



BLOWING ROCK

Tourism Development Authority

Fiscal Year-End Report

2020-2021

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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.

2020-2021 In Review

Blowing Rock has seen record-setting traffic and revenue numbers over the past year, despite a pandemic that has devastated the tourism economies of some other destinations. This was largely influenced by our proximity to large urban populations, and a strong traveler interest in rural destinations. Travel restrictions across the globe brought all travel to a screeching halt in the spring of 2020. Once travel bans and restrictions started to lift, pent-up demand motivated a wave of travel. With international travel still off the table, many people stayed close to home. Travelers avoided populous areas and small towns became highly desirable destinations, while those with plenty of outdoor, “socially-distanced” activities were most ideal. Blowing Rock and many other Blue Ridge towns in proximity to major NC cities experienced a sharp increase in demand. In 2020, the Blue Ridge Parkway- providing easy access to nature- was the most visited unit within the National Parks System with over 14 million visits. The same situation was playing out along the coast and similar rural, resort destinations.

The resulting traffic and demand on services in our region starting Q2 2020 was unprecedented. Due to ongoing restrictions, many attractions were closed or seriously limiting capacity. Many events were cancelled. National Parks were shuttered or had closed facilities. The Blue Ridge Parkway motor road itself was open, but facilities like restrooms, welcome centers, and campgrounds were closed. These closures and capacity limits pushed visitors into towns and areas that had never experienced an influx like that. In any normal year, many of these visitors would have been at events and attractions rather than circling our streets looking for a parking place or seat in a restaurant.

While small towns grappled with huge visitation increases, those urban markets that supply our visitors saw the opposite. Urban economies often heavily rely on business meeting and large group travel- conferences, sporting events, concerts, and more- which was also halted in 2020. Even though it's starting to come back slowly, group travel will take several years to fully recover. While impact on group travel doesn't directly affect every destination, this pandemic-driven change has hurt the many small businesses that support the hospitality industry. The North Carolina travel industry has lost more than \$10 billion dollars since the start of the pandemic. It's estimated that nearly 100,000 hospitality workers are no longer employed in the industry across the state. The hospitality and tourism industry in North Carolina employs about 500,000 people and the Charlotte region alone, Blowing Rock's largest feeder market, had nearly 10,000 hospitality workers displaced.

Staffing and supply chain issues continue to cause frustration throughout the industry. In 2020 and into 2021, much of the area workforce was not physically here, but rather studying remotely. ASU students make up a large portion of our local frontline employees. Even now that they have returned, remaining staffing issues have caused businesses to reduce hours of operation. This change has fueled frustration for businesses and customers but is ultimately unavoidable.

During the year, the TDA staff worked with Destination Development Association and Roger Brooks to start the heavy lifting of data gathering, scheduling and interviews for the start of the Sustainable Tourism Management Plan research. Brooks made clear that Blowing Rock does not suffer from over-tourism, the previous year notwithstanding. Rather, the community has an issue with parking and wayfinding, which drive most traffic issues. It will be imperative that the TDA and Town work together with all stakeholders to remedy these fairly simple, but expensive issues. Roger Brooks and his team plan to be back in Blowing Rock in December to give their final presentation and recommendations to the community. Ultimately, the TDA is looking to ensure that Blowing Rock continues to be a place that people want to live, visit and invest.

As the travel environment of 2021-2021 was heavily influenced by restrictions, limited travel options, and pent-up demand, many in the travel industry are projecting a cooling off period over the next year. As the Delta variant triggers a resurgence in travel hesitancy, the industry is already seeing a slowing of demand. It is the opinion of staff that it would be prudent to remain cautious and budget conservatively as there are many unknowns in regard to travel and potential restrictions or supply issues.

Looking ahead and over the next year, the TDA staff will continue to work with the Town, the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce and others to see that the communication stays open and relevant. As Covid and the Delta Variant keep the industry guessing as to what's next, we will work to see that information is available and any impacts are mitigated to the extent possible.

Tracy Brown
Director, Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority

2020-2021 in Review

Noteworthy in FY 20-21

Voted Best Mountain Town by Southern Living readers

Voted Best Main Street in NC by Insider Magazine

Retooled advertising messaging to incorporate “wide open spaces”

Major Attractions Closed due to Covid

Major Events Cancelled due to Covid

Busiest Fall Travel Season on Record

Strongest Ski Season on Record for many Winter Resorts

Favorite Quaint Town of 2020 by Travel Awaits

Blue Ridge Parkway, most visited unit within National Park Service, sees 14,099,485 visitors

Gas distribution interruption leading into summer 2021

Workforce shortage throughout 2021 season

Earned media features in
Southern Living
Palm Beach Post
Insider Magazine
AAA Go Magazine
Travel Awaits Magazine
Our State Magazine
Planet Ware
Blue Ridge Travel Guide
Carolina Traveler
This Is My South
WBTV, WSOC, WCCB,
Spectrum News, WCYB,
WJHL, WFMY, WXII



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

Fiscal Year Board Members:

Dean Bullis, Chairman

Tourism Representative

Term Expires: 2024

Tim Gupton

At-large Representative

Term Expires: 2023

Kevin Walker

Lodging Representative

Term Expires: 2022

Virginia Powell

Council Representative

Term Expires: 2021

Greg Tarbutton

Lodging Representative

Term Expires: 2022

Nicole Norman- Finance Officer
Shane Fox - Town Manager

Budget & Expenditures

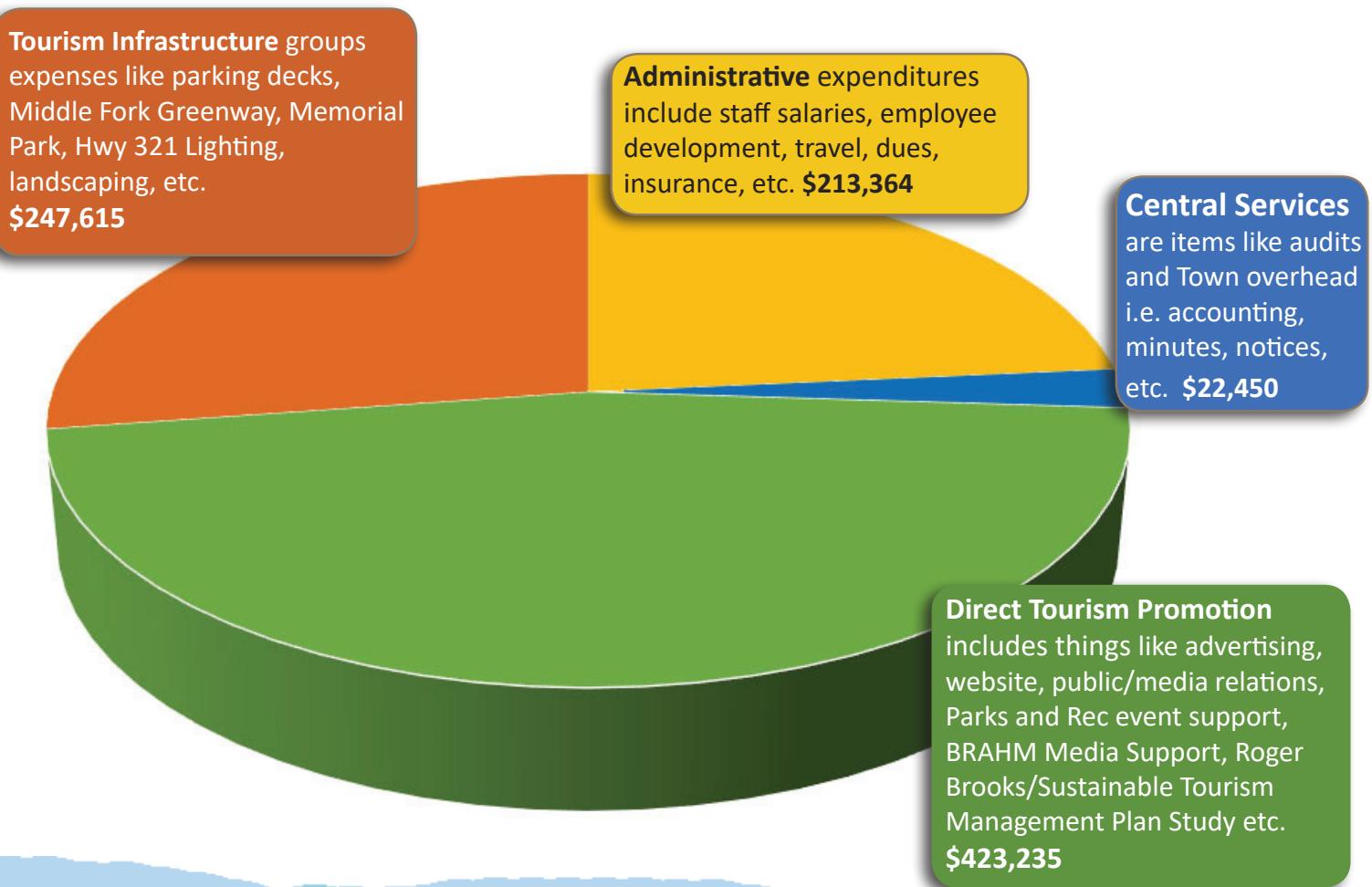
According to TDA Bylaws, the Authority shall use two-thirds of the funds remitted to it by the Town Council to promote travel and tourism in Blowing Rock and shall use the remaining one-third of the funds remitted for tourism-related expenditures.

Expenditures Overview

Based on travel interruptions due to Covid in third quarter and projected declines in revenue, the TDA budgeted a decrease in revenue by 40%. For Blowing Rock and all across the Blue Ridge, the decline in visitation and revenue did not occur but instead, the opposite happened.

In Revenue (unaudited), a total of \$1,509,237 was collected in Occupancy Tax from July 1st 2020 – June 30th 2021. +50.7% from prior year.

In expenses (unaudited), a total of \$906,665 was spent in the following categories:



Revenues & Impact

Gross occupancy taxes in FY 20-21:

\$1,509,237 (+50.7%)

Direct sales at lodging businesses:

\$25,153,950

Visitor Spending in excess of:

\$75,461,850



The TDA is funded by a 6% occupancy tax that is paid by visitors that stay in overnight lodging in Blowing Rock. Several factors played into the sharp 50.7% increase in Occupancy Tax Collections. Demand and adjusted room rates were a factor as well as visitors able to stay longer since many workers and school aged children could work remotely. While it is true that demand will drive up nightly rates thus increasing Occupancy Tax Revenues, properties in Blowing Rock are utilizing Revenue Management Software more than ever before to maximize Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR). New product like Main and Pine (Airbnb) or The Manor Hotel on Main Street have also help to move room rates higher on average throughout the market.

Blowing Rock Occupancy Tax Collections 2004-05 to 2020-21



Marketing & Advertising

11 media campaigns, primarily in digital outlets, including Art in the Park, Winterfest, Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show, and media support for BRAHM.

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.
- MILLENNIALS:** Ages 25-35, men and women are decision makers.

Value experiences over possessions. Outdoors, craft beer, where locals eat, etc.

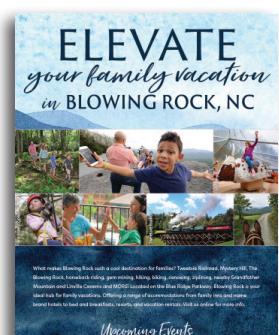
Because women are primary decision makers in four of our audiences, much of our advertising is targeted at women age 35-up. We target to niche demographics (couples, girls getaways) through content marketing on our website and social media. We are also able to further drill down into demographics in some of our advertising so that we can target by income level, interest and habits.



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

Digital marketing offers the flexibility of being able to change messaging quickly or canceling if needed.

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 2020-21 included:



Email Marketing in FY 20-21

Blowing Rock has over 8,545 active contacts in our email database. Contacts sign up on their own on www.BlowingRock.com. Monthly e-newsletters replaced seasonal ones, and have been well-received. 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.

In 2021 the TDA contracted with Todd Bush Photography to update image inventory. The images will be used in print and digital advertising as well as fulfillment for media inquiries.



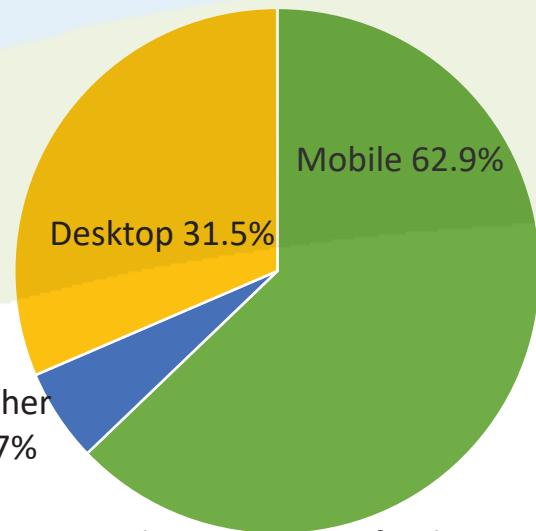
Website & Social Media

www.BlowingRock.com FY 20-21 vs. FY 19-20
10.76% increase in sessions
15.07% increase in New Users
89.94% increase in Page Views

Web traffic saw substantial increases in visitation once travel started to open back up and traffic on the site looked closer to pre-pandemic levels.

540, 264 Sessions
440,664 New Users
1,892,638 Pageviews
on BlowingRock.com in FY 20-21

Users access BlowingRock.com via:

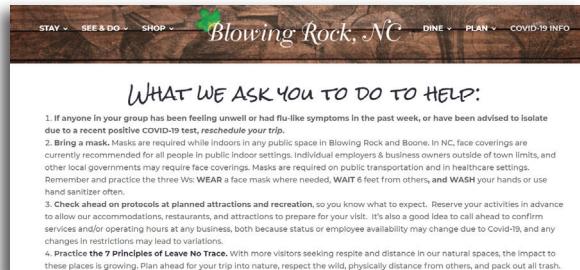


Recognizing the importance of website mobility, we strive to ensure that the site is fully responsive on all devices and remains updated to work with ever-changing platforms and applications.

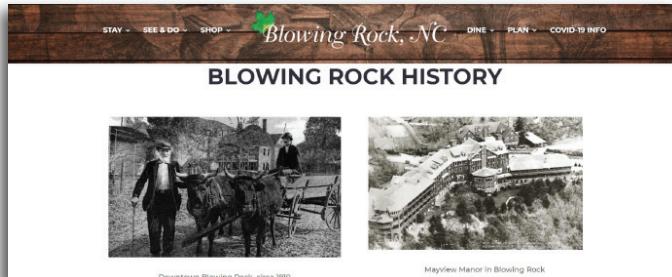
FY 20-21 Updates to BlowingRock.com



The event calendar was revamped to be more appealing and easier to integrate into other site content.



Covid-19 messaging to potential visitors was updated to include their responsibilities as a guest to our town.



New content like rhododendron bloom updates, historic locations and people, and event releases were posted to the site and shared on social media.



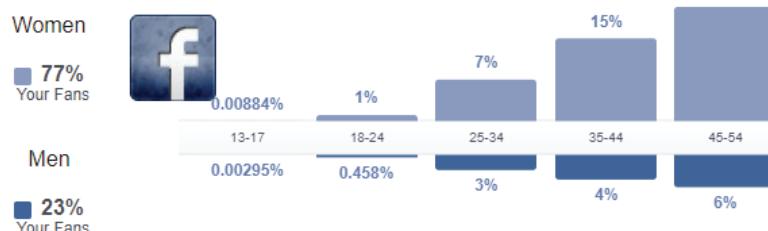
New content and five new articles that supported The Finer Things campaign were added focusing on arts, wine, fine dining and high-end shopping.

Website & Social Media

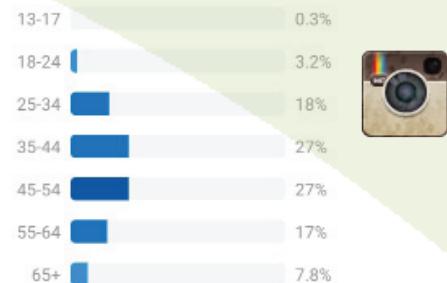
Social Media Mission: Engage our current visitors present on the platforms, and give them share-worthy material to attract new visitors.



Facebook is our oldest social media platform and where we do the most paid advertising. 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 slightly younger. These two platforms are our most prolific, with a combined 96K followers in 2021.



Reach across nearly all platforms continues to rise, though in 2020-21 actual engagement saw a slight decrease. This is likely due to the fact that most people were stuck at home in the early part of 2020. As folks could get away and travel more, our engagement levels returned to previous levels.

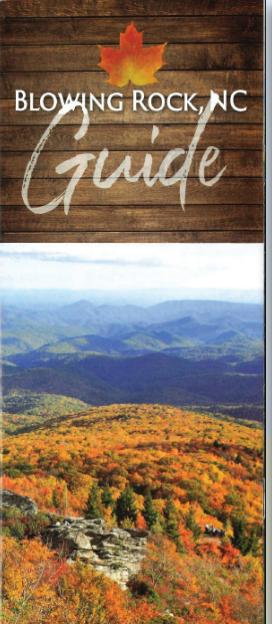


Blowing Rock's audience enjoys scenic images and interesting facts & history about our area. Posts that gain the most engagement usually include these elements. Event information and dates are also regularly shared.

Count on Me NC was a major promotion on social media in 2020. The Blowing Rock TDA also worked to get local businesses involved in the program to increase their visibility.



Operations & Internal Communications



Blowing Rock, NC Guide

Hiking

Surrounded by lush & rugged terrain, Blowing Rock is the perfect place to explore nature.

Green Burrey
Trail head in downtown Blowing Rock, 800' descent, 1.2 mi out-and-back trail with waterfall.

Memorial Park
200+ miles of trails along the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 294.

Julian Price Memorial Park Trails
12+ miles of trails for camping, boating and fishing. Milepost 297 on Blue Ridge Parkway.

Grandfather Mountain State Park
10 miles of trails and Ranger-led programs year-round.

What's Your Nature?

From exciting trips to peaceful relaxation, our natural places offer recreation for every type of adventure. The ridges and valleys, peaks and lakes, forests and waterways provide these experiences are truly irreplaceable. So, it's up to each of us to ensure our actions help preserve these special places. Whatever your preferred adventure, make it your priority to protect NC's outdoor spaces.

NC
SCAN ME

RECREATION -AND- ADVENTURE



INSTAGRAM [@blowingrocknc](#)

Appalachian Ski Mt




PARKS & FITNESS

Blowing Rock Park & Pool
14 Park Ave, Blowing Rock | 828-259-2222
Tennis, basketball, soccer, gazebos, & new playground in Memorial Park. More public spaces at Bryson Park, Annie Cannon, Gandy Park, and Field, plus the outdoor, heated Robbins Pool.

ZAP ENDURANCE
9550 Blackberry Rd, Blowing Rock | 828-259-0777
[beachmountain.com](#) | Beach Mountain, NC. Highest ski area east of the Rockies. 17 trails, lifts, ABC permits, tubing, ice skating, night skiing, group rates, and more.

RAFTING & ADVENTURE GUIDES

RIVER & EARTH ADVENTURES
Boxee 1 | 828-259-0777 | [raftingadventures.com](#)
Whitewater rafting, canoeing, kayaking, canoeing, and more. Offering all adventures with the option of an eco-tour guide-wed.

HAWKINS RIVER RAFTING & ZIPLINES
Seven Devils 1-866-943-6341 | [hawkinsrafting.com](#)
Biggest on the East Coast, 10 miles, 400+1000' long, two moving carpet lifts. Ziplines - 10 cable lines, 10 platforms, 100' high, with 2 zipslines. Head north, Can for reservations.

SUGAR MOUNTAIN SKI RESORT
Bonner Elm | 828-963-2060 | [sugarmountain.com](#)
ski, snowboard, tube, ice skate and snow shoe. 15 trails, 10 lifts, 100' vertical rise, 100' vertical rise, 20 trails, 7 lifts, ski and snowboarding school. Equipment rentals, group rates & packages.



FLY FISHING

The High Country's beautiful streams, lakes, and rivers provide wildlife sanctuaries and important habitat for fish. The best time of year to fish for trout here in the High Country are the spring, fall, and winter months, when the water temperature is between 40° and 60°. Our waters offer excellent opportunities for catching brown, brook, and rainbow trout. Many local waters are stocked or maintained by the NC Wildlife management signs are easy to locate alongside. Be aware that most places you fish in the area require a fishing license. Purchase a license at Village Hardware at 312 Green Street in Blowing Rock, or online at [ncwildlife.org](#).

FAVORITE FISHING SPOTS INCLUDE:



Price Lake
Milepost 297 Blue Ridge Parkway, Blowing Rock

Trot Lake at Cone Memorial Park
5580 Shultz Road, Blowing Rock

Bass Lake at Cone Memorial Park
1 Bass Lake Drive, Blowing Rock

Middle Fork of New River
Access at Middle Fork Greenway:
129 Mystery Hill Rd, Blowing Rock

Watoga River
Access at Valley Crucis Community Park:
2892 Broadstone Rd, Banner Elk

More at [BlowingRock.com/fishing](#)

The Blowing Rock Guide is our main printed information piece.

75,000 were printed and distributed.

1,040 were directly requested through our website, and 50,000 were distributed throughout the region through American Distribution Services and Print Distribution. The remainder were distributed through kiosks, hotels and NC Welcome Centers.

The Village Tattler, in its 14th year of distribution in 2021, 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%.



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.

Community & Media Relations



9 writers and influencers assisted

Travel to Blowing Rock in the latter half of 2020 surged as travelers sought out smaller towns and outdoor activities. Media features continued, and Blowing Rock garnered several substantial earned media placements throughout the year. Blowing Rock was featured in Southern Living, Palm Beach Post, Insider Magazine, AAA Go Magazine, Travel Awaits, Our State Magazine, Planet Ware, Blue Ridge Travel Guide, Carolina Traveler, This Is My South, WBTV, WSOC, Spectrum News, and others.

24 confirmed media placements, representing an estimated "earned media" value of over **\$140,000**

Writers and "digital influencers" were slower to return than visitors, but Blowing Rock still hosted several in 2020 and 2021. 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. 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. The TDA worked with media during the year to see that information presented was correct and that media inquiries were directed to the right people.

Media

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.



Networking

Although business and industry travel was cancelled across the board, TDA staff was able to attend several conferences and meetings virtually, including:

- VisitNC Tourism Conference
- Southeast Tourism Conference
- NC Travel Industry Association
- Blue Ridge Parkway Association
- NC High Country Host
- Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce.



Partnerships across the region and with like minded destinations or organizations are key to staying relevant and competitive. Even though industry travel and conferences were all but cancelled throughout the year, the TDA was able to maintain long lasting relationships by continuing to attend virtual conferences and board meetings via the internet. The Blowing Rock TDA values its 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.

2020-21 Partners

For more details on the information provided, please contact Tracy Brown or Amanda Lugenbell in the TDA office: 828-295-4636.