



# BLOWING ROCK

*Tourism Development Authority*

## Fiscal Year-End Report 2019-2020



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The mission of the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is to develop and promote travel and tourism to and within the town of Blowing Rock by executing a strategic marketing plan with the goal of increasing the number of overnight guests and extending the traditional tourist season.

# 2019-2020 In Review

Before the Covid pandemic struck in mid March of 2020, the Blowing Rock tourism industry was continuing a decade long stretch of growth. Fiscal year 19/20 was trending 11% above the prior year in occupancy tax revenue, which was the best year on record. When emergency declarations were declared across the state and country, travel and tourism virtually stopped. No one, with the exception of essential workers, were allowed to travel or rent lodging facilities. This was reason for the TDA to stop all outreach and calls to action for visitation. Blowing Rock and destinations literally around the world were closed for business, at least for a while. Covid changed everything.

The Blowing Rock TDA had to pivot from external sales messaging to local business support and resource management. Focus turned to assisting tourism businesses with finding the resources to survive so that when travel did resume, there would be something to promote. Work immediately began on creating landing pages on the website for both businesses and consumers that would help answer the many questions that arose. Internal communications with businesses were ramped up to get relevant information into the hands of owners and management. Social media had to change from inviting visitors to plan a visit to asking them to stay home, stay healthy and visit later. Coordination with the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce, Watauga County Health Department, NC Department of Health and Human Services and VisitNC became hyper critical. It was now more important than ever that factual information flowed to the right audiences in a timely manner.

By the end of FY 19/20, occupancy tax revenue went from +11% to a 7.3% decline compared to the prior year. Total occupancy tax collection was \$999,809.01 representing \$16.7 million in lodging revenue and \$50 million in direct visitor spending by the overnight visitor. Looking at trending collections until the start of the pandemic, Blowing Rock lost more than \$3.5 million in lodging sales from March through June and more than \$10.5 million in spending by overnight visitors. Day-trippers or those not spending the night in Blowing Rock also provide significant visitor spending. Losses over the last quarter to the businesses in the town of Blowing Rock can easily approach \$20 million.

Challenges will continue into 2020-2021 with traveler sentiment and resident feelings toward visitors coming into the community. According to a survey conducted on July 1 by Longwoods International, a travel industry research and consulting firm, 76% of travelers are planning to alter their future plans because of coronavirus, up from 69% at the beginning of June. The share of travelers who say they will cancel their plans completely has also jumped from 37% in mid-June to 45% at the start of July. Nearly 1/3 of residential respondents said they did not feel comfortable with visitors coming into their communities from other areas.

The TDA Board of Directors voted to fund a Sustainable Tourism Management Plan (STMP) to ease the perception of “over-tourism”. By hiring a consulting firm over the next year, the TDA hopes to put in place a plan that will address and better manage parking, traffic and overcrowding. A STMP should help to make life in Blowing Rock even better for full and part time residents as well as visitors.

Blowing Rock has seen a strong comeback in visitation as restrictions are lifted or eased. The area is poised for strong visitation over the next year and beyond due to our location and offerings. Leisure travelers are looking for what Blowing Rock and this region has to offer; fresh air and wide-open spaces with room to roam.

Tracy Brown  
Director, Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority

# 2019-2020 in Review

## Noteworthy in FY 19-20

One of 10Best Small Towns for Adventure  
in USA Today's 10 Best poll in 2019

One of The South's 10 Best Mountain Towns  
by readers of Southern Living in 2020

Listed as Best Small Town in NC by MSN

Hosted CycleNC Mountains to Coast Ride

Dedicated Trailhead for Middle Fork Greenway

Participated in Congressional Summit on  
Tourism in Washington

Contributed \$85k to Middle Fork Greenway

Contributed \$25k toward Cone Manor Restoration

Contributed \$25k toward BRAHM marketing

Before Covid, on track to have best year ever

Major events throughout summer and fall cancelled

Tweetsie not allowed to open

Lodging shutdown for two months due to Covid,  
50% limit on lodging occupancy continues since May

50% occupancy in restaurants

New guidelines and protocols for all businesses  
and consumers

Earned media features in  
Southern Living Magazine,  
Our State Magazine, Forbes Magazine  
New York Times, Palm Beach Post  
NC Weekend, Blue Ridge Digest  
WBTV, WCCB, WSOC,  
Spectrum News, WCYB, WJHL,  
WRAL, WFMY, & WXII



These 10 towns might be small – each has a population of fewer than 25,000 people – but they're big on outdoor adventure, from hiking and mountain biking to kayaking and rock climbing.



### Fiscal Year Board Members:

Dean Bullis, Chair

*(Tourism Representative)*

Kevin Walker, Vice Chair

*(Lodging Representative)*

Tim Gupton

*(At-large Representative)*

Virginia Powell

*(Council Representative)*

Greg Tarbutton

*(Lodging Representative)*

*Nicole Norman- Finance Office*

*Shane Fox - Town Manager*

TDA staff provides a report to  
its board on a bi-weekly basis  
to keep members informed of  
activities.

# Budget & Expenditures

According to TDA Bylaws, the Authority shall use two-thirds of the funds remitted to it by the Town Council to promote travel and tourism in Blowing Rock and shall use the remaining one-third of the funds remitted for tourism-related expenditures.

## Expenditures Overview

Budgets were adjusted at the end of third quarter due to restricted income resulting from State and County mandates on travel and lodging during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. From March through June, Occupancy Tax Collections dropped 62.4% from the same period last year. That \$178k Occupancy Tax Revenue loss represents \$2.97 million in lost lodging revenue and \$8.9 million over-night visitor spending.

In revenue (unaudited), a total of \$999,809.01 was collected in Occupancy Tax, down 7.32% overall compared to the prior F/Y and down 4.6% as compared to budget. In expenses (unaudited), a total of \$915,404.07 was spent over the course of the year in the following categories:

**Tourism Infrastructure** groups expenses like parking decks, Middle Fork Greenway, Memorial Park, Moses Cone Park, Hwy 321 Lighting, and landscaping.  
**\$326,603.00**

**Administrative** expenditures include staff salaries, employee development, travel, dues, insurance and more. **\$206,853.32**

**Central Services** are items like audits and Town overhead costs (accounting, minutes, notices).  
**\$22,417.30**

**Direct Tourism Promotion** includes things like advertising, website, public/media relations, parks and rec event support.  
**\$359,530.45**



# Revenues & Impact

Gross occupancy taxes in FY 19-20:

**\$999,809.01 (-7.32%)**

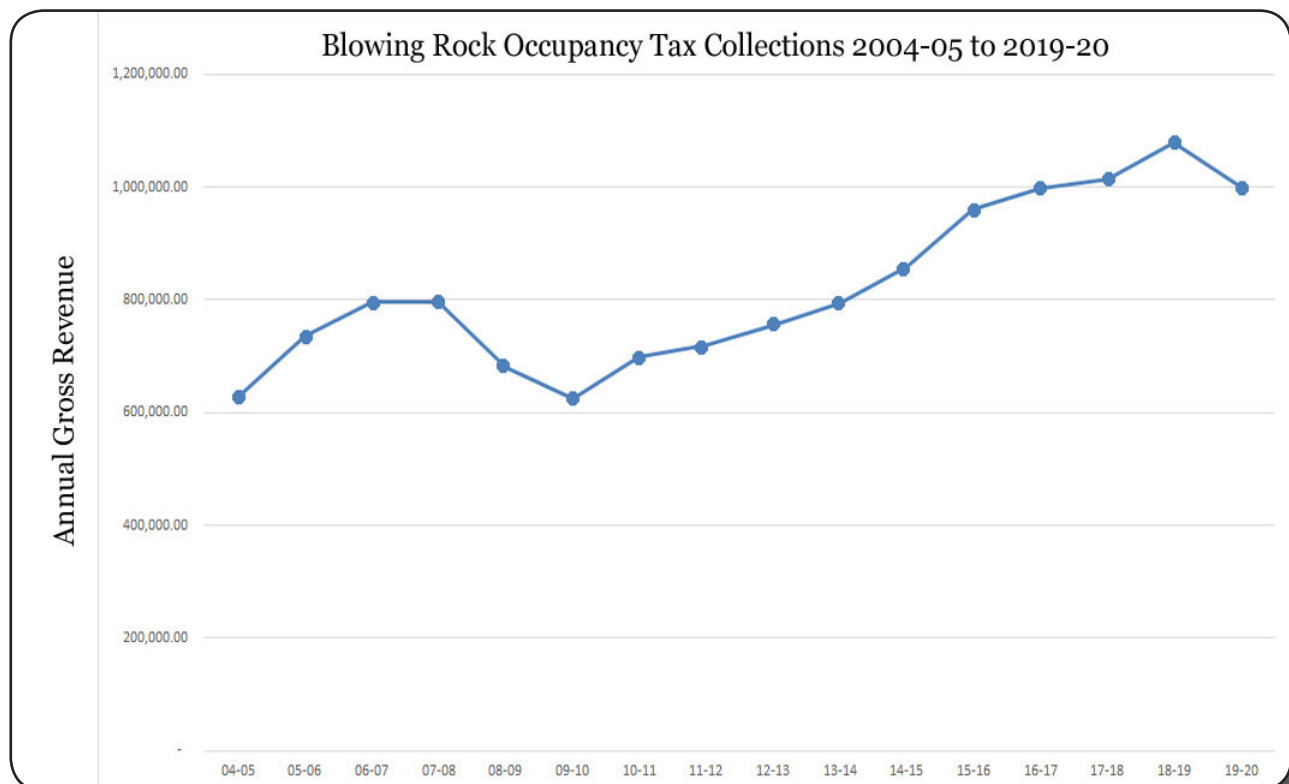
Direct sales at lodging businesses:

**\$16,663,403.00**

Visitor Spending in excess of:

**\$49,990,449.00**

The TDA is funded by a 6% occupancy tax that is paid by visitors that stay in overnight lodging in Blowing Rock.



# Marketing & Advertising

**22** media campaigns in traditional and digital outlets for Art in the Park, Winterfest, Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show, Blowing Rock Music festival, BRAHM support, Holidays, and more.

## Target Markets:

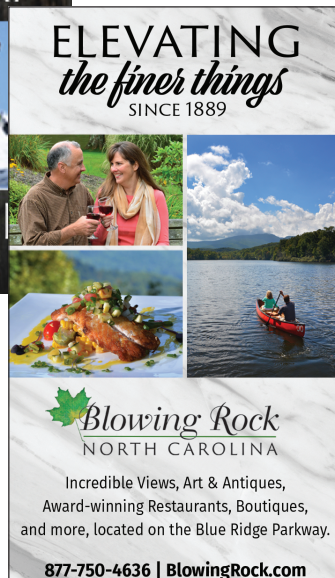
- Charlotte
- The Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill + Cary)
- The Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point + Burlington)

## Target Audiences

- RETIREES: Ages 55-up, high income, women are decision makers.
  - FAMILIES: Ages 35-55, medium high income, women are decision makers.
  - WOMEN: Ages 35-up, girls getaways.
  - COUPLES: Ages 35-up, women are decision makers.
  - MEETING PLANNERS: Small meeting planners in Southeast.
  - MILLENNIALS: Ages 25-35, men and women are decision makers.
- Value experiences over possessions. Outdoors, craft beer, where locals eat, etc.

Blowing Rock remains a drive destination, and these are consistently the top markets of our hoteliers.

Behavioral targeting, geo fencing, and retargeting strategies further ensure that we reach the right travelers.



Leveraged media, like these mailers sent through the Charlotte Observer, continues to be a big part of TDA marketing plan. Being able to use content across several platforms allows budgets to go further while presenting a cohesive message.





# Marketing & Advertising

Advertising outlets in 2019-20 included:



## Email Marketing in FY 19-20

Blowing Rock has over 8,300 active contacts in our email database. Contacts sign up on their own on [www.BlowingRock.com](http://www.BlowingRock.com). Five email blasts were sent to subscribers in 2019-20, ranging across seasons, events, & topics. Average open rate for our travel marketing emails was 30%. Typical open rates for travel & tourism mailers are around 16%, according to Constant Contact.

E-blasts were also sent through the Charlotte Observer and the Raleigh News & Observer, with 50k-75k recipients per blast.

New :15 and :30 second television spots were produced for television as well as digital and social media platforms.



As travel expectations changed with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, marketing messages were adapted to encourage traveler confidence and safety.





# Website & Social Media

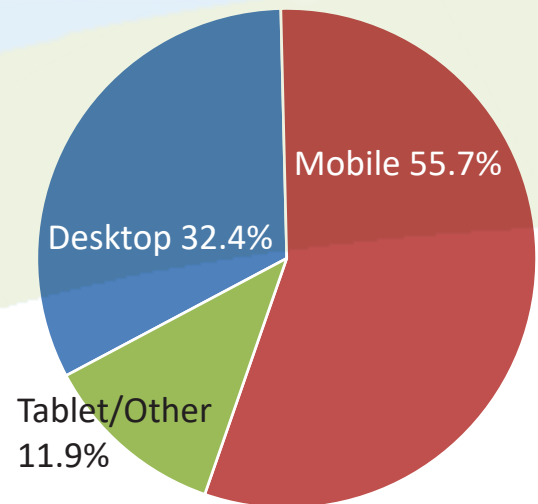
## www.BlowingRock.com FY19-20 vs. FY 18-19

- 18.64% decrease in sessions
- 14.93% decrease in New Users
- 14.16% decrease in Page Views

Web traffic understandably down, due to Covid and the abrupt stop in travel & travel planning during the last quarter of the year.

**487,790 Sessions**  
**374,874 New Users**  
**996,415 Pageviews**  
on BlowingRock.com in FY 19-20

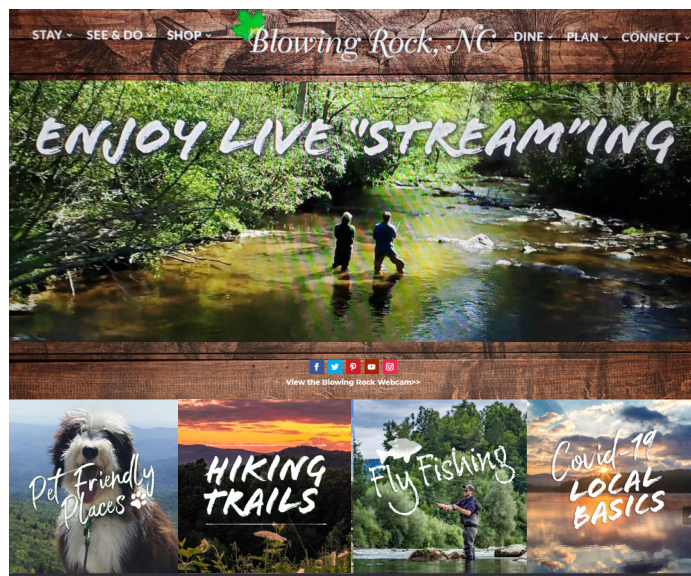
Users access BlowingRock.com via:



Recognizing the importance of website mobility, we strive to ensure that the site is fully responsive on all devices and remains updated to work with ever-changing platforms and applications.

## FY 19-20 Updates to BlowingRock.com

A total redesign of BlowingRock.com was completed in fourth quarter and during the shutdown due to COVID-19. New video and images were added to landing pages along with engaging fonts for a more modern feel.



Business listings were revamped and updated to provide a better end-user experience.



New messaging was incorporated to reflect guidance from the NC DHHS, CDC and local health department.

### COVID-19 UPDATES & RESOURCES

(Updated September 3, 2020, 5:00 pm) In this time of uncertainty, preservation of the safety, health, and wellbeing of our communities is a priority for us all. We are in constant communication with our local and state officials, and are working to provide the most updated local information about the current response to the COVID-19 health crisis. Remember: If you leave home, know your Ws!

If you plan to visit, please see our [Basics on Phased Reopening](#) page. We hope this will answer any questions you might have about enjoying time in Blowing Rock. There is also information about lodging, restaurants, retail, and local response below.

If you leave home, know your Ws!





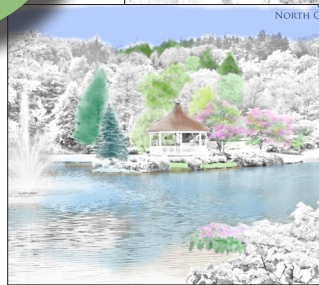
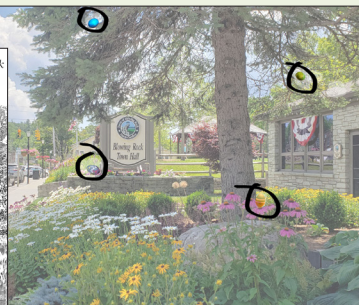
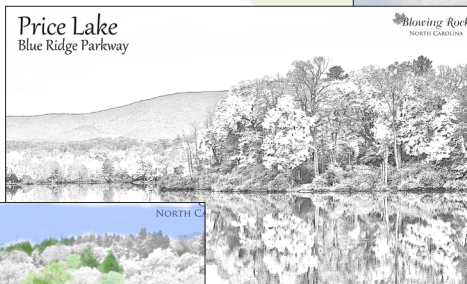
# Website & Social Media



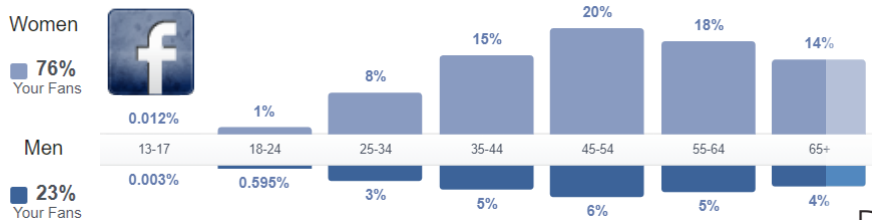
The #ParkwayTown tag was launched in Sept 2019 with a giveaway that focused on the connection between Blowing Rock and the Blue Ridge Parkway. The campaign had the support of the Parkway.

The prizes exemplified the partnership with the Parkway and local businesses.

Local business stories and owners were highlighted in a series of posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with a #LocalBusinessFriday tag. Reactions highlighted personal connections to Blowing Rock, and the series has longevity.

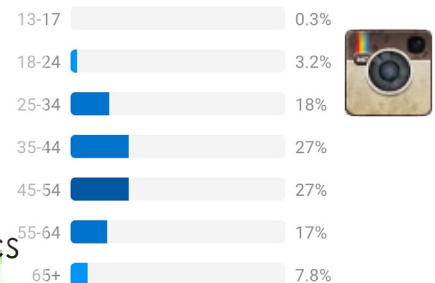


During the height of the COVID-19 travel restrictions in early 2020, we connected with people at home by creating coloring pages, virtual puzzles, and even an Easter egg hunt in a set of photos. The response was very positive.



A note on 2020 Social Media

Demographics



**Social Media Mission:** Engage our current visitors present on the platforms, and give them share-worthy material to attract new visitors.



Facebook is our oldest social media platform. It continues to encourage high rates of engagement from people who love Blowing Rock.

Instagram is a major influencer, particularly in travel. We saw notable growth on this platform in 2019-20.

Blowing Rock's activity on social media platforms supports our traditional marketing campaigns. Across all platforms, our audience is mostly female, and skews closer to middle-and retirement-age. An age graph for Facebook followers is on the left, and shows ages 45-54 as our largest group. Instagram, represented on the right, skews only slightly younger. These two platforms are our most prolific, with a combined 88K followers in 2020.



# Operations & Internal Communications



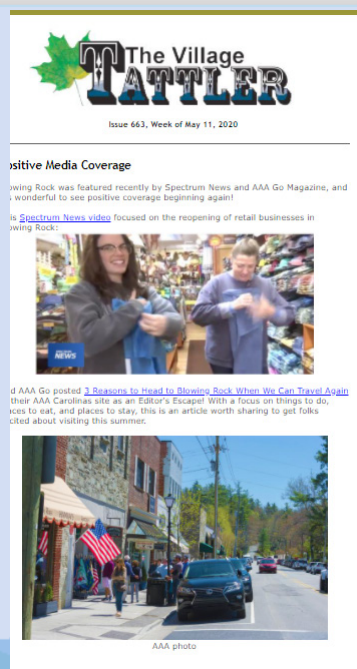
The Blowing Rock Guide is our main printed informational piece.

**80,000 were printed and distributed.**

939 guides were directly requested on the website. 50,000 guides were distributed throughout the region by American Brochure Services & Print Distribution. Remaining distributed through kiosks, hotels and bulk orders from NC Visitor Centers.

Each year, the Blowing Rock TDA creates several additional pieces in-house for display and print, including the Blowing Rock Community Calendar, brochures for visitors, the Restaurant Guide, and graphics for websites and signs.

The Village Tattler, in its 13th year of distribution in 2020, gives **weekly updates** to local employers and employees. It includes local happenings, news, and trends that affect tourism-related businesses in Blowing Rock. The newsletter is sent with an email management program and has an open rate consistently around 40%, higher than the government organization average of 26%.



## Surveys

The TDA conducts surveys at various times throughout the year to gauge traffic and business volume at tourism related businesses.

Lodging: 77% said business was up  
11% said business was flat  
Dining: 68% up or or at record levels  
Retail: 35% said business was up  
35% said business was flat  
25% said business was down

Attractions: 86% up in traffic & revenue  
Open ended questions allow feedback and aspirations:

"Weather has been on our side this year and sales have bounced back after a dismal 2018!!"

"Keep traffic up. More Traffic we can bring in the upcoming year the better."

"We need quality over quantity!!"

Market to people with more disposable income."

"More parking."

"My business has declined since 2017.

We do not have the summer traffic that we used to. The customer base has also changed to an older clientele that does not spend money."



# Community & Media Relations



Blowing Rock, North Carolina

Small Town Travel Series: The Best Things to do in Blowing Rock, NC



15 writers and influencers assisted



Despite interruptions in leisure and business travel due to COVID-19 in third and fourth quarter, Blowing Rock was able to garner several substantial earned media placements throughout the year. Blowing Rock was featured in Southern Living Magazine, Our State Magazine, Forbes Magazine, New York Times, Palm Beach Post, NC Weekend, Blue Ridge Digest, WBTV, WCCB, WSOC, Spectrum News, WCYB, WJHL, WRAL, WFMY, WXII among others.

32 confirmed media placements, representing an estimated "earned media" value of over **\$250,000**

Blowing Rock assisted several writers and "digital influencers" throughout the year until the shutdown stopped travel. Some require help with a visit, and others need images to enhance their articles. The new standard in travel writing is "digital influence," with writers and bloggers posting content on their respective digital channels. The days of staff travel writers is all but gone. More and more writers are freelance, selling articles to publications that are looking for specific content. By maintaining good working relationships with publications, editors, writers, reporters, and regional news outlets, Blowing Rock continues to score positive stories.

## Media Alerts

Maintaining relationships with others in the media keeps Blowing Rock top of mind for potential updates and promotions!



## Local

Guides and Maps continue to be available at the kiosks, Chamber, Town Hall and participating businesses.



The digital kiosks allow for interactive displays and mapping to assist visitors. They are updated regularly.

## Networking

Early in third quarter, it was clear that conferences requiring travel would stop, and virtual meetings began in earnest. Staying current is vital, and the TDA still participated in events and meetings with industry groups like:

- Visit NC 365 Tourism Conference
- Southeast Tourism Society
- Blue Ridge Parkway Association
- NC High Country Host
- NC Travel Industry Association
- Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce



Partnerships are key to being a successful destination in today's competitive environment. The Blowing Rock TDA continues to strengthen long lasting relationships while building new partnerships throughout the region. In 2019-20, participation on boards, hosting FAM tours, funding of special projects, collaboration on sweepstakes and giveaways, and promoting events all played a part in reaching visitors and maintaining partnerships with these local and regional organizations:



Plus: Appalachian State University, Grandfather Mountain, Tweetsie Railroad, Appalachian Ski Mountain, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, The Blowing Rock, and the Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show Foundation.