

**MINUTES OF THE  
HATTIESBURG TOURISM COMMISSION  
BOARD MEMBERS & MANAGEMENT**

Minutes of the regularly scheduled meeting of the Board Members of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission of the City of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, held at the Hotel Indigo board room on:

**October 23, 2024**

Be it remembered that on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of October, the Board Members of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission met in person at the Hattiesburg Hotel Indigo board room. Frank James, Chairman of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission, called the meeting to order at 12:09 p.m. The following Members of the Board were found to be present:

**PRESENT**

Frank James  
Melanie Archer  
Michael Marks  
Anthony Harris  
Shawn Lowrey

**ABSENT**

Dr. Joe Paul  
Bonnie Warren

**ALSO PRESENT**

Marlo Dorsey, Management  
Kristen Brock, Staff  
Paige Robertson, Staff  
David Ott, Counsel

**Citizens Forum**

With no members of the public present, Citizens Forum was not held.

Dorsey took the opportunity to highlight a successful 2024 Governor's Conference on Tourism, hosted in early October in Hattiesburg for more than 200 tourism professionals from across the country. This was the first Governor's Conference hosted by Hattiesburg in 15 years.

Dorsey also briefly shared the recently completed Tourism Economics study conducted on Hattiesburg visitor spending from 2019-2023. Commissioners had been provided the report when published. The detailed study reported visitor spending in Hattiesburg increased from \$433 million in 2019 to \$582 million in 2023, a 35% increase in four years. Recreation was the largest growth sector of the overall visitation growth. The commission noted this growth occurred at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had sharp declines on the tourism industry and Visit Hattiesburg's strategic planning goals were still implemented.

Dorsey noted the data had been presented to City Council earlier in the month with Chairman Frank James and Vice-Chairman Anthony Harris present. Additionally, Dorsey presented key findings of this report to 200 attendees at the ADP Accelerate luncheon two weeks prior.

Following review of October's meeting agenda, Michael Marks moved to make an addition to the schedule to add executive session to the end of the October 2024 agenda. Duly seconded by Anthony Harris, there was unanimous favorable vote of the board.

### **Minutes from Previous Board Meetings**

After full review and upon motion by Melanie Archer, duly seconded by Shawn Lowrey, there was unanimous favorable vote of the board to approve August 2024 meeting minutes as presented.

### **Financial Report**

Dorsey presented the financial report. Updated tax receipts for the commission's 2% special hotel levy are down 3.1% to close out FY24, with a total collection of \$932,442. Dorsey noted that actual tax collections from the MS Department of Revenue do not match projected occupancy-based revenue from national reporting firm Smith Travel Research and that she has met with the department to address the inequality in what has been collected. A small portion of the back payments owed was applied in September, with more expected in the coming months as coding issues continue to produce inaccurate payments. More than \$300,000 in hotel tax revenue has not been received during the last 24 months.

Claims dockets for the months of August and September 2024 were presented. A listing of all ARPA and non-ARPA expenditures was provided in full detail by line item, which were all budgeted expenses. The board was also provided with reconciled balances of all Hattiesburg Tourism Commission assets through September 30, 2024, showing a total balance of \$4,414,404.80. All reconciled accounts have been reported to the Mississippi Treasurer's office as part of compliance with year-end public funds.

Dorsey presented an unaudited 12-month budget update, noting that audited versions are in progress and will be presented no later than the February 2025 board meeting for both FY23 and FY24 years. Dorsey noted the FY24 year closed without having to use any operational reserves allocations and ended with a projected net income of \$63,643.80.

While the FY25 non-ARPA budget was approved at the August 2024 board meeting, Dorsey presented final copies that included designated reserve allocations. The board was provided an updated version of the budgets with all categories complete.

After full review and upon motion made by Michael Marks and duly seconded by Shawn Lowrey, there was unanimous favorable vote to approve the financial update as presented and the allocated reserves for the FY25 budget.

### **Old Business**

Dorsey and Robertson provided an update on procurement and expenses for Round 1 and Round 2 ARPA funding. All funds for both rounds have been procured by the deadline of December 31, 2024, and they have been allocated through procurement contracts through

December 2026. VisitHATTIESBURG remains in compliance and good standing with the Department of Finance and Administration (DFA) on these funds.

### **New Business**

Dorsey presented a Tourism Economics report overviewing visitor activity in Hattiesburg. Since 2020, 4.7 billion people were reached, resulting in \$22.9 million in earned media. Visitor spending also grew by \$201 million during this time. In addition to these highlights, the full report was covered in detail. The commission reviewed growth by sectors, noting the significant increase was also made possible through collaborative efforts with hotels, restaurants, tourism attractions, and public sector leadership.

Brock presented a Sales & Visitor Services update overviewing current groups being served by the department along with recent sales efforts. More than 7,150 event attendees were serviced through Red Carpet Services in FY24. A full report on the 2024 Governor's Conference on Tourism was provided, highlighting 3 Hattiesburg awards including Mayor Barker with the Governmental Tourism Leadership award and DMO of the Year and PR Campaign/Strategy of the Year for VisitHATTIESBURG.

Figures were presented for Hattiesburg Restaurant Week, which included nearly 50 participating restaurants and produced 250,000+ digital impressions and 340 giveaway entries. A list of FY25 Tourism Grant Program recipients was provided, resulting in awards totaling \$54,500.

Brock updated the board on HAPA projects, which includes 57 large-scale murals now unveiled in Hattiesburg with several additional projects in the works. A proposal for Hattiesburg's fifth outdoor sculpture competition and exhibit was also presented, which would reintroduce this once annual show and continue to grow Hattiesburg's sculpture collection. After full review of the proposal and upon motion by Shawn Lowrey, duly seconded by Anthony Harris, there was unanimous favorable vote of the board to allocate \$50,000 from reserve funds to host the exhibit.

Robertson presented a marketing and public relations overview for the months of August and September 2024. Total impressions for August totaled 3,940,108. September's overall impressions totaled 3,884,419. A detailed list of digital and traditional marketing placements was provided, along with significant earned media revenue from public relations efforts. Robertson provided insight on the new website update and the volume of traffic from new visitors to the site. A synopsis was also provided showing the top feeder markets and the locations in Hattiesburg of where visitors went. Robertson concluded this trend data intelligence helped with marketing campaign decisions in specific markets as well as who Visit Hattiesburg is behaviorally targeting.

After reviewing all items on the agenda and upon motion by Michael Marks, duly seconded by Anthony Harris, there was unanimous favorable vote to enter executive session at 1:07 p.m. to discuss organization and personnel updates. Staff left the meeting.

Following discussion and upon motion by Michael Marks at 1:21 p.m., duly seconded by Anthony Harris, executive session was ended with unanimous approval.

During executive session, the commission discussed Dorsey's employee evaluation and increased the annual salary she receives effective the following pay period.

Being no other business, and upon motion by Michael Marks, duly seconded by Shawn Lowrey, the meeting was adjourned at 1:24 p.m.

**Hattiesburg Tourism Commission:**

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Frank James, Board Chair

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Marlo Dorsey, CEO