

TOWN COUNCIL

STAFF REPORT

Finance & Administration Department



MEETING DATE:	September 8, 2026
PROJECT:	Consideration of Accommodations Tax Advisory Committee Funding Recommendations for Quarter Ending June 30, 2026
PROJECT MANAGER:	Shannon Milroy, Budget & Procurement Manager

REQUEST:

Town Staff requests Town Council to consider the Accommodations Tax Advisory Committee's (ATAC) recommendations for grant awards as presented below:

Requesting Organization	Amount Requested	Amount Recommended
Coastal Conservation Association: 2026 Conservation Weekend in Bluffton	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Historic Bluffton Arts & Seafood Festival: 2026 Arts & Seafood Festival	80,000	80,000
Old Town Bluffton Merchants Society: Marketing Bluffton as a Destination	15,000	15,000
Society of Bluffton Artists: FY2027 Getting the Word Out-Part 3	35,000	35,000
Congregation Beth Yam: 2026 Hanukkah Celebration in Bluffton	7,710	7,710
BlacQuity SC: 2026 Roots & Rivers Festival	25,000	25,000
Total for Quarter Ending June 30, 2026	\$ 172,710	\$ 172,710

BACKGROUND:

In accordance with the grant process, the Accommodations Tax Advisory Committee (ATAC) held a meeting on August 18, 2026 to review the quarterly applications. There were six (6) applications to review and make funding recommendations to Town Council.

Funds Currently Available for Distribution:

When comparing the State Accommodations Tax collections for the quarter ending June 2026 to the same quarter of last year, the revenues increased \$136,644 or approximately 31.4%.

Total estimated State Accommodations Tax funds currently available for distribution are \$676,984 as outlined in the following chart:

State ATAX	
Remaining from Previous Quarters	\$ 390,931
3 rd Quarter Revenue	572,106
First \$25k to General Fund*	N/A
5% to General Fund	(28,605)
30% to DMO	(171,632)
15% to Town of Bluffton – Housing	(85,816)
Lapsed Grants	-
Total State ATAX Funds Remaining for Distribution	\$ 676,984

* First \$25k taken in 1st Quarter of Fiscal Year and Not Applicable (N/A) to the remaining quarters.

Funds Requested for Distribution:

❑ Coastal Conservation Association requests \$10,000 to support advertising and promotion of tourism for Celebrating Conservation Weekend in Bluffton.

- The request comprises 7% of the event’s budget and will be used towards marketing expenses
- This event is scheduled to be held September 11-13, 2026 in Old Town Bluffton
- Approximately 29% of attendees were from out of town for the 2025 event
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising & Promotion: radio, television print, digital, and social media ads, as well as direct mailers and e-blasts/e-newsletter

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$10,000.

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 11,090		\$ 10,000
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events:	23,495		-
Public Facilities:	-	*	-
Municipality and County Services:	500	*	-
Tourist Transportation:	-	*	-
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	103,495		N/A
Total	\$ 138,580		\$ 10,000

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

❑ **Historic Bluffton Arts & Seafood Festival Inc. requests \$80,000 to support advertising and promotion, facilities for civic and cultural events, municipal and county services, public facilities, and tourist transportation service expenses for the 2026 Arts & Seafood Festival.**

- The request comprises 43% of the \$185,200 budget
- This year's event takes place over ten days, to be held October 9-18, 2026
- Total tourism for the 2025 festival was approximately 55%
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising & Promotion: radio, television, social media, digital and print advertising (including Southern Living Magazine), e-blasts, signage/banners, online festival listings and the HHI-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce Vacation Planner
 - Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events: rentals of stages, tents, tables, chairs
 - Public Facilities: temporary/portable restrooms, dumpster rental/trash hauling
 - Municipality Services: event security
 - Tourist Transportation: event shuttles

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$80,000.

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 72,000		\$ 65,000
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events	12,000		6,000
Public Facilities	6,000		3,000
Municipality and County Services	6,000	*	3,000
Tourist Transportation	7,000	*	3,000
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	82,200		N/A
Total	\$ 185,200		\$ 80,000

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

❑ **Old Town Bluffton Merchants Society requests \$15,000 in support of advertising costs related to Marketing Bluffton as a Destination.**

- The total budget is \$35,800 with approximately 42% or \$15,000 being requested
- All requested funds will be used towards marketing expenses to attract visitors to Bluffton
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising & Promotion: radio, social media, print and digital advertising as well as posters, signs and the Bluffton Tourist Maps

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$15,000.

(Old Town Bluffton Merchants Society, continued)

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 25,900		\$ 15,000
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events	-		-
Public Facilities	-		-
Municipality and County Services	-	*	-
Tourist Transportation	-	*	-
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	9,900		N/A
Total	\$ 35,800		\$ 15,000

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

□ Society of Bluffton Artists is requesting \$35,000 in support of the marketing campaign “Getting the Word Out – Part 3” from September 1, 2026 through August 31, 2027.

- The total operating budget for the fiscal year is \$205,175 with \$35,000, or 17% being requested for marketing expenses
- This request is from September 2026 through August 2027 to align with the organization’s fiscal year, which begins September 1
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising & Promotion: print and digital advertising as well as social media ads, eblasts, mailers, flyers, postcards and posters

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$35,000.

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 35,000		\$ 35,000
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events	-		-
Public Facilities	-		-
Municipality and County Services	-	*	-
Tourist Transportation	-	*	-
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	170,175		N/A
Total	\$ 205,175		\$ 35,000

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

❑ **Congregation Beth Yam is requesting \$7,710 to support advertising and promotion of tourism, facilities for civic and cultural events and municipality services for the 2026 Hanukkah Celebration in Bluffton.**

- The event will be held on December 12, 2026 at Martin Family Park
- The 2025 Hanukkah event drew approximately 45% tourist attendance
- Requested funds comprise 72% of the total event budget of \$10,710
 - This event also receives monetary support from the Town's Events & Venues Department
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising and Promotion: newspaper, magazine and social media ads and posters/signage
 - Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events: rental of tables, chairs, tents and audio equipment
 - Municipality and County Services: security to be provided by the Bluffton Police Department and possibly additional private security

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$7,710.

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 3,200		\$ 3,200
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events	3,250		3,250
Public Facilities	-	*	-
Municipality and County Services	1,260	*	1,260
Tourist Transportation	-	*	-
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	3,000		N/A
Total	\$ 10,710		\$ 7,710

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

❑ **BlacQuity SC is requesting \$25,000 to support advertising and promotion of tourism, facilities for civic and cultural events, public facilities, municipal services and tourist transportation for the 2026 Roots & Rivers Festival.**

- Requested funds of \$25,000 comprise 70% of the event's total budget of \$35,290; of that amount, \$14,500 is planned for marketing expenses
- This event will be held on September 12, 2026 at Oyster Factory Park from 2-8 pm
- The 2025 event hosted visitors from Savannah, Charleston, Alanta, Jacksonville, and Columbia that made up 53% of the attendees.
- Eligible tourism-related expenses as presented in the application include:
 - Advertising & Promotion: newspaper, magazine, social media, radio and television ads, billboards, email/text blasts, postcards, posters, and event website
 - Facilities for Cultural Events: venue, stage and tent rentals
 - Public Facilities: Port-o-Lets and handwashing rental, and trash hauling
 - Municipal Services: security to be provided by Bluffton Police Department and other security
 - Tourist Transportation: event shuttle services

(BlacQuity SC, continued)

The committee voted unanimously to recommend a total award of \$25,000

Eligible Tourism-Related Expense Categories (per SC Code of Laws)	Total Budget for Category		Recommended ATAX Funds
Advertising & Promotion of Tourism for Arts and Cultural Events	\$ 14,500		\$ 14,500
Facilities for Civic and Cultural Events	5,690		5,600
Public Facilities	2,000		2,000
Municipality and County Services	2,400	*	2,400
Tourist Transportation	1,200	*	500
Other/Ineligible Project Expenses	9,500		N/A
Total	\$ 35,290		\$ 25,000

* Based on percentage directly related to tourist attendance

N/A – Not Applicable

NEXT STEPS:

Town Staff will notify organizations of award amount and requirements.

SUMMARY:

Below are the applications received for quarter ending June 30, 2026 and ATAC's recommendation for each:

Requesting Organization	Amount Requested	Amount Recommended
Coastal Conservation Association: 2026 Conservation Weekend in Bluffton	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Historic Bluffton Arts & Seafood Festival: 2026 Arts & Seafood Festival	80,000	80,000
Old Town Bluffton Merchants Society: Marketing Bluffton as a Destination	15,000	15,000
Society of Bluffton Artists: FY2027 Getting the Word Out-Part 3	35,000	35,000
Congregation Beth Yam: 2026 Hanukkah Celebration in Bluffton	7,710	7,710
BlacQuity SC: 2026 Roots & Rivers Festival	25,000	25,000
Total for Quarter Ending June 30, 2026	\$ 172,710	\$ 172,710

ATTACHMENTS:

1. ATAC draft meeting minutes from August 18, 2026
2. Coastal Conservation Association: 2026 Conservation Weekend in Bluffton ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
3. Historic Bluffton Arts & Seafood Festival: 2026 Arts & Seafood Festival ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
4. Old Town Bluffton Merchants Society: Marketing Bluffton as a Destination ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
5. Society of Bluffton Artists: FY2027 Marketing Campaign ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
6. Congregation Beth Yam: 2026 Hanukkah Celebration in Bluffton ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
7. BlacQuity SC: 2026 Roots & Rivers Festival ATAC Staff Report, Grant Application, and Scoring Sheet
8. Previously Funded Grant Awards and Expenditures Updates