



CONTACT: Marla Tambellini, Interim Executive Director
Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau
(828) 258-6138
mtambellini@exploreasheville.com

NEW COMMUNITY TOURISM PROJECTS RECEIVE \$2 MILLION

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (March 7, 2012) — Continued improvements to a major regional event venue, trailblazing expansions at a world-class outdoor attraction and experience-enhancing upgrades to a beloved community arts venue all received funding today from the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) and its Tourism Product Development Fund (TPDF). The three community projects will receive a total of \$2 million in funding for their capacity to increase new and incremental room nights in Buncombe County.

“TPDF dollars are a unique economic incentive tool that we are fortunate to have in the community. The sole purpose of the fund is to spur growth in the tourism industry, one of the largest economic drivers for our region. These projects help our destination continue to compete on a national level, giving consumers new reasons to visit and compelling reasons to come back,” said BCTDA Chair Ron Morin, vice president and managing director of The Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa.

As guided in the enabling legislation, TPDF funding assists with the construction of tourism projects that will attract overnight visitors and, thus, drive additional dollars into the local economy. The 2012 cycle brings the award total to fifteen projects that have received more than \$14 million from the fund.

Based on a recommendation from the TPDF committee, the BCTDA voted to award the grants during its most recent meeting. Recipients of the 2012 funding cycle include:

- **Montford Park Players** was awarded a grant of \$125,000 for the construction of a new welcome and guest services facility to better meet the needs of the thousands of guests in attendance each season. Funds will allow for the completion of a second floor stage as well as the expansion and improvement of seating and wheelchair accessibility at Hazel Robinson Amphitheatre. Phase I improvements will increase capacity and provide a greater visitor experience. Montford Park Players, North Carolina’s longest-running outdoor Shakespeare Company, plans to leverage the TPDF award for additional funding for this phase and the planned second phase of construction.

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- **Navitat Canopy Adventures** will receive a \$500,000 grant to build a first-of-its-kind wilderness zip line tour constructed of three new mountaintop zip lines. The dual zip lines, in lengths between 2,000 and 3,500 feet and at heights of over 400 feet, will send guests through a lush wilderness in Moody Cove in northern Buncombe County. The new tour is expected to be more inclusive as the weight range and participation requirements are broader than the existing canopy tour. Throughout the zip tour, participants will have the opportunity to hike to observation decks for landscape views and learn about the geological history of the Blue Ridge Mountains from interpretive guides. The new tour and welcome center will accommodate an additional 375 to 425 guests per day.
- The **City of Asheville** was awarded \$1,375,000 to further enhance the newly renovated ExploreAsheville.com Arena including upper bowl seat refurbishment and the development of a club-level amenity space. Other renovations to the U.S. Cellular Center include lower lobby improvements that will allow for more events to take place simultaneously, a new ticket office to reduce congestion, better access points within the center, and exterior improvements. The U.S. Cellular Center attracted more than 280,000 patrons last year and, depending on the event, over 50 percent of those are out-of-market guests. These front and back-of-house improvements will allow the U.S. Cellular Center to attract additional quality productions and provide guests with a positive experience.

In the late 90s, tourism partners and business leaders began discussions to increase the self-imposed room tax in order to provide a dedicated funding source for tourism projects that would help Buncombe County remain viable as a vacation destination. With passage of the legislation in 2001, the room tax increased from three to four percent with the additional cent allocated to capital projects. Visitors also pay state sales tax on their lodging.

“The TPDF committee is charged with assessing a project’s ability to increase room nights and anticipated return on investment. We take that role seriously,” said TPDF Committee Chair John Ellis, managing director of Diana Wortham Theatre. “Each project is reviewed by the committee and, along with the room night criteria, is judged by its overall potential for economic impact, job growth and community value. Looking back on the projects funded since 2001, many of these attractions and venues may not have come to fruition as quickly, if at all, were it not for the available TPDF funds.”

“More than 3 million overnight leisure visitors travel to the Asheville area annually generating more than \$2 billion in economic impact to the region,” said BCTDA Interim Executive Director Marla Tambellini. “The Asheville area is fortunate to have a strong destination brand, which helps us attract new and repeat visitors to the area. Bringing new products online is critical in influencing their travel decisions.”

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Tourism product funding is generated through one percent of the four percent room tax collected from overnight visitors that stay in Buncombe County hotels, bed & breakfast inns and cabins. For profit and non-profit entities are eligible to apply for funding if they demonstrate that their bricks and mortar project will increase room nights and, ultimately, have a positive economic impact on the region.

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