

**Tourism Commission**  
January 23rd, 2015  
Merrill Chamber Office

**Members Attending:** Dan Wendorf, Russ Grefe, and Chris Malm,

**Absent:** Lauree O'Day, Jim Arndt, and Steve Wendland

Others in attendance: Willie Schultz, Christine Vorpapel, Mayor Bill Bialecki, Debbie Kinsey, Dave Johnson

At 12:00pm, not enough members were present to call the meeting to order. In which we started a discussion.

Discussion of packets that were provided: in 2013 \$50.72 million was spent in Lincoln County, which was an increase of 4.01% from 2012. \$5.3 million in state and local taxes were collected in Lincoln County in 2013.

**Called to Order:** 12:03pm after an additional Commissioner arrived.

**Public Comment:** Willie from the Devils Creek Stump Jumpers indicated that they are working on putting information into regards of opening the City streets to snowmobiles and ATV's, to present it to the Health and Safety committee on February 16<sup>th</sup>.

**Review of Minutes:** A motion to approve the minutes from April meetings was made by Malm, seconded by Grefe, voted and carried.

**Discuss Local Marketing Impact:** We have been very aggressive with Marketing. We have increase the guides and magazines that we advertise in – Fun in Wisconsin, WI Weekender, American Road, Journeys, Harley Dealers Go Guide, Snowmobile & ATV, Biking – WI Trails, Fall Ride Guide, Chicago Daily Herald, Travel Wisconsin. The 2015 Snowmobile & ATV Guide we are on the inside front cover. With this advertising, we have had 4,539 inquires from the fall with American Road, and 4,205 inquires from the summer months. The Chamber's web/calendar/events from May to December has 19,713 inquires. Northwoods has had 300+ inquiries, ITBEC has had 100+. We have mailed out visitor guides/information to 4,746 from May to December. Our foyer that is open 24/7, we have restocked with 2,262 pieces from May to December. We have distributed over 15,000 Visitor guides through mail, festivals, and/or shows. July through September is the busiest for the hotels. There were a handful of weekends that both the Badger and AmericInn are full at the same time. The Hispanic weekend with a Soccer tournament is planned for this summer (date still pending) will fill up the hotels.

**Discuss status of grants:** review on paid events and where we stand on who has been paid and who had not. The New building (construction) in the City has made a big impact at the AmericInn. Marketing & Advertising – some of the single print for 2015 has already been paid. Will need to keep track of the 800 phone number and the usage, and decide if we still need it.

**Discuss Lincoln County Fairgrounds information:** 15-5 vote from the Lincoln County Board to send a committee to work with the City on getting the Fairgrounds going forward. This group will need to meet and bring back ideas to the Lincoln Board. A grandstand needs to be started to help save the grounds. A group will be set up to run the fairgrounds that are not members of the County or City Boards. Will need to have a Marketing Manager and will need to come up with funds to pay this position. Raising Room tax could help pay for this position. The fairground needs to stay in Merrill with events to help keep locals to stay here and spend money here.

**Discuss Snowmobile and ATV access:** Tourism Commission believes it would be a bonus to have the city streets open to snowmobiles and ATVs. This would allow people to come into the City: downtown, east and west sides of Merrill. It would be a good increase of businesses. The Chamber sent out a survey to the members. It was split on the decision to open the city streets. Some of the concerns of opening the city streets are you cannot see over the snow banks, we don't even have bike lanes, and the noise. The survey was unpleasant to hear. People do not realize this is another way for people to get to their business. School district would have no economic impact but it would be another way for students to get to school. You cannot run parallel to Hwy 64 but can go across it. Hwy K you would be able to run on it. This would make an easier route to get from East to West. Would need to come up with a plan that would not disrupt the areas. Opening the city streets would get people to come here, and maybe re-locate here.

\*\*Motion for the Tourism Commission to support the actions of opening city streets to snowmobiles/ATV's was made by Wendorf, seconded by Grefe, voted and carried. We will need to Market and educate people about what this would do for the City.

**Public Comment:** Dave Sukow stated that the winter months are slow for hotels, and this could bring more people to town. Some City streets that are currently open to snowmobiles does not make sense. Some people were at the Hwy 51 Truck Stop to

unload and travel the trails, but they had a hard time trying to get north. A group of people (DNR, and city officials) have meet and would like to open some of the city streets. This way people can come and start their ride in Merrill. Our biggest problem is the Wisconsin River. People are looking at major trails to get from North to South. Snowmobile speed limit on streets would be 15 mph. They would have to stay on the far right of road way, and if they came to a parked vehicle, they would have to yield to any traffic before going around it. Right now if you are at AmericInn you can go North/South/East but nothing to the West unless you go up or down and around. A big winter event could be snowmobile races at the fairgrounds. We have races to the North and south of us, but nothing right here. Also, would like to see somewhere that ATV's could go and play (City Forest). Merrill is missing what this could do for the City. People will have to make sure that they follow the rules, and if they do not, tickets and fines will be issued. Young people are taking jobs in Merrill, but not moving here because the City does not offer things that they like. New laws and bill are in effect in Wisconsin for snowmobile and ATV's. Thank you from Christine Vorpagel on behave of the Merrill Sled Dogs and Merrill Ice Drags for helping fund events. February 14 there will be an Antique Sled Race at Schulz County Inn.

Grant applications will be going out in February and do back at the end of March.

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made at 1:26pm by Malm, and seconded by Grefe.

Next meeting will be planned via email at a later date.

Submitted by,

Cheryl Skoug  
Merrill Chamber of Commerce