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TOURISM ASSOCIATION GOES TO BAT FOR OPERATORS

Around 100 tourism operators attended the Hawke's Bay Wine Country Tourism Association (HBWCTA) quarterly members meeting on Tuesday 30 June at the Century Theatre in Napier. Many came to hear the results of recent efforts by the association on behalf of its members and to hear guest speaker, HB Regional Council CEO, Andrew Newman, explain the challenges and changes ahead for Hawke's Bay's Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO), Venture Hawke's Bay.

Mr Newman told the audience that he understood that it is tough out there at the moment, across all industry sectors, not just tourism. He has however had concerns about some Venture Hawke's Bay relationships with industry and also with the unit's budgetary issues. Due to a reduction in government funding for economic development and an operating deficit that became recently apparent, they have to reduce costs and staff numbers, and will relocate to the Regional Council offices by December.

Mr Newman said that of the funding apportioned to VHB operations for the RTO function, approximately 30% will be allocated for staffing, and the balance, an estimated \$600,000, is intended for marketing and promotional activity.

"It is important to have an RTO," Mr Newman said, "However the region needs a unified front, led by the RTO, and we have to all accept it is a group effort, rather than industry pointing the finger purely at Venture HB. We can win together, share success together and if necessary accept failures together."

Mr Newman also advised that the old adage of "he who pays, says" will however be the overarching factor when making strategic decisions.

Questions and comments from the floor included:

- a preference for a change in the structure of the VHB Advisory Board, removing the political weighting;

- whether there is an intention to split the economic development (EDA) and RTO functions into separate units;
- the need for increased marketing investment now to capitalise on tourism opportunities and show growth;
- why can't the Regional Events strategy move forward; and
- the need for inspirational leadership of the industry by the RTO
- Praise for the staff working with operators on famil's and media projects etc. at the coal-face.

In response Mr Newman indicated the structure of the advisory board may be looked at after the elections, and that there seems to be no compelling reason to split the EDA and RTO functions. He agreed an events strategy is very important and will move forward in July/August but cost structures and support are an issue. He said that the industry needs to see a good performance from VHB and going forward he will judge its performance on industry's comments and whether they are happy with the results, and he genuinely wants to see improved relationships and consultation.

In his introduction, Sam Orton, Chairman of HBWCTA, explained that he had been to several strategic meetings with councils and that there was considerable pressure being put on Venture Hawke's Bay to undertake more meaningful consultation with and take advice from the region's industry professionals. As a result a regional marketing advisory group will be set up with input from HBWCTA and other experts.

Other speakers included, HBWCTA Executive Officer, Megan Harris, who outlined results of a recent member survey looking at this year in comparison to last year, which showed a very mixed bag of results and forecasts for accommodation providers, often depending on their property type. A slightly more positive result was evident for activity providers such as retailers, attractions, cafes and restaurants. The recent 'Sunday Drive' pilot project running in Napier and Ahuriri was reported on and Ms Harris advised that whilst ticket sales had been lower than hoped for, operators who were involved and the patrons on the day were very receptive to the concept and were keen to be involved again.

Ann Barrar, Event Manager at the Art Deco Trust spoke about how operators could get some marketing advantage for their own businesses out of events such as the upcoming Deco Decanted Weekend utilising database marketing strategies, and Jane Libby, of Food Hawke's Bay detailed the inaugural New Zealand Olive Festival

being held in Hastings in September. Jason Fleming, General Manager at Hawke's Bay Racing, outlined changes to the annual Spring Carnival and encouraged the audience to experience race days and gave away free passes.

New member Allan Dewsnapp of OnlineTourismTV invited operators to become the first in Hawke's Bay on this new online media channel which invites travellers to "see it before they live it"; and recent immigrant Mike Lewis from Hawthorne House, outlined the refurbishments they are working on as the new owners of this luxury B&B on the outskirts of Hastings.

The meeting closed with HB Museum & Art Gallery host Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins giving an overview of the \$18m museum redevelopment and was followed by a social networking function in the gallery amongst the stunning Ply-ability exhibition.

ENDS

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