



City of Kirkland

Tourism Development Committee (TDC) Meeting Minutes

Date: November 5, 2020 9 a.m. – 10 a.m.

“Virtual” Meeting via Zoom Conference

Present: Chairperson Toby Nixon, Lori Goldfarb, Jac Cooper, Jeff Lockhart, Danielle Dorland and Phil Megenhardt

Staff: Jim Lopez and Chris Hendrickson

Welcome and call to order: Chairperson Nixon called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m.

Approval of Minutes: The meeting minutes from October 1, 2020 were approved pending the correction of a typographical error. Motion for approval made by Lori Goldfarb and seconded by Phil Megenhardt. Passed unanimously.

Staff report: Update committee vacancy outreach

The Heathman general manager Mike Hill has been approached about serving on the TDC but has not responded. Outreach was conducted by City staff in person, and via email. Brief discussion ensued about the possibility of reaching out to a different member of Heathman staff, Danielle Dorland suggested checking with the director of sales, since the general manager may not have the capacity to engage with the TDC. Jac said that he would reach out to Heathman Sr. Events Manager Annette Seats, who was with the Woodmark previously.

Discussion on whether to hold December meeting

The TDC reached consensus it would hold its regular meeting on Thursday, December 3, 2020.

Future of Tourism in Kirkland

Chairperson Nixon gave a brief overview of meeting materials included in the packet, meant to help inform the discussion about the future of Kirkland’s tourism program. Documents provided included the Peter Kirk Park enhancement study, three reports relevant to expanding opportunities for tourism and commerce at the Marina through pier improvements and other new features, the Kirkland asset list, a brainstorming email authored by Nixon about prioritizing Kirkland parks and promoting parks as tourism assets, and earlier research conducted on types of tourism events, both in the state of Washington and across the nation. These items were distributed to spur the ongoing discussion of the future of tourism in Kirkland and how the TDC might consider revitalizing the current LTAC grant funding model by changing the way lodging tax dollars are distributed in Kirkland.

Another idea that’s been placed on the table for further consideration is an outdoor art walk stretching from Marina Park to Peter Kirk Park.

Danielle expressed the opinion that finding a way to increase sporting events would be the most beneficial to the City in terms of drawing guests, increasing overnight stays, and fulfilling the tourism mission of adding “heads in beds.” Sports tournaments, particularly youth sports, are perfectly suited to drawing overnight guests, as youth must travel with their parents. These events, often multiday, have the potential to draw people from Canada, eastern Washington, Oregon and beyond. She was intrigued with the Peter Kirk Park enhancement plans, stating that the aquatic center would have a huge draw. Expanding basketball court and athletic field capacity would help as well.

Jac is a longtime advocate for increasing sports tourism as youth tournaments invite families from all over the region, thusly ensuring the TDC mission of increasing heads in beds. It would be interesting to find out about indoor court capacity by reaching out to the Lake Washington School District (LWSD) to see what possibilities exist there.

Chairperson Nixon reminded the group that there is an established existing partnership between the City and the school district in terms of athletic fields and their management. At certain LWSD athletic fields, the City manages public access (during non-school hours) to the fields, plus maintenance, while at other fields, the City manages public access, and the school district completes the maintenance. Further, the City has spearheaded significant improvements at school district fields (most recently Finn Hill Middle School) to help ensure that the fields are modern, in good condition and playable.

Chairperson Nixon said that he did not think there was a similar arrangement in terms of school gyms. It would be good to talk to parks staff and find out what the City could do to deepen the partnership with the school district and possibly broaden the City’s ability to use school facilities, like gyms, for potential tournaments and events.

TDC achieved consensus that it would be proactive and efficient to arrange a meeting with parks staff to launch a formal discussion on how to better leverage our parks as tourism assets and potential locations for destination type tournaments and events. City staff promised to reach out to Director Lynn Zwaagstra for the initial iteration of that conversation, slated for December 3, pending Lynn’s availability.

Discussion centered around the Peter Kirk Park enhancement plans, which include a vast underground parking structure, outdoor concert venue, modern, state of the art aquatics center and more. Jeff Lockhart initiated the discussion as he had the opportunity to provide feedback to the City on the plans when the idea was first presented to the City Council in 2017. In alignment with goals to build capacity by encouraging partnerships, it was a natural assumption that the Kirkland Performance Center might oversee operations of the outdoor concert venue. Lockhart offered keen perspective into the idea of building an outdoor venue on par with Marymoor Park or the St. Michelle Winery.

Firstly, an outdoor venue of that magnitude and scale would have dramatic impacts on noise in Kirkland’s mixed-use downtown region, which includes many square feet of residential properties. Not only are there homes in close proximity to downtown, but there are various multifamily complexes in and near downtown with more being added. The sound system necessary to support major, touring national acts would be noncompliant with the City’s existing noise ordinances and would potentially receive massive scrutiny and criticism from nearby residents.

Another significant limitation to the plans is that there is no way to restrict access to the venue, which is key in terms of selling tickets. Performances at that level rely on restricted access to sell optimal, “club level” tickets. With a wide-open venue like that, restricting access becomes less feasible making tickets sales unlikely. What’s the incentive for buying a ticket if you can just walk into the park and plunk down on the grass and catch an awesome show?

If we're talking about free, evening-in-the-park-type outdoor concerts that are more community based, similar to what takes place now in Marina Park, then yes, an additional outdoor venue would be great. But for any significant, national-level touring artist, the sound is amplified at a much more intense rate and access restriction is vital to inspire people to pay for tickets.

To create a major outdoor concert venue that is sustainable, the barriers of noise and no exclusivity of access, must be addressed and overcome. This is a tall order.

Discussion pivoted back to the City's tourism program in general. Phil reiterated his thoughts that Kirkland's lodging tax grant funding model really isn't broken. It works and has been successful for years. Its value is really in the grassroots organizations that come together to make the Kirkland community truly shine. Those efforts are amplified by collaboration, like pairing an event like Kirkland Uncorked with hotel packages and dinner specials at Kirkland's array of fine dining establishments, to fully capitalize on the wine tourism genre.

Phil added that we need to take a closer look at how we're attracting people and figure out ways to maximize our key assets. Like with the Fremont Troll, which is Fremont's number one tourist attraction. Our Marina is our Fremont Troll, so let's (continue to) use that to our advantage.

How can we better build off what we have? How do we reach out to sports event planners and let them know that we're open for business?

Chairperson Nixon stated that we've already taken strides to improve the tourism funding model and make it more mission oriented. This year, they made a strategic decision to not put money in community events so the TDC could put more money in events that more definitively promise adding heads in beds. Perhaps we don't need to fundamentally change the program, but maybe we change criteria to make heads in beds a much more powerful and weightier category on the tourism funding application. That, paired with more robust level of outreach to try and get more events that bring heads in beds, could be a great formula.

Overall, a path forward could entail finessing the program rather than completely revamping it.

Action plan for moving forward:

Look at the list of City facilities and consider what types of sports or competitions could be held in those facilities. Further, what minor improvements to City (or school district) facilities could help pave the way for a big tournament? Councilmember Nixon stated that it's always possible that the City could be persuaded to invest in some of those facilities, even ones that we don't own, as we've done in the past.

Collaborate with parks to delve beyond traditional events. What other types of competitions could we host in Kirkland? Things like mountain biking, iron man, gaming... Collaboration with parks is key and can help us identify those things.

Phil suggested contemplating a standard formula for calculating heads in beds on our tourism funding application and after-event reporting forms, to help ensure uniformity. Currently, each agency adopts their own mechanism for projecting/computing overnight stays resulting from their events.

Further analyze the potential for indoor sports events that could take place in the shoulder season. Danielle specifically mentioned CrossFit, which can actually be indoor or outdoor. Some type of multiday CrossFit qualifier in Kirkland would be epic for drawing people to Kirkland and increasing overnight stays. CrossFit is hugely popular with broad appeal and an almost cult-like following.

Look at less conventional tournaments like Magic the Gathering, chess, gymnastics and other, Comicon type events. Chairperson Nixon referenced PAX, (Penny Arcade Expo) a huge festival held in Bellevue that embraces all things gaming. PAX uses meeting rooms at various Bellevue hotels transforming them into huge video gaming meccas. Kirkland is a great venue for a tech event, particularly with its close proximity to Microsoft, Google, Amazon, DigiPen and more.

The KPC is uniquely positioned for an event like that, as the projection and sound have recently been upgraded to accommodate its entirely digital series, KPC at Home.

Find out if Parks and Community Services Director Lynn Zwaagstra can attend the December meeting to help inform our discussion about parks and using them as assets.

Capacity as a committee

Assistant City Manager Jim Lopez will contemplate staff capacity for attracting an event of this type (gaming) that could be bolstered with possible sponsorships from nearby tech firms in addition to LTAC funding. Whether we decide to pursue sports, gaming or both, we need to figure out what constitutes a successful event. Can the KPC accommodate a successful gaming event? Do we use KTUB as well? What other indoor venues can we add? The Heathman is walkable from KPC and so a gaming convention could theoretically utilize both venues.

Next Meeting:

Thursday, December 3, 2020

Meeting adjourned at: 10:05 a.m.

Meeting minutes prepared by Chris Hendrickson