

TOURISM TAXES FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Asheville DSA - Asheville Food and Beverage United - Asheville For All - Buncombe Decides

Based on recent events, the organizations represented in the Tourism Taxes for Affordable Housing campaign coalition **call for the Buncombe County Commission to abandon the collection of the county's occupancy tax**. Only by boycotting the occupancy tax do we believe that the county can bring the state legislature to the table to renegotiate the terms by which the hotel tax funds are spent. Working people drive our tourism economy, and we believe they should have a say in how its proceeds are distributed.

How we got here:

Last spring, dozens of volunteers launched a petition campaign, engaging in thousands of conversations across Asheville. This effort, which asked the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) to send Legacy Invest from Tourism (LIFT) funds to affordable housing projects and for service worker representation on the LIFT committee, resulted in over 2,000 signatures of support.

This campaign was grassroots democracy at its purest, as volunteers met people on sidewalks, at farmers markets, and on front porches. The petition complemented efforts to meet with elected officials, non-profit leaders, community stakeholders, and TDA members, to listen, learn, and discuss solutions.

In late May, residents mobilized to the TDA's monthly meeting, filling the meeting room and overflow rooms, making their case to board members to support a more vibrant, sustainable, and accessible economy.

What was the TDA's response to these efforts?

- **Annoyance.** After waiting two hours on a Wednesday morning to speak, our group was asked twice (privately and publicly) to consolidate our many public speakers into one speaker and comment. While publicly telling the workers who showed up to speak that "their voices matter," the board's actions indicated otherwise. The group of workers refused to combine their comments and all speakers were heard.
- **Turn a deaf ear.** Despite the LIFT fund's ability to support community needs and infrastructure, the county's pending request for LIFT funds to be used for housing, and thousands of signatures asking the board to support workers and families, the TDA has signaled they do not plan to join the city and county in addressing this need. The Chair of the TDA board has recently said, "Housing is not what the TDA is here to do."
- **Hypocrisy.** The TDA denied our endorsed candidate for the LIFT committee, stating he may bring too much bias to the role. This is despite the TDA's board members'

TOURISM TAXES FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Asheville DSA - Asheville Food and Beverage United - Asheville For All - Buncombe Decides

overwhelming bias to pursue corporate profits, regardless of the cost to working people. **Zero candidates** for the LIFT committee, which is slated to distribute \$7-10 million this year, and millions more in future years, were interviewed before the committee was named.

What's next?

LIFT funds will be distributed in the spring of 2024. Buncombe County is requesting LIFT funds to support its Ferry Road affordable housing development. We do not expect the TDA to grant this request.

The county commissioners will vote next year, as it does each year, on whether to keep collecting the occupancy tax and at what rate, if any. We advocate to stop collecting this tax and end the TDA's current unelected, unaccountable, and anti-democratic structure. The TDA have repeatedly shown they are unresponsive to the community and unwilling to fight for, and support, the workers that earn tourism industry revenues.

Our elected leaders must step up and do what they have been hired to do; to serve the interests of everyone in the county, not just tourism industry executives. **Eliminating the tax now is, in our view, the only way to force a more democratic, equitable, and just use of this tax in the future.**

We encourage those who support this call to contact county commissioners and urge them to take this step.