



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
January 25, 2024 @ 8:15 a.m.**

**Regular Meeting**

**1. The meeting was called to order at 8:17 a.m. by Cindy Garren.**

**Roll Call**

Council Members Present:

Cindy Garren (Acting Chair)  
Josh Stewart  
Charles Wilson

Maritza Cristiensen  
Christine Hatfield

Council Members Absent:

Commissioner Campbell  
Andy Kesling

Elizabeth Worley

Also, Present:

Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator  
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC  
Lauren Hartog, Madden Media  
Brandon Gunn, Parks & Facilities Director  
Lydia Capote, Tru by Hilton/Residence Inn Sebring

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum was present. Ms. Garren established that the meeting was properly noticed.

**2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of October 26, 2023.**

Ms. Garren inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of October 26, 2023. Ms. Hatfield made a motion, seconded by Mr. Wilson to approve the meeting minutes. All Council members voted aye to approve the minutes. The motion carried.

**3. Financial and Office Reports**

Tourist Development Council Meeting Minutes of January 25, 2024

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue and office reports that showed a balance total of \$1,933,826.47 for the entirety of FY22/23, an almost 20% increase over the previous FY.

Council members received detailed printouts of financial and office reports. Council members had no questions on the financial or office reports.

#### **4. Marketing and Event Updates**

##### **A. Marketing and Public Relations Update**

Casey Hartt presented the Highlands County Tourist Development Council Marketing update that included the information on 2023 Media Highlights; Staff Outreach & Events; and a 2023-2024 Budget Update.

###### *1. 2023 Media Highlights*

Ms. Hartt presented highlights reported from MuchPR, the TDC's contracted PR agency. The highlights included more than 220 earned media articles/mentions in 2023, with 102 for Caladium Festival and 79 for the Sebring Soda Festival specifically. Priority messaging was reached in outlets including Travel + Leisure, Thrillist, Fox, AAA, Yahoo, Journal de Montral, Southern Travel + Lifestyles, Authentic Florida and more – many of these stemming from hosting media in the area in 2023 and years prior.

##### **B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media**

Ms. Hartog presented a FY24 Q1 recap of the efforts made by Madden Media on digital marketing and campaigns for Visit Sebring, as well as continued plans for FY24. Council members received detailed printouts of the reports. Ms. Hartog noted that a key takeaway from the metrics shown are that the story of the city's Downtowns is something people are interested in. Madden plans to continue with the "Bring It" campaign, as it is continuing to perform well.

##### **C. Sports Tourism Update from Airstream Ventures**

Mr. Verlander presented an update on Airstream Ventures Sports Tourism efforts for Highlands County. Mr. Verlander provided updates on events brought to Highlands County in the past contract year, those already booked for the upcoming contract year, and those they are in serious talks or beginning conversation with about coming to the Sebring area. He noted that of the 5 upcoming conferences their team will be attending, one in October will feature all the presidents and CEOs of national governing bodies (NGB) for sports, which he is extra excited about after hosting USA Lacrosse in Sebring last year, and discussions with more NGB's of late.

Members were provided a printout of sporting events coming to Highlands County in 2024, currently showing roughly 30 events, 22 of which would potentially receive TDC funding, and with more to come.

## 5. Items for Voting

### A. 2023-2024 TDC Budget Amendment Recommendations

Ms. Hartt presented a budget update to the TDC members. There was no change to the overall budget, and so no vote for an amendment was needed.

### B. Facility Funding Request in the amount of \$37,500

Ms. Hartt provided a presentation on the TDC's Sports Tourism Assessment & Study History from 2020 – 2024 to help recap the path the TDC has taken thus far in sports tourism and facility enhancement/development. A printout was included in member's packets. One key component was that the collection of the "3<sup>rd</sup> penny" was originally intended for future facility enhancement/development, something TDC Staff was wanting to reaffirm is the direction the TDC members want to proceed in. Ms. Hartt also reminded that the proposed plan for facility enhancement at the Highlands County Fairgrounds would halt if the Fair Association would not be awarded the grant they applied for from the State under a DEO grant program utilizing repurposed ARPA funds.

Ms. Hartt shared that an alternative opportunity has recently come forward. A letter of intent from a local property owner was included in the TDC members' packets. The letter explained the property owner and their business partner acquired 600 acres within the county and is seeking to development as a mixture of retail, mixed residential and commercial with hotels and restaurants. They explained they are interested in donating a piece of the property to the County/TDC for development of an indoor sports and recreation facility.

Ms. Hartt explained the plans are very early and basic currently. With that in mind, Jason Boudrie of Synergy Sports, who the TDC recently worked with the Feasibility Study for an indoor facility, suggested the TDC complete a Business Financial Plan, and to make the plan transferable throughout the county rather than being tied to a specific piece of property. A proposal for the business plan was included in TDC member packets.

A formal motion or vote was not needed, as the funding for the Business Financial Plan was included in the approved TDC budget already. Staff simply requested a consensus from members that the development of an indoor facility is the direction they want to continue in. Members confirmed yes, this is the path they want to continue down.

### C. Parks & Recreation Department request for financial assistance in the amount of up to \$50,000 for an Automatic Field Lining Machine for Highlands County Sports Complex

Mr. Gunn presented a request for the TDC to purchase a robotic field striping machine by manufacturer SWOZI to assist in lining the field at the Highlands County Sports Complex for sporting events, which would benefit the sports complex personnel and broaden the variety of events the sports complex could host. Mr. Gunn answered questions from TDC members.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield, to approve funding up to \$50,000 for the purchase of SWOZI automatic field striping unit.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### D. Request from Florida Medal of Honor Memorial

Item 5D was removed from the agenda with intention to return at a later date.

#### E. USFA Softball Multi-Event New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a request from United States Fastpitch Association (USFA) for 6 new softball tournaments to be held at the Highlands County Sports Complex annually, the financial request being:

Year 1 (2024): \$60,000 (\$12,000 base + \$48,000 room night) = \$10,000/tourn.

Year 2 (2025): \$57,000 (\$9,000 base + \$48,000 room night) = \$9,500/tourn.

Year 3 (2026): \$57,000 (\$9,000 base + \$48,000 room night) = \$9,500/tourn.

Mr. Verlander explained USFA are hosting events at the sports complex throughout January, February, and March as well, with USFA understanding the TDC does not fund events during those months. He felt with that in mind, the County is benefiting from a lot of events, without having to pay the organization for some of the events through TDC grants.

Ms. Hatfield made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve the New Event Grant request for \$60,000 in 2024, \$57,000 in 2025 and \$57,000 in 2026 from United States Fastpitch Association (USFA) for 6 new youth softball tournaments held at the Highlands County Sports Complex in 2024, 2025 and 2026.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

## **6. Old Business/Discussion**

### A. Istokpoga Fishing Tournament Improvement Projects Update

Ms. Sauls provided an update to the members on the progress of the Istokpoga Park project. She explained that the County's Road and Bridge department would be executing the construction portion of the project. Included within the agenda packets were a couple of photos showing construction progress at the site.

### B. Tourism Award Nominations & Award Luncheon

Ms. Hartt shared that the award nominations are open until March 10<sup>th</sup>, and that an awards luncheon will be held in May with date TBA. She encouraged members to nominate individuals for the awards. The 8 categories are:

- Attraction Service Champion

- Hotel Service Champion
- Restaurant Service Champion
- Rising Star Champion
- Volunteer Champion
- Innovation Champion
- Sports Tourism Champion
- Humanitarian Champion

Nominations can be made at <https://visitsebring.com/tourism-awards/>.

### C. National Travel & Tourism Week, May 7-13

Ms. Hartt shared that staff is hoping to host the Tourism Awards Luncheon during the week. She also shared that staff is also speaking with Madden Media and other partners about fun things to engage the community during that week and make them more aware of the impact tourism has on the local community.

## **7. Public Input**

No input from the public.

## **8. Board Member Roundtable**

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

Mr. Stewart shared that the City of Sebring is going to be looking at a redesign of the waterfront at the pier on Lake Jackson sometime in the next two years, and questioned if there would be a tourism impact if there was a boat ramp to Lake Jackson included at that site. Ms. Hartt felt it would, but commented that in prior discussions there was possible concern of issue if there were boats moving in an area with people swimming nearby.

Ms. Garren reminded members of nominations for the tourism awards being due on March 10<sup>th</sup> and the next TDC meeting being April 25<sup>th</sup>.

## **9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events**

- A. Tourism Award Nomination Deadline, March 10  
*Nominate at [VisitSebring.com/Tourism-Awards](https://visitsebring.com/tourism-awards/)*
- B. AJGA Visit Sebring Preview, April 12-14
- C. Pro Watercross, April 19-21
- D. TDC Meeting, April 25**
- E. Crabs Club Lacrosse Showcase, May 18-19
- F. USA Lacrosse Event, May 25-26
- G. Florida Prep Lacrosse Tournament, June 7-9 (Pending)
- H. ACL Cornhole State Tournament, June 14-16
- I. Drag Boat Racing at Lake June, September 5-7 (Potential)
- J. Motosurf, September 25-29

- K. GFNY Cycling & Marathon, Oct 20-21
- L. Visit Sebring Classic with MLGT, Fall 2024 Date TBD
- M. Citrus Golf Trail Open, Fall 2024 Date TBD
- N. Spartan Trifecta Weekend, December 7-8
- O. Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational, December Dates TBD

## **10. Adjournment**

Ms. Garren adjourned the meeting at 9:40 a.m.

For all backup documents, please contact Highlands County Public Information Office  
863-402-6500.