



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
April 28, 2022 @ 8:15 a.m.**

**Draft Regular Meeting**

**1. The meeting was called to order at 8:15 a.m. by Christine Hatfield.**

**Roll Call**

Council Members Present:

Commissioner Chris Campbell  
Kacey Mee  
Mark Stewart  
Diane Rydecki  
Christine Hatfield

Vicki Pontius  
Cindy Garren  
Brittany McGuire  
John Story

Council Members Absent:  
None

Also, Present:

Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Lori Krinsky, Tourist Development Coordinator  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC.  
Matt Gose, Youth Baseball of Sebring, Inc.  
Jennifer Bush, Executive Director, Greater Lake Placid Chamber of Commerce  
Phil Attinger, Highlands News Sun

Christine Hatfield and Lori Krinsky established that a quorum was present, and the meeting was properly noticed. Christine Hatfield also introduced Kacey Mee as the new TDC member representing accommodations and Lori Krinsky as the new tourism development coordinator.

**2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of January 27, 2022.**

Ms. Hatfield inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of January 27, 2022. Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart to approve the meeting minutes. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

**3. Financial and Office Reports**

Ms. Hartt presented the revenue reports that showed a balance total for FY 21/22 through February 28, 2022 of \$661,000. Ms. Hartt expects revenue to reach approximately \$1.4 million this year.

Ms. Hartt presented the Tourist Tax Revenues FY 14/15 to Current chart and noted that we generally don't compare FY20/21 due to the COVID-related decreases in travel and events. The 4<sup>th</sup> penny collections started in October 2018. Ms. Pontius asked that the chart be shaded to indicate the years before the 4<sup>th</sup> penny increase to make it easier to compare fiscal year revenues. Ms. Hatfield remarked that the increase could be partially due to increased hotel rates and events. Ms. Krinky stated that going forward the report would be shaded as requested.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve the financial reports as presented. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### 4. Tourism Award Presentations

##### Volunteer Champion – R. Fletcher

Ms. Hartt presented Ruth Fletcher with the Tourism Volunteer Award for her work coordinating and launching the GeoTour and her continued efforts of maintaining geocache locations that attract thousands of first-time and returning visitors to Highlands County. Ms. Fletcher provided a quick GeoTour update noting that visitors come from all over Florida and from out-of-state to geocache. She also mentioned that visits to Florida parks are on the rise which should also increase visits to Highlands County.

#### 5. Marketing and Event Update

##### A. Marketing & Public Relations Update

Ms. Hartt presented a summary of the Miles Media DMO Webinar that focused on recent travel trends. From analysis of their March 2022 survey, Miles Media is deeming 2022 the Year of Connections. People are looking to connect with friends and family and are finding travel inspiration from family and friends via direct contact (email, text, etc.) and social media. Official destination websites, online and print visitor guides, official tourism information centers and apps make up about 38% of travel resources used. Dog-friendly searches have increased tremendously. Among other trends, traveling to unknown or diverse places, historical sites, small towns, and state, county, and regional parks are of special interest.

Ms. Hartt summarized public relations activities including those related to the Soda Festival, the Traveling Golfer Show, Monsterbass Fishing social media and marketing outreach, and the Visit Florida's NYC Media Mission that was attended by Tanya Churchmich.

Ms. Hartt pointed out that submissions for the Tourism Awards increased this year with 20 submissions being the highest so far.

There is an RFP for 2022/2023 search engine optimization/search engine marketing and digital marketing services that will be sent out soon. Once a vendor has been selected, we will be able to put that amount into the upcoming budget.

Florida Sports Foundation (FSF) has awarded up to \$8,788 for April-June 2022 sporting events in Highlands County. FSF grants for July-August events are still pending.

Ms. Hartt reported that an EDA Grant application for Tourism Planning was submitted but was denied due to funding depletion. VISIT FLORIDA is looking at sponsoring the Agritourism Forum on Sept. 14<sup>th</sup> and the Extension Office will be involved as well. Stakeholder Meetings are ongoing. We are continuing to do facility and site visits for possible event host locations.

Ms. Hartt reported that approved grants for FY21/22 total \$309,250 after deducting Bono Bilt & VS Classic (\$29,750 that will move into next fiscal year's budget). If all grant requests for today are approved, the new total would be \$379,500. Ms. Pontius asked for clarification on the event grants budget status stating it looked like it would be over-budget if today's grants were all approved. Mr. Story stated that the funds in question were already allocated and would still leave over \$14,000 in unallocated funds. Ms. Sauls stated that it wouldn't be an issue to request funds from other line items be moved if needed.

Mr. Story asked if grants are being audited after the event and added that the TDC is not seeing a re-capping of grant-funded events. Ms. Hartt explained each grant is different. Some are only based on room-nights, some on attendees, that are paid based on the amount of room nights or visitors that can be verified. Grants that have ties to verified room nights are awarded a base amount with an additional amount determined on room verifications up to the grant amount approved by the TDC. High impact grants are figured strictly on attendees with no base amount. Consequently, the grant recipients may not receive the full amount that was awarded. Grants funded strictly for advertising reimbursement aren't tied to verified room nights (ProWatercross and Watersurf are examples) but we pay for their advertising. The GFNY cycling event was grandfathered in with this being their last year – they get the grant amount awarded without the room night or attendee requirement.

#### B. Sports Events Update from Airstream Ventures

Alan Verlander reported that he had toured all three high schools and noted there were lots of potential in the facilities here. He will be in Fort Worth, Texas next week at the Sports ETA where 3,300 sports commissioners will be in attendance. He has 39 meetings scheduled with event planners that could potentially bring events to Highlands County. Mr. Verlander will provide a summary of those meetings to Ms. Hartt to identify and plan for engaging best prospects. Most of the prospective events will be in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Similarly, he will also attend Connect Sports and TEAMS sports tourism conferences.

Mr. Verlander also spoke about the recent multipurpose facility meeting. He noted that it had great attendance and participation. The meeting's goal was to determine if Highlands County should be looking to build a new multipurpose facility. Some needs mentioned at that meeting were a place to host rodeos, agricultural events, pickleball, and others. Attendees were all respectful of each other and more meetings will be scheduled. Commissioner Campbell noted the collaboration that took place across departments and agencies to get Bernie Little ready for the American Corn Hole League Tournament.

Addressing Mr. Story's earlier question regarding event audits, Mr. Verlander noted that Airstream Ventures does an audit and provides a summary page after each TDC grant-awarded event. He also provided an Airstream Venture's event schedule through December 2022.

### **6. Items for Voting**

#### A. 2022 Dixie Boys State Tournament (July 1-4, 2022) presented by Matt Gose. Sports Event Grant Request for \$5,000

Matt Gose of Youth Baseball of Sebring stated that last year's events booked 422 rooms for the two events combined. He noted that T-ball brings a crowd since family including grandparents come. Dixie Boys doesn't generate as much of a crowd because they are older but he's hoping T-Ball will increase the total attendees. Mr. Gose stated that house rentals hurt last year's room counts. Ms. Garren inquired if the grant was based on room night verification. Mr. Gose affirmed that it was. Ms. Pontius asked how room nights were verified. Mr. Gose replied that he went to every hotel prior to and after the events to get room verifications and asked participants upon registration.

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Pontius, to approve up to \$5,000 in funding for the 2022 Dixie Boys State Tournament based on \$20 per room verification. Reimbursable grant funds to be

used for hosting fees. Funds are from cost center 5305 Marketing and Events. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

B. 2022 Florida Dixie Youth Baseball T-Ball Tournament (July 1-4, 2022) presented by Matt Gose. Sports Event Grant Request for \$5,000

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve \$5,000 in funding for the 2022 Florida Youth Baseball T-Ball Tournament based on \$20 per room verification. Reimbursable grant funds to be used for hosting fees. Funds are from cost center 5305 Marketing and Events. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

C. Caladium Festival (July 29-31, 2022) presented by Jennifer Bush. High Impact Signature Event Grant for 5,000

Jennifer Bush of Lake Placid Chamber of Commerce stated that the event brings approximately 20,000 people to town over a 3-day festival. Ms. Bush will be tracking attendees and advertising outside of the county. Mr. Story inquired of Ms. Hartt if we support the Caladium Festival with public relations for this event as we do the Soda Festival. Ms. Hartt indicated that we support it 100% from a public relations standpoint explaining that Tanya Churchmuch pitches the event to anyone who may be interested in this niche festival making sure this event information is sent out to radio stations and tv stations for their event calendars and they can usually get Fox 13 and Daytime to do a segment on the festival. Ms. Garren noted a discrepancy in the grant application in the proposed marketing and promotions expenses. Ms. Bush apologized about the discrepancy. Ms. Bush stated that they do a website, digital marketing, digital billboards, geofencing, marketing and social media.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve up to \$5,000 in funding for the Caladium Festival based on at least 10,000 verified attendees with a minimum of 30% of attendees coming from outside Highlands County, payable at a rate of \$.50 per verified attendee. Reimbursable grant funds are payable for county advertising, digital, geofencing, billboard and radio advertising all taking place outside of Highlands County. Funds are from cost center 5305 for Marketing and Events. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

D. High School Girls Lacrosse Showcase (July 22-24, 2022) presented by Alan Verlander. New Event Grant requesting up to \$40,000 year #1 (2022) and up to \$30,000 /year for years #2 (2023) and #3 (2024)

Mr. Verlander noted that both events, High School Girls Lacrosse Showcase and Fall Prep Girls Lacrosse Showdown, will be hosted at the Sports Complex. Teams will be coming in from all over the Southeast. There are about 18 people on each team and they travel with parents. The event should be a great showcase for our community. Organizers are looking for a nice “home” for lacrosse and we could offer that to them. The event organizer has an extensive tracking system so that they know exactly where each attendee is coming from and where they are staying.

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Rydecki to approve three years with year number one (2022) up to \$40,000, and up to \$30,000/year for years #2 (2023) and #3 (2024) in funding for the High School Girls Lacrosse Showcase. For year one, the applicant will receive \$20,000 for reimbursable expenses after the event plus \$20 for each verified room nights up to a total of \$40,000. For years 2 & 3 (2023 and 2024), applicant will receive \$10,000 for reimbursable expenses after the event plus \$20 for each verified room night up to a total of \$30,000 per year total. Reimbursable grant funds are for venue rental, event officials, digital marketing, equipment rental, signage, and promotional items. Funds to come from cost center 5305 for Marketing and Events. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

E. Fall Prep Girls Lacrosse Showdown (September 17-18, 2022) presented by Alan Verlander New Event Grant requesting up to \$40,000 year #1 (2022) and up to \$30,000 /year for years #2 (2023) and #3 (2024)

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Pontius to approve three years with year #1 (2022) up to \$40,000, and up to \$30,000 /year for years #2 (2023) and #3 (2024) in funding for the High School Girls Lacrosse Showcase. For year one, the applicant will receive \$20,000 for reimbursable expenses after the event plus \$20 for each verified room nights up to a total of \$40,000. For years 2 & 3 (2023 and 2024), applicant will receive \$10,000 for reimbursable expenses after the event plus \$20 for each verified room night up to a total of \$30,000 per year total. Reimbursable grant funds are for venue rental, event officials, digital marketing, equipment rental, signage, and promotional items. Funds to come from cost center 5305 for Marketing and Events. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

F. AJGA Visit Sebring Preview date change request; shift to 2023, 2024

Ms. Hartt said that AJGA was supposed to have their second year event here in April 2022, but needed to cancel due to hail storm damages at the golf course. They have tried to find a new event date that fits into their schedule for this year. Unfortunately, they didn't find a date that fits for everyone, so they are asking that we shift their grants out one year. Ms. Garren asked what happens to the funding that was allocated for this fiscal year. Ms. Krinsky said that Purchasing said it could roll over into next year.

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve the revised dates that have yet to be determined for AJGA Visit Sebring Preview to 2023, 2024. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

G. Minor League Golf Tour (MLGT) Visit Sebring Classic date change request to Nov. 8-10, 2022

Ms. Pontius made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stewart, to approve the request to re-schedule the Minor League Golf Tour (MLGT) Visit Sebring Classic to November 8-10, 2022. Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

## **7. Old Business/Discussion**

## **8. Public Input**

## **9. Board Member Roundtable**

## **10. Upcoming Meeting**

- A. Restaurant Stakeholder Meeting – May 2 @ 3:30 PM at Sebring Civic Center
- B. County Commission Meeting: TDC presentation & resolutions for International Museum Day and National Travel & Tourism Week – May 3 @ 9:00 AM at County Commission Chambers
- C. Citrus Golf Trail Meeting – May 13 (TBD)
- D. International Museum Day- May 18 at various museums
- E. TDC Board Meeting – August 11 @ 8:15 AM, Government Center, Boardroom
- F. Agritourism Forum: September 13-14, 2022

## **11. Adjournment**

Ms. Hatfield adjourned the meeting at 9:44 a.m.

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