



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
January 26, 2023 @ 8:15 a.m.**

**Regular Meeting**

**1. The meeting was called to order at 8:18 a.m. by Cindy Garren.**

Gloria Rybinski, the Highlands County Public Information Officer, presented a Sunshine Law Training Video to the Council Members and meeting attendees.

**Roll Call**

**Council Members Present:**

Kacey Mee  
Mark Stewart  
Charles Wilson

Cindy Garren  
Maritza Christiansen  
Vici Pontius

**Council Members Absent:**

Christine Hatfield, John Story, Commissioner Campbell

**Also, Present:**

Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator  
D. Matt Raulerson, Assistant County Attorney  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC.  
Kate Strickland, Wander Media  
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media  
Lauren Hartog, Madden Media  
Charlette Ganas, Hardee County

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

**2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of October 27th, 2022.**

Ms. Garren inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of October 27th, 2022. Mr. Wilson made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart to approve the meeting minutes. All Council members voted aye to approve the minutes. The motion carried.

### 3. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Garren and Ms. Hartt presented the revenue reports that showed a balance total for FY 21/22, through FY 22 end of \$1,577,049.17. Council members received detailed printouts of financial reports. Council members had no questions on the financial reports. Ms. Hartt noted that the 3<sup>rd</sup> penny account was at almost \$1.5 million and that the Lakes account was at \$240,866.19 and was earmarked for the Istokpoga Park Project. October 2022 was the highest revenue for the month of October yet, with a revenue of \$198,813.41.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve the financial reports as presented. All Council members voted aye to approve the financial and office reports. The motion carried.

### 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 2021 Economic Impact Report from Visit Florida; Industry, PR and Media Outreach; Staff Outreach & Events; the 2022-2023 Budget Update; and the 2023 Tourism Winner's Circle Awards.

#### *1. 2021 Economic Impact Report*

Ms. Hartt pointed out that total visitor spending for 2021 was almost \$250 million. IT was a 17.1% increase over 2020, but only a 0.2% increase from 2019, pre-Covid. Ms. Hartt shared her though that 2021 was still a recovery year for the County's tourism industry, and good to see us bounce back so quickly. She does expect 2022 to be a record number.

#### *2. 2023 Winner's Circle Tourism Awards*

Ms. Hartt shared that the 2023 Winner's Circle Tourism Award Nominations were now open. The deadline for nomination submissions is March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023. She encouraged all TDC members to submit a nomination for someone. People previously nominated can be resubmitted for the same or another category. Award Categories are: Hotel, Restaurant, Attraction, Volunteer, Innovation, Rising Star, Sports and Humanitarian. Winners will be announced at Tourism Luncheon in May 2023. Link to submit [here](#).

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

Jen Carlisle and Lauren Hartog of Madden Media presented a report on last quarter's marketing performance. They reported that overall traffic is showing down in numbers, but with contractual switch to Madden, they were unable to begin tracking number of users until November. However, data was showing that engagement of those visiting the site is up in numbers, which is a great thing. They noted that even though we might not be getting as many visitors just yet, the people visiting are spending more time on the website and visiting on

average 5 pages per user, which they described as an incredible number. They provided a breakdown and details of the different markets website users are coming from, the way in which they are using the website and tactics the Madden team has begun using and will build upon in coming months to bring in more users. They shared updates on the content and paid advertisements they have implemented and the campaigns they are working on to roll out in the coming seasons.

### C. Sports Events Update from Airstream Ventures

Alan Verlander presented a sports tourism quarterly report. Mr. Verlander provided an update on the sporting events recruited by Airstream Ventures (ASV) for the Highlands County area. He noted that his team will be attending a variety of sports conferences in the coming year, connecting with a variety of event organizers interested in bringing their events to the Highlands County area. He noted that they are starting to get calls from sport event organizers and seeing that the Sports community is becoming more aware of Highlands County and its offerings.

Mr. Verlander provided a recap of the Spartan race held in early December 2022, looking at overviews of the different locations which the many participants traveled from to compete in Sebring.

Ms. Pontius complimented Mr. Verlander for all that he and his team are doing for Highlands County.

### D. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update from Wander Media

Kate Strickland with Wander Media provided an update on the marketing campaigns and content she has been working on for the Citrus Golf Trail. They are seeing growth across the board in followers and engagement. She also shared a short clip from the video footage her team shot in November and is currently editing and piecing together to be used by CGT, the CGT members, and Visit Sebring.

## **5. Items for Voting**

### A. Youth Lacrosse Tournament (April 7-8, 2023)

Mr. Verlander presented a request for a New Event grant for the Youth Lacrosse Tournament in the amount of \$26,500.00 for 2023 (\$20,000 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at \$20/night)), \$16,500.00 for 2024 (\$10,000 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at \$20/night)) and \$16,500.00 for 2025 (\$10,000 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at \$20/night)). Based on the application, the TDC staff scored the event at being eligible for 75% of the requested grant funds.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Mee to recommend approval of the grant with funding up to \$21,500.00 for 2023 (\$15,000 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at \$20/night)), \$14,000.00 for 2024 (\$7,500 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at

\$20/night)) and \$14,000.00 for 2025 (\$7,500 (grant) + \$6,500 (325 verified room nights at \$20/night)). Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for venue rental, event officials, digital marketing, equipment rental and insurance. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

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

### A. Tourism & Recreational Facility planning Grant Update

Leah Sauls provided an update on the grant being received from DEO for the Tourism and Recreational Facility Study. She shared that everything was still meeting the timeline. Huddle Up Group would be conducting facility study and Central Florida Regional Planning Council is surveying visitors, event organizers and the community. There was a sample flyer for the survey provided in the TDC members' packets.

Ms. Garren asked how and to whom the survey would be distributed to. Ms. Sauls shared they the survey would be shared online through websites and social media, as well as different places in the community that people frequent, such as hotels, Chambers of Commerce, libraries, government centers, tourist attractions, like the Alan Jay Wildstein Center for Performing Arts, museums, Highlands Hammock and more.

### B. Update: TDC Board Member Terms

Ms. Sauls shared that the TDC Board Members term expirations were included in the packets they received for the meeting. Four members terms will be expiring in 2023 and if they desire to continue on the council, would need to submit an application and be approved by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC).

Ms. Pontius inquired the length and amount of terms allowed to serve. Ms. Sauls confirmed that it is the standard policy that members can serve up to two four-year terms, then roll off the advisory boards. She shared that the BOCC adopted a secondary policy that if it is a field that requires prior knowledge or experience, the staff can write a letter stating the importance of why a specific board member should continue into a third term.

Ms. Pontius inquired when the TDC Staff would begin soliciting for applications for new members. Ms. Sauls clarified that the Staff would be notifying the BOCC of the vacancies first, then would begin accepting applications. The application portal is open year-round, and if the advisory board they are interested does not have any vacancies at the time, they are essentially wait listed until there is a vacancy before being put for consideration before BOCC.

### C. Istokpoga Fishing Tournament Projects Update

Ms. Sauls provided an update on the projects taking place at Istokpoga Park on Lake Istokpoga. In TDC members' packets there was notes from the most recent site-meeting at Istokpoga Park which provides some status updates on where things currently stand. Fishing Tournament directors expressed a desire to widen the parking lot/boat ramp entrance, which Ms. Sauls noted

would be a completely different project to the standing work being looked at for the parking lot, so the departments involved are in the very initial stages of looking at what this would entail. She stated that when there are more details and research done, the TDC staff would put this before the TDC members for consideration.

ADA accessibility at the boat ramp is another aspect being looked at for improvements to the site.

#### D. Tourism Award Nominations and Luncheon

Ms. Hartt reminded everyone the deadline is March 10<sup>th</sup> for Tourism Award Nominations to be submitted and encouraged all to submit nominees. She shared that there are 8 different categories, and descriptions for each can be found on the Visit Sebring website. [Winner's Circle Tourism Awards - Visit Sebring Florida](#)

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

Ms. Hartt reminded that the first Tourism Awards Ceremony and Luncheon was held during the National Travel & Tourism Week, and that she hopes to bring that back and some more engagements as well to highlight the week. She shared that there sometimes seems to be a disconnect between our front-line tourism workers in the area, and the different offerings that the community has for visitors to do. She hopes to come up with some ideas in how to get the front-line workers out to experience the attractions so they can share these with visitors in the future.

Kacey Mee shared that the hotel teams occasionally struggle to find a source that highlights all the events happening in the community for any given week/weekend. Ms. Hartt noted that she would share a link with Ms. Mee to the Visit Sebring website Event section, and that any events relayed to the TDC staff are shared on that portal. The importance of event organizers sharing that information with the TDC staff so that they can be sure to get it on the Event page was also mentioned. [Upcoming Events in Sebring, FL | Visit Sebring](#)

### **7. Public Input**

Time was made available for Public Input.

### **8. Board Member Roundtable**

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

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

- A. Stakeholder Meetings/MuchPR Visit: March 8-10
- B. Tourism Award Nomination Deadline: March 10
- C. Sebring Soda Festival: April 7-8
- D. AJGA Visit Sebring Preview: April 14-16
- E. TDC Board Meeting: April 27, 2023
- F. Prowatercross, Lake Jackson/Veterans Beach: May 5-7
- G. FAWA Sunshine State Clubs Championship: May 5-7
- H. Motosurf/Motoskate: September 1-3

## **10. Adjournment**

Ms. Garren adjourned the meeting at 9:47 a.m.

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