

Tourism Expert Recommendation and Review Panel
Meeting Minutes
Monday, November 30, 2015
4:00 p.m.

Present – Cheryl Armstrong, EMU Auxiliary Services; Brenda Black, Director of Tourism; Caitlin Boyer, Young Adult; Cortney Carderelli, Valley Mall; Kristy Johnson, Family; Christopher Jones, Mayor of Harrisonburg; Matthew Little, Harrisonburg Parks and Recreation; Lisa Shull, Explore More Discovery Museum; Valerie Weaver, Ten Thousand Villages; and, Erica Kann, City Clerk.

Brenda Black introduced herself and welcomed everyone.

Mayor Jones thanked everyone for taking time out of their busy schedules to be present at the meeting. Mayor Jones noted that during his time as mayor he wants to make a difference in tourism. Mayor Jones stated tourism is bipartisan; everyone can contribute to and make Harrisonburg more robust. Mayor Jones stated this team has various stakeholders from a variety of areas within the community. Mayor Jones stated he wanted this group to review what we have to offer now and possibilities of what we can offer in the future. Mayor Jones stated Brenda has done a tremendous job with the resources she has, but resources are limited. Mayor Jones noted that we are the third lowest tax cities in Virginia. Mayor Jones explained that the tourism department is under the economic development department here in the city, which is currently seeking an assistant director of economic development. Mayor Jones stated he would like this group to assist with the direction, with Brenda's leadership, where we want tourism to go and make a holistic recommendation of how to sell Harrisonburg. Mayor Jones would like to walk away with a unique selling position; a point of entry and where people begin to use our services; main triggers and questions of things a visitor or citizen may want to experience; what our strongest, weakest, and most challenging offers are; and, what is our call to action. Mayor Jones would like to keep meetings no longer than 45 minutes in length.

Each member present introduced themselves to the group.

Mrs. Black informed the group that she has been with the tourism department for ten years and she also oversees the Hardesty Higgins House, which includes a gift shop.

Mayor Jones asked the group the following questions:

Is it hard to sell Harrisonburg to your family and friends/What do you hear when your family and friends visit Harrisonburg?

The group responded with the following: people think downtown, James Madison University (JMU) and then Eastern Mennonite University (EMU); JMU students typically have a small radius when they arrive in the city, take their time to expand out of that radius, and then end up settling here; perception is there is nothing here and then when individuals arrive they are

typically pleasantly surprised; the city is friendly and there is a great outdoor aspect; people notice the change when they haven't been to visit, particularly in the past ten years; the city has beautiful scenery; the city is a great place to raise a family; there has been a significant change in the vibe for young people; there has been an increase of coordination between JMU and the city to get visitors off the college campus during their time here; the college town vibe with several events; a great place for bicyclist to visit; would like to see an increase in lodging revenues; Massanutten is blessing (they bring individuals to the area) and a curse (they lodge in the county), it was noted traffic tends to come off the mountain to explore the city, especially seeking rainy day activities, but Massanutten works hard to keep visitors on the mountain; it was noted that at the mall the constant request is seeking indoor activities for children; a destination for many church and other types of retreats due to the reasonable travel distance; and, a wide variety of things are offered, not a lot is offered for recent college graduates.

Mayor Jones asked the group do they see their families and other locals spending their disposable income here.

The group responded with the following: it was stated for those living in Weyers Cave when family is shopping for groceries and such, Harrisonburg is the choice, but Staunton is the typical choice when going out to eat; a survey completed by the mall a few years ago found that citizens are typically shopping outside of the city; the mall doesn't have what people are looking for and the mall is working on that; and, cars being typically the second largest purchase for a person are being purchased from outside the city, due to easy access to other places.

Mayor Jones would like examples of what would a day trip to Harrisonburg would look like, how the group would advertise, and how they would be displayed.

Brenda stated historically the tourism market was outside a 50 mile radius, but that isn't the case anymore. There are several target audiences that can be reached. Brenda reported 40% of tourism comes from Massanutten and they are typically eating.

The question was raised about where the economics and the store in the mall. It was reported when dealing with national retailers everything is based on sales per square foot. The way the mall is now, the city does not meet that national average. It was reported anchor stores, anything bigger than 10,000 square foot, do not count. The stores that are smaller than 10,000 can bring the average down, if they aren't bringing in enough revenues. It was stated that on paper, Harrisonburg is not appealing to national businesses, but if they do a site visit they are pleasantly surprised.

It was also noted that our designated market area is 178th in the country.

Mayor Jones asked when you think Harrisonburg tourism what three (or less) people, places, or things come to mind?

The group responded with the following: children's museum; biking; parkway; hiking; JMU; outdoor activities; downtown; Friday's on the Square; Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR); Court Square; breweries; Cycling Capital of Virginia; unique food (Virginia's First Culinary District); and, the various festivals held within the city.

It was noted several people are coming to visit the wineries in the county.

There was brief discussion regarding HDR working with retail to help gain insight, working on promotions, and working on new hours of businesses being offered. The dynamics have changed and people working downtown don't typically shop during the day and those coming downtown in the evenings for food would possibly like to have the opportunity to shop. Brenda stated she spoke at one of the events that HDR hosted and addressed how everyone needed to work together no matter where the business is located in the city to help with retail promotions in the future.

Mayor Jones stated when he thinks JMU he thinks about the programs that the multicultural center offers, speakers, football, and other events that JMU has to offer. The group felt that those things come to mind, but mainly JMU is used as a point of reference when speaking to others from outside the area.

There was brief discussion about if UPB (University Program Board) still sells tickets to the community and how those concerts aren't advertised and welcoming as they once were. It was noted that UPB is set up for the students and they don't spend extra funds advertising to the community. There was also discussion about the Forbes Center and how you have to search for upcoming performances. It was noted that a couple had informed one of the group members that they never go out of the area anymore to see shows due to the performances being offered through the Forbes Center. The question came up about what is the trigger for citizens and visitors to think about checking to see what is playing at the Forbes Center.

At 4:50 p.m., Mayor Jones closed the meeting by stating that Harrisonburg has a lot to offer, but there are a lot of silos and we need to figure out how to gel all those things together and get the word out.

The remaining questions from the agenda will be transferred to the next meeting.

Next Meeting:

When: Monday, February 1, 2016

Where: City Hall, Room 237

Time: 4:00 p.m.