Blount Partnership

Annual Report
2023

Chamber of Commerce | Economic Development | Smoky Mountain Tourism Development Authority

Working with diligence, tenacity and determination, the Blount Partnership has established itself as the standard by which economic development, chamber of commerce and tourism development are measured statewide.

And with an attitude of never letting downturns get the best of us, the momentum generated by the huge number of jobs and capital investment brought to the county over the last five years bred the optimism for continued growth.

Per that ambition to make Blount County a leading economic driver in the state, the Blount Partnership will continue to strengthen the regional economy while enhancing residents' quality of life. By investing in the Blount Partnership through Chamber of Commerce memberships, funding of the Economic Development Board of Blount County and the Smoky Mountain Tourism Development Authority, you are helping to create jobs, attract new business, recruit a talented workforce and improve Blount County's competitive positioning and economic prosperity.

Amazon officially opened its fulfillment center in Alcoa on October 5, 2023. The 3-million square-foot facility is expected to employ 800.

The long term goal of the Blount Partnership is to create primary, high-value jobs, and competitive annual salaries with a significant capital investment. It also plans to work towards creating more opportunities for the business and family visitors as well as group travel while increasing educational and training programs for the business community.

Additionally, hosting numerous educational training workshops and seminars while continuing to be an advocate for the business community and making federal, state and local elected officials available to its members, the Blount Partnership serves as convenor for building relationships. Its strong commitment to workforce development is the key to shaping the county's future economic growth.

The Blount Partnership thanks you for your contribution to enhance our economy and quality of life. The importance of the role our partners play in the economic development of Blount County cannot be overstated.

Bryan F. Daniels

Bryan Daniels
Blount Partnership President/CEO

Chris Soro

Chris Soro
Chair, Blount Partnership Joint Operating Committee

A New Brand for Blount County

CHALLENGES
- What to call the region and how to "get people there" succinctly.
- How to integrate the current tourism brand (Peacefulside of the Smokies) that is known and loved.
- How to be broad enough to appeal to a wide range of external audiences, while at the same time, be unique enough to catch their attention.

PROJECT MISSION
- Elevate Blount County through a compelling umbrella brand to drive business, visitors and talent to East Tennessee.

GREATER SMOKIES REGION

VISION STATEMENT: The Blount Partnership will earn a national reputation as the primary catalyst for this region's competitive success and economic prosperity, steeped in strong tradition and leadership.

MISSION STATEMENT: The mission of the Blount Partnership is to serve its members and stakeholders while promoting economic growth and stability, fostering community development and enhancing the overall quality of life in the region.

Continuing Education & Honors

- Director of Tourism Kim Mitchell was named the DMO Manager of the Year at the State of Tennessee Governors Conference
- Paul Monroe graduated from Leadership Blount Class of 2023
- Director of Workforce Development Jessica Belitz named Vice Chair of the East Tennessee Local Workforce Development Authority – covering 16 counties.
- Belitz graduated from Tennessee Workforce Invest.

Conferences & Meetings

Managerial staff attended the following meetings and conferences to gain further insight into national and regional trends.

- U.S. Chamber Institute for Organizational Management
- International Economic Development Council
- Southern Economic Development Council
- American Chamber of Commerce Convention
- Tennessee Chamber of Commerce Convention
- Governor's Conference on Tourism & Economic Development
- Tennessee Hospitality and Tourism Association
- Southeast Tourism Society Marketing College
- Distillers Convention
- Site Selectors Guild Conference
- 44th Annual SEUS Meeting
- Japanese Business Roundtable and Strategic Alliance Series
- JAST annual conference
- TVA Economic Developers Forum
- TEDC spring conference
- DCI Marketing Summit
- eTourism Summit
- HR training sessions hosted by the TN Valley Human Resources Association (TVHRA)
- TN Society of Human Resources Management (SHHRM) conference
- New Hope Childrens Advocacy Center- Stewards of Children training
- Joined the Knoxville Technology Council
- Participant in monthly IT training webinars

Clockwise: Chamber VIP trip to Nashville to meet state legislators; Visit from Senator Marsha Blackburn; Jeanette Beaverson of Massey Properties talks to the Young Professionals group; Sharon Hannum conducts her Women in Business workshop; Rep. Tim Burchett makes his annual visito to the Blount Partnership.

2023

Member Benefits

- 25 Ambassadors made over 4,000 members calls.
- Sent 183 member email marketing campaigns.
- Coordinated 29 ribbon cuttings.
- Engaged over 1,000 members in relationship connections and expansion events.
- Launched new Growthzone membership database platform to increase member engagement and experience.
- Engaged approximately 150 women in the Women in Business program.
- Hosted seven VIP events.
- Participated in the Sky City Entrepreneur Center and their first pitch event.
- Had over 50 participants in Small Business Saturday.
- 23 networking events including coffee club, afternoon mixers and power connect luncheons with average attendance of 75.
- Conducted 39 business education workshops and seminars with nearly 1,000 in attendance. The average market cost for training is $750 per person.
- Videoed and posted on YouTube all Success in 90 workshops.

Small Business Development

- In process of identifying growth in specific industry sectors, gathering inventory of small business assets and identifying best practices from other organizations.
- Along with the Tennessee Small Business Development Center (TSBDC), the Chamber facilitated 228 consulting sessions with 84 clients.
- Over 120 hours were spent leading to capital creation of $442,000 with 7 business starts and more than 20 jobs created.

Advocacy

- Blount Partnership Housing Committee formed to address housing crisis. Includes business members, government officials/staff, United Way and Foothills Community Development Corp. Purpose of the committee is to identify needs and challenges to the housing industry and identify assets that can be leveraged to create solutions.
- Participated in state and federal legislative affairs. Nashville legislative trip organized with over 50 East TN members promoting Blount County's legislative agenda. Thirty East TN members traveled to Washington, D.C. to promote a federal legislative agenda and recruit University of Tennessee talent back to the region.
- In addition to the regional legislative agenda and Blount Chamber's legislative agenda, the governmental committee weighed-in on Pellissippi Parkway completion, permitting reform, Promising Future, business tax relief, legal immigration reform, workers' comp death benefits, non-competes and increasing FSA dependent care.

Community Events

- Held the Long Table Community Dinner for the second year with 184 guests on the bridge connecting the public library and the greenway.
- Sold out Taste of Blount with a record 30 food vendors and over 800 attendees.
- Townsend Fall Heritage Festival saw more than 6,000 attend the two-day event.

The Italian Apron was one of 29 ribbon cuttings conducted; Chamber Ambassadors were instrumental in member relations; Past Chamber chairs gathered for a summer lunch; Taste of Blount once again highlighted some of the best food in the county.

Young Professionals

- The Blount County Young Professionals group has over 170 individual members and had over 275 attend at least one event since its inception in 2022.
- Held 20 events aimed at attracting and retaining talent.
- Mentor program paired 34 individuals with seasoned professionals to help them grow professionally and be active community members.

Traditional Media

- Conducted over 30 digital and print media interviews.
- Sponsored high school athletics programs at William Blount and Alcoa with paid ads to promote the community.
- Appeared on NewsTalk 98.7 Hallerin Hilton Hill's and Around the House radio programs to talk about community events and development.
- Conducted a local media tour with news directors from print and television.

Social Media Success

Chamber:

- Engagements across all platforms increased by 90% over last year and our engagements are 93% higher than our competitors.
- We improved our video coverage of events, including adding reels to our Facebook and Instagram pages, resulting in an increase of 283% in video views over last year.
- Created sponsorship of weekly calendar, providing top-tier members with another benefit of membership.

Tourism Development:

- Developed daily posts from User Generated Content (UGC) which increased audience engagement by 182%, and user comments by as much as 1,026%.
- Created weekly reels for Facebook and Instagram, contributing to a 129% increase in audience growth and 9K new followers.

Economic Development:

- Grand opening coverage of Smith & Wesson resulted in more than 330K video views on Facebook, 21K likes and 2.3K shares.
- Promoted Manufacturing Month with a full calendar of posts and a video series about careers in manufacturing.
- Shared news and trends about the growth of innovation and technology in the greater Blount County area across all social platforms, positioning Blount County as an emerging leader in these industries.

Workforce Development:

- Crafted a series of ads for Facebook promoting job fairs, the Blount Area Jobs website and dual enrollment programs.
- The engagement rate for BAJ rose 692%, with an audience growth of 12%. We spent 90% less on paid ads, but increased our clicks 127% with one ad receiving more than 2,000 link clicks. This success parlayed into record numbers attending our job fairs and dual enrollment events.

Blount County Young Professionals:

- Enhanced social media outreach by adding Instagram to our profile, resulting in an increase in impressions by 99% and an engagement rate of 8.7%
- Utilized both Facebook and Instagram to promote BCYP events and leadership opportunities as well as post-event video coverage, to grow our followers by 64%.

Updates

- Worked on a Perfectly Blount public relations plan to promote the community through the Blount Partnership's assets.
- Collaborated with DCI on a new brand called Greater Smokies Region to elevate Blount County through an umbrella brand to drive business, visitors and talent to the area.
- Expanded department to include two Maryville College interns.

The Blount Partnership worked with area schools introducing students and counselors to the many career paths available. State Rep. Jerome Moon and Sen. Art Swann honors former Alcoa City Mayor Clint Abbott for his years of service.

Return on Investment

- Blount County ranked eighth in Tennessee in direct visitor spending of $544 million in 2022 for a daily average of $1.5 million.
- Saw direct labor income related to tourism of $200 million.
- Saw direct tourism employment of 4,700.
- Direct state taxes totaled $29.9 million.
- Direct local taxes totaled $21.7 million.
- Each Blount County household saves $987 due to state and local taxes generated by tourism.

Events

- Hosted the ultra-successful Grains & Grits Spirits Festival which sold out of 1,000 tickets in three hours.
- Hosted Rendezvous South convention which brought in 150 meeting planners to the Airport Hilton Convention Center.
- Hosted a FAM tour for travel writers.
- Presented Summer on Broadway with a silent disco.
- Sold out Hops in the Hills in the theater in the park in downtown Maryville for 1,000 guests. There were 30 breweries and nine food vendors.
- Townsend Visitor Center played host to numerous festivals including the Scottish Festival and Games (12,000 attendees), the Bigfoot Festival (10,000 attendees),the Bronco Truck Festival (4,000 attendees), Great Smoky Mountains Hot Air Balloon Festival (10,000 attendees), Townsend Fall Heritage Festival (6,000).
- Great Smoky Mountains Half Marathon once again saw more than 2,500 runners participate.

Townsend Visitor Center

- Improvements were made to the Townsend Visitor Center grounds with the addition of fencing, gates, and gravel roadways to aid in the ingress and egress from the area.
- Construction began on a new event support facility.
- Mailed nearly 19,000 vacation guides.
- Distributed 11,000 more through on-site pick up and the state welcome centers.

Media Outreach

- Social media increases were seen with help from Advanced Travel in addition to organic growth.
- All platforms - Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest - all saw increases in followers and engagement with more than 10 million impressions.
- 435 Media Hits - 44.5% increase over previous year.
- Over 1.2 Billion Impressions - 22.5% increase over previous year.
- Growth in media placements within markets outside local area (helps drive overnight stays in Blount County).
- Media tour drove growth in media outlets we hadn't received placement in before.
- Media tour also helped drive more national placements, particularly by travel writers.

Festivals like Hops in the Hills, Townsend Heritage Festival and the Bigfoot Festival continue to bring in new visitors and make for fun experiences; Rendezvous South meeting planners convention was held the Airport Hilton.

2023

Information Technology

- Transitioned the Townsend Visitors Center from a cable coax internet connection to a Fiber Optic internet connection with synchronous data flow rates. The network has improved staff operations with server drive access and printing capabilities while working at either location.
- Planned and configured the internet fiber conduits and fiber wiring for the new Facility Event Center at the Townsend Visitor Center.
- In process of Implementing a Point-of-Sale system for the TVC Gift Shop and Event Facility for the sale of food, drinks, merchandise, etc. The POS system will include inventory management and complete accounting and tax reporting capabilities.
- Completed setup of "Eventeny" an online event management program. This program is now being used as the management hub for Blount Partnership related events.
- Implemented a new Chamber membership database called "Growthzone." It coordinates Blount County Chamber of Commerce membership activities. The program has improved revenue flow and decreased days in Accounts Receivable.
- Set up a Bluetooth Mobile App padlock system for entrance gates at the TVC allowing access to staff, construction crews, event vendors, etc with a phone App rather than physical keys.
- Upgraded hardware in the Partnership Boardroom to include an upgraded computer, a new 700 lumen laser projector, and wireless/handheld microphones all to improve the quality of presentations held in the Boardroom. The volume of room rentals has increased 83% from 2022 to 2023.

Cybersecurity

- Installed new server and routers/firewalls as part of migrating to a more secure domain network from a workgroup environment.
- Implemented multi-factor authentication tools for our key software systems.
- Participated in monthly cybersecurity trainings via webinar and videoconferencing platforms.
- Installed new visitor traffic flow monitors at both the Chamber and TVC facilities to report data on the number of visitors at each location on a daily, weekly, and event specific basis.

Accounting

- Implemented a new Purchasing Card program for Partnership staff.
- Acquired $5.5 million loan for construction of the new Event Center in Townsend.
- Successfully transitioned Partnership to new audit firm.
- Managed efforts to bring DENSO Greenway extension to the point of construction approval with TDOT.
- Participated in leadership of Downtown Maryville branding project.
- Achieved PPP Loan forgiveness for Partnership.
- Received ERC refunds for Partnership.

Broadband Initiative

- Invoked a community-wide Broadband Access initiative as part of the Partnership's new 5-year Strategic Plan. A committee of local Information Technology focused business owners and government employees was formed to facilitate the initiative to expand access to broadband internet services throughout Blount County.

Blount Chamber Walk of Fame honorees included Lamar Alexander, Virginia Hardwick, Bob Sullivan, Ruth & Steve West, Pam Young and Joe Zappa; Members were invited to an Amazon tour; Donna Cutting showed how important customer service is; Best of Blount Awards recognized those who continue to give back.

Economic Development

- 12 New Project Site Visits.
- 5 Existing Industries Expanded.
- 55 RFI Submissions in Partnership with ECD and TVA.
- New Expansion Projects:
    - o Siemens $46.3 Million, 94 jobs
    - o Axis Fabrication $10 Million, 30 jobs
- Celebrated Amazon and Smith & Wesson's grand openings.
- Continued work alongside Workforce Development with Aerospace industry partners. to plan A&P Mechanic School with PSTCC/Northeast State.
- Rebranding external marketing of the region.
- Orange Carpet Tour – Hosted ECD and TVA Development teams.

External Branding

- Contracted DCI for external branding development.
- Results: Greater Smokies Region.
- 2024 implementation and activation to different audiences.

Community Development

- Submitted plans to City of Alcoa for Pellissippi Place development – Ramston Capital.
- Downtown Maryville Developers Group:
    - o Mill House at Pistol Creek grand opening
    - o Maryville College Downtown Hospitality Center
    - o The Armory groundbreaking
    - o Greenway Village groundbreaking
    - o J. Danforth Mercantile opening
    - o Peaceful Side Brewery expansion
- Downtown Maryville Association Economic Vitality Committee.
- Downtown Maryville Association branding, Downtown Maryville Master Plan committee
- Blount Partnership Housing Committee co-chair.
- United Way Housing Committee Member.

Shared Blount's ED Mission with Community

- Hosted Alcoa and Maryville High Schools marketing classes to showcase Amazon and Smith & Wesson projects.
- Hosted ETIC to showcase Blount County's projects and community development.
- Spoke to various local organizations and leadership groups.

Awards and Leadership Opportunities

- Leadership Tennessee NEXT Program.
- TN Economic Partnership Board, East TN Representative.
- Blount County Public Library Board co-chair.
- TEDC Board Nomination Committee.
- Awarded Three Star Community Development Certification.
- ETDD South Rural Planning Organization (SRPO) Committee Member.
- ETEDA Advisory Committee Member.
- Marblegate Tremont Event Committee Member.
- United Way Allocations Panel Member.

Groundbreaking for the Armory entertainment facility in Maryville; Ramston Capital investment in Pellissippi Place; A new events facility is being constructed in Townsend; Amazon fulfillment center grand opening.

2023

BlountAreajobs.com

- BlountAreaJobs.com continues to grow with employers and job seekers. Implemented SEO Audit and Reporting system to ensure the site shows up on searches and downloads quickly on mobile devices. Also added a module on the homepage for keywords.

Aviation Initiatives

- New aviation Airframe & Powerplant (A&P) School in the works with Pellissippi State Community College. FAA application in progress.
- Hosted aviation industry leaders on tours of A&P schools in East Tennessee.
- Hosted Northeast State and TCAT Morristown for two visits to Blount County for their A&P student to our aviation companies.

Childcare Initiatives

- Completed multiple community focus groups and studies to better understand childcare and early education needs.
- Created an Early Literacy, Preschool and Childcare resource website.
- Led two community meetings in partnership with DHS to educate community members on opening childcare in our community.
- Took local employers to employer-led childcare facilities in the state.

Education

- Brought all three K-12 systems together with PSCC and TCAT to plan for dual enrollment and dual credit courses for high school students.
- Co-hosted a UT Alumni reception in D.C. with Knoxville Chamber to bring our alumni back home to our jobs.
- Assisted PSCC and TCAT with hosting a parent and student open house for dual enrollment and dual credit.
- Hosted a presentation on collaborative robots for manufacturers.
- Received grant funding for Arconic Foundation Grant to provide internships for manufacturing. Expanded the program to include internships in hospitality/tourism.
- Collaborated with Alcoa High School to successfully secure a Tennessee Department of Transportation Division of Aerospace grant for A&P tools in the high school.
- Hosted high school counselors for a manufacturing and construction industry day.
- Presented to all Career & Technical Education Directors in East Tennessee about workforce development and job needs.

Events

- Took Signing Day to another level this year with 65+ graduates and 30+ employers.
- Expanded the 8th Grade Career Exploration Fair to include private schools and some surrounding county schools with a record 49 employers.

Job Fairs

- Record breaking job fair with 72 employers and thousands of participants.
- Started mini job-fairs in the high schools which led to multiple hires upon graduation.

Other Initiatives

- Started a Workforce Strategic Planning Committee to tackle Lima strategies.
- Assisted in the relocation of a new and improved Blount County American Job Center.
- Hosted Amazon community partner kickoff event.
- Assisted multiple Smith & Wesson families in relocation with finding homes and spouse/family member jobs.

Aviation is on the forefront for new careers in the area; Smith & Wesson and Amazon highlighted the businesses at the Blount County Job Fair; A record 49 companies participated in the 8th grade career exploration fair.

BOARDS OF DIRECTORS

Blount Partnership Joint Operating Committee

Chair .... Chris Soro, C2RL, Inc.
Vice Chair .... Chuck Alexander
Chamber of Commerce Board Representatives:
Chair .... Trevis Gardner
Chair-Elect .... Drew Miles, Miles Insurance Agency
Past Chair .... Chris Soro, C2RL, Inc.
Economic Development Board Representatives:
Chair .... Matt Murray
Vice Chair .... Greg Wilson, First Horizon
Past Chair .... Chuck Alexander
Smoky Mountain Tourism Development Authority Representatives:
Chair .... Tim Seay, Century 21 Smoky Mountain Real Estate
Vice Chair .... Jewell Overton, ProNova Solutions
Past Chair .... Bryan Cable

Blount County Chamber of Commerce Board

Chair .... Trevis Gardner
Chair-Elect .... Drew Miles, Miles Insurance Agency
Chair – Chamber Foundation .... Rick Shepard, Leadership Blount
VIP Chair .... Dennis Dockery, MBI
VIP Chair-Elect .... Robyn Blair, DENSO
Board Member at Large .... Mike Lutheran, Royal Metal Powders
Board Member at Large .... Tracy Queen, ICC International
Auto Sales & Services, Transportation & Petroleum .... Kendall Case, Smoky Mountain Harley-Davidson
Construction, Building Trades & Suppliers .... Ben Pinnell, Hickory Construction
Finance & Professional .... Tony Thompson, Pinnacle Financial Partners
Government & Public Utilities .... Tom Hatcher, Blount County Circuit Court Clerk
Hotel/Accommodations, Restaurants & Recreation .... Carmen Simpher, Little Arrow Outdoor Resort
Individuals/Non-Profits .... Vanessa Painter, Vivid Image Consulting
Manufacturers, Wholesalers & Agriculture .... Bryan Hayes, Clayton Homes
Retail/Service/Real Estate/Insurance .... Joy Carver, Dandy Lions Gifts
One Year Director .... Brian Davis, Danny Davis Electrical Contractors
One Year Director .... Stephen Deucker, Cirrus Aircraft
One Year Director .... Chuck Mabe, The Christman Co.
One Year Director .... Adriel McCord, First Horizon
One Year Director .... Pat McGill, Realty Executives Associates
One Year Director .... Kevin Painter, LeConte Wealth Management
One Year Director .... Kris Tatum, Company Distilling
One Year Director .... Abhijit Verekar, Avero Advisors
One Year Director .... Stefan Wilson, Allevia Technology
One Year Director .... Leslie Woodall, Blevins Group - Realty Executives
Ex-Officio Members:
Chair, Economic Development Board .... Matt Murray
Chair, Smoky Mountain Tourism Development Authority .... Tim Seay, Century 21 Smoky Mtn. Real Estate
Legal Counsel .... Matt Haralson, Kizer & Black, Attorneys
City of Alcoa .... Mark L. Johnson, City Manager
Blount County .... Ed Mitchell, County Mayor Blount County Government
City of Maryville .... Greg McClain, City Manager

BOARDS OF DIRECTORS

Long Table Community Dinner

Summer on Broadway

Benz Werks Ribbon Cutting

Young pickers at the Townsend Fall Festival

Enjoying the Summer on Broadway's silent disco.

Tapping it out at Hops in the Hills

Hands-on Cirrus flight simulator at the 8th grade career exploration fair.

Turtleman makes an appearance at the Bigfoot Festival