

***Pulaski County
Tourism Advisory Council***

Thursday, 20 March 2025
Winamac Municipal Utilities Complex
Winamac, Indiana

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, 8 October 2024
Winamac Municipal Utilities Complex
Winamac, Indiana

Members present: President Dave Scott (Winamac Town Council (W.T.C.)), Vice-President Tom Miller (W.T.C.); Raymond Heabel (County Board of Commissioners (Board)), Vernon Gillum (County Council (Council)), Jeff Litke (The UPTOWN Project), *Kelsie Zellers (Main Street Winamac) by telephone*. Department of Community Development (D.C.D.) Executive Director Nathan P. Origer, D.C.D. Assistant Taylor Bailey.

Members absent: Secretary Sue Kast (Board) [personal]; Scott Kubish (Board), Christie Nicholson (Council) [personal].

Guests present: Diana Day, Donna Heabel, Brandi Larkin.

Call to Order

President Scott called the meeting to order at 6:00 *p.m.*

Consent Agenda

With no requests for extraction having been made, the consent agenda was approved.

Motion: Mr. Gillum; second: Mr. Litke; no discussion; approval: all.

Guest Presentation

Pulaski County Tribe: Brandi Larkin with the Pulaski County Tribe presented a proposal to place an electronic sign on the courthouse lawn or elsewhere along U.S. 35 in Winamac to promote awareness of events and opportunities within the county; the sign could provide advertising for both non-profit organizations and businesses within the county. Mrs. Larkin and Diana Day had presented the idea to the Board of Commissioners, who assigned the matter to the Tourism Advisory Council (TAC) on Director Origer's recommendation.

Noting that such signs are common in surrounding counties, Mrs. Larkin suggested that communication is sometimes lacking in the community, and that perfecting a messaging strategy can often be tiresome for organizations and businesses. Mrs. Larkin proposed that the County assist with the funding of the project, which likely would reach at least \$30,000, with the Tribe willing to take the lead in asking other organizations to contribute, ideally securing \$3,000 contributions from ten organizations, and willing both to contribute directly and to seek grant funding. Mrs. Larkin explained, in response to Mr. Gillum, that the proposed Winamac sign would be the first installation across the county, with the hope that partnerships in other towns in the community would follow suit. The Tribe would not manage this project, but would help with coordination, with Mrs. Larkin suggesting that it would make sense if the Town of Winamac were to manage the sign in Winamac, and other Towns to take such responsibility in their communities.

Mr. Litke inquired as to whether the sign's content would be oriented toward residents or visitors, and Mrs. Larkin explained that it could serve both purposes; brief discussion ensued regarding benchmarking the successes of such signs.

Mrs. Larkin formally requested that the TAC contribute funds toward the project; Mr. Heabel asked if the Town of Winamac would be contributing. Mrs. Larkin and Mrs. Day explained that the W.T.C. had not yet been formally asked, but had expressed interest in the idea when it has first been presented to them. Further discussion regarding sign location and how other communities make use of similar signs ensued. Mr. Heabel suggested that private entities could potentially pay a fee to advertise on the sign.

Vice-President Miller suggested that such a sign might not be ideal for communicating messages effectively given the unlikelihood of motorists stopping traffic to study the display. Mr.

Gillum raised the question of affordability for the TAC given the anticipated cut to the 2025 marketing budget; Mrs. Larkin enquired as to the extent of the proposed cut, and the director explained that the Council had tentatively agreed to cut the appropriation from \$65,000 in 2024 to \$40,000 in 2025, noting that fitting a contribution to the sign project would not be impossible, but might be difficult. Discussion regarding the Council's decision and the TAC's mission ensued, with Mrs. Larking sharing insights into effective marketing strategizing and budget prioritization.

Old Business

Tourism Strategic Plan: The Strategic Planning Committee (Committee) had met twice earlier in the year, developing an outline for the new strategic plan; Director Origer had provided the draft outline for TAC review. Once the members had okayed the proposal, staff would begin turning the outline into a written plan for the Committee to review, and once the Committee had reviewed and revised it, the director would present it to the TAC for further discussion as well as making it available public review.

Director Origer guided the members through the various sections of the outline; discussion ensued regarding the need for the plan, its potential usefulness in advocating the Council for more funding, the pros and cons of the County's eventually implementing an innkeeper's tax, and the details of some of the content included in the outline.

Substantial discussion ensued regarding the cut the Council had made to the marketing budget, with Mr. Litke highlighting that the Council had given the TAC no opportunity to prove itself before reducing its funding. Director Origer provided background on the Council's decision and noted that some councilors had acknowledged this factor, which contributed to their not fully eliminating the appropriation. Mr. Litke suggested that perhaps business owners should ask the County what they are doing to promote them or the community. The director highlighted the one silver lining to the issue: it would give the TAC time to develop an updated commercial without rushing to have it ready for the 2025 season — although he did note that doing so might be risky without any promise of reinstated funding in 2026. Mrs. Larkin added that, with a limited budget, a need exists to be selective as to where the marketing funds should be spent, rather than sprinkling a little money in a number of places; additional discussion ensued regarding tourism-spending metrics and what sets Pulaski County apart as a destination.

The TAC authorized the staff to work on converting the strategic-plan outline as-is into a fleshed out draft plan.

By consensus.

New Business

Tourism-season reports: President Scott reported that Riverside Rentals had had a rough season due to weather, both flooding and a cold streak; the vice-president echoed these sentiments regarding his short-term rental unit. Vernon Gillum reported that traffic at Tippecanoe River State Park dropped by four percent from 2024, highlight an increase in mosquitoes due to the flooding. Mr. Heabel reported issues at Miss Kitty's Orchard pertaining to both staffing and the weather, noting that apples had come in too early, leading to their not having a U-Pick season, and highlighting that they found alternatives to maintain traffic. Discussion ensued regarding annual weather impacts and flooding, including a tangential conversation about past plans to the move the fairgrounds from the Winamac Town Park to the industrial park.

2025 Community Development budget: In light of discussion pertaining to the budget that arose in the strategic-plan conversation, the director declined to dive into this matter at this point; however, further discussion regarding the possibility of adopting an innkeeper's tax arose, eventually landing on the topic of potentially developing a hotel in the county and the use of short-term rentals as an alternative.

Next meetings: Director Origer expressed the need for one more meeting before the end of the year, assuming that staff and the Committee had made sufficient progress on the strategic plan to merit next steps on the part of the full TAC.

Other Business

Further budget discussion: Mr. Gillum inquired further about the 2025 budget. Director Origer explained that D.C.D. had spent \$64,050 on marketing in 2024: \$30,000 on Chicagoland television marketing, and the remainder on a mix of print and digital outlets that he reviewed. Mr. Gillum vocalized that any television marketing should be off the table for 2025. President Scott asked about the demographics of people receiving the ads from GreatNews.Life; the director said that he would look into this.

Donna Heabel recommended putting an ad in the Indiana Beach guide; the cost would be about \$615 per year, and the director would need to contact David Gross for further details. President Scott expressed concern that content gets “buried” in *Travel Indiana*; the director expressed appreciation for the digital components from Travel Indiana as well as that statewide distribution of the magazine. Director Origer would be meeting with his account representative the next week and would enquire about a digital-only package; discussion ensued regarding the benefits of statewide marketing as opposed to focusing on the geographic areas from which the most visitors already come, with various members highlighting where their visitors originate.

The director expressed a desire to make better use of Facebook ads as well as looking into paid advertising on Google; additionally, he mentioned wanting to produce an updated brochure in the form of a clean and attractive rack card. Additional discussion ensued regarding different uses for new video content across multiple platforms.

A question from Mr. Gillum returned the conversation to the Tribe’s contribution request. Discussion ensued regarding the effectiveness of the medium specifically for tourism purposes, as opposed to for broader community-information dissemination; whether it would be seen as problematic if a County tourism agency allocated funds to a project that, at least at the outset, would benefit Winamac the most; and whether installing such a sign on the courthouse lawn would be appropriate from an effectiveness or aesthetic perspective. Members concluded that, in light of the reduced budget and these concerns, support the project at this time would not likely be appropriate, but remained open for further discussion in the future.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

Motion: Mr. Heabel; second: Mr. Litke; no discussion; approval: all. 7:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Taylor Bailey, Assistant/Recording Secretary

Vernon Gillum, Secretary *pro tempore*