



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom
Special Meeting
June 8, 2023 @ 8:15 a.m.**

Special Meeting

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

Roll Call

Council Members Present:

Commissioner Campbell

Cindy Garren

Christine Hatfield

Maritza Christiansen

Victoria Currence

Charles Wilson

Andy Kesling

Josh Stewart

Council Members Absent:

John Story

Also, Present:

Leah Sauls, Development Services Director

Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant

Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator

Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC.

Laney Stearns, Public Safety Director

Kacey Mee, Residence Inn Sebring & Tru by Hilton Sebring

Colleen Paul-Hus, The PARC

Commissioner Campbell welcomed the three new TDC members, Victoria Currence, Andy Kesling and Josh Stewart. Commissioner Campbell and Ms. Fultz established that a quorum was present, and that the meeting was properly noticed.

2. Tourism Award Presentation

Ms. Hartt presented Colleen Paul-Hus of The PARC with the Humanitarian Champion Award as part of the 2023 Winner's Circle Tourism Awards, as Ms. Paul-Hus was unable to attend the awards ceremony on May 17, 2023.

3. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of April 27th, 2023.

Commissioner Campbell inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of April 27, 2023. Mr. Wilson made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren to approve the meeting minutes. All Council members voted aye to approve the minutes. The motion carried.

4. TDT Collections Update

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue reports that showed a balance total of \$1,252,517.99 for FY22/23 through March, with March being a record-breaking month. Council members received detailed printouts of financial reports. Council members had no questions on the financial reports. Ms. Fultz explained they were only presenting financial updates rather than full office reports since that would be a main topic in this Special meeting.

There were no questions from the Board.

5. Items for Voting

A. Additional Penny Ordinance – Highlands County Tourist Development Tax

Ms. Sauls presented the drafted Ordinance for the passing of an additional penny to the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) collections. She explained that following the last meeting where the TDC voted to take recommendation of considering a 5th penny in the TDT collections to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC), the TDC staff did take this to the BOCC, where the Commissioners voted to consider an Ordinance for this. She explained that before taking the Ordinance back to the BOCC, the TDC would have to review and approve the drafted Ordinance.

Ms. Garren had a question on an item in the Ordinance, if the TDC would budget or the BOCC would budget it. Ms. Sauls explained that ultimately the County Commissioners have final say in the budget, but that the budget that goes before the BOCC is the one that's approved by the TDC annually in August.

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield to forward the 5% local option tourist development tax revenue ordinance to the County Commissioners. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

Mr. Kesling inquired where Highlands County stood in comparison to the other counties in Florida on the pennies collected. Ms. Hartt explained that there is a chart the outlines the collections by county that she would shar with Mr. Kesling and Commissioner Campbell answered that most of the other counties are collecting 5% or more.

B. Airstream Ventures requesting New Event Grant funds up to \$20,000 for year 1 (2023), and \$15,000 per year for Years 2 & 3 (2024 & 2025) for United States Fastpitch

Association (USFA) Sebring Invitational (Aug. 19 – 20) and Pumpkin Smash Softball Tournament (Oct. 14 – 15)

Mr. Verlander presented a request from USFA for a New Event Grant for the Sebring Invitational (Aug. 19 – 20) and Pumpkin Smash Softball Tournament (Oct. 14 – 15) in the amount of \$20,000 for Year 1 (2023) and \$15,000 per year for Years 2 & 3 (2024 & 2025). He explained the state director for USFA approached him specifically interested in bringing events to Sebring, so they are looking at bringing even more tournaments in 2024, but wanted to go ahead and get a few in for 2023 as well.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren, to recommend approval for the grant in the amount of \$20,000 (with a \$15,000 base + \$5,000 based on \$20/verified room night, up to 250 rooms) for 2023 and \$15,000 (\$10,000 base + \$5,000 based on \$20/verified room night, up to 250 rooms) for 2024 & 2025. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for umpires, sanction fees, venue rental, marketing, event staffing. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

6. Old Business/Discussion

Technical complications prevented the presentation Ms. Hartt worked up for the Facility Study Update in being delayed displaying, so the agenda items 6A and 6B as shown on the agenda swapped to allow more time for IT to try to fix the issue.

A. Grant Committee Meeting – Summer 2023

Ms. Hartt explained to the new members that the TDC revamped their grant program about 3 years ago, and they had a committee that worked on that task, including Ms. Hatfield and Ms. Garren. She explained that the committee meets on an annual basis to review the grants before starting the new fiscal year. She wanted to bring this to the full board to inquire interest in serving on the committee. Ms. Garren and Ms. Hatfield confirmed they were interested in still being on the committee. Commissioner Campbell also spoke to being interested on the committee. Ms. Hartt explained she would reach out to coordinate a date and time for the Grant Committee meeting.

B. Tourism Facility Study Update

Ms. Hartt provided an overview of the results from the portion of the Facility Study conducted by Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC) focusing on Recreation. She shared one of her biggest takeaways was there were a lot of things existing in the community that many residents probably didn't realize were available. The TDC staff started dialogue with some of the other county departments in how some information could be compiled on all the assets in the county, even those managed not by county, so the information would be more easily accessible to the community.

She also shared that since there were no specific recommendations on a livestock facility, but it was a topic brought up in the Recreation study results from the residents, TDC Staff have scheduled a livestock facility meeting between some members of the

Junior Livestock community as well as some of the Fair Board members to facilitate discussions between the groups.

Ms. Hartt also went into some highlights of the results of the Sports Tourism portion of the study conducted by Huddle Up Group. The full report was provided in the TDC members packets.

There was discussion between the TDC members and staff on some questions or takeaways from the study.

Ms. Hartt and Ms. Sauls prompted the TDC members in further discussion on next steps following the study.

Ms. Garren stated a desire to look at the sustainability of the facility in however the next steps take form in terms of maintenance, and that she hopes for the TDC to find a clear path to funding before taking next steps in enhancing or building a new facility.

Ms. Sauls explained that from staff perspective, they hoped that this meeting would facilitate discussion among the TDC members on the study findings and directions for next steps. She also explained that as the county is currently going through budgeting for the next fiscal year, questions on how the TDC funds might be able to be used in other ways has come up, like funding items at the Multi-Sport Complex, and she hoped the TDC members would be able to discuss on that topic.

Ms. Garren felt that the TDC should do a deep dive in their strategic planning and laying out what their next steps should be in terms of what type of facility they should be focusing on and where the funding would be coming from, then look at conducting a feasibility study.

Ms. Hatfield felt the TDC should do a feasibility study to look 3-4 things that are possible for this county, what the budget is, what the maintenance is, and where are they going to get the biggest bang for their buck on what they're doing. Ms. Hatfield asked for clarification on the discussion Ms. Sauls mentioned of other departments utilizing TDC funds.

Ms. Sauls clarified that based on the eligible uses of each penny of the TDC as set by state statute, that some pennies can be used for maintenance of facilities used for tourism purposes, so some Commissioners and other departments are beginning to ask if the tourism should be helping to fund the maintenance on some facilities, and Ms. Sauls posed the question of if so, what is the balance and what is best.

Ms. Hatfield felt that it could start down a slippery slope if the TDC funds were to begin being used for maintaining facilities already existing in the community, as that would take away from funding for promotion and ability to bring more events in, which she felt is more important to bringing visitors and their spending into the county. She explained that the TDC funds are brought in by heads in beds, and to not promote the county and events to bring more people into the county, the TDC would start losing income.

Ms. Sauls explained that the TDC under previous administration in 2007/08 funded the building of the multi-Sports complex, but with it now losing money annually, the Commission doesn't want a similar situation with a new facility.

The TDC members agreed that ensuring the funding for maintaining the new facility in whatever form it takes is a priority in their next steps.

Mr. Kesling believes a feasibility study is a necessary step. He also mentioned he felt there would be a lot of benefits to an indoor facility.

Ms. Garren agreed that we need a feasibility study but feels we should not spend the money on the study if we can't find a clear path to funding and sustaining a new facility.

Ms. Sauls clarified that any request for proposal that they do for a feasibility can have that included as a requested item to be focused on in the study.

Ms. Hartt explained to Ms. Garren that like Mr. Kesling said, an indoor facility would have a lot of benefits, but would also likely be the most expensive option, so conducting a feasibility study where someone would drill down on maybe the top three recommendations from Huddle Up Group so the TDC would then be able to look at the numbers they provide back to decide how they would want to proceed.

Ms. Sauls stated that with the TDC's blessing she would like to go to the BOCC and share a summary of this discussion, that being that the TDC is in support of what was recommended, and that their thoughts are that they need to conduct a due diligence period with a feasibility study to talk about cost, maintenance, sustainability of a facility; and that they are in support of maintaining a new facility moving forward, that the TDC agrees there should be a clear path to funding to do so.

Mr. Wilson echoed that the funding should be a driving force in consideration going forward with the facility discussions.

Mr. Stewart expressed wanting to reassure the Board that the TDC is not dropping a financial liability on them.

7. Public Input

Time was made for public input, with no one from the public providing comment.

8. Board Member Roundtable

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- A. Florida State Cornhole Championship, June 16-18
- B. Dixie Youth Baseball Division II, June 30-July 4
- C. Dixie Youth Baseball Division I, July 7-10

- D. TDC Board Meeting August 10**
- E. Motosurf/Motoskate, Sept. 1-3
- F. Visit Sebring Classic, Oct. 10-12
- G. USSSA Senior Draft Softball Tournament, Oct. 6-8
- H. GFNY Marathon, Oct. 21
- I. GFNY Cycling, Oct. 22
- J. TDC Board Meeting October 26**
- K. CGT Open, Nov. 13-15
- L. Spartan, Dec. 2-3
- M. CGT Ladies Invitational, Dec. 27-30

10. Adjournment

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at 9:11 a.m.

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