

Public Comment for May 5 Meeting

- **Hunter Ogletree, Co-Executive Director, WNC Workers' Center:** On behalf of WNC Workers Center, an organization that serves over 200 workers in the hospitality industry, we would like to address the actions of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority.

We hear that some folks are encouraged by the bill that just passed and authorizes five million dollars from the TDPF funds to be used to support tourism businesses once they are ready to reopen in Buncombe County. While this is a step in the right direction, we can't help but notice that our constituents, people who have dedicated their lives to making visitors' experience in Western North Carolina warm, welcoming, and memorable, are left out of this relief effort. Our members have been thrust into a humanitarian crisis due to the sudden economic loss and cannot pay bills and feed their families on the promise that there may be jobs once the County is able to reopen. These workers who have worked to shape the culture and industry of this region require emergency support now and are not included in this TDA fund.

Additionally, we are in communication and solidarity with the points made by Faith 4 Justice and hope that you will be taking these points into account as you make decisions moving forward.

While the steps made through the legislature are headed in the right direction, they do not provide support to the workers who live here now and are facing loss of employment. We hope you will take these concerns into consideration as you continue to make decisions and influence legislation and emergency relief funding opportunities.

- **Ashley Cooper, Downtown Asheville, NC:** I'm writing to inquire about how you will be using your leadership and relationships to influence the next steps with the five million dollars from the Buncombe County TDA/TDPF Fund. It is hopeful to see that the General Assembly recognizes the need for our County to access additional funds to address this economic crisis and yet I hope you see in their actions an opportunity to make further changes in how our occupancy tax dollars are used.

While this is a step in the right direction, our community deserves more. These funds are being taken from the 25% that is already allocated to community benefit and county infrastructure projects. We are going to be losing sales tax as a government and while previously those funds could've also been accessed by nonprofits – now they are only available to businesses and only once those businesses reopen. We are currently facing humanitarian aspects of this crisis. People need emergency funds now. It seems absurd that funds are sitting unused in the Buncombe County TDA advertising budget and the reserve fund while people are suffering in their homes.

We've heard the claims that legally nothing can be done with that money, and yet we also just witnessed that legal changes can be made. And I believe some of you Commissioners were able to weigh in on the new bill. So we need you now. Is there anything that you can do to make more emergency relief funds available for the tourism industry workers, and looking forward, do you recognize that necessity of the opportunity of tax dollars with advertising taking 75% only 25% going to community needs that this must be changed. Additionally, what specifically are you doing to attend to the needs of businesses owned by people of color? There are so few, we cannot afford to lose any of them.

And the workers – whether it is immigrant workers or black workers who do not feel safe navigating the social service requirements that were necessary to access the One Buncombe Fund or whether it is businesses owned or run by people of color, we must be doing everything possible to address the racial inequities in our community, making decisions that are mindful of historical racism that have been baked into our County’s practices. And insuring that workers are being cared for during this time of crisis. I believe that we are capable of governing and serving our community in ways that match our values.

Let’s keep working together to bring these ideals to life now – we can do things differently during this crisis and we need your leadership to influence these next steps.

- **Keaton Hill, M Div, Faith 4 Justice Asheville, Steering Committee, Carolina Jews for Justice West, Steering Committee, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Elder:** On behalf of Faith 4 Justice, Carolina Jews for Justice, and in collaboration with local residents at grassroots organizations, I write regarding next steps for the BCTDA. \$5 million allocated for re-opening businesses is a step in the right direction – thank you. And we believe we can do more.

As people who live out our moral convictions through the pursuit of justice, we understand that we are called to dismantle White Supremacy in ourselves, our religious institutions and our governing systems. We also know that moral conviction surpasses all political parties and human divisions. In love and truth, we call on you, our elected leaders, to lead with compassion and courage. Please recognize and respond to this points:

Hoteliers have profited greatly off of workers, but there are zero dollars being allocated for workers. No commitment is included to an equitable distribution of those funds. How will businesses owned by People of Color be centered in receiving these funds? Where is emergency relief funds being made available to Black and Brown workers?

TDPF funds were already purposed for community projects and community benefit. Now, when our local governments have less revenue to spend on those projects because of decreases in sales tax, TDA money that was going to support community projects is repurposed to the business sector.

At a time when tourism advertising is unnecessary, the tax funds allocated to advertising sits idle while tourism industry workers are in crisis. Some of you wrote the bill that leaves out the most impacted in our community and left the 75/25 split in place. We need your moral courage to right this injustice.

According to this bill, funds will be disbursed until the state re-opens. Our community is struggling now. While the steps made through the legislature last week are responding to needs, they simply were not enough to support the people that live here.

We look forward to your leadership, and working with you as we move forward to build a more just society in these trying times.

- **Kim Roney, Piano Teacher:** Today I'm writing in solidarity with Faith For Justice, Carolina Jews For Justice, the WNC Workers Center, and concerned citizens.

While the recently passed legislation to make emergency relief funds available for businesses from our TDA funds is a step in the right direction, there are still concerns that require your leadership:

- These funds are pulling needed infrastructure funding from the 25% TPDF funds allocated for community projects and benefit. As we anticipate projected sales taxes decrease, we needed those funds to be increased, not decreased. Now the funds will go to pro-profit businesses again instead of non-profit grants and County infrastructure.
- The 75% allocated for marketing is not being accessed. This further demonstrates why the 75/25 split for our occupancy taxes must change.
- Many businesses and employees in our community are struggling now, with zero funds made available to workers through this action, and not until the tourism business returns.
- BCTDA has unused funds in their advertising and reserve budget. We need creative, inspirational leaders to ensure marketing dollars are kept in our local economy!
- Accountability for funds distributed needs to carefully ensure use of an equity lens so distribution doesn't further perpetuate inequity in our community.

Thank you for your consideration.