

Putnam County Visitors Bureau, Inc.

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After a scandal within the Putnam County Visitors Bureau in 2016, at the directive of the NYS Attorney General, a new board of directors was formed, the bylaws were revised, a new Executive Director was hired, lingering issues were resolved to the satisfaction of the NYS Attorney General and all outstanding bills from the prior administration were paid. A new independent accounting firm was retained and guidelines were established for the future operation of the Putnam Visitors Bureau in accordance with NYS regulations. The board was committed to following the letter of the law as it pertains to Tourism Matching Funds Guidelines and multiple meetings with the NYS Attorney General took place to ensure adherence to all regulations.

After an extensive search, reviewing the resumes of 40 applicants, the field was initially narrowed down to 25 and finally to 5 finalists who were interviewed for the position. Bruce Conklin, a native of Putnam County, was hired as Executive Director in January of 2017. Bruce brought several years of experience as a tourism director to the position. Bruce was approved by the NYS Department of Economic Development and the Attorney General.

A quiet, competent man, Bruce hit the ground running. He immediately redesigned the website, giving county businesses the ability to post their business listings online. A self-serve event calendar was posted on the website which included up-to-date information on events, outdoor activities, dining, lodging, and historical sites. Board documents including Putnam County Funding Policy and Application, NYS Tourism Research Reporting for the Hudson Valley and Putnam County, Annual Reporting submitted to the County Executive's Office, Legislature and Federal Income Tax Form 990, and Form CHAR500 (this form is for organizations filing electronically with the IRS Annual Filing for Charitable Organizations New York State Department of Law (Office of the Attorney General)) were all available from the website. Full disclosure was of paramount importance to the newly revamped Visitors Bureau.

The travel guide underwent a complete redesign and 30,000 copies were produced. Of these, 25,000 were distributed at I-87 rest stops, Metro North Stations, 119 locations in NJ & PA, Travel Agencies, Amtrak, Hotels & Motels and AAA Offices. The remaining 5,000 were available to the public locally through the Visitors Bureau.

Social Media Marketing was heavily utilized beginning in March of 2017, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Constant Contact and the number of followers on each platform increased significantly between inception and early 2019.

Television commercials aired 1,324 times to an audience in NYC, Westchester and the Hudson Valley on 69 channels through Spectrum, Altice and FIOS. Streaming services yielded 375,164 impressions to an audience of 1.5 million subscribers.

Radio Ad campaigns included Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter, Things to Do in Putnam, Come to Putnam County, and Discover Putnam. Stations broadcasting the Visitors Bureau ads were WHUD, the peak 107.1, i95, Kicks 105.5, B94.5, 98Q, 94.1FM, 103.7FM, 97.9 and 107.3 The Bull.

Print advertising media was also utilized in 15 different publications reaching a total of 3.6M print impressions. Digital advertising on 4 sites yielded a total of 1.54M digital impressions. Needless to say, the Board of Directors was pleased with the results. Planning for the next phase included ramping up the promotion of the Putnam Visitors Bureau through speaking engagements with area Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, Town Boards and local Not-for-Profits. Future tourism opportunities were identified and included the multiple Rail Trails in Putnam which would ultimately connect Connecticut to the Walkway Over the Hudson, Brewster to NYC and many points in between.

As far back as early 2017, informal discussions with the former Deputy County Executive, Bruce Walker and the Visitors Bureau took place to consider combining the Visitors Bureau, the Economic Development Corporation and the Industrial Development Agency into a single, county department. Although these were outside agencies, all received some funding from the county. Each agency had a specific focus yet logically could be combined under the broad auspices of economic development. There were economies of scale that could be achieved by combining these separate outside agencies into a single county department. For example: as separate agencies, each retained an attorney, an accounting firm and two of them employed an Executive Director. When Mr. Walker resigned from his position, no further talks took place.

The Visitors Bureau was approved for funding for 2019. When the contract was received by the VB in early 2019, there were objections to several items and a resolution could not be reached with the county. The county attorney stated that the contract would not be modified. The county did continue to fund the VB and it continued to operate despite the lack of a signed contract.

In March of 2019, two county legislators and the county attorney requested to address the Board of Directors. It was clear from this meeting that the legislature was not satisfied with the performance of the Executive Director of the Visitors Bureau. The board then requested that the legislature provide them with a performance improvement plan by mid-April, in order that the agency could meet the objectives expected by the legislature. This was never received.

The VB was then caught off guard to find a job posting for the Executive Director's position posted in the local papers. No notice had been given to the VB and a reasonable conclusion was drawn that the county was likely moving forward with bringing the functions of the VB in-house. In anticipation of this change, and in deference to the Executive Director, the VB began taking action to dissolve the 501c6. One of the many steps taken was to return the unused Matching Funds from the I Love NY program to the state. Upon receiving a call from NYS and learning that the return of funds to NYS would make it impossible for the county to reapply for the funds in 2019, the check was mailed back to the VB. As of this writing, the check has been voided and a new check will be made payable to Putnam County so that they can operate as a TPA (Tourism Promotion Agency). Final steps before dissolution will be payment of all outstanding bills, filing of the final tax returns and return of unspent funds to Putnam County.

The members of the all-volunteer Board of Directors are proud of the work accomplished during the short lived tenure of the Board and are grateful to and sincerely thank their Executive Director for all his hard work and immeasurable improvements made under his auspices.

Respectfully submitted by the Board of Directors of the Putnam County Visitors Bureau, Inc.