Downtown Boone Development Association
March Board Meeting – March 26, 2024
8:30 am – The Community Room of the Appalachian Theatre

Board Members Present: Kendra Sink, Suzanne Livesay, Fulton Lovin, Vanessa White, Michelle Novacek, Renee Boughman, Wayne Miller, Sarah Long and Megan Kevorkian.

Ex-Officio's Present: Lindsay Miller, Eric Plaag and Edie Tugman.

MSD Members/Guests present: Valerie Midgett, Ali Aita, Anna Roseman, Tina Houston, Carolyn Ward Alyssa Hasty, Bob Flanigan, Annie Pipes, David Sprague, Deron Geouque, Charles Haynes, Braxton Eggers, David Jackson and Krystal Carter.

Town Staff Present: Lane Moody, Amy Davis, Todd Moody, Geoff Hayes, Reta Jackson, Jessica Mitchell, Mark Freed, Brad Farthing, and Guy Miller.

Call to Order
Kendra called the meeting to order at 8:35.

Request for Approval of March Agenda
Lane opened by noting that if people were in attendance to speak about the proposed parking changes there would be a parking presentation at the end of the meeting, followed by an opportunity for questions and public comment. Fulton made a motion to approve the agenda. The motion was seconded by Sarah and had a unanimous vote.

Request for Approval of February Meeting Minutes
Michelle made a motion to approve the February meeting minutes. Fulton seconded the motion and it had a unanimous vote.

Request for Approval of Financial Statements
Michelle made a motion to approve the financial statements. The motion was seconded by Kendra and had a unanimous vote.

Review of Main Street Conference Highlights
Lane opened the discussion by letting the Board know that she and Suzanne went to the Main Street Conference in Goldsboro last week. She stated that it was a wonderful experience with lots of good and inspiring information. She continued that she and Suzanne had put together a highlights reel from the event covering what they learned and it was included in the packet. Lane then reviewed her notes from the conference. Suzanne then added how much she had enjoyed the conference, noting that all of the trainings she attended were spot on and that they provided versatile information that was applicable for a variety of user groups. Suzanne then reviewed her notes and added that she hoped that during a future meeting, she could use some of the tools she learned to help Board members further define themselves by highlighting what makes them unique. Lane finished up by stating that the 2025 Main Street conference would be in Mooresville and hoped that additional members of the Board would attend.

Discussion and Review of MSD Tax Rate

Lane opened by noting that on the last agenda, she had incorrectly listed the tax discussion as "sales tax" when it should have been "MSD tax." Lane continued by reviewing the history of the Municipal Service Tax District, noting that in April of 2022, the MSD rate was set at $.21 per $100 valuation and is currently $.1575 per $100 valuation, adding that due to a miscalculation of a brownfield property, the rate had to be increased. Fulton inquired about the tax rate calculations of brownfield properties. Amy clarified that for brownfield properties the tax rate follows a 5-year period of staggered tax exclusion. Guy stated that at the current tax rate, the anticipated tax collection would be roughly $258,000. Lane added that since we, as DBDA, are primarily funded by the MSD tax, reducing the rate would devalue our program in the eyes of Main Street officials. After a short discussion, Kendra made a motion to keep the MSD tax rate unchanged. The motion was seconded by Fulton and had a unanimous vote.

Discussion of Proposed Changes to Façade Improvement Grant Application

Lane opened the discussion by noting that it had come to her attention that in September of 2022, the DBDA made a motion to amend the façade improvement grant (FIG) application to allow for applications to be accepted up to one-year post-completion, however, the change had never been made. She continued that she had recently received an application that was a post-completion application but did not feel comfortable moving forward with the request until the FIG application had been updated and approved. Lane continued that during her review of other façade grant applications, she realized that some additional areas of the current application could be cleaned up. She directed the Board to the draft in the agenda packet and reviewed the proposed changes, noting that except for the language about submitting up to one year post-completion, there were no real substantive changes, mainly cleaning up unclear language and removing things that were not currently being done. Eric noted that with the rising costs of construction, it might be worth looking into increasing the grant award amount. Megan stated that she would like to be transparent and informed the Board that she was the applicant that Lane was referring to. After a short discussion, Renee made a motion to have Lane research the feasibility of increasing the award amount, make the changes listed in the draft application and bring the research and a clean version of the application to the April meeting. The motion was seconded by Kendra and had a unanimous vote.

Discussion of Potential Street Pole Banner Policy

Lane opened the discussion by stating that this policy is something that has been kicked around for a while and she thought it was a good time to discuss. She continued that in the past there had been two schools of thought, one being that not having anything in writing and addressing requests as they come was ideal and the second noting the need of having a policy that clearly states what request will not be entertained. She stated that she thought the policy as presented could speak to both schools of thought because the policy clearly states what is not allowed while leaving open the opportunity for other requests to come to the Town Manager. She continued that she used a draft policy from 2018 to develop this policy noting that she had removed the application that had been previously included and kept some of the other language. After a short discussion, Suzanne made a motion to approve the policy. The motion was seconded by Michelle and had a unanimous vote.

Discussion of April First Friday Art Crawl

Lane noted that in light of the new vendor ordinance, she was working with the Watauga Arts Council, to set up First Friday Art Crawls to be a special event to accommodate additional opportunities for artist's downtown. She stated that they were currently working on the guidelines for registration and finished up by noting that it was still a work in progress.

Review and Discussion of Funding Request From Historic Preservation Commission (Recommendation from Watauga County Historical Society)

Lane asked Jessica if she would like to take the lead on this item. Jessica opened the discussion by reviewing the Civil War Trails Marker Program, specifically the Stoneman's Raid Interpretive Panel project that the Historic Preservation Commission is working on. She noted that the Historical Society made a motion to cover $750 towards the initial fee of $3000 and also recommended that the Downtown Boone Development Association contribute $750 towards the project. She continued that as the staff liaison for the HPC, she was bringing the request for funding to the DBDA today. She noted that the Town Council is aware of the project, but there are additional pieces of the project that need to be completed. After a brief discussion, Wayne inquired about the commitment level of the Town Council and Eric and Edie both noted that they were supportive of the project. Eric added that many people follow the Civil War trails marker program and added that it would have a beneficial impact on the downtown businesses. There was additional conversation clarifying the history. Suzanne expressed her concern about entertaining a recommendation from the Watauga County Historical Society and noted that in the future she was more comfortable considering requests for funding coming before the board. Fulton made a motion to approve the $750 request from the Historic Preservation Commission, contingent on the Town Council covering the estimated $1500 left to cover the project. The motion was seconded by Sarah and had a unanimous vote.

Review and Discussion of Revised Proposed Changes to Parking

Eric began the discussion with a presentation of the proposed changes. He opened by noting that when hearing from his constituents during the election he heard lots of requests from locals about the dire need for parking solutions. He acknowledged that changing parking was akin to a no-win situation and would likely be painful but potentially worth it in the long run. He noted his goal of being reasonably equitable while increasing costs over time, and not targeting one group in particular.

The first item he spoke to was eliminating construction parking passes due to abuse. He noted that the goal was honorable at first but has been exploited. Fulton asked if there was a limit on the passes and Eric requested that all questions be held until the end of the presentation. He added that while there might be some flexibility to revisit the passes, the proposal was to eliminate the free construction passes.

The next item Eric discussed was the proposed meter rate increases to $2 per hour at the parking meters and $3 per hour at the pay station/kiosk spaces due to the convenience they offer.

Eric went on to review the suggested changes to the permit system in downtown by moving to a hangtag system that requires validation for residency or employment, which would encourage accountability for parking. He reviewed the two types of permits being proposed and used the University costs as the comparative justification for the changes. He also noted that he hoped that the hangtag system in combination with overselling the lots would help with the underutilization of the lots, adding the need for a reassessment within one year. He went on to review some of the problems with the current permit system. Eric finished up this item by stating that the hangtags would grant parking in all permit parking lots downtown.

Eric spoke to the Jones House lot acknowledging the concerns that had been brought up in the past, and stating that the proposal includes an additional 6 reserved spaces for the Jones House.

Eric then reviewed the proposal for returning or swapping back the spaces on Queen Street that are reserved for the County and the Town releasing the Town reserved spaces at the library, essentially swapping back the spaces that had been agreed to in the past but currently had an expired contract. He noted that these changes are not proposed to occur until January 1, 2025, in anticipation of the County's parking deck being completed in December of 2024.

Eric went on to review the proposal to eliminate the jury duty parking pass program when the County's parking deck is complete. He continued that currently, the jury pass program interferes with Town revenue.

Eric went on to review the proposal that the town return the meters across the street from the First Baptist Church and Hamby Alley to one hour only meters. He noted that he has implemented a pilot program to research if the proposed change achieves the intended results.

Eric reviewed the proposed changes to the overtime fines, specifically increasing the overtime fines to $25 while raising other parking fines proportionally. Eric also proposed that due to the amount of outstanding violation fines the Town adopt a campaign targeted at collecting those fees.

Eric noted the proposed need to have Public Works more clearly delineate parking availability by adding or correcting current signage.

Eric reviewed a draft plan for the Rivers Street house and pointed out the potential opportunity to create an additional 40 parking spaces on the property.

Eric stated that per the proposal they would like to research the Town offering a subsidy to businesses that encourage their staff who use either public transportation or take steps to reduce the amount of cars parking downtown.

Eric stated that there is a proposal to explore a park-and-ride option at Brookshire Park that would take advantage of the Appalcart stop there.

Eric finished up the proposals by suggesting the potential for a pay station to be added to the Upper Queen Street lot for use on Saturdays, to take advantage of the underused spaces in that lot.

Eric then opened up the discussion for questions but noted that questions would be limited to 10 minutes.

During the question session of the meeting, the details of the one-hour pilot program were confirmed as well as the current overtime fine for parking. Edie noted that part of the issue is the difficulty collecting unpaid fines, and noted that there was currently $163,000 in unpaid parking tickets. Fulton inquired what the percentage of unpaid parking tickets is but no one knew off hand what the percentage was. Fulton noted that it would be helpful to know what the percentage is. Sarah added that she believes there is a need for updated signage. Suzanne questioned what Eric was looking for from the Board, specifically asking if he was looking for a recommendation. Eric stated that he is seeking feedback as part of his due diligence for the proposal. Suzanne then offered that she believes that the parking rate fee should be increased incrementally. There was a brief back and forth between Eric and Suzanne regarding the impacts of raising rates at one time versus incrementally. Kendra added that she did not believe that all of the pay station lots were convenient and the rates as proposed would have the opposite effect of what is intended. Kendra continued that she believed that hourly workers downtown will utilize the cheaper parking option. Kendra also advocated that the Jones House parking remain the same and reviewed the reasons she believed it should stay that way. Megan added that while she appreciates the comparable rates that Eric had provided she thought they were misleading, and suggested using regional comparable rates because Blowing Rock, West Jefferson, Hickory, Lenoir and Banner Elk were currently free. Megan added that she believed the rates should increase incrementally and inquired where the money would go, noting that if it was clear where the money is going, it might be easier to get buy-in for the proposed changes. Eric reported that the town currently has aging infrastructure that will need to be replaced and that while a parking deck would be ideal they are very expensive. He added that some funding could possibly go to the potential spaces at the Rivers Property but since there is no funding in place he does not see a parking deck coming in the near future. Megan reiterated the need for clear communication about what the revenue increases were being used for and suggested that someone, possibly Eric, be the face or Parking Czar to help with the public perception. Wayne inquired about the current costs of parking permits. Reta responded by listing the current permit costs. The was a short discussion regarding the spaces at the Jones House, noting the many programs and events that take place and with a few Board members advocating that the Jones House be excluded from the current proposals. Edie suggested that the Jones House could have a premium fee for those permit spaces. Edie noted her concern that people might not take advantage of a park-and-ride. The discussion then returned to the Jones House and the impacts of the proposed changes. Eric noted that one of the biggest challenges of downtown parking is that various spaces are expected to serve multiple functions. Kendra stated that what is currently being proposed is a lot, continuing that she would support the overtime fines going to $25 but had serious concerns about many of the other proposed changes. Edie suggested that the County lots at the Health Services and Extension offices could be used for jury parking. Deron spoke up about his concerns with the suggestions and clarified the reason for the agreement between the Town and County for the Queen Street and Library lots. He highlighted that the goal of the parking deck is to accommodate employee parking to free up other lots for courthouse use. Deron spoke about the economic impact the courthouse has on downtown. Deron encouraged Eric to present his proposals to the County staff in advance of presenting proposals because this was the first time he had heard of these suggestions. Deron continued that it is frustrating when outside groups make recommendations of other groups with no prior knowledge. There was a short discussion about County lots and upcoming County plans. Fulton in response to the stated underutilization of the Queen Street lot, asked if there was a backup plan if Queen Street were full. Eric noted that he was proposing a slow approach to implementing some of the changes to gauge the impacts of the new use. Suzanne suggested that the construction passes should not be eliminated but there should be a cost associated with them, noting that if there were issues, enforcement would be key in stemming the misuse. Fulton inquired about the River Street parking and a short discussion ensued regarding the property. Michelle asked about where feedback needs to be sent and Eric suggested that any feedback be sent to Lane. Due to time constraints, the Board moved onto the Public Comment period.

Lane gathered the public comment sign-up sheet and called on Anna Roseman. Anna opened by thanking everyone who was in attendance and highlighting her appreciation for Reta and the parking staff. She stated that she has owned Anna Bananas located in the heart of downtown for the past 14 years. She informed the Board that small business owners pour their heart, soul, and lots of money into their business. She continued that she was a proponent of the meters when they were installed and understands the need for regulations. She commented that the rates as currently proposed are a devastating increase for her and her ability to staff her business. She went on the speak to the economic impact of students and asked that the students not be demonized because they do spend money in downtown. She noted that when she first came to downtown, they were talking about the need for a deck, and now the discussion had returned and the cost of a deck has doubled. She stated that she was grateful that the proposed changes were not in place, because she believed that they were only a band-aid that would not be effective for addressing the issues. She finished up by encouraging the Town decision makers to have bigger conversation about the future of parking in downtown.

Lane then called on Carolyn Ward to speak. Carolyn stated that she was representing Lost Province on N. Depot Street. She stated that she understood the need to work on parking solutions and increase rates, but not at the rate currently proposed. She went on to say that the rates were excessive and would be very hard on staff, noting that as proposed the rates would cost her employee $120 per week. She continued that she thought the rates changes would be a deterrent to visitors and encouraged a reasonable increase in fines, but not what is currently listed in the proposal.

Lane then called on Deron Geouque. Deron stated that he had said most of what he needed to say earlier, but did take a moment to talk about an upcoming facility study for expanding the courthouse and reviewed some of the potential issues with the deck that would likely require flexibility in the future, citing the impacts of snow removal. Deron also confirmed that there are at least 100 employees in the court house and administration buildings.

Lane called on David Sprague. David stated that he was with ECRS and had about 65-70 employees in downtown and many had a hybrid or shift work schedule. He voiced his opposition for the first come first served proposal, noting that it could cause some confusion or uncertainty. He then inquired about where the revenue would go. Eric clarified that the money collected by on-street meters could only be used for parking infrastructure and money collected in the pay stations for off street parking could be used for parking infrastructure or other town related functions. David thought that the proof of residency or employment was a good idea.

Lane called on Valerie Midgett. Valerie opened by thanking the group for the opportunity to provide input and highlight how important this discussion is. She stated that she completely understands why meters are necessary. She noted that she had heard from many people how they don't want to pay to park downtown, but she would refute them by saying if you don't want to come downtown then our town will turn to a town full of strip malls and big parking lots. She stated that she thought the rates and the comparable rates used to justify them were not a fair comparison and would be more harmful to employees in downtown Boone. She continued that if the Queen Street lot were to go to $3 per hour it would kill her business. She then expressed her gratitude for the 1 hour parking and extended enforcement being removed from the proposal. She then informed the board that she was the owner of Neighborhood Yoga and Rooted on King and had been in business for 8 years. She reviewed why the culture downtown was important to her and how she had hoped to bring additional businesses downtown. She then asked that the fines for exceeding time not be increased because she felt it would negatively impact downtown. She proposed having a 15 minute grace period and incentives to pay parking tickets quickly. She questioned why parking was free on weekends and holidays. She finished up by noting all the different costs that are associated with running a business, acknowledging the additional tax to be in the downtown district and thanked everyone for their time.

Lane called on Tina Houston. Tina stated that she was the owner of Bettys Biscuits, apologized about the recent construction and thanked Reta and her staff. She stated that she was thankful for the construction passes and noted how helpful they were. She continued that she agreed with everything that Valerie, Anna and David had said. She emphasized the importance of small businesses and how the make our community unique and special.

Lane called on Braxton Eggers. Braxton opened by stating that he would be taking off his commissioner hat and speaking as co-owner of the Speakeasy building. Braxton noted the difficult position that Amy, Eric and Edie were all in. He encouraged them to look into developing the upper Queen Street lot into a parking deck. He noted that it was a supply and demand issue, and then he asked the town to look into long term solutions. He again noted that he was speaking as a landowner, and not a commissioner and thanked everyone for the opportunity for input.

At 10:41 with no other comments, Kendra made a motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Suzanne and had a unanimous vote.