



Contact:
Emily Neeley | Director of Marketing and PR
emily@exploreboone.com
(828) 266-1345

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Explore Boone's Annual Partners Meeting Highlights Tourism's Resilience and Growth

BOONE, NC (March 26, 2025) – Explore Boone hosted its 2024 Discover Watauga Tourism Summit at Appalachian State's Grandview Ballroom, bringing together local tourism and hospitality professionals to reflect on the past year's challenges and successes. The event, rescheduled from last November due to Hurricane Helene's impact, emphasized the resilience of the Boone area's tourism industry and highlighted the strategic marketing efforts and infrastructure developments that continue to shape the region's visitor experience.

The meeting began with remarks from Explore Boone's Executive Director, Wright Tilley, who acknowledged the community's immediate response to the natural disaster that disrupted the peak fall season. **"The people who make up our tourism industry are the reason visitors keep returning year after year,"** said Tilley. **"Our guides, outfitters, hoteliers, restaurateurs, and attraction operators make this destination truly special, and their resilience in the face of hardship is what keeps Boone thriving."**

Following the storm, Explore Boone paused all digital advertising efforts to focus on disaster recovery. The team also personally engaged in community support efforts, from volunteering to clean up homes and riverbanks to checking in on lodging partners and area attractions.

Tilley also discussed [key tourism infrastructure projects](#) supported by occupancy tax revenue, including the Middle Fork Greenway, Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park, and Howard Knob Park, as well as downtown improvements like Howard Street upgrades, new public restrooms, and enhancements to Daniel Boone Park.

Explore Boone's Director of Marketing & PR, Emily Neeley, provided insights into the organization's marketing strategy, which focuses on maintaining a year-round presence to attract visitors. The team works closely with its advertising agency, Miles Partnership, and public relations firm, Lou Hammond Group, to generate awareness and drive visitation.

The event's keynote speaker, Marlise Taylor, Director of Tourism Research at [Visit North Carolina](#), provided valuable insights into the state's tourism landscape. Taylor shared an overview of Visit NC's role in supporting local partners, highlighting resources available to enhance destination marketing efforts. She also presented the latest visitation data for both

Watauga County and North Carolina, offering a comprehensive look at travel trends and economic impact. Additionally, Taylor detailed Visit NC's strategic marketing initiatives aimed at accelerating tourism recovery in the wake of Hurricane Helene, emphasizing the collaborative efforts that helped rebuild traveler confidence and drive visitation back to the High Country.

The event concluded with a special awards presentation recognizing outstanding contributions to Boone's tourism industry. This year's awards held particular significance, honoring individuals and businesses that played a vital role in hurricane recovery efforts. The awards and recognitions announced at this year's event include:

- The **2024 Social Media Award** was presented to [Hatchet Coffee Roasters](#) for their engaging and innovative use of social media to connect with visitors and locals alike, enhancing the Boone Area's reputation as a top-tier travel destination.
- The **2024 Sustainability Award** was given to [Springhouse Farm](#) in recognition of its commitment to sustainable agricultural practices and environmental stewardship, helping to preserve the natural beauty of Watauga County while supporting local food systems.
- The **2024 Hospitality Professional of the Year Award** was presented to **Cody Morgan** of [Sky Valley Zip Tours](#). Nominated by peers in the industry, Morgan was recognized for his outstanding service, professionalism, and dedication to providing visitors with unforgettable outdoor experiences.
- The **2024 Michelle Ligon Community Service Award** was awarded to **Valentine Reilly and Ashley Galleher** of [Zionville Ramp Company](#)/Stateline Resource Center for their exemplary contributions to the community, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to making Watauga County a welcoming and vibrant place for residents and visitors alike.
- The **2024 Tourism Partner of the Year Award** honored [Mast General Store](#) for its ongoing dedication to enhancing the visitor experience through exceptional service, deep community involvement, and the preservation of local history and culture.

With a strong foundation of collaboration, innovation, and perseverance, Boone's tourism industry is well-positioned for continued success in 2025 and beyond.

Note: [Link to Imagery](#), Courtesy Explore Boone

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About Explore Boone

Explore Boone is the Watauga County District U Tourism Development Authority (WCTDA), a local tourism development authority authorized by the state (North Carolina) and local government (Watauga County) to promote travel, tourism, and corporate travel, sponsor tourist-related events, and activities, and finance tourism-related capital projects in District U. District U is defined as the unincorporated areas of Watauga County, North Carolina. Boone is the seat of Watauga County, which also encompasses the towns of Blowing Rock and Seven Devils, and the communities of Deep Gap, Foscoe, Meat Camp, Sugar Grove, Valle Crucis, and Zionville, as well as portions of the Banner Elk and Beech Mountain communities. As a true business center and popular dining and shopping destination, Boone is known as "the Heart of

the High Country.” The town is named for the explorer, Daniel Boone, who lived nearby during the mid-1700s before blazing the famous trail into Kentucky. For more information, visit www.exploreboone.com.