

Explore Boone Presents 2022 Tourism Partner Awards

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BOONE, NC – The inaugural **2022 Discover Watauga Tourism Summit** took place last Tuesday for tourism partners of the Watauga County and Boone Tourism Development Authorities ([Explore Boone](#)). Several awards recognized tourism professionals and entities for their contributions to Watauga County's tourism industry.

The program began with staff introductions and a brief explanation of the Tourism Development Authority's structure and history as a destination marketing organization. Executive Director Wright Tilley presented a summary of the County's short-term occupancy tax collections report from 2021 compared to previous years. Tilley also reported on infrastructure projects throughout the county that have been funded partially or entirely by occupancy tax revenue. These include [Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park](#), [the Middle Fork Greenway](#), [new wayfinding signage](#), and [paddle access areas](#) on the New and Watauga Rivers.

"We look forward to making this an annual event for our tourism partners. We want to keep them updated on our advertising and promotional strategies, emphasize the importance of tourism to our economy, and let them know how we can all work collaboratively for the benefit of our visitors and community," Tilley said.

Senior Vice President of Miles Partnership Ryan Thompson was the keynote speaker for the event, presenting comprehensive information on Explore Boone's media campaigns and offering an overview of the data collection software utilized by the TDA.

The awards and recognitions announced at this year's event include:

- The 2022 **Social Media Award** was presented to [Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation](#) for its outstanding social media presence, quality of content, and user engagement.
- The 2022 **Sustainable Tourism Award** was presented to **Joel Olsen**, owner of the historic [Lovill House Inn](#), for his impressive commitment to sustainable renovations that allow the bed & breakfast to operate completely off-grid.
- The 2022 **Hospitality Professional of the Year Award** went to **Jason Deathridge**, Patron Services Manager at the historic [Appalachian Theatre of the High Country](#). Deathridge was nominated by the Executive Director of the App Theatre, Suzanne Livesay, for his dedication to the recently reopened venue following a global pandemic and changes in leadership.

- In fond memory of Explore Boone's late colleague, the **Michelle Ligon Community Service Award** was presented to Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park Trail Boss **Kristian Jackson** for his tireless efforts in organizing volunteer groups, work days, and special events with the Boone Area Cyclists.
- The 2022 **Tourism Partner of the Year Award** went to [Hawksnest Snow Tubing and Zipline](#) for their long-standing commitment to enriching the visitor experience in Watauga County, proven by their popularity via trackable metrics and overwhelmingly-positive online reviews.

Attraction owner Lenny Cottom stated, "**Hawksnest has made it a priority to keep up great standards that reflect well on the Boone area and keep tourists coming back year after year. We will continue to do our part to make Watauga County a great place to visit.**"

Explore Boone is the Watauga County District U Tourism Development Authority (WCTDA), a local tourism development authority authorized by the state (North Carolina) and local government (Watauga County) to promote travel, tourism, and corporate travel, sponsor tourism-related events, and activities, and finance tourism-related capital projects in the unincorporated areas of Watauga County, North Carolina. Learn more at [exploreboone.com](https://www.exploreboone.com).

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