

**ACCOMMODATIONS TAX ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES**  
**November 15, 2023**

**1. Call to Order & Welcoming Remarks:**

Chair Christy Parker called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. Other committee members present were Sam Britt, Allyne Mitchell, Nate Pringle and Scott Thrasher. Absent committee member was Ellen Shumaker. Staff in attendance was as follows: Natalie Majorkiewicz, Director of Finance.

**2. Roll Call and Confirmation of Quorum:**

Five committee members present, one absent, quorum met.

**3. Adoption of Agenda:**

Mitchell moved to adopt the agenda. Britt seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

**4. Election of Officer:**

Pringle nominated Sam Britt to the position of Vice-Chair with Mitchell seconding the motion. The nomination carried unanimously.

**5. Adoption Minutes of August 15, 2023 Meeting and September 19, 2023 Special Meeting:**

Mitchell moved to adopt the minutes from both meetings. Thrasher seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

**6. Financial Report:** *Natalie Majorkiewicz, Director of Finance*

The total funds available for distributions are **\$151,450**. First quarter revenue was \$235,638 from State ATAX collections, which is down approximately 7.8% over the same quarter last year. We have five (5) applicants this quarter totaling \$182,002 in requests. Town staff is working on compiling information related to grant awards that have lapsed and what amounts will go back into fund balance.

**7. Old Business:**

**a. Legal Opinion: ATAC's Responsibilities Regarding Local Accommodations Tax Usage:**

The outcome of the legal opinion is that for Fiscal Year 2025, ATAC will receive a draft copy of what the Town's proposed budget is as it relates to local accommodations tax allocations. ATAC will be able to review and make comment on those recommendations.

Britt wanted to clarify the use of local ATAX funds for event security provided by Bluffton Police Department (BPD) Officers. If applicants receive ATAX funding for their events, any costs associated with BPD security will be paid from Local ATAX funds. However, if other security is hired for those events, the funding will come from State ATAX monies. Applicants will still be required to show the cost in their budgets so Town staff and ATAC are aware and can allocate properly.

**8. New Business:**

**a. Adoption of 2024 Application Due Dates and Meeting Schedule:**

Mitchell moved to adopt the schedule as proposed. Pringle seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

**b. Review of Updated Staff Report Format and Applicant Scoring Sheet:**

The table of ATAX funding “buckets” was updated to include all eligible categories and will stay static on all Staff Reports going forward with appropriate amounts input according to each application’s submitted budget. The information section under the “blue chart” on the staff reports correlates to the scoring sheet to help determine appropriate scores for each applicant.

The updated format of the scoring sheet was discussed. Like the staff reports, these sheets will be static with certain scoring categories excluded/blacked out based on the type of project/event funds are being requested for. Forty (40) points will still be the maximum possible total per applicant. All members of ATAC shall use these sheets for scoring each applicant going forward. Scoring sheets will be gathered and tallied before the committee makes a motion and votes on a recommendation for Town Council.

**c. Discussion Regarding Updates to Application Policies & Procedures:**

The committee will have an ongoing discussion related to tweaking the application, review and scoring processes and then the committee will vote on any changes. Due to the ongoing nature, this item will be moved to after the applicant presentations and Q&A sessions during future meetings.

Town Council has requested to see the application scores and those will be included on the staff reports included as part of the Town Council meetings that follow the quarterly ATAC meetings. Parker would like to discuss updating stipulations of applications to include prior awards being spent before additional requests are made. Britt suggested that perhaps ongoing events like the Farmer’s Market be required to be substantially complete to qualify for additional funds but one-time events must be completed. Britt also voiced concern about this stipulation as it relates to capital projects. For example, if an entity has received funds for phase one of a project and additional money needs to be secured to move on to phase two, but phase one is not yet complete, is the entity eligible to apply? The committee will continue to explore this discussion.

**d. Grant Applicants’ Presentations and Q&A:**

**a. The New Bluffton Worship: Christmas Eve Under the Stars - \$23,110**

Monica Barricks, Assistant Minister at New Bluffton Worship, gave a brief presentation about the Christmas Under the Stars event, which has taken place in Bluffton for the past twelve (12) years. Started at Buckwalter Place and moved to Oyster Factory Park when the event outgrew the original location; this event is done in partnership with First Zion Missionary Church. Of the 1,500-2,000 annual attendees, it is estimated that 30% are out-of-town guests. A hospitality station serves to convey the “Bluffton State of Mind” to all who attend. TV interviews as well as mass mailings and advertisements outside of the local are used to attract tourists. Four banners have been purchased to date; hung at Sheridan Park and along Wharf Street where First Zion Missionary Church is located. Due to weather conditions in 2022, attendance was down but estimated at around 800. Thrasher asked for clarification on the volunteer shirts/apparel listed in the budget as there appear to be two lines for the same expense; Barricks confirmed this was a duplicate. Advertisements will appear in The Bluffton Sun, The Jasper Sun, CB2 online and The Island Packet.

Applicant Average Score: 22/40 or 56%.

Possible Recommended Award of \$12,942 if percentage applied to request.

**Britt motioned to award \$15,280. Mitchell seconded. During discussion, it was disclosed that BPD security will be paid from Local ATAX and “swag” items were removed from the request. The motion carried unanimously.**

b. Gullah Traveling Theater, Inc.: Gullah Kinfolk Come to Bluffton - \$18,791

Denise Mason-Bullitt presented on behalf of the Gullah Traveling Theater (GTTI). Anita Singleton-Prather, who is the performer and founder of Gullah Traveling Theater, Inc., was also in attendance. Singleton-Prather’s shows have historically taken place in Beaufort to sold out audiences and the goal is to expand into the Bluffton community due to the historical aspects here, the shopping/dining and close proximity to the two airports tourists use to travel here. Groups have travelled from Atlanta and North Carolina to see performances and GTTI helps coordinate travel packages for these groups. A performance schedule in Bluffton for 2024 has not yet been determined as GTTI wants to coordinate with Town staff on the best dates to attract visitors during “flat times” in tourism rates. Other options may include Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, February for Black History Month, March for Women’s History Month and/or Juneteenth. Advertising is planned on TV, radio, billboards and social media. Web site enhancements spotlighting Bluffton and things to do while here would also be part of the marketing plan. Due to performance dates and locations not yet being set, Parker suggested GTTI reapply next quarter (ending December 31) with performance dates, venues, and a budget tailored to the Bluffton shows included in the application, which ATAC can then consider at their next meeting.

**Britt recommended that this organization reapply next quarter with a more fully developed plan. Mitchell seconded. The motion carried unanimously.**

c. May River Theatre, Inc.: Advertising & Royalty Funding for the 2024 Season - \$39,801

Beth Schlieger, board president of May River Theatre (MRT), attended on behalf of the organization. The 2024 calendar year will be MRT’s 21<sup>st</sup> season. Eight of the 12 musical performances in 2023 sold out, which is an increase from the prior year which had two sold out shows. Attendees from outside the area came from Atlanta, Charlotte, Jacksonville and Charleston. MRT recently received over 25 recognitions across 16 categories from Broadway World South Carolina, which is recognized nationally.

Applicant Average Score: 30/40 or 75%.

Possible Recommended Award of \$29,652 if percentage applied to request.

**Pringle motioned to grant \$39,801. Mitchell seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.**

d. Farmers Market of Bluffton: 2024 Expenses - \$55,300

Kim Viljac, Executive Director of the Farmer’s Market of Bluffton, was present. The 2024 advertising budget was increased for next year to include a billboard and kiosks at the Savannah Airport in the baggage claim area. Other advertising from prior years will be continued. Palmetto Breeze has been a partner in bringing tourists to the Market; specifically from the Motor Home Park (across from National) where tourists with RV’s are staying. The HHI-Bluffton Chamber assisted with tourism surveys in 2023 and statistics are still averaging around 75% tourists. Facility support includes tables, chairs, tents, sawhorses for signage; Parker requested that those costs be broken down in the future.

Applicant Average Score: 33/40 or 83%.

Possible Recommended Award of \$45,623 if percentage applied to request.

**Thrasher motioned to grant \$55,300. Mitchell seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.**

- e. HHI-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce: 2024 Official Vacation Planner - \$45,000

Representatives of the Chamber were unable to attend the meeting and requested that their application be considered at ATAC's next quarterly meeting.

**Britt motioned to table this application until the next quarter's meeting, per the organization's request. Mitchell seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.**

**9. Comments, Announcements and Other Business:**

None

**10. Adjournment:**

Mitchell motioned to adjourn the meeting. Britt seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 8:04 p.m.