plan and to address resident concerns of over-tourism. Brooks delivered the plan in January of this year with \$22 million in recommendations. (See page 10 of this report.)

Because traffic and sales continued to be strong in F/Y '21-'22, the TDA all but halted call-to-action advertising during heavily travelled months. We instead focused more on education and public relations regarding protecting natural and outdoor spaces. As the footprint of our outreach grows, new approaches have become critical to moving forward in an everchanging media environment. In Q3, the TDA created two new positions to focus on digital management and social media. Two new employees were hired in Q4 to manage the more than 100k followers in our social media channels as well as the numerous website and digital media outlets that are managed by the TDA. The TDA will take the opportunity to rebrand over the next year working with a qualified marketing and branding agency to rejuvenate our media messaging in a post-covid landscape.

Several challenges are facing the leisure travel market including but not limited to the economy, gas prices, inflation, and recession. It will be important that the TDA remain flexible and ready to adjust messaging and media placement as conditions warrant. As was expected, the industry is starting to see a “cooling-off” as we move into 2023. All segments within the industry understood that the rate of growth over the past two years could not be sustained and most welcome a slowing down of demand.

Given the increased traffic and demand over the last two years, the Town and other agencies should take a hard look at allowing and scheduling events. A great deal of the frustrations voiced by both residents and visitors may be remedied by scheduling changes as overlapping events contribute to congestion. The TDA encourages thoughtful management of public spaces, and events are no longer necessary to draw visitors at certain times of year.

The TDA will continue to support the Town Council and staff in moving forward with the Sustainable Tourism Management Plan. TDA staff is pleased to assist Town staff and advise Town management on tourism related issues. By working together, Blowing Rock will continue to be a superior destination to live, visit, and invest.

Tracy Brown, Director, Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority

2019-2020 in Review

Noteworthy in FY 21-22

Masking regulations continued in 2021, vaccine requirements instated in locations nationwide, travel sentiments in flux
Post-pandemic return of several summer events
Hospitality businesses struggle with staffing
Roger Brooks visit, surveys, and study
Release of Sustainable Tourism Management Plan
Southern Living readers name Blowing Rock one of the South's 10 Best Mountain Towns
Part time staff position added to TDA, transitioning to two full-time positions
Storm damage closes Price Lake to boating Sept-Oct
BRAHM celebrates 10 years
TMP Certification for staff member Amanda Lugenbell
New seasonally-public restroom at BR School
Nationwide publication of fall photos, Associated Press
New webcams installed by Town
Delayed but strong ski season
Sidewalk to Bass Lake completed
The Getaway lodging property opens
Parkway sledding hill closed by officials
The Blowing Rock featured on Our State Magazine cover
Blowing Rock TDA receives Community Impact Award
New crosswalk signals and lights installed on Main St.
Oasis Shriners host Summer Ceremonial in Blowing Rock
Inaugural High Country Jazz Festival



Lodging focus group in 2021, part of Sustainable Tourism Management Plan process.

Blowing Rock TDA Staff:

Tracy Brown
Director
Amanda Lugenbell
Assistant Director
Tyler Graves
Digital Community Manager
Lindsay Garcia
Content Manager
Raheim Andrews (*Jul-Dec 2021*)
Social Media Manager, 2021
(*this part-time position became the full-time Digital Community Manager position in 2022*)

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

Fiscal Year Board Members:

Dean Bullis, Chairman
Tourism Representative
Term expires: 2024
Kevin Walker, Vice Chair
Lodging Representative
Term expires: 2025
Tim Gupton
At-large Representative
Term expires: 2023
Pete Gherini
Town Council Representative
Term expires: 2025
Greg Tarbutton
Lodging Representative
Term expires: 2025
Nicole Norman- Finance Officer
Shane Fox- Town Manager

Budget & Expenditures

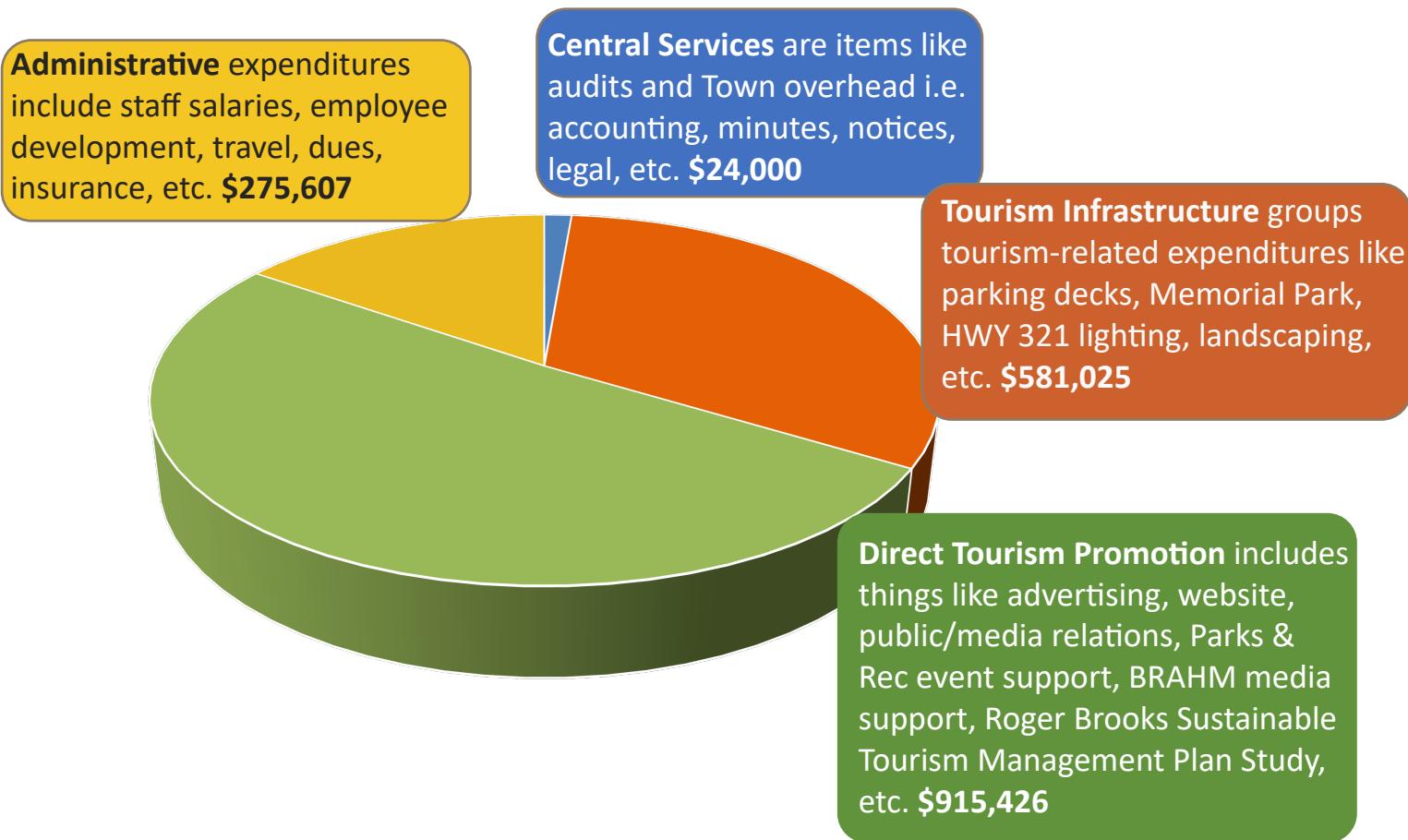
The Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is funded by a 6% occupancy tax paid by overnight visitors staying in hotels, inns, and other short-term rentals in Blowing Rock. The Town of Blowing Rock collects this tax.

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.

A full audit of the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority budget is provided as an addendum to this report.

Budgeted Expenditures Overview

In expenses, a total of \$1,796,058 was spent in the following categories:



Revenues & Impact

Gross occupancy taxes in FY 21-22:

\$1,816,087 (+20%)

Direct sales at lodging businesses:

\$30,268,116

Visitor Spending estimated in excess of:

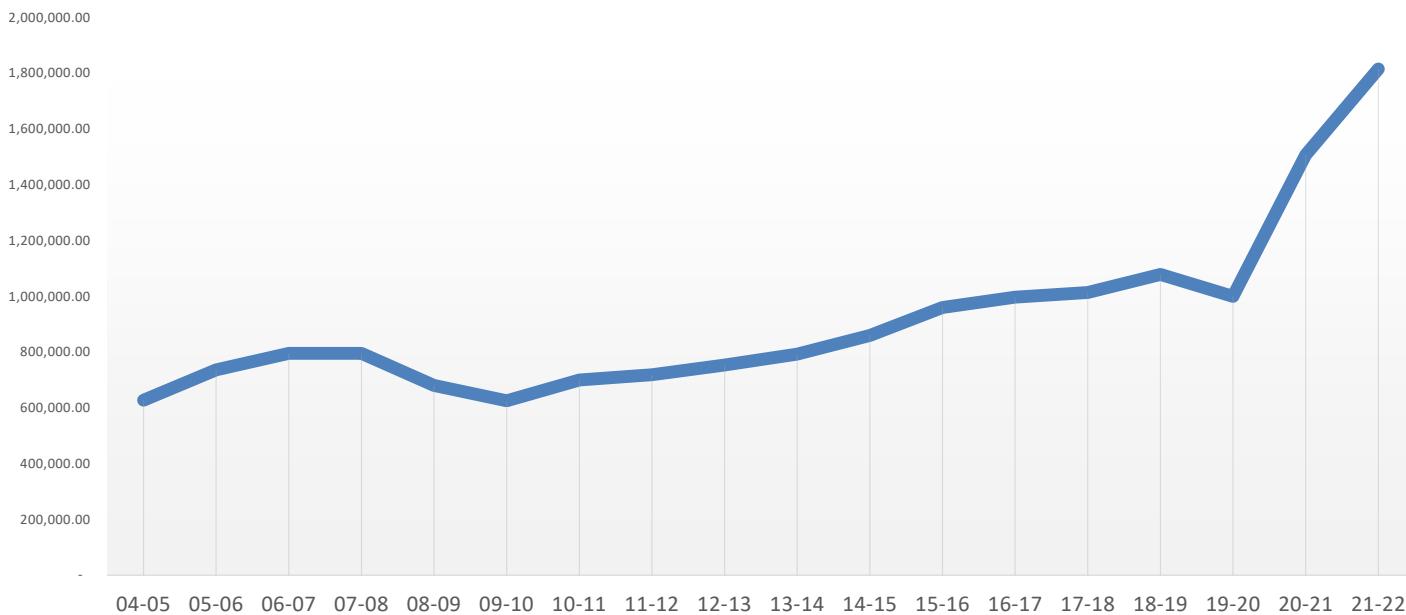
\$90,804,348

New lodging properties in FY 21-22 increased the inventory of short-term rental rooms in Blowing Rock. The Manor, a boutique hotel with 20 rooms, and The Getaway, a 12-room sister property, both opened. Airbnb and VRBO rentals grew in number as well, and continue to be a very important part of the short-term rental mix. The Embers broke ground this year at the corner

of Main Street and US Highway 221. The 40-room boutique hotel is slated to open summer 2023.

Some revenue growth in FY 21-22 may also be attributed to higher overall room rates, driven by sustained high demand and the increased use of rate management software by individual lodging businesses.

Blowing Rock Occupancy Tax Revenues 2004-05 to 2021-22



Tourism-related TDA expenditures in FY 2021-22 included:

American Legion Parking Structure
Street Lighting
Funding for Attendant in
Memorial Park Public Restrooms

Hwy. 321 Landscaping
Christmas Decorations
Town Sidewalks

Town Street Maintenance
Town Center Beautification
Downtown Shuttle

2021 Tourism Economic Facts for Watauga County*

\$465.05 Million
in Visitor Spending

\$34.9 Million
Visitor related taxes
generated

\$650.84
Tax savings per
Watauga resident

2,916
Watauga jobs
in tourism

*Data from *The Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties*.

This study was prepared for Visit North Carolina by Tourism Economics.

Marketing & Advertising

Media campaigns, primarily in digital outlets, included Art in the Park, Make it Your Nature, Winter, Winterfest, Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show, and media support for BRAHM.

A detailed media plan is provided as an addendum to this report.

Target Markets:

- Charlotte
- The Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill + Cary)
- The Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point)



Blowing Rock remains a drive destination, and these are consistently the top markets of our hoteliers.

Target Audiences

Retirees, Families, Couples,
Women aged 35+, & Millennials selected by income level, interest and habits.

Big Changes to Advertising Strategy in Fiscal Year 2021-2022

Reduced media placements

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Blowing Rock TDA drastically reduced all paid media placement in FY 2020-21. Largely in response to resident sentiment, this continued into FY 2021-22, and is set to continue in the near future.

Major shift in seasonal advertising

Taking a more responsible stance on stewardship, the TDA shifted all call-to-action advertising to educational promotions in summer months in FY 2021-22. Call-to-action advertising is more limited to shoulder-seasons rather than traditionally busy months.

Increased focus on proactive content and communication

New approaches have become critical to moving forward in an everchanging media environment. Considering the changing tourism landscape, local surveys, and recommendations made by Roger Brooks, the TDA moved to focus on creating more detailed content and reaching out to businesses and residents. In 2022, the TDA shifted some promotional spending from paid advertising to two new staff positions.

Marketing & Advertising

Advertising outlets in 2021-22 included:



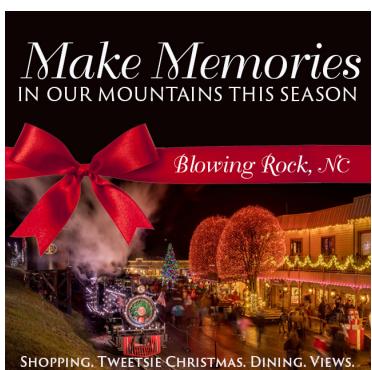
Digital marketing offers the flexibility of being able to change messaging quickly or canceling if needed.

Email Marketing in FY 21-22

Blowing Rock has over 8,545 active contacts in our email database. Contacts sign up on their own on www.BlowingRock.com.

Monthly e-newsletters replaced quarterly ones this year, and have been well-received. Average open rate for our travel marketing emails was 38%. Typical open rates for travel & tourism mailers are around 16%, according to Constant Contact.

Leveraged media, like these mailers sent through the Charlotte Observer, continues to be a big part of TDA marketing plan. Being able to use content across several platforms allows budgets to go further while presenting a cohesive message.



TWEETSE CHRISTMAS
Now Nov-30, Fri, Sat & select weekday evenings, 6pm-9pm. Visit the village for light displays, visit Santa's Workshop, take Photo with Santa, Polar Express Train, caroling, a live pet, animals and more!

CRAZY CHRISTMAS AT MYSTERY HILL
Now Nov-27, Sat & Sun, 10am-4pm. Join us for a day of crazy fun, including light displays, visit Santa's Workshop, take Photo with Santa, Polar Express Train, caroling, a live pet, animals and more!

WOOHOO KIDS
November 27

An all-new day in downtown Blowing Rock, surrounded by the festive lights of the season. Shopping, live music and more!

HOLIDAY STROLL
December 3

An all-new day in downtown Blowing Rock, surrounded by the festive lights of the season. Shopping, live music and more!

BOOK YOUR HOLIDAY GETAWAY TODAY!

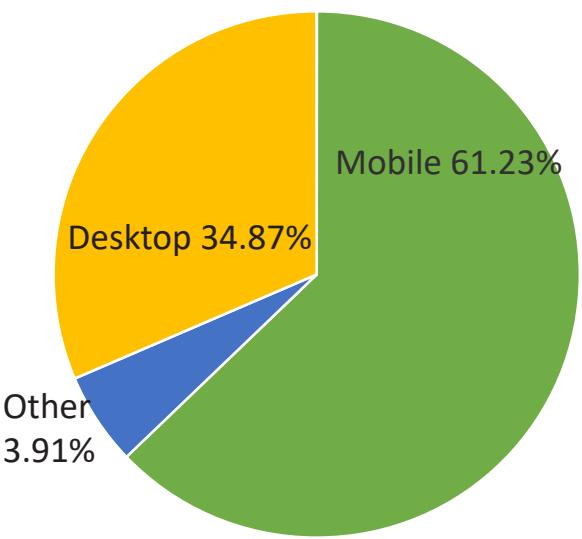


Website & Social Media

**500,363 Sessions
391,407 New Users
1,022,767 Pageviews
on BlowingRock.com in FY 20-21**

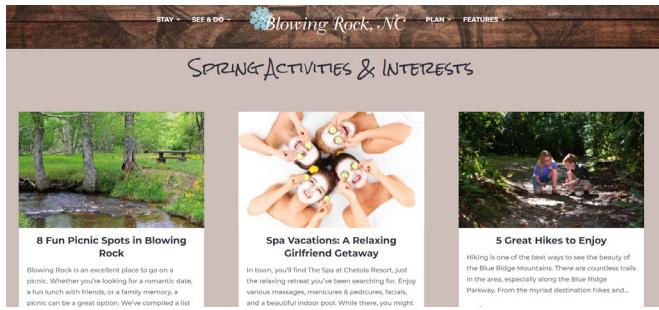
Changes in the way analytics are gathered and presented by the G4 platform make comparisons to the previous year difficult. Reported metrics are generally down across the board, but it's not unique to BlowingRock.com, nor does it necessarily reflect true changes in traffic.

Users access BlowingRock.com via:



The TDA strives to ensure BlowingRock.com is fully responsive on all devices and remains compatible with ever-changing platforms and applications. Mobile access has grown quickly and continues to increase in importance.

FY 21-22 Updates to BlowingRock.com



Seasonal landing pages were created to organize content, fulfilling recommendations by Roger Brooks.

Videos were incorporated into the homepage, showing seasonal scenes and attractions.

New Content Manager Position

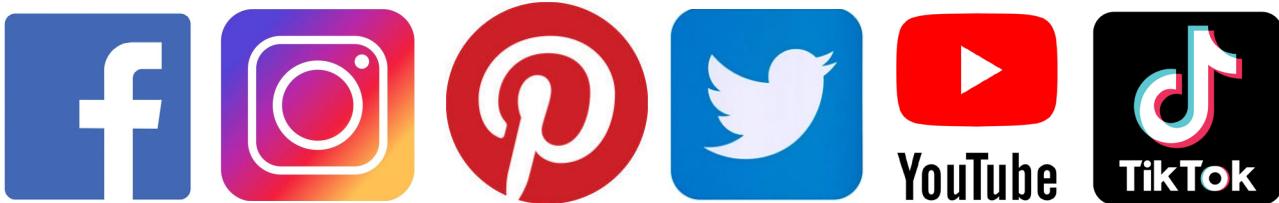
In the 4th quarter of the 2021-2022 fiscal year, Lindsay Wright Garcia was hired as the new Content Manager for BlowingRock.com. This work supports advertising and promotional campaigns, improves information quality, and increases opportunities for partnerships with local businesses. Lindsay creates and updates website content about activities in Blowing Rock, helping guide visitors and set trip expectations. She also sends event information and content to partner websites like VisitNC.

Website & Social Media

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 where we do the most paid advertising. Blowing Rock's activity on social media platforms supports our traditional marketing.

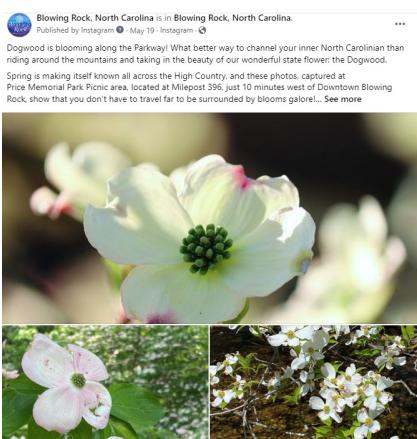
Blowing Rock's audience enjoys scenic images and interesting facts & history about our area. Posts that gain the most engagement usually include these elements. Event information and dates are also regularly shared.



Blowing Rock has a presence on six popular platforms.

Tiktok was a new addition in FY 21-22.

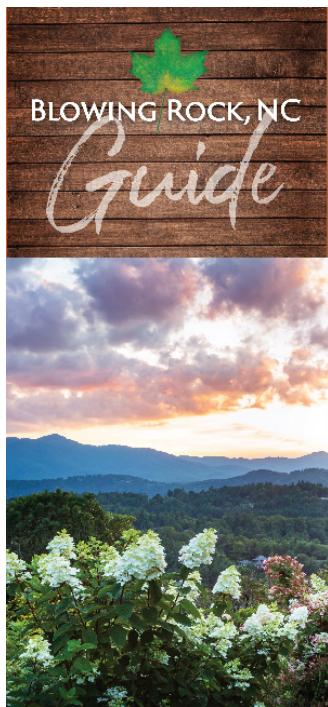
Followers across all platforms exceeded 108,000 individuals in FY 21-22, with Facebook and Instagram reaching the most users.



New Social Media Manager to New Digital Community Manager Position

In the first quarter of the 2021-2022 fiscal year, Raheim Andrews was hired as a part time Social Media Manager. Following changes in promotional strategy, a more active, full-time position was required. In the 4th quarter of the 2021-2022 fiscal year, Tyler Graves was hired as the new Digital Community Manager. This work supports advertising and promotional campaigns, improves information quality, and increases opportunities for promotion of local businesses. In addition to creating engaging content for multiple platforms, Tyler also constantly monitors and responds to visitor questions and feedback on social media.

Operations & Communications



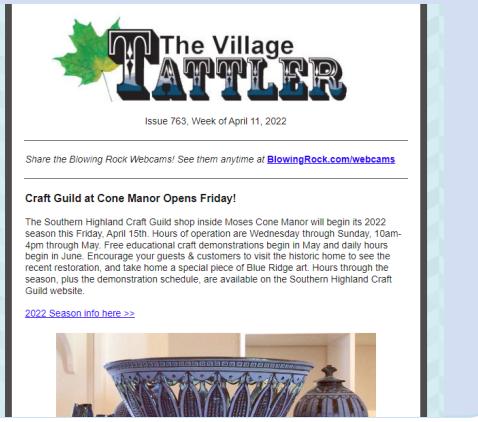
**The Blowing Rock Guide is our main printed information piece.
65,000 were printed in FY 2021-2022**

Many are distributed throughout the region through American Distribution Services and Print Distribution. Others are distributed through kiosks, hotels and NC Welcome Centers. Some are directly requested through our website.



Each year, the Blowing Rock TDA creates several additional pieces in-house for display and print, including the Blowing Rock Community Calendar and the Restaurant Guide.

The Village Tattler gives **weekly updates** to local employers and employees. It includes local happenings, news, and trends that affect tourism-related businesses in Blowing Rock. The 774th issue was sent in June 2022. The newsletter is sent with an email management program and has an open rate consistently around 50%, higher than the government organization average of 26%.



During F/Y '21-'22, the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority (TDA) hired Roger Brooks International to create a Sustainable Tourism Management Plan and to address resident concerns of over-tourism. **Brooks delivered the plan in January of this year with \$22 million in recommendations.** Brooks found a lack of parking and poor wayfinding were causes of much local frustration. The TDA is working toward securing a firm to develop and manage wayfinding design and deployment. Many of the recommendations are already being addressed, such as parking, with a new parking committee headed by the Blowing Rock Police Chief. The Town has purchased property that should eventually become remote parking. Maple Street has become one-way to address congestion and safe vehicular movement on the narrow street. The full Sustainable Tourism Management Plan is available on BlowingRock.com, at Town Hall, or the TDA office.



Community & Media Relations

Blowing Rock garnered several substantial earned media placements throughout FY 2021-2022. Blowing Rock was featured in Conde Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, Southern Living Magazine, Our State Magazine, Luxury Travel Magazine, South Park Magazine, World Atlas, Trips to Discover, Vacation Idea, WBTV, WSOC, WCCB, and Spectrum News. Earned media placements are generally considered more valuable than traditional purchased advertising because of the implied endorsement.

By maintaining good working relationships with publications, editors, writers, reporters, and regional news outlets, Blowing Rock continues to score positive stories. The TDA prioritizes efficient and timely responses to all media inquiries. Media assistance includes fact checking, contact sourcing, interviews, providing images, and itinerary assistance. More than a dozen individual media outlets contacted the Blowing Rock TDA directly for assistance in FY 21-22.



Community

With support of Visit North Carolina, the Blowing Rock TDA began a pilot Outdoor NC educational program with Watauga Opportunities, Inc.

MAKE IT YOUR NATURE TO PROTECT NORTH CAROLINA'S OUTDOOR SPACES

When you follow the 7 Outdoor NC Leave No Trace Principles, you can connect with nature like never before.

How do you practice the 7 Principles of Leave No Trace?
Share your photos with Blowing Rock for the chance to have them featured on the destination's Instagram stories and website!

Local Info

Guides and Maps continue to be available at the kiosks, Chamber, Town Hall and participating businesses.



Changes in Assistant Director Position

Throughout fiscal year 2021-2022, changing and expanding responsibilities for the TDA required adjustments to staffing. In the 3rd quarter, the Assistant Director position was restructured and two new staff members applied increased efforts to some areas of work. Starting in the 4th quarter of 2021-2022, the Assistant Director position was focused on public relations, community communication and research, promotional content direction, and

Partners



Networking

TDA staff was able to attend several conferences and gatherings in FY 21-22, including:

- VisitNC 365 Tourism Conference
- Southeast Tourism Conference
- Outdoor Economy Conference
- NC Travel Industry Association Annual Meeting
- Blue Ridge Parkway Association meetings
- NC High Country Host meetings
- Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce Board meetings

Partnerships

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 2021, participation on boards, hosting FAM tours, funding of special projects, collaboration on sweepstakes and giveaways, and promoting events all played a part in maintaining partnerships with these regional organizations:



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