NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAIN TOWNS OF CASHIERS, CHEROKEE, DILLSBORO AND SYLVA

To: Jackson County Board of Commissioners Chairman Brian McMahan
Jackson County Commissioners
Jackson County Manager Don Adams

From: Nick Breedlove, TDA Executive Director
Caleb Sullivan, TDA Sales & Marketing Manager

Date: September 1, 2020

Subject: COVID-19 Updates & State of the Tourism Industry in Jackson County

Chairman, Commissioners, and County Manager,

Over the past six months, our hospitality industry experienced significant and profound losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those losses are still being felt today and will be for quite some time.

The TDA staff in early March shifted duties from marketing and promotion and worked to help mitigate losses and support our hospitality industry and our residents.

While we have been and remain diligently working on the recovery of our hospitality sector, we are writing to share our efforts since March and the current state of the Tourism Industry in Jackson County. We greatly appreciate the time to share these written updates and will provide slides on the day of the Sept. 8 work session with additional, separate information we are compiling in a visual format.

- During March, April and May, we experienced losses of $95,855.72 in Occupancy Tax compared to the prior year's same period of collections. Last year, those three months amounted to 18.64% of our annual collections. This year, those three months amounted to 11.56% of our annual collections. Modeling based on last year's U.S. Travel Association annual spending, we lost at a minimum of **$14,579,580.40** in direct visitor spending in Jackson County on lodging, food service, recreation, transportation, and retail.

- The JCTDA in early March ceased all advertising and public relations campaigns and immediately began budget exercises to drastically cut spending from its budget. The resulting move saved over $150,000 in planned expenditures (primarily advertising) through the remainder of the year.

- With not knowing how the pandemic would affect travel, and without any nationwide historical trends other than 9/11 and the 2008 recession, we slashed budget projections entirely, projecting $0 in revenue for the remainder of the fiscal year. In actuality we collected for overnight stays in March $34,404.69, April $15,854.63, and May $76,044.67. For June stays, we collected $187,832.18. June's figures were our largest June in JCTDA history, the second-highest month of collections in our 96-month collection history.

  Below are prior tax collections in July for June overnight stays:

FY 17-18	FY 18-19	FY 19-20	FY 20-21
$119,152.80	$135,881.68	$122,421.68	$187,832.18

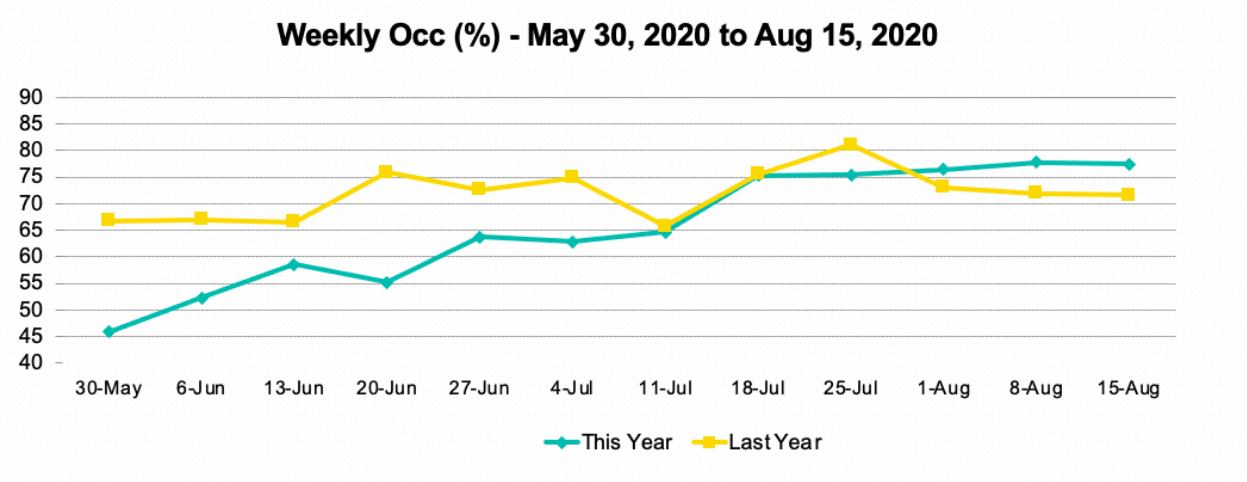
  - In analyzing June stays, we noticed a significant increase in bookings for Vacation Rentals – both Airbnb and VRBO.
    - The Airbnb figure for June bookings was more than double last year. We only began receiving VRBO receipts last October, so we don't have a comparable period. With $36,487.44 received from Airbnb at a 4-percent tax rate, that represents $912,186 in Airbnb bookings that occurred in June.

  - Our budget process, completed in May and passed in June, budgeted conservatively for this fiscal year. Our TDA budget for FY 20-21 is $872,100 compared to last year's budget of $1,203,579, a decrease of 27.54-percent.

    - With the surge of June stays, which we did not account for, we are able to place those funds into the TDA fund balance. Those funds will not be utilized in compliance with the TDA's Fund Balance Reserve Policy, passed in Nov. 2019, which requires us to keep a fund balance in an amount equivalent to 30-percent of the current fiscal year's operating costs. The fund balance reserves will help us maintain a sufficient cash flow should we see any disruptions in the current fiscal year due to COVID-19 or other causes.

- Other destinations are not seeing travel return as quickly as our County. All national research from Destination Analysts, Longwoods, and other firms, show travelers are primarily seeking to escape crowded cities and visit rural destinations and National Parks, which positions Jackson County perfectly for capturing that pent-up demand. With this opportunity also came a challenge to ensure the safety of our residents and visitors throughout the process.

Jackson County Hotel Occupancy
Source: Smith Travel Research



- Between early March and July, we sent out 27 emails to our partners throughout Jackson County – restaurants, retail, employers, key industry stakeholders, accommodations, and more. Those 27 messages kept all of our partners informed on regulations, best practices, national trends, and ways to keep themselves, our community, and visitors safe.

  Topics included:
  - The Stay at Home Orders and Supplemental Orders
  - Best practices for reopening accommodations
  - What to Do if an Employee Tests Positive
  - Cleaning Vacation Rentals
  - Employment Opportunities
  - Financial Assistance
  - All In Jackson Fund
  - 'Count on Me NC' Restaurant Pledge
  - WCU Community Updates

- A total of 27 communications/emails were opened 34,785 times, and people clicked on resources, links, and guides contained in the emails a total of 7,693 times. Note: these communications were sent to our local community members and partners and not to our visitor database.

- We held a Lodging Industry Forum with best practices for cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting. While many chain hotels receive advice from their corporate office, specific guidelines for vacation rentals were not yet available. We had over 90 accommodations in attendance at this session.

- We focused heavily on what we could do to support our businesses at a time they needed it the most. We had many individual requests for signage, financial aid, business counseling, PPE, and the list goes on. We worked daily since March to connect people with resources. The TDA staff, Chamber leaders Stephanie Edwards and Julie Spiro, Small Business Centers, Economic Development, along with our Board of Directors, worked daily and continually, in order to mitigate losses and provide support for our businesses.

- The JCTDA created www.LoveJacksonNC.com and corresponding social media campaigns to encourage patronage of local businesses in March and April when they needed it the most. Following the creation of the website, we also created a 'Virtual Tip Jar' where community members could electronically tip out of work and displaced restaurant workers. The page was viewed over 5,000 times before we forwarded the website to our 'What's Open' page on our main website.

  Social Media Campaign Graphic:

  High-profile signage we created for businesses throughout Jackson County:

- We created three community support ads for the Smoky Mountain News, The Sylva Herald, and Crossroads Chronicle.

Farther Apart, but feeling as close as ever

Nature's beauty is all around us, and there is reason for optimism as the mountain spring is happening. No one and nothing will take that away. It's something we all can share no matter the distance between us.

CASHIERS AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
COMMUNITY ■ COMMERCE ■ CONNECTED

JACKSON COUNTY PLAY ON NC
NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAIN TOWNS OF CASHIERS, CHEROKEE, DILLSBORO AND SYLVA

Jackson COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE NORTH CAROLINA

- TDA Director Breedlove served on the North Carolina Tourism Industry Recovery Working Group alongside fifteen state leaders, including Sen. Rick Gunn, Sen. Chuck Edwards, and Sen. Ralph Hise. Through our collective efforts and our Senators introducing the bill, our state legislature appropriated a total of $15 million for Tourism Industry Recovery in two separate appropriations. As part of that $15 million, TDA's throughout the state are eligible for funding to help them advertise through the state tourism office Co-op program.

While we worked hard to support our local hospitality industry, we took a very deliberate and phased approach to safely and responsibly bring back visitation and advertising. Bringing visitors back is like threading a needle; you have to do it slowly and carefully. We started in early spring with the message of together in spirit - dream now and plan later. Safety has been paramount in everything we have done.

Our Advertising Program began this fiscal year with:

- A message about **wide-open spaces** and personal space - a strength that Jackson County can own.

- A focus on activities that can be done with small groups to **"re-bond"** after weeks or months in physical isolation.

- A paid media program that can be **turned on, off, and UP quickly** without penalty.

- A continued focus on **testing, analyzing, and improving**.

- A **flexible** social media campaign that focuses on positive outdoor messaging that can be paused at any time.

- In March, we had our Visitor Guide ready to print prior to when COVID-19 hit. We waited a few weeks, used language sensitive to large events and crowds, and only printed a fraction of the guides we'd normally print for the entire year.

  Now that we have a better grasp of how to safely promote travel, our partners, lodging, restaurants, etc. next month, we'll reprint 25,000 more copies that have all the latest research, imagery, changes to our destination (as a result of COVID-19) to invite visitors to come safely and responsibly.

- JCTDA Director Nick Breedlove authored a $208,000 Federal EDA CARES Act Grant application and worked with Finance Officer Darlene Fox to submit the application. We are awaiting a decision expected mid-September.

- JCTDA Director Breedlove worked with Trout Unlimited and Best Western Hotel to author and submit a Blue Ridge Parkway / Deer Park water Sustainability grant for $2,500, and we are waiting to hear back.

- JCTDA Staff since March has participated in 147 total Zoom and GotoWebinars focused on recovery for our partners. This is in addition to our Executive and Full Board TDA meetings.

- Both TDA Director and Sales & Marketing Manager Caleb Sullivan earned their CVENT Event Management Technology & Hospitality Solutions Supplier Certification during the pandemic. This course is usually $395 but was offered for free.

    - The TDA created two new print products often requested by visitors - a Motorcycle Guide for Jackson County and a guide to Accessible Attractions in Jackson County. As a result of the Accessibility Guide, we were asked to lead a session at Destinations International Annual Conference, which we did in July, and had several hundred attendees learn how we got started in creating the guide.

- We also worked on several new pages on our website, which showcase important items:

    1. A guide to Sustainability showcasing how we as a TDA, as well as a County, are sustainable in our efforts. We became a partner of Leave No Trace this year and we use the below graphic on our website to remind people to keep our mountains Clean & Green. We communicate regularly with Commissioner Gayle Woody on Sustainability. Also as part of our dedication to the environment, we became a partner organization of http://recreateresponsibly.org/

    2. A Safety guide to visiting the NC Mountains, which covers:
        a. COVID-19 Safe Travel
        b. Recreate Responsibly

c. Waterfall Safety
d. Paddling/River Safety
e. Hiking Safety
f. Camping Safety
g. Wildlife Safety
h. Permits
i. Voluntourism
j. Leave No Trace Seven Principles
k. Best Time to Visit
l. Pet Friendly Trails

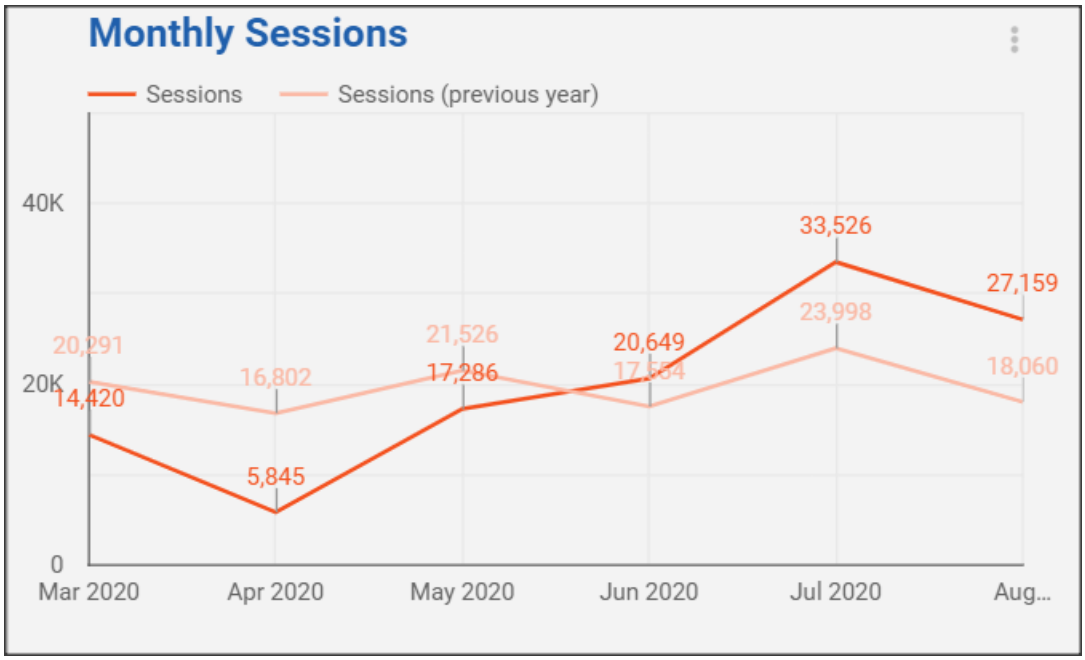
3. A virtual tour of Jackson County

4. A new itinerary called 'Avoid the Crowds' letting people know how they can explore the mountains and travel safely and social distance. This feature launched recently has already received over 3,000 views.

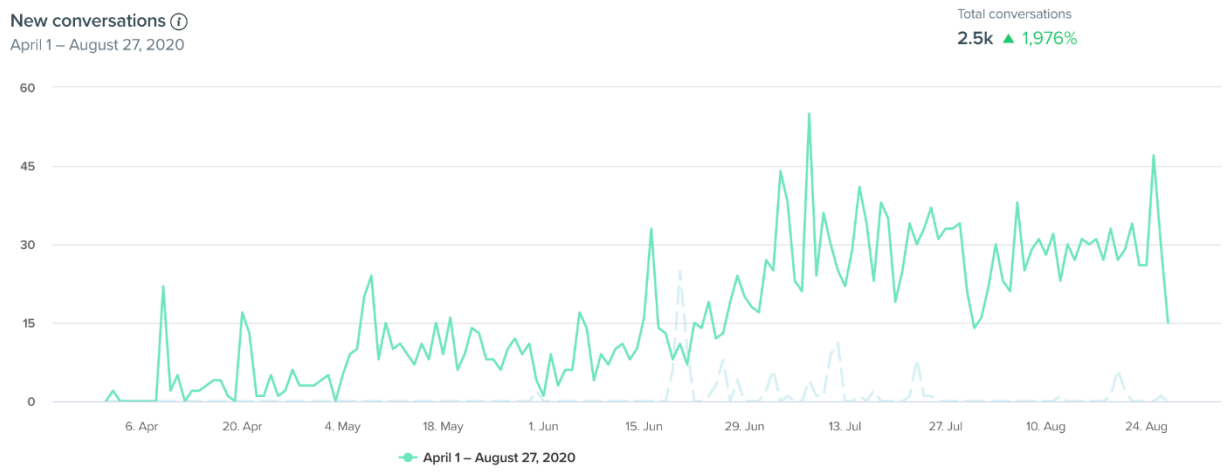
5. A new itinerary called 'Family Field Trip' highlighting how families whose children are utilizing remote learning can travel to our mountains and experience biology, science, arts, music, and more on their trip here. 1,354 views since its launch a week ago.

Website Traffic to DiscoverJacksonNC.com:

- While traffic was down in 2019 from March to May, it has been significantly up year over year in the past three months. See graphic below



- We implemented two new Artificial Intelligence tools during the COVID-19 pandemic to help answer Visitor Questions. The one implemented on our Facebook answered almost 500 visitor questions in just four months. The one implemented on our website was shown to 76,097 visitors, and 2,440 started a conversation with it.



Social Media:

- In Social Media, we've had impressive results with implementing live videos to inspire visitors during the lockdown. Sales and Marketing Manager Caleb Sullivan, who does our social media, filmed a 'Waterrock Knob Sunrise,' 'Hike up Whiteside Mountain,' and 'Sunrise from Cashiers,' all of which were broadcast live. The three videos collectively received 46,781 Views and 4,895 Engagements (how many times our content was clicked or interacted with).

- Year to date, we've received significant free promotion on Google (separate from our paid placements) as part of the Google Destination Marketing Organization partnership we established with Google last year. We had 401,881 Impressions (how many times our content was seen) and over 35,278 Engagements (how many times our content was clicked or interacted with) with our Google posts.

- We surpassed 200,000 followers on Facebook and 18,000 on Instagram this year (9.1% year over year growth)

  Year to date Social Media Channel statistics:
  - 19,761,046 Impressions (how many times our content was seen); 38.2% Increase YOY
  - 1,230,416 Engagements (how many times our content was clicked or interacted with); 70% Increase YOY
  - 247,019 Facebook Link Clicks; 40.9% Increase YOY

Impressions	Engagements	Post Link Clicks
19,761,046 ↗38.2%	**1,230,416** ↗70%	**247,019** ↗40.9%

Top Performing Posts

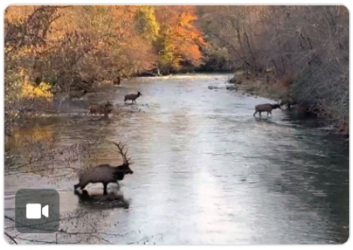
North Carolina Mountain ...
Wed 8/19/2020 10:26 am PDT

It's important we all do our part to keep each other safe. 😊 ❤️ That is why we've become proud partners of

Total Engagements	**29,326**
Reactions	20,031
Comments	509
Shares	2,836
Post Link Clicks	217
Other Post Clicks	5,733

North Carolina Mountain ...
Wed 12/4/2019 8:42 am PST

Elk sighting! This herd was seen crossing a river on the Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail®. Sam Smith captured this



Total Engagements	**19,414**
Reactions	7,802
Comments	758
Shares	1,667
Post Link Clicks	6
Other Post Clicks	9,181

North Carolina Mountain ...
Sun 5/24/2020 3:38 pm PDT

Nothing compares to a misty Blue Ridge sunrise. 💙 📷 **@j_kreiss**

Total Engagements	**17,524**
Reactions	10,982
Comments	1,102
Shares	1,123
Post Link Clicks	-
Other Post Clicks	4,317

- We also created a social media campaign to encourage people to 'Hang in There' during the pandemic and partnered with ENO Hammocks to giveaway one free hammock a week from May to September 25 on our Instagram page. We've had thousands of entries, and people are excited about the promotion.

Blogs we've created and published to our website this year include:

Favorite Memories in the North Carolina Mountains – Posted 4/3/20

100 Years of Memories on the WNC Fly Fishing Trail® – Posted 4/24/20

Best Days Best Spent – Posted 5/8/20

The Great American Road Trip – Posted 5/22/20

Take Back 2020 – Posted 6/12/20

Recreation and Relaxation; the New R&R – Posted 6/26/20

This is Why You Should Visit the Hammock Adventure Capital of the U.S.A – Posted 7/3/20

48 Hours of Fun in the NC Mountains – Posted 7/24/20

Top 10 Must-See Waterfalls in the NC Mountains – Posted 7/31/20

Beat the Heat in the NC Mountains – Posted 8/14/20

Perfect Patios for Al-Fresco Dining – Posted 8/17/20

Experience Jackson County's Golden Hour with These Tip 8 Sunrise/Sunset Spots – Posted 8/28/20

Public Relations Highlights:

Ocala Style March 2020

Southern Living: Southern Tails: Fun Fact American Museum of the Cat – (Print) March 2020

Style Blueprint: Take a Virtual Tour of Jackson County, NC – March 24, 2020

Our State: Big Memories in a Tiny Shack – April 27, 2020

AAA Carolinas: Jackson County, NC: Social-Distance Approved Getaway – May 22, 2020

AAA Carolinas: All Access Travel in Jackson County, NC – June 19, 2020

Readers Digest: 15 Crowd-Free Summer Vacations You Can Book Last Minute – June 30, 2020

Blue Ridge Outdoors: On the Road Again – (Print) July 2020

Our State: Falls For Fall – (Print) July 2020

Buzzfeed: 19 of the Best Places to Camp in the U.S. If You're Craving Adventure – July 20, 2020

Forbes Online: Six Underrated Southern Destinations To Include On A Nature Lover's Road Trip – August 7, 2020

Black Southern Belle: Five Family-Friendly NC Mountain Towns to Visit This Summer – July 28, 2020

Other updates:

- Continuous updates to our 'Welcome Back' Page on our website, so visitors know what is open and what type of operations are in place for restaurants.

Colima Mexican Restaurant | Mon-Fri 11 am – 10 pm, Sat 11:30 am – 10 pm, Sun 11:30 am – 9
Dine-In ✅ · Carryout ✅ · Curbside ❌ · Delivery ❌

Creekside Oyster House | 11 am – 3 pm, 5 – 10 pm
Dine-In ✅ · Carryout ❌ · Curbside ❌ · Delivery ❌

El Patron Mexican Restaurant | Sun-Thurs 11 am.-9:30 pm, Fri-Sat 11 am-10 pm
Dine-In ✅ · Carryout ✅ · Curbside ❌ · Delivery ❌

- JCTDA Director Nick Breedlove now serves on the Main Street Sylva Association promotions committee, and alongside Caleb Sullivan helped to update the outdated map and refresh it with up-to-date business information.

1. Jackson County Public Library
310 Keener Street

2. Bicentennial Park
Located off Keener Street

3. Jackson County Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center
773 West Main Street

4. The Nichols House
83 Landis Street

5. Southern & Sunkissed
663 West Main Street

6. Lazy Hiker Brewing / Mad Batter Food & Films
617 West Main Street

7. SassyFrass
581 West Main Street

8. City Lights Bookstore
3 East Jackson Street

9. City Lights Cafe
3 East Jackson Street, Ste. 2

10. In Your Ear Music Emporium
573 West Main Street

11. The Paper Mill
610 West Main Street

12. The Sylva Herald
539 West Main Street

13. The Coffee Shop
385 West Main Street

14. Innovation Brewing
414 West Main Street

15. Pie Times Pizza
428 West Main Street

16. Jackson's General Store
456 W Main St

17. The Wine Bar and Cellar
470 W Main St

18. Natalie Nicole Boutique + Salon
474 W Main St

19. End of Main
482 West Main Street

20. Jones Country Store & Museum
494 West Main Street

21. NOON
509 Mill Street

22. Balsam Falls Brewing
506 West Main Street

23. Treasures Unknown
561 Mill Street

24. Livingston's Photo
526 West Main Street

25. Harry Alter Books - Used, Scholarly, and Rare
528 West Main Street

26. Tuckaseegee Fly Shop
530 West Main Street

27. White Moon Coffee Shop
545 Mill Street

28. Friends of the Library Used Book Store
536 West Main Street

29. Arsenal Artifacts
540 West Main Street

30. Baxley's Chocolates
546 West Main Street

31. Motion Makers Bicycles
36 Allen Street

32. Mountain Laurel Gift Shop
552 West Main Street

33. Nichols House Accessories
551 Mill Street

34. Black Balsam Outdoors
570 West Main Street

35. The Farmhouse Mercantile & Coffee Bar
582 West Main Street

36. B&B Gifts & Interiors
594 West Main Street

37. Melissa's Backstreet Takeout
605 Mill Street

38. Hollifield Jewelers
600 West Main Street

39. Eric's Fresh Fish Market
609 Mill Street

40. Gallery One
604 West Main Street

41. Guadalupe Cafe
606 West Main Street

42. The Cut Cocktail Lounge
610 West Main Street

43. Cotton Leigh Bakery
628 West Main Street

44. Dixie & Co.
630 Mill Street

45. Mountain Flora
634 W Main St, Sylva

46. Underground Sylva
635 Mill Street

47. The Table - A Made-From-Scratch Eatery
646 W Main St

48. Gordmans
670 West Main Street

49. Lulu's On Main
678 West Main Street

50. Fusions Spa and Wellness
714 West Main Street

51. Blue Ridge Inn
940 West Main Street

52. Nantahala Brewing
5 Grindstaff Cove Road

53. Farmers Market & Public Parking
76 Railroad Avenue

54. Bridge Park
110 Railroad Avenue

55. Poteet Park & Public Restrooms
29 Central Street

56. Sylva Pool
Municipal Drive

57. Mark Watson Recreation & Dog Park, Freedom Park & Public Restrooms

58. Bryson Park & Public Restrooms
Chipper Curve Road

MAIN STREET
Sylva Association
http://www.mainstreetsylva.org/