



CONTACT: Kathi M. Petersen
Director of Public Information
& Community Engagement
Explore Asheville
Convention & Visitors Bureau
C: 828.712.1286
kpetersen@ExploreAsheville.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Act signed into law, allowing tourism-related businesses impacted by COVID-19 to receive grants of up to \$50,000

Mountain BizWorks set to administer \$5 million emergency grant fund; application period opens May 15, with awards announced in mid-June

(Asheville, N.C. – May 5, 2020): The \$5 million Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund was enabled Monday for local tourism-related small businesses and nonprofit organizations impacted by the COVID-19 public health crisis, thanks to legislation introduced by Sen. Chuck Edwards with support of the Buncombe County delegation, and signed into law on Monday by N.C. Governor Roy Cooper.

Senate Bill 704 allows the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority to establish the fund for emergency grants of up to \$50,000, available for businesses that provide a direct visitor experience, including restaurants, retail establishments, studios and galleries, attractions, tours and activities, entertainment and event venues, and breweries, wineries, cideries and distilleries, among others.

Such entities can use the grants to restart their business as restrictions are lifted and recovery begins, to help with rent, payroll, inventory, and other expenses associated with reopening. Priority will be given to small businesses that are local and independently owned. Lodging properties are not eligible.

"Asheville was just recognized as one of the 30 Most Creative Small Cities in America, and before this pandemic, there were close to 9,000 creative jobs in our area," said Katie Cornell, executive director of the Asheville Area Arts Council. "The Buncombe County TDA's new jobs recovery fund will help us preserve our cultural organizations and keep these creative jobs in place. I am very grateful for their continued support at this difficult time."

Mountain BizWorks Set to Administer Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund

The Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund will be administered by Mountain BizWorks, a local U.S. Treasury-certified nonprofit community development financial institution (CDFI) with a 30-year history of providing tailored small business financial services in the Asheville and region, and experience managing several emergency response funds.

The online application portal opens May 15 and runs through May 31. Awards will be announced in mid-June. Interested applicants will be able to sign up at mountainbizworks.org to learn more about the program, including opportunities for training and technical assistance in applying for grants.

Grants will go through a standard review process based on grant criteria established in the legislation and scored by Mountain BizWorks. There will be a financial component as well as an impact component to the application process and scoring. Grant applications will be confidentially reviewed by a team of Mountain BizWorks lenders, staff, and business coaches, and there will be an internal investment committee, similar to Mountain BizWorks' normal funding approval process, that will review and approve all grant awards, per the program goals and guidelines.

Development of the Buncombe County Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund

The recovery fund is established with occupancy tax revenue collected for the Tourism Product Development Fund, maintaining the purpose of the TPDF while responding to the unique needs of the coronavirus crisis. The Tourism Product Development Fund comes from 25 percent of the occupancy tax paid by people who visit and stay overnight in commercial lodging facilities in Asheville and Buncombe County.

Broadening the use of the fund has been the subject of discussion by the Asheville Buncombe Hotel Association since last summer, said Executive Director Jim Muth.

“Months before the COVID-19 outbreak began and in response to community needs, our organization representing all the local hotels had been developing proposed changes to the law that governs the use of the occupancy tax collected from visitors by our members. Then the pandemic hit, and we built on that consensus to respond to the unique and unprecedented impacts of this crisis,” Muth said.

“Many small businesses across Asheville and Buncombe County are directly impacted by tourism and generate billions in revenue. They generate overnight stays by providing people with reasons to visit our community,” said Muth. “This pool of funding provides much-needed financial support for the small businesses that are the lifeblood of our local economy.”

In his announcement about the legislation, Sen. Edwards credited the work of Muth, along with Buncombe County Commissioner and BCTDA board member Joe Belcher, BCTDA Chair Gary Froeba, and Explore Asheville President & CEO Stephanie Brown, for developing the idea of the recovery fund.

“My job in the Senate is to listen to concerns and ideas of those in my district, then help them develop solutions to solve problems,” said Edwards. “The folks back at home had the foresight, and they worked out the mechanics of how to make the program successful.”

“On behalf of the 150 members and 6,000 employees of the Asheville Independent Restaurant Association (AIR), I want to express our appreciation for everyone who worked together to bring about this fund – in particular, the hotel association,” said Kevin Barnes, chair of the organization and owner of Ultimate Ice Cream.

“Like us, the hoteliers have had to furlough thousands of employees and shut down their businesses. In the face of this crisis, they came out swinging to create a way that will allow TPDF funds to be used to help bring back Asheville’s many and unique small businesses, in a way that is consistent with TPDF’s constitutional purpose,” Barnes said. “We will never forget this incredible and generous gesture.”

More about the Tourism Product Development Fund

Funding for Tourism Product Development grants that were awarded prior to the pandemic will continue to held in an escrow account dedicated to that project. The Tourism Jobs Recovery Act appropriates \$5 million in funds that have been collected but not awarded. Funds collected moving forward will be available to fund future TPDF grants.

###