

Downtown Boone Development Association
October Special Meeting – October 11, 2024
9:00 am – The Jones House

Board Members Present: Kendra Sink, Suzanne Livesay, Fulton Lovin, Mike Forrester, Sarah Long, Megan Kevorkian, Vanessa White, Austin Northern and Renee Boughman.

Ex-Officio's Present: Eric Plagg, Edie Tugman and Lindsay Miller (virtually).

MSD Members/Guests present: Ryan Robinson (Mast General), Rosie Bentley (Shoppes at Farmer's), Bob Snead (Dancing Moon), Charlotte Baxter (Shear Shakti), Paul Tuttle (Melanie's) Melina Daniel (Common Good), Alexia Brewer (Ambrosia Arcade), Summer Rhodes (Betty's Biscuits), Amy Forrester (FizzEd) Julia Moretz (Betty's Biscuits), Luke Barber (Watauga Democrat) and Lee Warden (Ben and Jerry's).

Town Staff Present: Lane Moody, Geoff Hayes, Matt Krause, Brad Farthing, and Mark Freed.

Call to Order

Kendra called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. She noted that, although the agenda was short, she wanted to allow time for general discussion at the end of the meeting. She asked if the board could work through the agenda with limited interruptions and save a broader discussion for the conclusion. Kendra then turned the meeting over to Lane.

Lane opened by thanking everyone for attending, saying it was good to see everyone's faces, and expressing her hope that everyone was recovering from the storm damage. She continued by expressing her gratitude for the town and county leadership and the difficult decisions they have had to make. Lane emphasized that she hoped this meeting would serve as an opportunity to regroup and begin looking forward, rather than using the time to question past decision-making processes, which she felt could be addressed in the future. She reiterated that there was a lot of information to cover and requested that they move through the agenda with limited interruptions, saving general discussion for the end.

Lane then turned the meeting over to Town Council liaisons Eric Plagg and Edie Tugman for an update on town operations.

Eric began by noting that ASU will resume in-person operations and classes on October 16th. Red Cross shelter operations are closing, and those still needing housing are being transitioned to non-emergency accommodations. He emphasized that there are many rumors circulating about housing and encouraged people to verify information before sharing it.

There is a countywide curfew from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. to allow for repairs and emergency operations. The boil water advisory for Boone has been lifted, but repairs to water and sewer line breaks are ongoing. He urged community members to avoid power washing due to the risk of runoff into the already strained storm drains, which could lead to further blockages. Lane added that Public Works had been in downtown that morning to help clear mud and debris.

Eric reported that New River Light and Power had restored service to all of its customers, while Blue Ridge Energy had reduced outages to around 2,500 customers. As of yesterday at 2:00 p.m., the Town of Boone had only two road closures, while Watauga County had 175. Household trash removal services have resumed. Countywide hurricane debris removal began on Wednesday and is being handled by a

company called SDR. Town recycling pick-up is scheduled to resume next Monday. He also mentioned that Pinnacle Storage had been given a temporary certificate of occupancy to provide access to 168 storage containers.

The Daniel Boone lot at Horn in the West is currently being used to house FEMA operations and is the only NCDEQ-approved site for debris storage. The Farmers Market will be moving to Leon Levine Hall on the campus of Appalachian State University. Eric added that FEMA is still working on housing needs for those displaced by the storm, and there was a brief discussion about estimates of the number of people displaced. Edie clarified during the discussion that, under current circumstances, when a building is listed as condemned, it means that it is currently uninhabitable but not beyond repair. Eric noted that FEMA assistance locations are currently set up at Watauga High School and the Appalachian Enterprise Center at 130 Poplar Grove Connector.

Eric took a moment to sincerely thank Boone Area Chamber of Commerce President David Jackson for his role in coordinating assistance opportunities throughout the community. He concluded his update by informing the Board that Sugar Mountain's Oktoberfest, the Woolly Worm Festival, and the Valle Country Fair have all been canceled. However, due to its low impact and primarily local attendance, Boone BOO will proceed as scheduled on Thursday, October 31. Eric then asked Edie if she had any updates.

Edie began by informing the Board that the recent High Country Council of Government newsletter contained a lot of helpful information and encouraged the Board to review it. Lane added that she would email a copy of the newsletter to everyone. Edie went on to explain that the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce had requested a pause on unscheduled donations, expressing her gratitude for the outpouring of supplies. She also informed the Board that AppHealth Care would be assisting with water and well testing. Additionally, she mentioned that Mountain BizWorks is offering rapid relief recovery loans of up to \$100,000. Edie concluded by encouraging attendees to apply for assistance, even for minor needs. There was a brief discussion about the locations of FEMA assistance, and with no further updates, Edie handed the meeting over to Lane.

Lane opened by reiterating Edie's point, clarifying the definition of "condemned." She then informed the Board that Planning and Inspections would resume a normal work schedule today, though there might be delays in processing due to ongoing hurricane recovery efforts. Lane also noted that the Town was waiving permit fees up to \$3,000 for any storm-related repairs. Additionally, she reviewed AppHealthCare's updated priorities in response to the storm. Eric added that if a business was damaged, a permit is not currently required to demolish the space, but one will be needed for renovations.

Lane continued, mentioning that she had met twice with the NC Main Street team. The first meeting was a more casual check-in, while the second was a gathering of directors from storm-affected areas. She highlighted key takeaways from those meetings, such as the importance of documenting any damage, organizing vital business documents, and updating the business's web presence. Lane also reviewed various resources available for guidance and best practices in website and social media development.

Lane then informed the Board that during the second meeting, a major concern emerged regarding the messaging that "Western NC is closed," especially since this is the peak tourist season. She explained that two Main Street directors were working on a shopwnc.com website to support businesses in Western NC and reviewed some related details.

Shifting to the NC Main Street Work Plan, Lane noted that Main Street staff had encouraged the Board to scrap the current plan and develop a temporary one tailored to business support in light of the storm. She reviewed the current plan and suggested shifting to a safer strategy focused on encouraging locals to visit downtown. Ideas included continuing the Buy Boone Lunch program at FARM Café, developing itineraries, organizing scavenger hunts, promoting downtown Boone walking tours, and possibly sponsoring a movie at the Appalachian Theatre. Lane also mentioned that High Country Host had put together a list of open businesses by community. There was further discussion about the current state of the schools and the careful messaging needed to invite people back downtown.

Edie noted that DriveNC.gov is a helpful resource for people with questions about road closures. Suzanne added that while some roads are listed as open, they are still damaged, and visitors should be advised to pay attention and be cautious. Megan suggested messaging visitors to bear with the unique situation, and Lane noted that David Jackson had already emphasized the message of "treading lightly" when visiting the area.

The conversation then returned to the DBDA sponsoring a movie at the theatre. Suzanne reviewed some of the current impacts at the theatre. Renee mentioned that FARM Café is available to feed downtown staff who are recovering from the storm or need a little relief. After a brief discussion on AppState programming, Lane stated that she had covered everything from Main Street and that moving forward, she would focus on promoting opportunities to bring locals downtown. She also planned to schedule a Promotions Committee meeting in the next week to finalize those details. Kendra then made a motion to approve funding for the DBDA to sponsor a movie at the Appalachian Theatre, which was seconded by Megan and passed unanimously. The Board agreed to volunteer for ushering and concessions during the movie.

Lane then shifted the discussion to the Small Business Administration (SBA) and a meeting she recently attended at the Chamber of Commerce with Francisco Sanchez Jr., the Associate Administrator of the SBA Office of Disaster Recovery and Resiliency. She shared a loan information fact sheet, noting that no interest would accrue, and no payments would be due for the first 12 months. Lane encouraged everyone to apply for SBA loans, clarifying that COVID loans do not affect eligibility. She also provided information on the Mountain BizWorks Helene Business Recovery Fund, adding that they are holding weekly meetings to discuss recovery efforts. Lane invited anyone interested to join her for these meetings.

Suzanne added three important points: (1) a FEMA number is needed to apply for most resources, (2) businesses should apply for loans even if they don't need them, as they can return the funds, and (3) utilizing FEMA support is important to demonstrate the need for continued recovery efforts. Lane concluded by reviewing NC House Bill 149, the Western NC Disaster Recovery Act, which allocates \$273 million in hurricane aid.

Lane also updated the Board on the "Boone Hearts Boone" campaign, spearheaded by Boone County, Indiana, to support recovery efforts in Boone, NC. She noted that due to some confusion about donation opportunities, she had not yet widely promoted the campaign but planned to do so soon. With no further discussion items, Kendra invited those in attendance to speak.

Melina Daniels, owner of Common Good, acknowledged that many in the room were dealing with visible and invisible injuries from the storm. She stressed the importance of careful consideration when

reintroducing tourism, noting that locals recovering from the storm cannot be the primary customer base.

Allexia Brewer, owner of Hole Lotta Doughnuts and Ambrosia Arcade, expressed frustration with the lack of messaging around tourism, the difficulty of operating a business in the current climate, and concerns that the relief opportunities being offered were insufficient. She emphasized the need for positive, inviting messaging for the community. Megan echoed her concerns, noting that some community members on social media felt it was inappropriate to invite visitors while recovery efforts were ongoing.

Amy Forrester, owner of Fizzled, also voiced concerns about the "Boone is closed" messaging, suggesting that the loss of tourism revenue during peak months could lead to a secondary financial crisis.

Sam Ratchford, owner of Vidalia's, expressed frustration that only loans were being offered to businesses and called for additional grant opportunities. He also suggested coordinating fundraisers throughout downtown.

Lane thanked the Main Street Community for their support in brainstorming recovery efforts. There was a brief discussion on parking operations and the need for clearer communication regarding future enforcement. The conversation returned to business grants, with the Board discussing possible funding sources and donation streams. They also shared personal strategies for advocating on behalf of local businesses and noted that due to its 501(c)(3) status the Downtown Boone Development Association was barred from lobbying and would be unable to help with a coordinated effort.

With no other items on the agenda, the Board adjourned.