



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom
Regular Meeting
April 27, 2023 @ 8:15 a.m.**

Draft Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:18 a.m. by Commissioner Campbell.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:

Commissioner Campbell
Cindy Garren
Vicki Pontius

Kacey Mee
Charles Wilson
John Story

Council Members Absent:

Christine Hatfield, Maritza Christiansen

Also, Present:

Leah Sauls, Development Services Director
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator
Kenedy Grayson, Airstream Ventures, LLC.
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media
Lauren Hartog, Madden Media
Jon Schmeider, Huddle Up Group
Don Staley, Huddle Up Group
Jennifer Codo-Salisbury, Central Florida Regional Planning Council
Beneshea Frazier, Central Florida Regional Planning Council
Matt Gose, Sebring Youth Baseball, Inc
Sergio Duran, Avon Park Baseball, Inc
Aaron Wells, USSSA Tampa, LLC
Chris Hutchins, Mosquito Creek Disc Golf
Jason Descalzo, Mosquito Creek Disc Golf

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

2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of January 26th, 2023.

Commissioner Campbell inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of January 26th, 2023. Ms. Pontius 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

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue reports that showed a balance total of \$658,761.61 for FY22/23 through January. Council members received detailed printouts of financial reports. Council members had no questions on the financial reports. Ms. Fultz explained that on request from Commissioner Elwell the TDC Staff was in the process of securing the STR report for the TDC again, but the agreement was currently in the county's Legal office for review. Ms. Pontius asked of what is begin reviewed for receiving the STR Report now as compared to receiving the report previously before the previous Director of Development Services elected to cease receiving the report. Ms. Fultz and Ms. Hartt explained that they are looking at the Terms and Conditions, and more specifically at the Trade Secrets and sharing the information amongst the board.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren, to approve the financial and office 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 2022 Data from Visit Florida; Industry, PR and Media Outreach; Staff Outreach & Events; a 2022-2023 Budget Update; and the 2023 Tourism Insights & Awards Luncheon.

1. 2022 Visit Florida Data

Ms. Hartt presented data received from Visit Florida for the year of 2022 looking at numbers on a county-specific level for Highlands County. Tampa-St. Petersburg/Sarasota was our top origin market with 22.8% of visitors coming from this area. Visitors as percent of patrons showed that visitors made up 41% of outdoor recreation patrons in Highlands County in 2022.

2. Industry, Public Relations and Media Outreach

Ms. Hartt provided a recap of the recent activities on a industry, PR and Media outreach level, one of the largest in the past quarter being the Soda Fest, where the TDC staff hosted 4 media influencers/writers for a FAM tour, touring them around the entire county and the Soda Fest. The TDC PR firm MuchPR visited in March, meeting with each municipality and touring new attractions and

businesses in the county. Summer PR focus will be on Caladium Festival, Family Fun and Watersports/lakefront enjoyment.

B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media

Jen Carlisle and Lauren Hartog of Madden Media presented a report on last quarter's marketing performance. January – March showed just under 90,000 users on the website. They reported that paid media is driving users to the Stay page on the Visit Sebring website, producing 1,050 clicks off to an accommodation partner sites in quarter 2. And website visitors from Atlanta has risen, with 5.7% of users begin from that market this quarter, as compared to 0.4% in the last year. The paid media campaign for the last quarter generated 5.2 million impressions with just over 93,000 clicks. They saw great traction with the “raceway” keyword group for this quarter, which included the Twelve Hours of Sebring race. They provided further details of the campaign performance across different platforms, as well as the upcoming campaign for Summer, using Family friendly travel, Events (Caladium Festival) and Lake & Water activities as the main pillars.

C. Sports Events Update from Airstream Ventures

Kenedy Talley-Grayson presented a sports tourism quarterly repost. Ms. Talley-Grayson provided an update on the sporting events recruited by Airstream Ventures (ASV) for the Highlands County area. She noted that her team will be attending a variety of sports conferences in the coming year, one of the biggest coming up in May at Sports ETA. She provided a recap of the 2022 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational, highlighting the 7 states that some of the total 87 golfers traveled from. She also noted that this event is a major fund raiser for the Citrus Golf Trail.

Ms. Talley-Grayson touched on some of the 11 Airstream-recruited events still to come for 2023, as well as some they are looking at for the coming years, including a Parkour Championship.

Ms. Garren asked what time of year the Parkour championship was interested in. Ms. Talley-Grayson confirmed September to October is what they're especially looking at but are a bit flexible.

D. Tourism & Recreation Facility Study Update

Moved up from Item 6A on agenda due to presenters' time constraints with travel.

Ms. Hartt started off the presentation with a bit of background on the study and previous work with Huddle Up Group in the 2020 Sports Audit Assessment of Highlands County. She explained that the current presentation is just an update on where they are at in the study, and the final results will be presented on May 17th, 2023 at the Annual tourism Luncheon (recorded and posted later for those unable to attend), with the final report due to the State on May 31st as part of the grant.

Jon Schmieder presented the Huddle Up Group's portion of the study this far. He provided background to their process and tasks in the study, including what their action items to date have been. He introduced their Sports Tourism Index which helps compare destinations to others nationwide, regionally and based on community size on a factual and data driven basis. He highlighted the jump the Highlands County has made in comparison to the 2020 assessment, more than doubling the overall score from 21.48 to 45.60 in their scoring system, and scoring above the average overall in the indexing system, Southeast region, and Under 500k markets. He noted this is a jump they've never seen any other market make in just 3 years' time. He also discussed some initial themes from Highlands County, as well as some of the national trends they are seeing in facilities, and what benchmarks event organizers are looking at for tournament friendly and anchor facilities by sport.

Jennifer Codo-Salisbury introduced the background of their organization, as well as the overview of the online recreation survey results. She noted the survey received over 3,000 responses, and 94% were residents of Highlands County with 87% of respondents saying Highlands County needs a multipurpose recreation facility.

Beneshea Frazier went into more specifics of the survey results, highlighting the different purposes of visiting Highlands County from the seasonal and visitor respondents, and the responses for which recreation facilities respondents have visited in the county in the last 12 months.

Commissioner Campbell provided comment to the Huddle Up Group in that he appreciates looking at not only building a new facility, but also enhancing some of the facilities we may currently have. He also mentioned he likes their model take the emotion out of the analysis and is based just on facts and data.

5. Items for Voting

A. USA Lacrosse Florida Hall of Fame & All-American Festival (May 19-21, 2023)

Ms. Talley-Grayson presented a request for a New Event grant for the USA Lacrosse Hall of Fame & All-American Festival in the amount of \$30,000.00 for 2023 (\$20,000 (grant) + \$10,000 (500 verified room nights at \$20/night)), \$20,000.00 for 2024 (\$10,000 (grant) + \$10,000 (500 verified room nights at \$20/night)) and \$20,000.00 for 2025 (\$10,000 (grant) + \$10,000 (500 verified room nights at \$20/night)). Based on the application, the TDC staff scored the event at being eligible for 100% of the requested grant funds. She noted that this is a nationally recognized lacrosse brand, so they were especially excited about bringing this to Highlands County as they have been working to brand the community as a lacrosse destination based on the past events they've brought in.

Ms. Garren asked a question on the location they've selected for the awards dinner, with Ms. Talley-Grayson answering that they have selected the Jack Stroup Civic Center. Ms. Garren also asked if Highlands County was not the host site, where would the event go. Ms. Talley-Grayson noted that they would find another location, and while they are based in Tampa, they would prefer to not stay in Tampa for this event. Ms. Garren also recommend revising the post-event survey that Airstream would provide

the attendees, suggesting that it be more positive, rather than a question that could lead to a negative frame of mind. Ms. Talley-Grayson noted they would be happy to do so for this event and for events going forward.

Ms. Pontius asked of the goals being used for the event. Ms. Talley-Grayson noted that the organizer would be bringing in their own goals for this event. Ms. Pontius also asked which spaces were used, if they were the green spaces or the softball fields at the Multi-Sport Complex. Ms. Talley-Grayson answered that they use five fields in the green space, with the football serving as the championship field, and the other four fields fitting in the open greenspace.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren to recommend approval of the grant with funding as requested. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for uniforms, goal rental, fields, marketing, and insurance. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

B. Sebring Youth Baseball requesting Sport Event Grant Funds up to \$7,500 for Division I State Tournament (July 7-10, 2023)

Matt Gose presented a request from Sebring Youth Baseball for a Sport Event Grant for the Dixie Youth Baseball Division I State Tournament in the amount of \$7,500. He noted that in previous years they were not making the room nights they expected, so requested that in holding the tournaments in Sebring this year, they be given 3 leagues. They were awarded the host site of the Division I AAA, Ozone and T-ball leagues.

Ms. Garren pointed out a discrepancy between the requested amount and the intended use of total TDC expense, the requesting amount being \$1,000 more than that calculated for the intended use. As such, Mr. Gose amended his request to \$6,500.

Mr. Story questioned why the funding was more this year compared to the previous year's request. Mr. Gose noted that they are receiving an additional tournament this year, so that has increased their total hosting fees.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Wilson, to recommend approval for the grant in the amount of \$6,500 based on \$20/verified room night. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for hosting fees and baseballs. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

C. Avon Park Baseball requesting Sport Event Grant Funds up to \$5,000 for Division II State Tournament (June 30 - July 4, 2023)

Sergio Duran presented a request from Avon Park Baseball Inc. for a Sport Event Grant for the Dixie Youth Baseball Division I State Tournament in the amount of \$5,000. Mr. Duran noted that this is a great opportunity for Avon Park and Highlands county, bringing even more players and families to the area and creating more exposure of the local communities to potential return visitors.

Mr. Story asked if this would be a grant similar to the one requested by Sebring Youth Baseball, in that it would be based solely on room nights. Ms. Hartt confirmed yes.

Mr. Wilson made a motion, seconded by Ms. Mee to recommend approval of the grant with funding as requested. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for hosting fees. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

D. USSSA Tampa, Inc. requesting Sport Event Grant Funds up to \$5,000 for the USSSA Senior Player Draft Tournament (Oct. 6-8, 2023)

Aaron Wells presented a request from United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) Tampa, Inc. for a Sport Event Grant for the USSSA Senior Player Draft Tournament in the amount of \$5,000. Mr. Wells provided a background of the league, explaining it is a slow pitch softball league for players 40 years and older. This event will be a draft style event. Last year they had 12 teams. They opened registration for this event mid-March and to date had 102 people registered so far. They expect 16-20 teams this year from all over Florida, as well as other states.

Ms. Pontius questioned how many local people were registered for the event so far. Mr. Wells estimated about 10-12 players from Highlands County.

Ms. Garren questioned how many people usually attend the tournaments and noted that the figures on the application seemed rather low. Mr. Wells answered that with this only being the second year they are hosting this tournament, he is unable to get a better estimate of the number of attendees, so wanted to be conservative in his estimate.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Mee to recommend approval of the grant with funding as requested. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for facility fees, and shirts for players, shirts for officials and shirts for staff. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events.

Ms. Garren questioned why Mr. Wells chose Highlands County. He explained that the organization has held events in Sebring in the past, last year hosting about 6 in the area. His state director has used Sebring in the past and speaks highly of the facilities.

Commissioner Campbell confirmed there was still a motion standing. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

E. Date Change from Visit Sebring Classic (from April to October 2023)

Ms. Hartt presented a date change request from Minor League Golf Toru for the Visit Sebring Classic. She explained that the event is usually held in April, but last year they had to push back to the fall due to hailstorm damage on their originally scheduled date in April. They felt the Fall was a better turnout for the event, so they are wanting to do the same for 2023. Ms. Hartt felt this date works event better for the TDC as well being a lower TDT month.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren to recommend of the date change request of the Visit Sebring Classic from April 2023 October 2023. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

F. Additional Penny – Highlands County Tourist Development Tax

Ms. Hartt presented a request to increase the TDT collections by one percent. Ms. Hartt provided background on the TDT in the county, explaining that when she began her role the county was only collecting 2 pennies, then they added a 3rd and 4th penny and encouraged the TDC members to look at the printout in their packet that lists the eligible uses of the fund for each penny of TDT. In looking at a chart of TDT collections by county in the state of Florida, she recognized many counties similar to Highlands were collecting 5 pennies. She specified that the "5th penny" is eligible for use only by a High Impact county, which Highlands is not, so she began asking similar counties how they were collecting 5 pennies, finding that they were actually collecting the "6th penny" as their 5th penny. She wanted to bring this to the TDC members' attention to let them know an additional penny is available to collect.

Commissioner Campbell read a letter from Ms. Hatfield in support of collecting an additional penny.

Ms. Pontius questioned how the individual hotels formulate the TDT in their transactions. Ms. Hartt explained that the county currently has a 4% TDT, so that whatever a guests hotel bill would be, there would be a 4% Tourist Development Tax on that bill, along with the usual sales tax.

Ms. Pontius and Ms. Garren discussed the uses of the additional penny based on the Florida Statutes.

Ms. Garren recalled being on the TDC when they were collected 2% and discussing increasing to 4%, noting that in that time they were approving grants for much smaller amounts, and felt a major difference has happened in the community after increasing the collections to 4%, bringing in much larger events and gaining international recognition. She also noted that this is a tax that does not affect the county residents. She urged her colleagues to vote for the increase of the penny.

Ms. Hartt noted that this would be voting to recommend approval to the Board of County Commissioners, and that the County Commissioners would still vote on the matter.

Mr. Story asked what the process would be after that, and how it would come to pass if it should. Ms. Hartt noted the County's legal team would draft an ordinance for the County Commission to approve. Mr. Story asked if it goes to the state, to which was answered no.

Mr. Story felt the county would not get the increase. He noted mention of it being about a \$400,000 increase to the TDC budget, and would like to see plan for that. He also noted that some people he had spoken to at the state level suggested now would not be the time to begin asking for an additional penny due to potential legislative changes at a state level with Visit Florida.

Ms. Hartt noted that when they increased to 4 pennies, there was not a plan for the 4th penny but that it rolled into the budget and they instead formulate a plan for that money annually.

Ms. Garren noted that when they did that increase, there was not even a strategic plan or mission for the TDC at that time. But after receiving the funding the TDC developed their strategic plan. She commented that she finds what has happened in the years from increasing to 4% remarkable. She noted this would not be voted on at the state level, so she doesn't see a problem with the state level.

Ms. Pontius commented that she feels much more comfortable increasing to 5% now, that it is a completely different mindset than she had when they increased from 2% to 4%, as she struggled to see what they would spend that increase in funds on. She described being absolutely amazed at the events the TDC has brought in since increasing to 4%. She also noted being amazed at what it has done for the local economy. She shared that she doesn't feel an extra penny on the dollar will deter anyone from coming and staying in Highlands County.

Mr. Story noted he agrees with everything he's heard. He shared that he'd rather spend larger amounts on events with larger attendance than smaller amount on events with smaller attendance. He also noted that in relation to the discussion of facilities, that he doesn't feel the TDC will secure higher level events without the facilities and infrastructure to support that. He asked for clarity on if the additional penny in question could be used for facilities.

Ms. Hartt noted that the additional penny would have to go to advertising and marketing, but that in looking at the eligible uses for the 1st and 2nd penny and the 3rd penny, that eligible uses include acquire, contract, extend, enlarge, remodel, repaid, improve, maintain, operate, or promote specific categories of tourism facilities. Mr. Story recognized that there could be reallocation of the current pennies toward facilities, if the additional penny is collected for advertising and marketing.

Mr. Story commented that the TDC and community needs to look at how they are going to fund a facility. He stated that as they consider increasing the penny, and clarified he's not saying they shouldn't, that the TDC should start thinking on how they are going to spend the money that they already have to build the facilities they must have in order to continue to grow.

Ms. Hartt noted that the study being conducting with CFRPC and Huddle Up Group is helping them to formulate a plan, and that currently there is \$1.6 million in the 3rd penny's collections, so the study will help them develop a plan on how to spend it best.

Ms. Garren spoke to Mr. Story, noting that she thinks a lot of this comes back to their strategic plan and how the TDC will move forward coming out of this study. She also noted that in funding a facility, she expects they will have to think creatively to acquire additional funds to support the money they are collecting through TDT, but that she felt in the present they need to pass the additional penny.

Commissioner Campbell noted that the first eligible use across all the pennies is the same, that being for promotion and advertising tourism in the state, national and internationally, so he sees that as using the additional penny for that purpose, allowing them to use some of the pennies they already are collecting to set aside more money for a facility.

Mr. Story commented that he felt all the TDC members are correct, but that he hopes as the board moves forward in bringing this to the county commissioners, that they would think of a plan for a facility.

Ms. Sauls commented that after the luncheon and presentation of the study results from CFRPC and Huddle Up Group, she hopes the next part of the conversation to have with the TDC is about strategic implementation.

Ms. Garren agreed with Mr. Story that she also hopes to bring in more high attendance events, but that based on the TDC's mission on improving quality of life for residents, she sees a place for them to still fund smaller events in the community as well.

Ms. Sauls expects to see a change in discussions with the TDC members moving beyond just voting on items, but having more discussions on how they move forward in strategic planning, should the council members' desire.

Ms. Pontius noted the importance of maintaining the facilities already in place as well.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren, to recommend to the board of county commissioners that they implement the 6th penny of the Tourist Development Tax, Florida Statute 125.0104 (3)(n). All in favor said aye. There were no oppositions heard. The motion carried.

6. Old Business/Discussion

A. Tourism & Recreation Facility Study Update

Item was moved to 4D during meeting.

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. She noted that Ms. Hatfield has reapplied for a second term, and Ms. Garren has reapplied for a third term. She explained that pursuant to Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) policies, to serve a third consecutive term the TDC would need to submit a letter of recommendation or rationale to the BOCC to support Ms. Garren's reappointment. The letter was included in the packet and would be signed by Ms. Hatfield as the TDC chairperson. There were no questions on the matter.

She noted that Josh Stewart would be serving as the City of Sebring representative, and that there are applications being received for the additional seats opening up.

C. Istokpoga Fishing Tournament Projects Update

Ms. Sauls noted that there has been an application for a permit. They are awaiting approval from the water management district before they can proceed with next steps.

Ms. Hartt noted that there are also notes from a meeting between Ms. Hartt, Ms. Fultz and two FWC representatives. She noted that the meeting introduced new grant eligibilities to the TDC staff, so that is something they are looking at for the next year's grant application period.

D. Tourism Award Nominations and Luncheon

Ms. Hartt reminded everyone the deadline is May 10th to register for the Tourism Industry Insights and Awards Luncheon. She encouraged all planning to attend to register.

E. Tourism-Related Proclamations for County and Municipalities

Ms. Hartt shared copies of the proclamations from Sebring and Avon Park for National Travel & Tourism Week May 7-13, 2023 an International Museum Day on May 18th. She noted that this had been presented in all three municipalities in the county, and that it will be presented to the Board of County Commissioners on May 2nd, 2023.

7. Public Input

Chris Hutchins and Jason Descalzo spoke to the Council as representatives of the Mosquito Creek Disc Golf and local Disc Golf enthusiasts. They provided opinions on the impact that disc golf has on players, including youth, and that they believe it is a very positive sport for people to be involved in. They expressed concerns that the current disc golf course located at the YMCA and Max Long complex is in poor condition. They are looking to revitalize their course or relocate their course to a new location.

Commissioner Campbell encouraged them to meet with Ms. Fultz and Ms. Hartt on the event grant process with TDC. He also noted that Ms. Pontius is the chair for Recreation & Parks Advisory Committee (RPAC) and that they might be a good source as far as facilities go.

Mr. Descalzo mentioned having a few ideas for properties to hold a new course, and cited a golf course he previously lived close to in another county that had disc golf included in the course.

Ms. Pontius encouraged that if they were looking to implement a course on another current facility, like current golf courses, they should reach out to the owners of the facilities. Then they should come to the RPAC for funding for the actual construction of the course. She noted they should come to the TDC for event grants when they are ready to being that step.

8. Board Member Roundtable

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

Commissioner Campbell thanked Ms. Pontius for her time on the TDC as this would be her last meeting of her second term. He also thanked Mr. Story and the team at Sebring International Raceway from their part in allowing some track time to some of the Corvettes from the Corvette Parade featured during the event in Circle Park in April as part of Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Ms. Garren shared that there would be a free family friendly show at the Alan Jay Center for Performing Arts, "Three Billy Goats Gruff" at 3:00pm on Sunday, May 7th, 2023.

9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- A. ProWatercross, Lake Jackson/Veterans Beach; May 5-7
- B. FAWA Sunshine State Clubs Championship; May 5-7
- C. Youth Lacrosse Showcase, May 12-14
- D. Tourism Insights & Awards Luncheon, May 17
- E. International Museum Day, May 18
- F. USA Lacrosse & Hall of Fame Banquet, May 19-21 (pending approval)
- G. Florida State Cornhole Championship, June 16-18
- H. Dixie Youth Baseball Division II, June 30-July 4 (pending approval)
- I. Dixie Youth Baseball Division I, July 7-10 (pending approval)
- J. TDC Board Meeting August 10**
- K. Motosurf/Motoskate; Sept. 1-3

10. Adjournment

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at 10:20 a.m.

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