

River Parishes Tourist Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
March 16, 2010

Meeting Attendance

Present: Paul Aucoin, Delores Florent, Betty Haydel, Mike Norton,  
Judy Songy

Absent: Peter Jasper, Nancy Robert, Nicole Veillon

Staff: Kimmie Carlos, Coy St. Pierre, Jay Tusa

Stakeholders/Guests: Rachael Burns (Holiday Inn Express), Kim Fontenot (San Francisco Plantation), Cathy Matherne (Airboat Tours by Arthur), Zeb Mayhew (Oak Alley Plantation), Bonnie Norton (Bull's Corner Restaurant), Richard Orgeron (Bike Week New Orleans), Vikas Patel (Best Western LaPlace), Catherine Schons (Pleasure Bend Nature Tours), Audrey Temple (St. James Welcome Center), Sheilah Wentzell (Quality Inn LaPlace)

I. Call to order

Chairman Paul Aucoin asked that roll be taken; recognized a quorum and called the meeting to order.

II. Approval of February Minutes

- Paul asked for a motion to approve the February minutes

*A motion was made by Judy Songy and seconded by Mike Norton to approve the February minutes subject to the correction of a misspelled word on page 5. The motion was unanimously approved.*

III. Monthly Financial Reports

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- Increased our total assets by \$10,000 over the last month
- Total assets are \$606,708 in CD and checking accounts
- When comparing Actual versus Budget, Paul pointed out that income is slightly down
- We budgeted \$428,00 and collected \$350,000
- Under *Program Expenses*, we're \$16,000 over budget for advertising because of the way the invoices come in however we're \$10,000 under budget for promotional items
- Paul noted that for *Total Program Services* we are \$5,000 under budget
- For *Salaries & Benefits* we \$1,300 over budget
- For *Total General & Administrative Services* we budgeted \$36,000 and spent \$33,000 therefore we're \$2,000 under budget
- For Total Expenses for the 8 Months Ended we're \$5,860 under budget

*A motion was made by Judy Songy and seconded by Mike Norton to approve the February financials. The motion was unanimously approved.*

- Paul reviewed the charts for the three parishes
- St. John Parish is doing well, holding it's own and really carrying the budget for us
- St. James Parish is doing better than before they had the new hotel
- St. Charles Parish is really down
- Paul asked Jay to contact our CPA firm and request they add last year's income chart along with this year's so we can see any trends
- Paul reviewed the Omni Bank Statement which shows a balance of \$132,514 with an average balance of \$143,500

*A motion was made by Judy Songy and seconded by Delores Florent to approve the hotel occupancy tax for February. The motion was unanimously approved.*

- Paul reviewed the General Ledger which is a list of all expenses current and year to date for each category
- A new code was recently added for Film to see exactly what we're spending
- Paul asked everyone to review the invoices paid

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*A motion was made by Judy Songy and seconded by Betty Haydel to approve the invoices paid for February. The motion was unanimously approved.*

Review Revised Budget

- We usually amend our budget quarterly but with the decline in revenue Jay took an extra look at it
- The budget is being proposed today but will be voted on at the next meeting to give everyone an opportunity to review it
- Our expenses are inline with budget but the income appears to be going down in St. Charles
- The proposed budget is very conservative
- If the income in St. Charles happens to pick up, we won't be faced with a short fall but if it continues with the trend that it's on we anticipate that we will have 13% less income this year than last year
- That is a difference between \$324,000 last year to \$282,000 collected so far this year
- We also worry about the check we receive from the state which was \$200,000
- If it's 13% less, it will be \$170,000
- The check from the state is based off of the same occupancy; it's just a rebate of that same occupancy
- We should receive \$170,000 if it's 13% less than last year
- If things pick up on the occupancy then it will pick up on the rebate
- Paul reminded everyone not to forget that we budgeted in Houmas House's membership, which wasn't in the original budget to begin with, and we lost 3 months worth of income when we decided to give him a break until we got the new brochures in
- Jay amended the budget using the worst case scenario
- With this scenario we're about \$30,000 over budget but Paul thinks we will be able to close that a little
- Paul asked the board to look over the proposed budget and if they think there is an area that can be trimmed, talk to Jay about it
- Mike Norton mentioned that he would be inclined to cut *Program Services*
- Jay mentioned that this time of year we really don't have much going on right now
- Paul stated that he and Jay are working real hard to find out how this state rebate works
- It is completely different this year than it was last year
- Jay explained what they can't figure out in looking at the numbers is we're running 13% less in our income but our tax rebates are running about 30% less

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- Paul stated that we are not in bad shape at all and we do have a large reserve so we can certainly weather this but want to monitor it
- Another thing we're monitoring is the surplus
- We are capped at \$200,000 right now so every year surplus builds up which requires a house bill to withdraw the funds
- We will look at that again although Paul doesn't anticipate it being as large since they raised our cap from \$75,000 to \$200,000

*A motion was made by Mike Norton and seconded by Judy Songy to go into recess. The motion was unanimously approved.*

Break 1:20 - 1:30

*A motion was made by Betty Haydel and seconded by Mike Norton to reconvene. The motion was unanimously approved.*

Roll was once again taken; a quorum was recognized and the meeting was called to order and opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

## IV. Director's Report

### Bike Week

- Last year we participated in Bike Week in New Orleans and hosted a poker run to the plantations
- This year they are doing it again but changing it up a little
- Jay introduced Richard Orgeron that is organizing the event
- Richard explained that last year they had included White Castle in the run which made it too long therefore it didn't give the bikers enough time to spend at each stop
- Richard actually did the run that he designed this year to include Oak Alley, Destrehan, San Francisco and Laura
- His thinking is that each biker should have 30 - 45 minutes at each location to be able to visit the plantation
- Richard stated that he's not asking for any money this year
- Richard offered some advice to the plantations in providing a table and chair set up near their gift shop with a sign that reads 'Will Ship'

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- Richard stressed that bikers need to have items shipped since they are limited to space
- If plantations would like to offer discounts, Richard will need to know so he can include that info on the flyers
- Flyers would include all the rules and regulations specifically that plantation tours are not included in the run and drinks will be available for purchase at the plantations
- Richard mentioned that all the plantations that will be used in the poker run will be on two different websites from now until the next event
- BikeWeekNewOrleans.com and BikeWeek.com will be the two websites
- Paul asked Richard if he could link our website to the two websites being used for this event for those that may not want to participate in the poker run but may want to ride out to any of the plantations on their own
- Paul mentioned the interest in hosting or sponsoring a River Parishes Bike Week to be held on the grounds of the St. John Center
- Richard noted that the month of October is wide open right now if we wanted to hold a bike week for our area
- Rachael Burns with Holiday Inn Express understood how the poker run was benefiting the plantations but asked how was it benefiting the hotels
- Richard explained that he was brought in late for this event and is basically in charged of the poker runs and doesn't have control over anything else
- Jay thought it would be great if we could have our own bike event
- Richard mentioned that October is normally a good month for riders
- He suggested either having it the weekend before or weekend after the Andouille Festival
- Richard stated that if we wanted to have an event for October 2010 then we would have to start today
- Paul asked Richard to get with Jay as soon as he could to work on the event for October 2010
- Richard mentioned the only thing we'd have to do is set up a name for the event and he'd get a web site designed especially for it
- Richard warned that the first year plan to breaking even
- Paul stated that if we can get people to our hotels and plantations that would be our goal because we want them to make the money
- Paul asked everyone to be thinking of a name for our bike run and send your ideas to Jay
- Paul mentioned that he likes 'New Orleans Plantation Country Bike Ride'
- Mike Norton thought it had to have a ring to it and suggested either 'Ride the Levee' or 'Bike the Dike'
- Paul once again encouraged everyone to submit their names to Jay and will look at the list at the next meeting

### Website

- Jennifer Barbee provided us with a report on the new website
- Jay reviewed the sections that we've been working on
- 48% of site visits from site Launch were attributable to search engine referrals
- 453,374 total brand impressions from site launch
- 155 keywords ranking on 1<sup>st</sup> page of search results
- We've seen a total of 914 direct visits to the page since the site has launched, which indicates SEO & marketing and effectiveness
- Our Google PPC (pay per click) placements have received 448,936 impressions and 1,025 clicks
- 87 requests for brochures for the month of February
- Top referring keywords are New Orleans Plantation Country with 66 and New Orleans Plantation Country.com with 39
- Jay referred everyone to the pay per click results for all the keywords
- These are what's making up the 453,000 impressions
- Kim with San Francisco Plantation questioned why she wasn't listed in the results
- Jay mentioned that he would check on it
- For top pages viewed on our website, *Plantations* was the best viewed page with 3,513 impressions
- Jay mentioned that we will have this report each month and will look into doing some sort of comparison from month to month
- As an example if we see some keywords that are working really well, we can focus more on those and drop some of the ones that are not working
- Jennifer will be helping us to determine the quality of these impressions that we are getting for the pay per click advertising
- Mike asked what are we paying for this information
- Jay explained that we receive the information free but we pay for the advertising and have a budget of \$1,000 a month

### Visitor Guide

- Jay handed out the new visitor's guides
- Stakeholders were offered to take a box with them if they wished

### Social Media Approval

- A decision was made not to hire someone to get us started with the social marketing
- We are going to attempt to do it ourselves and see what results we get in the next two or three months
- If we need some assistance then we will evaluate it and see what we need help in
- Rachael Burns with Holiday Inn Express has offered to assist Kimmie in getting us started
- Olivia also said she could give us some tips and steer us in the right direction

### PR & Advertising

- When The Public Relations Selection Committee met last, we were looking at some PR firms to hire however they were all really expensive
- Jay went back to the firms and asked if they could fine tune the costs and they all told him no
- For next budget year, Jay would like to look into hiring an advertising agency to help us out with our marketing efforts and our PR
- Some agencies that Jay has spoken to have expressed interest in handling both efforts opposed to only one part of it
- Jay asked if anyone had any recommendations on agencies to let him know
- Jay has spoken to the Graham Group and plans to speak to Peter Mayer as well

### Visitor Study

- Norman with Laura Plantation has the University of Southern Mississippi coming in April to do this study
- He has called a couple of the plantations to see if they are willing to participate
- Norman participated in this study about 7 years ago and got some great demographic information out of it such as where are people coming from, where are they going, their age and etc.
- Jay noted that this would be great information for us since our last study was done by Northstar over 5 years ago

### Sales

- Kimmie met with Sandra with World Wide Concepts who will be bringing a group of 650 middle school to high school aged kids in July to do a swamp and plantation tour and to eat lunch.
- We are in the planning stages right now
- New Orleans Plantation Country is the point of contact for this group
- Kimmie will be setting up a run through of the plantations with Sandra for March 23<sup>rd</sup> so she can decide which direction to proceed
- An Antique Car Group will be coming in November
- They wanted to do something in the River Parishes
- The group has booked 50 rooms at Quality Inn
- They have already toured Oak Alley and Laura
- Sheilah Wentzell with Quality Inn mentioned that they sold all the plantations to them when they first met
- They came back and said they would like to go to San Francisco and will consider Houmas House
- They requested the banquet be held at Quality Inn since it's the host hotel
- Sheilah asked the plantations if they could give her some group rates so that she could sell some tours to tourists staying at her hotel
- Although she has a package that includes a plantation or two to offer them, some want to break the package and tour other plantations
- Both Zeb Mayhew with Oak Alley and Kim Fontenot with San Francisco Plantation agreed to work with Sheilah on open packages
- Jay asked if anyone has packages to please email them to him so we can put it on our website

### Show Update

- **American Bus Association (ABA)**- Washington, D.C. (Jan 14-20)
- ABA was a great show; met with 40 tour operators with 5 of them already planning to come to New Orleans in April
- Leads were sent by email
- Tour operators are looking for interactive tours and something different
- Agra-tours are a big draw as well
- People are interested in seeing how things are made and processed
- Kimmie took a seminar on Group Connect which we have signed up for which a lead is generating system
- This system is where tour operators through ABA and OMCA can go directly to submit an RFQ for services

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- The RFQ would be sent to Kimmie and she would forward to the appropriate stakeholder
- Laine with LTPA suggests we do a school group committee because there is a lot of focus on student travel and it is a big market
- **Tennessee Motor Coach** – Chattanooga, TN (Feb 8-11)
- Kimmie was one of only 4 people there from Louisiana which was great because they all partner together to sell the region
- Attending were: Lafourche, Houma, Audubon Institute and New Orleans Plantation Country
- First time attending this show
- All feedback was very positive
- Tour operators have traveled to our area and are hungry for information
- The main thing they want is for us to plan trips for them and have itineraries
- Kimmie met with 20 tour operators during the show with leads that will soon follow
- **DMAI Sales Academy** – Washington DC (Feb 21-24)
- Both Jay and Kimmie attended this seminar
- Learned how to better sell our destination, qualify and prospect leads as well as sell against the competition
- Discovered tools to determine which trade shows will have an ROI (return on investment), also effective sales call planning and follow up
- Jay expressed how good it was that both he and Kimmie attended this seminar together
- The one thing that is really needed and somehow put in the budget is a database
- Currently we have no proper database
- We are looking to see if we can do something that's encompassing for our stakeholder information that we use on our website and brochure and also for Kimmie's purposes for her sales efforts
- This way all the information is in one place
- Jay explained there are databases for CVBs that we've looked into but they are very expensive
- We're searching to see if we can create something ourselves either through Access or maybe hire South Central Planning to assist us
- Jennifer Barbee mentioned that she may be able to help us out with something on the back end of our website
- Rachael Burns mentioned that they use ISales which is web based
- Jay expressed that we definitely want a web based database and it's something that we are working on for next year's budget

Upcoming Schedule for RPTC:

- **April 2:** Good Friday – Office Closed
- **April 10-14:** Travel South Showcase – Birmingham, AL
- Kimmie will be attending this show with other CVBs from Louisiana

Directors and Officers Insurance

- Jay is researching Directors and Officers Insurance for the organization
- Currently we do not have this type of insurance
- Jay has one quote from Garrett & Garrett Insurance out of Baton Rouge
- This is the company that LTPA uses; they are a member and they offer other CVBs their services
- Jay plans to get quotes from some of our local companies like Dave Millet Insurance and Riverlands Insurance
- Jay feels this is something that is really important to have
- Jay explained that board members are protected under Louisiana Law as far as getting sued and not being held personally responsible however he as an officer is not covered under that law
- Also board members might not be responsible for the damages but might be responsible for the legal fees
- This insurance will cover that as well
- Jay is looking into it and will put it in the budget for next budget year
- Paul added that this interpretation of the law was provided to Jay by the insurance company and he will check into it to make sure he agrees with that interpretation before we spend the money although it's not expensive

V. Chairman's Monthly Report- Paul Aucoin

St. John Tax Collection

- We are making a conscious effort to collect from the RV parks

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- St. John Parish is slow but today finally solidified that they will make a collection effort from the RV parks
- It's just a matter of determining what's a transient and what's not a transient when it comes to staying in an RV park
- We are putting together some language that they can use to determine who owes and who doesn't
- Nathan Stein will collect any unpaid taxes for as far back as he can
- St. Charles Parish is doing a complete audit on all their RV parks and hotels
- They are about to complete their RV audit and give us a report and then they will audit their hotels
- We did speak with St. Charles Parish about the decline in revenue and they said it's just slow right now

Closing Comments

- Paul asked Coy to give a little report on the new TV series *Delta Blues*
- Coy reported that a TV series has rented the St. John Center Soundstage from March 15 through August 15 with the option of staying an additional two months to see if another network picks them up
- If they are successful they could be here indefinitely
- It is being produced by George Clooney and stars Jason Lee
- It will air on TNT
- It's about a Memphis Cop who moonlights as an Elvis impersonator

*A motion was made by Mike Norton and seconded by Delores Florent to adjourn the meeting. The motion was unanimously approved.*

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned.