

# **INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, SMALL BUSINESS, AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

## **Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2025 Interim**

**June 18, 2025**

### **Call to Order and Roll Call**

The first meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Tourism, Small Business, and Information Technology was held jointly with the Interim Joint Committee on Economic Development and Workforce Investment on June 18, 2025, at 9:00 AM in the Hotel Covington Lightwell Ballroom in Covington, KY. Senator Phillip Wheeler, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

### **Present were:**

Members: Senator Phillip Wheeler, Co-Chair; Representatives Deanna Gordon, Co-Chair; Kim King, Co-Chair; Senators Shelley Funke Frommeyer, Rick Girdler, Scott Madon, Matt Nunn, Reginald L. Thomas, Mike Wilson, Max Wise, and David Yates; and Representatives Shane Baker, Ryan Dotson, Chris Fugate, Daniel Grossberg, John Hodgson, Nima Kulkarni, Matthew Lehman, Chris Lewis, Mary Lou Marzian, Shawn McPherson, Adam Moore, Michael Sarge Pollock, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Aaron Thompson, Joshua Watkins, Bill Wesley, Mitch Whitaker, Richard White, Nick Wilson, and Susan Witten.

Guests: Kris Knochelmann, Kenton County Judge/Executive; Ron Washington, Mayor of Covington; Dave Knox, Executive Director, Blue North; Keith Casebolt, CEO, CMH23; Julie Kirkpatrick, President and CEO, meetNKY; and Terri Bernstein, Owner, BB Riverboats.

LRC Staff: Janine Coy, Christian Deeter, Austin Johnson, and Sasche Allen.

### **Welcome**

Kris Knochelmann, Kenton County Judge/Executive, and Ron Washington, Mayor of Covington, welcomed members to the region.

### **Supporting High Growth Entrepreneurship**

Dave Knox, Executive Director, Blue North, testified on behalf of KY Innovation Hubs and other regional entrepreneurial partners. Blue North is one of six designated entrepreneurial hubs in the Commonwealth. He discussed state-level initiatives and support systems to retain founders in the Commonwealth, stressing ecosystem-building across capital, talent, and infrastructure. Mr. Knox provided an overview of both regional and statewide innovation landscapes and emphasized collaboration among hubs, investors, and

government stakeholders to enhance support for startups and small businesses and to become more competitive with surrounding states. Additionally, he highlighted SparkHaus, an entrepreneurial hub under construction in Covington, that will centralize startups, investors, and support services to boost collaboration and innovation in Northern Kentucky.

Answering Senator Funke Frommeyer, Mr. Knox compared risk capital versus venture capital.

Responding to Representative Kulkarni, Mr. Knox discussed the “Silver Tsunami”, a concept that refers to the significant number of Baby Boomer business owners approaching retirement. He also explained the funding mechanisms and entrepreneurial supports of the Global Entrepreneur in Residence (EIR) program, which operates in partnership with universities leveraging H-1B Visas.

Addressing Representative Lockett, Mr. Knox further detailed the “Silver Tsunami” phenomenon and said no states are evaluating its progression or potential effects. Most analysis has been performed by colleges, universities, and private stakeholders.

Replying to Senator Wise, Mr. Knox discussed the Governor’s School for Entrepreneurs and the potential benefits of expanding the program. He also said updating the innovation hub statutes would be advantageous to the entrepreneurial sector.

Answering Representative Lehman, Mr. Knox highlighted states with emerging high performing entrepreneurial sectors such as Michigan, Utah, and Tennessee.

### **CMH23**

Keith Casebolt, CEO, CMH23, discussed leveraging the “Country Music Highway”, which runs through seven counties in Eastern Kentucky, to drive economic growth. He proposed launching a dedicated radio-television channel focused on music of the region. His goal is to inject approximately \$700 million into the economy. The strategy involves syndicating content from the Country Music Highway channel across the state at no cost to broadcasters. By highlighting the musical legacy and attractions of Eastern Kentucky, the initiative aims to position the region as a major cultural and tourism destination.

### **Large Festival Events and Talent Attraction - America's River Roots in NKY**

Senator Shelley Funke Frommeyer; Julie Kirkpatrick, President and CEO of meetNKY; and Terri Bernstein, Owner of BB Riverboats, provided an update on America’s River Roots Festival taking place in October 2025. The four-day event will be hosted along the Ohio riverfronts of Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport, marking the kickoff to America’s 250th celebration. The festival is projected to attract more than one million visitors with an

estimated \$150 million economic impact while merging music, cuisine, riverboat cruises, and heritage programming to spotlight the region's river legacy.

**Adjournment**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned.