



Contact:
Emily Neeley | Director of Marketing and PR
emily@exploreboone.com
(828) 266-1345

Explore Boone Honors Community Partners And Shares Industry Insights At 2026 Watauga Tourism Summit

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BOONE, NC (April 2, 2026) – For the fourth consecutive year, Explore Boone hosted its annual partner meeting, the Watauga Tourism Summit, on Tuesday, March 31, 2026. This year’s event was held at the Mill at Rock Creek, a wedding and event venue, where over 80 local tourism and hospitality professionals gathered for a day of insight and celebration of the industry’s continued resilience and innovation.

Explore Boone, which represents both the Boone and Watauga County TDAs, highlighted a strong year of media impact and destination storytelling during a critical period of recovery. These efforts resulted in significant national recognition for the Boone area, including being named “America’s Best Small Mountain Town” by Travel + Leisure. Additional coverage in outlets such as Southern Living, Garden & Gun, Forbes, and National Geographic helped position Boone and Watauga County as a destination where Appalachian heritage and modern experiences intersect.

The summit highlighted the evolving landscape of travel to the High Country while unveiling Explore Boone’s newest marketing campaign direction, “Feel Something More.” The campaign represents a strategic shift toward fostering deeper emotional connections with visitors, inviting them to experience Boone through its people, culture, and natural beauty.

The event concluded with a keynote presentation from Chris Adams, Head of Research and Insights with Miles Partnership, who provided tourism partners with a look at travel trends and data on North Carolina’s “Recession-Proof Traveler.”

During the annual awards presentation, Explore Boone recognized outstanding contributions to the local tourism and hospitality industry.

The 2026 award recipients included:

Social Media Award – Beech Mountain Resort, recognized for its dynamic and engaging digital storytelling that showcases the High Country’s adventure and beauty year-round while fostering an active and loyal online community.

Sustainable Tourism Award – F.A.R.M. Café, honored for its commitment to community-centered sustainability through its pay-what-you-can model, locally sourced ingredients, and innovative efforts to reduce food waste while strengthening the local food system.

Michelle Ligon Community Service Award – Amber Bateman, Executive Director of the Watauga Arts Council, recognized for her leadership in expanding accessible arts experiences throughout the community, including the Arts in the Outdoors initiative along the Middle Fork Greenway.

Hospitality Professional of the Year Award – Stephanie Reece, General Manager of the Holiday Inn Express of Boone, honored for her exceptional leadership, decades of service, and unwavering commitment to both her team and the broader community.

Tourism Partner of the Year Award – Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, recognized for its regional impact, environmental stewardship, and leadership in promoting sustainable tourism and advocacy efforts that benefit the entire High Country.

“Tourism has been a cornerstone of our community for decades, and we wouldn’t be able to do the work we do as a destination marketing organization without the incredible local businesses, organizations, and attractions that make Boone such a special place for visitors,” said Wright Tilley, Executive Director of Explore Boone. “We’re proud to honor these partners and the vital role they play in bringing our community to life for every guest who visits.”

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About Explore Boone

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 tourist-related events, and activities, and finance tourism-related capital projects in District U. District U is defined as the unincorporated areas of Watauga County, North Carolina. Boone is the seat of Watauga County, which also encompasses the towns of Blowing Rock and Seven Devils, and the communities of Deep Gap, Foscoe, Meat Camp, Sugar Grove, Valle Crucis, and Zionville, as well as portions of the Banner Elk and Beech Mountain communities. As a true business center and popular dining and shopping destination, Boone is known as “the Heart of the High Country.” The town is named for the explorer, Daniel Boone, who lived nearby during the mid-1700s before blazing the famous trail into Kentucky. For more information, visit www.exploreboone.com.