



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

Draft Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:15 a.m. by Cindy Garren.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:
Cindy Garren (Acting Chair)
Josh Stewart
Andy Kesling

Elizabeth Worley
Charles Wilson

Council Members Absent:
Commissioner Campbell
Christine Hatfield

Maritza Cristiansen
Victoria Currence

Also, Present:
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media
Jason Boudrie, Synergy Sports Global
Cherie Bortnick, Spartan Race, Inc.
Ray Royce, Lake Placid Town Council
Nell Frewin-Hays, Lake Placid Town Council
Phil Attinger, Highlands News-Sun
Austin Maddox, Highlands County Fair Association

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum was present. Ms. Garren established that the meeting was properly noticed, and recognized guest presenter, Jason Boudrie.

2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of August 10th, 2023.

Ms. Garren inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of August 10th, 2023. 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.

Presentation of Sports Tourism Award to Spartan

Tourist Development Council Meeting Minutes of October 26, 2023

Ms. Hartt presented the award for Sports Tourism Champion to Cherie Bortnick of Spartan Race, Inc. Award ceremony was held on May 17th, 2023.

3. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue and office reports that showed a balance total of \$1,565,357.61 for FY22/23 through May.

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

Ms. Fultz provided update that the TDC office would be moving to the Highlands County Sports Complex. She confirmed all contact information would remain the same.

At the request of presenters with time constraints, the presentations for items 4C and 6A took place at this time in the meeting

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 Governor's Conference Highlights; Staff Outreach & Events; and a 2022-2023 Budget Summary and 2023-2024 Budget Update.

1. Governor's Conference on Tourism Recap

Ms. Hartt presented highlights from the Governor's Conference on Tourism she and Ms. Fultz attended on Sept. 7-9, 2023. Hospitality was the topic of one key speaker, suggesting that hospitality is about business, and in the future, all business will be hospitality. Adventure Travel is an emerging area of interest for VISIT FLORIDA and the TDC Staff is holding an Adventure Travel Stakeholder Meeting on Nov. 9 with representatives from VISIT FLORIDA. Ms. Hartt also listed macro and micro trends for travel marketing.

B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media

Ms. Carlisle presented a FY23 end recap of the efforts made by Madden Media on digital marketing and campaigns for Visit Sebring, as well as plans for FY24. Council members received detailed printouts of the reports.

Ms. Garren commented that she particularly likes the "Bring It" campaign. She also inquired if there were any recommendations from Madden for the TDC to consider in the future. Ms. Carlisle explained the biggest opportunity in would be development of a commercial airport, and that in the meantime, focusing on major drive markets is the best option for Madden's destination marketing efforts. She also mentioned as the TDC focuses more on sports, this gives more opportunity for Madden to lean into marketing the leisure travel piece of Highlands County to the visitors coming here for sports.

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.

Ms. Garren asked how rugby might impact the condition of the flat fields. Mr. Verlander confirmed it would be same as any other field sport, like soccer or lacrosse.

Mr. Kesling asked what type of teams are represented on in the rugby event. Mr. Verlander answered that it is adult recreational teams from all over the south and Florida.

Mr. Kesling also asked how ultimate frisbee is different from disc golf. Mr. Verlander described ultimate frisbee as football with frisbee played on athletic fields, scoring touchdowns, etc. while disc golf is played more like the traditional game of golf.

Mr. Kesling complimented Mr. Verlander on the job Airstream Ventures is doing.

5. Items for Voting

A. Spartan Grant Request

Ms. Bortnick presented a request from Spartan Race Inc. for a High Impact Signature Event Grant of \$90,000.00 per year for the 2024 – 2026 Annual Spartan Trifecta Weekend in Highlands County, FL. Ms. Bortnick made comment complimenting the work that the Council and staff does, emphasizing that what they are doing as a rural community is light years ahead of the other rural communities they work in. She highlighted the Council's current work and efforts to create a sports-friendly indoor facility within the County, commenting that youth sports are the biggest thing in the country, and so creating the space to capitalize on that will have a positive domino effect on the growth of the community, and she finds that to be extremely forward thinking of the Council.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Mr. Wilson, to approve the High Impact Signature Event Grant request from Spartan Race, Inc. for the 2024-2026 Annual Spartan Trifecta Weekend in Highlands County, FL. For Years 1, 2 and 3 (2024, 2025 and 2026), applicant will receive up to \$90,000.00 each year based on verified room nights (up 4,500 verified room nights at \$20/room night). Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for marketing expenses and facility rental fees. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

B. GFNY Grant Request

Ms. Hartt phoned in GFNY President, Lidia Fluhme, to answer any questions of the grant application. Ms. Fultz provided background to the council members that this grant

application is intended to replace the grant revision requests that the TDC had voted to approve in their last meeting. She explained the county's legal team informed the staff they could not revise the existing grant contract as requested and would instead need a new grant application and contract made.

Council members had no questions.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Worley, to approve the High Impact Signature Event Grant request from Gran Fondo New York for the 2024-2028 Annual GFNY Sebring Endurance Sport Festival in Highlands County, FL. For Years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (2024, 2025, 2026, 2027 and 2028), applicant will receive up to \$90,000.00 each year based on verified room nights (up 4,500 verified room nights at \$20/room night). Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for MOT & Traffic control & Light towers;

Promotional items/shirts for athletes (including customs & shipping of items to race); Facility rental; Marketing & graphic design; Post-race meal for athletes; A/V and DJ services; and Trophies. Promotional items/shirts and trophies to include Visit Sebring logo, and designs to be pre-approved by TDC staff. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

C. TDC Chair for 2023-2024

Ms. Hartt opened the item for Council Members to discuss their nomination for TDC Chair for 2024. Mr. Stewart made motion, second by Mr. Kesling, to appoint Commissioner Campbell as the TDC Chair for 2024.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

D. 2024 TDC Meeting Dates

Ms. Hartt presented potential meeting dates for 2024. Mr. Stewart made motion, seconded by Ms. Worley, to set the schedule as follows for the 2024 TDC meeting dates:

Thursday, January 25, 2024
Thursday, April 25, 2024
Thursday, August 8, 2024
Thursday, October 31, 2024

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

6. Old Business/Discussion

A. Tourism & Recreation Facility Study Update

Mr. Boudrie presented his company findings in their feasibility study of the Highlands County area regarding a potential indoor recreational/sport facility. The entire presentation was recorded and can be found at <https://visitsebring.com/about/> or <https://youtu.be/hhDd0BsEiPs>.

B. Stakeholder Updates

Ms. Hartt provided an update on stakeholder meetings that TDC staff has recently held and will be hosting in near future, including a Recreation Meeting. She noted that TDC Staff had been working with the IFAS Extension Office and the Florida Agritourism Association on an Agritourism Educational Series that didn't quite fill up, so will be revisited. She also noted that the Citrus Golf Trail meets bi-monthly.

Notes from the September 18th Hotel and Accommodations Stakeholder Meeting featuring a presentation from Civitas on Tourism Improvement Districts were included in Council Member packets, as well as the invitation sent for the November 9th Adventure Tourism Stakeholder Meeting.

7. Public Input

Mr. Royce asked if it is anticipated that TDC funds will be used in subsequent years for athletic field enhancements for county facilities or if that was a one-time deal. Mr. Stewart commented that from his understanding that \$200,000 that was provided to the county this year is not necessarily locked in, but depends on the Commissioners each year. Mr. Royce commented that if that is going to be a use of funding, that there may be other facilities that may want to seek similar equipment enhancements beyond county-owned facilities.

Mr. Royce asked if the \$4 Million grant from the Florida Commerce Office of Broad Band is awarded to the Highlands County Fair Association for the construction of a new facility (as discussed in the Presentation of Item 6A by Jason Boudrie of Synergy Sports), that that facility would be wholly owned and managed by the Fair Association. Ms. Hartt confirmed that, but also noted that there would be an operating agreement. Mr. Royce questioned if the determination from TDC and County Commission on if they are going to enter into a significant expenditure of TDC funds to supplement to operations of the facility or to perhaps become a lessee would come after the grant is extended, that the. Ms. Hartt confirmed that the intention would be to wait for the outcome of the grant application before those conversations are had, and looking at the potential of making the facility to the specs of a special needs shelter and if there would be additional county or outside funding available for that purpose.

Mr. Royce commented that he felt the greater population of Highlands County's concern would be if the Sebring Fireman (Highlands County Fair Association) are receiving a new facility and if public dollars are involved, that there is an opportunity for other uses of the facility beyond what it's currently used for.

Ms. Hartt clarified that on Mr. Royce's previous topic, that per the State Statute on usage of TDC Funds for maintenance of facilities, that the facility is used predominately for tourism.

Mr. Royce asked if there would still be a review of potential use of enhancement of other outdoor facilities. Ms. Hartt shared that she felt the TDC has been working in a funnel from the 2020 Sports Tourism Audit to the early 2023 Recreation Facility study to the current Feasibility Study of an indoor facility, narrowing down to what is needed in the community to support sports tourism.

8. Board Member Roundtable

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

Mr. Kesling emphasized that he's a big proponent of an indoor facility, and feels it's solely based on the track record the TDC has with Airstream Ventures in the revenue they've been able to make for the county.

Ms. Hartt added that while staff is aware there are arguably some issues with a facility at the Fairgrounds, regarding parking, the county not owning the facility, and more. But to fast track getting an indoor facility that supports sports tourism in the county, the Fairgrounds is the most workable solution to make this happen within the next two years. Otherwise, there would be added timelines of purchasing land, adding infrastructure and more.

Mr. Stewart updated on the topic of connecting the sports complex to the City of Sebring sewer system that the Sebring Utilities is working with County Engineering to figure out cost for that to be able to bring forth. Ms. Hartt provided background that this conversation came up with Mr. Stewart during discussions of the sports complex flat field restroom facilities being built to residential rather than commercial specs, resulting in large scale event organizers having to supplement the restroom facilities with port-a-lets, and how that's not the most ideal situation from a tourism perspective.

9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- A. Adventure Stakeholder Meeting, Nov. 9
- B. ING Fall Forum, Nov. 10-12
- C. Citrus Golf Trail (CGT) Open with MLGT, Nov. 13-15
- D. Spartan Race, Dec. 2-3
- E. CGT Ladies Invitational, Dec. 27-31
- F. TDC Meeting & 2023 TDT Collections Update, Jan. 25

10. Adjournment

Ms. Garren adjourned the meeting at 9:54 a.m.

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