



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

Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:15 a.m. by Commissioner Campbell.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:

Commissioner Campbell (Chair)
Lydia Capote
Andy Kesling

Maritza Cristiansen
Cindy Garren
Elizabeth (Worley) Compton

Council Members Absent:

Josh Stewart

Christine Hatfield

Also, Present:

Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC
Lane Teitelbaum, Airstream Ventures, LLC
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media
Alex Noto, Madden Media
Jason Boudrie, Synergy Sports
Daniel Veale, Sebring Youth Baseball
Kayla Selander, Tru by Hilton
Sergio Duran, Avon Park Youth Baseball
Kevin Roberts, County Commissioner
Scott Kirouac, County Commissioner
Kevin McCarthy, Town of Lake Placid

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

2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of January 25, 2024.

Commissioner Campbell inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of January 25, 2024, to which there were none.

3. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue and office reports that showed a balance total of \$440,776.50 October – December for FY 23/24. She highlighted the dip in October's numbers being expected as October 2022 saw record high collections as result of high occupancy in hotels in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian.

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

Ms. Fultz provided update that in no longer being on Lake Placid Town Council, Charlie Wilson would not be able to complete his term on the TDC. She shared that Lake Placid expressed interest in putting forth another member to complete the term, and that once received, that appointment would go before the BOCC for approval.

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 the Destinations Florida Conference; Q2 Media and PR Highlights; Staff Outreach & Events; and a 2023-2024 Budget Update.

1. Update from STR at Destinations Florida Conference

Ms. Hartt presented highlights reported from Smith Travel Research (STR) at the early-April Destinations Florida conference. The highlights included domestic hotels having resurgence of competition with cruises and international travel in post-Covid environment, as well as Florida occupancy levels trending below 2019 and 2023 numbers. Takeaways included the lower numbers being a sign of normalization post-Covid, demand continuing to grow slowly, rebounds in group travel with leisure travel fatiguing, travel returning to major markets, and domestic competition ramping up for Florida specific with other states and destinations.

2. Public Relations Update

Ms. Hartt shared that FY24 Q2 was the strongest PR quarter she'd seen in her time with the TDC. She provided commentary on the major stories and pitches that MuchPR had landed for Highlands County, many of the stories thanks to TDC and local partners hosting Terry Ward and her family in early January, as well as the interest in Sebring thanks to HGTV.

B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media

Jen Carlisle presented a FY24 Q2 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. Carlisle noted a 60.1% increase in Engaged Sessions on VisitSebring.com YOY, and 91% increase in Engagement Rate, and an 8.4% in Average Session Duration on the website.

Ms. Garren asked Ms. Carlisle in her opinion why website leads would be dropping when PR is increasing, and engagement duration is increasing. Ms. Carlisle commented that leads do fluctuate on website naturally, especially when once users get the information they want, they go off to other sites to finish their bookings for travel to the area. Ms. Carlisle shared that Madden is working building awareness of the destination through the website, but if leads become a priority, their team can change the direction. Ms. Garren asked if Ms. Carlisle felt the website needed to be updated or enhanced. Ms. Carlisle confirmed it does. Ms. Hartt clarified that updating the website is in the budget, and that county's legal team was currently reviewing a contract to get that started.

C. Sports Tourism Update from Airstream Ventures

Alan Verlander presented an update on Airstream Ventures Sports Tourism efforts for Highlands County. Mr. Verlander provided updates on a conference he'd just returned from, events brought to Highlands County so far in the fiscal year, those booked for the remainder of year, and those they are in serious talks or beginning conversation with about coming to the Sebring area. He also introduced Lane Teitelbaum, the Director of Sports Tourism for Airstream Ventures.

Commissioner Campbell inquired if Airstream had a ballpark figure of number of visitors generated by the events. Mr. Verlander estimated over 30,000 people.

Ms. Garren asked how Airstream figures the economic impact of the events that come to the area, if there was a standard "average dollars spent" used in the formula. Mr. Verlander confirmed they have an economic calculator that they subscribe to that provides the figures for them based on data input.

5. Items for Voting

A. Avon Park Youth Baseball Sport Event Grant Request: Requesting up to \$5,000 for Dixie Youth Baseball Tournaments, June 29 – July 2, 2024

Mr. Duran presented Avon Park Youth Baseball's Sport Event Grant request of \$5,000.00 for the 2023 Dixie Youth Baseball Tournaments to be hosted by their organization.

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve the Sport Event Grant request for \$5,000 in 2024 from Avon Park Youth Baseball Inc. for the 2023 Dixie Youth Baseball State Tournaments held at the Durrah Martin Sports Complex June 29 – July 2, 2024. All funding will be based on \$20/verified room night.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

B. Indoor Facility Business Plan Presentation & Next Steps

Mr. Boudrie provided a presentation and update on the Indoor Facility Business Plan and Next Steps. A recording of the full presentation and members' comments can be found at this link from timestamps 0:46:21 – 1:27:26: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6oQG5knmc>

Ms. Garren acknowledged this would be an ambitious project, but that she encourages County Commissioners, fellow TDC members, and community members to have vision when considering this project and the impact it could have on the community.

Commissioner Campbell acknowledged that as a County Commissioner he appreciated hearing that this facility could be realized without requiring funding from General Fund and possibly TDC.

A formal motion or vote was not needed. Staff simply requested a consensus from members that the development of an indoor facility is the direction they want to continue in, and that taking this to BOCC is the desire of the board. Members confirmed yes, this is the path they want to continue down.

C. Third Party Rental of Sports Complex

Ms. Sauls shared that the TDC Staff is looking to the TDC for direction on if the third-party rental/management of the Sports Complex was a path they wanted TDC staff to continue to pursue, and if they wanted TDC Staff to next take the discussion to the Board of County Commissioners.

Ms. Sauls directed members to a document in the TDC members' packets which provided a summarized history of the path the TDC had taken with Sports Tourism since 2020, as well as a document which provided details of three different types of potential management structures.

The Council gave unanimous consensus that they would like Staff to continue forward.

Commissioner Campbell further expressed his interest to move forward with contracting a 3rd party to manage the complex, citing costs and staffing complications being issues he's aware of at the Sport Complex and seeing this as an opportunity to get those issues off Parks & Recreation's plate.

Ms. Sauls confirmed that TDC staff would move forward, taking this topic next to County Administration, and the then County Commission, and would report back to the TDC on the outcome.

D. TDC Welcome Monuments Update & Approval/Recommendation

Ms. Hartt presented mockup designs for updating the county monuments at the north and south sides of the county on Highway 27.

Ms. Compton expressed preference of the design similar to the Visit Sebring logo, but inquired if the "Visit" part of the logo could be added into the design to feature the logo

in its entirety. Members agreed. Staff confirmed they would take the suggestions to the designer for updates.

A formal motion or vote was not needed as the project was already part of the TDC's approved budget for the fiscal year. Staff simply requested a consensus from members that based on the comments given, the "Visit Sebring" design is their preference with the mentioned changes in mind. TDC members confirmed yes.

E. Funding for Netting at Sports Complex

Ms. Sauls presented an update on the netting project at the sports complex. She explained that when initially put in the budget, Staff was estimating about \$60k for the project, but it is coming closer to \$70K, thus requiring reallocation of \$10k with a Budget Amendment.

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Ms. Capote, to approve the Budget Amendment.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

F. 2024 – 2025 TDC Preliminary Budget Recommendations

Ms. Hartt provided a Preliminary Budget for FY 24-25 to the members.

Ms. Garren questioned if there would be a contingency line item in the budget. Ms. Hartt questioned if it was meant to be a line item every year, or just a lump sum held for contingency. Ms. Garren recalled it being an annual line item. Ms. Hartt confirmed staff would investigate it.

Ms. Sauls confirmed that the budget presented would need to have a vote, as it would be going before the County Commissioners as preliminary budget, and, per state statute, any TDT funds expended must first come as recommendation from the TDC to the BOCC.

Mr. Kesling confirmed if they should plan to spend \$200k at the current sports complex on connecting the facility into the city's sewer lines if the new Sports Facility Mr. Boudrie presented on were to become reality. Commissioner Campbell explained he thought the current Sports Complex would still need to be used for larger tournaments in conjunction with the new facility. Ms. Garren and Mr. Verlander also commented that the current complex would continue to be used in the interim if the new facility were to move to construction, and that requiring tournaments to rent port-a-lets is not an ideal situation as it currently stands at the sports complex.

Mr. Kesling also commented he thought the third employee on the TDC staff is much needed and he has no problem with budgeting for that position.

Ms. Christiansen made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve the preliminary budget as presented.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

G. Airstream Ventures Contract Renewal

Ms. Sauls presented contract renewal for Airstream Ventures.

Ms. Garren commented that she would like to see clarification on item 3 of the contract, naming the contract manager as the "Visit Sebring Lead Marketing Consultant or county's designee", with her concern being the "or county's designee" verbiage. She clarified she was concerned about TDC paying for Airstream Ventures contract, if it seems like another department could be designated as manager of the contract.

Staff confirmed that they would get with County Legal team on the matter for clarification and bring the amended contract back to the TDC.

H. Gray Dog Contract Renewal

Ms. Sauls presented the contract renewal for Gray Dog.

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren, to approve the renewal of Gray Dog's contract for Lead Marketing Consultant.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

I. United Flag Football League (UFFL) New Event Grant Request

Mr. Teitelbaum presented a New Event Grant Request from the United Flag Football League for a tournament being held at the Highlands County Multi Sports Complex annually, the financial request being:

Year 1 (2024): \$17,200 (\$7,200 base and \$10,000 room nights)

Year 2 (2025): \$17,200 (\$3,600 base and \$13,600 room nights)

Year 3 (2026): \$17,200 (\$3,600 base and \$13,600 room nights)

Based on scoring of application, the event is eligible for 75% of requested base funding.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve UFFL for funding up to \$15,400 for year 1 (2024), \$16,300 for year 2 (2025) and \$16,300 for year 2 (2026).

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

J. Southern Outlaw Dragboat Association (SODA) New Event Grant Request

Mr. Teitelbaum presented a New Event Grant Request from the Southern Outlaw Dragboat Association (SODA) for their Fall Nationals event being held on Lake June annually, the financial request being:

Year 1: \$19,500 (\$9,500 base plus \$10,000 room nights)

Year 2: \$19,500 (\$4,750 base plus \$14,750 room nights)

Year 3: \$19,500 (\$4,750 base plus \$14,750 room nights)

Based on scoring of application, the event is eligible for 75% of requested base funding.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve SODA for funding up to \$17,125.00 for year #1 (2024), \$18,312.50/year for years #2 (2025) and #3 (2026).

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

J. Florida United Lacrosse New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a New Event Grant Request from Florida United Lacrosse (aka Florida Prep Lacrosse) for their Florida Blast tournament being held at the Highlands County Multi-Sport Complex annually, the financial request being:

Year 1: \$90,000 (\$20,000 base plus \$70,000 room nights)

Year 2: \$90,000 (\$10,000 base plus \$80,000 room nights)

Year 3: \$90,000 (\$10,000 base plus \$80,000 room nights)

Based on scoring of application, the event is eligible for 100% of requested base funding.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve Florida United Lacrosse for funding up to \$90,000/year for years #1 (2024), #2 (2025) and #3 (2026).

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

L. Minor League Golf Tour (MLGT) Sport Event Grant Request for Visit Sebring Classic

Mr. Verlander presented a Sport Event Grant Request from Minor League Golf Tour for their returning Visit Sebring Classic being held at Sun 'N Lake Golf Club on September 30 – October 2, 2024, the financial request being \$6,000.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve Minor League Golf Tour for funding up to \$6,000 for the 2024 Visit Sebring Classic, all funding being based on \$20/verified room night.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

M. Minor League Golf Tour Sport Event Grant Request for Citrus Golf Trail Open

Mr. Verlander presented a Sport Event Grant Request from Minor League Golf Tour for their returning Citrus Golf Trail Open being held at Sun 'N Lake Golf Club on November 5-8, 2024, the financial request being \$6,000.

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve Minor League Golf Tour for funding up to \$6,000 for the 2024 Citrus Golf Trail Open, all funding being based on \$20/verified room night.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

6. Old Business/Discussion

A. GFNY Update

Tourist Development Council Meeting Minutes of April 25, 2024

Ms. Fultz provided an update to TDC members that TDC staff had been notified by Lidia Fluhme, President of GFNY, that GFNY cancelled the Marathon portion of their 2024 event in Highlands County. As such, they would forfeit the grant approved in October 2023 by the TDC that would have provided funding for both their marathon and cycling event under one contract. GFNY would instead be maintaining their existing cycling only contract, which would have 2 more years of eligibility, that being for 2024 and 2025. All had been discussed and approved by the County's Legal team.

B. TDC Grant Committee Meeting Update

Ms. Fultz directed TDC members to the notes from the March 19, 2024 TDC Grant Committee meeting included within the meeting's agenda packet. She shared that a possible new model for verifying overnight attendance as an alternative to room night certifications from accommodations was proposed, and was something currently being modeled out for possibility by staff. In the case this model would not work as an alternative, staff was also looking at methods to better the hotel room certification process.

C. Istokpoga Fishing Tournament Improvement Projects Update

Ms. Sauls provided an update to TDC that the construction of the the Istokpoga Park parking lot expansion project was officially completed. Included within the agenda packets were photos showing construction before and after's at the site.

D. Tourism Award Nominations & Award Luncheon

Ms. Hartt shared that 15 award nominations were received for the Winner's Circle Tourism Awards and were being sent to three out-of-county judges for review and scoring. She also shared that instead of the typical May date for the luncheon, staff was looking at postponing the event for later in the year to invite a representative from a HGTV Hometown Takeover destination as the luncheon speaker. In sharing this with HGTV team, they expressed their support of the idea, but asked if the event could be scheduled post-filming in the area. As staff confirms a date and speaker, they will bring the information to the TDC.

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

Ms. Hartt shared proclamations that would be going before the BOCC and municipalities recognizing May 19-25 as National Travel and Tourism Week and May 18, 2024 as "International Museum Day".

7. Public Input

No input from the public.

8. Board Member Roundtable

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- A. Pro Watercross at Veteran's Beach/Lake Jackson, May 3-5
- B. USFA Youth Softball Tournament at Highlands County Sports Complex, May 4-5
- C. High School Lacrosse Tournament at Highlands County Sports Complex, May 11-12
- D. USA Lacrosse at Highlands County Sports Complex, May 17-19
- E. International Museum Day, May 18
- F. National Travel & Tourism Week, May 19-25
- G. USFA Youth Softball Tournament at Highlands County Sports Complex, May 25-26
- H. Florida Blast Lacrosse Tournament at Highlands County Sports Complex, June 7-9 (Pending)
- I. ACL Cornhole State Tournament at Alan Jay Arena, June 14-16
- J. USFA Youth Softball Tournament at Highlands County Sports Complex, June 22-23
- K. Dixie Youth Tournaments in Avon Park, June 29 – July 2 (Pending)
- L. **TDC Quarterly Meeting, August 8**

10. Adjournment

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at 10:36 a.m.

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