



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
August 10, 2023 @ 8:15 a.m.**

**Draft Regular Meeting**

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

**Roll Call**

Council Members Present:

Commissioner Campbell  
Victoria Currence  
Andy Kesling  
Charles Wilson

Maritza Cristiansen  
Christine Hatfield  
Josh Stewart  
Elizabeth Worley

Council Members Absent:

Cindy Garren

Also, Present:

Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC.

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum was present. Commissioner Campbell established that the meeting was properly noticed, and recognized the new member, Elizabeth Worley.

**2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of June 8th, 2023.**

Commissioner Campbell inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of June 8th, 2023. Mr. Wilson made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield 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 and office reports that showed a balance total of \$1,470,319.02 for FY22/23 through May.

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

Ms. Sauls provided an answer to a question that had been posed in the June 30<sup>th</sup> Board of County Commissioners meeting, explaining that there is no “secret” or “hidden” account for TDC funds totaling over \$1 million. She explained that figure is actually the amount in Cost Center 5305 for Marketing and Events, and explained the different figures in the chart shown in the council members’ packets total up to that amount in the Cost Center. But that there is no additional \$1 million that was unknown to the TDC staff or members.

#### **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 Trends in the Tourism Industry; Industry, PR and Media Outreach; Staff Outreach & Events; a 2022-2023 Budget Update; and the 2023 Tourism Insights & Awards Luncheon.

###### *1. Trends in the Tourism Industry*

Ms. Hartt presented on current trends in the tourism industry. One was a rebalancing of tourism, meaning that immediately post-Covid there was an extraordinary influx of travel, and now those numbers are starting to soften a bit and the consumers are once again cruising and traveling internationally. She also noted that current state of hotel guest satisfaction is trending high, though travel budgets are continuing to decline.

###### *2. Industry, Public Relations and Media Outreach*

Ms. Hartt provided a recap of the recent activities on an industry, PR and Media outreach level, one of the largest in the past quarter being the Caladium Festival, receiving 101 pieces of coverage on the festival and 3.42 million views of those pieces. The Sebring Area was covered in an article in Travel + Leisure, penned by Jared Ranahan who was hosted by the TDC in January. Summer PR focus will continue with family fun and watersports/lakefront enjoyment.

##### **B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media**

Ms. Hartt presented analytics and figures reported by Madden Media on their digital marketing and campaigns for Visit Sebring. Council members received detailed printouts of the reports. Council members had no questions on the digital marketing reports.

### C. Sports Tourism Update from Airstream Ventures

Mr. Verlander presented an update on Airstream Ventures Sports Tourism efforts for Highlands County. The Airstream team will be attending three more sports conferences in the upcoming quarter. 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.

Mr. Kesling asked what station the MotoSurf Games would be aired on. Mr. Verlander confirmed this is CBS Sports.

Commissioner Campbell inquired on any effects the softening of travel may have on Sport Tourism. Mr. Verlander explained that they're seeing that more people are treating their travel for a sporting event as a family vacation.

Mr. Stewart questioned on why Tough Mudder was no longer included in the Spartan event like they were in their first year in Sebring. Mr. Verlander explained that Spartan and Tough Mudder are under the same ownership, so they have pulled back on putting both events in the same market.

Mr. Kesling asked on bringing a second AJGA event to the county. Mr. Verlander explained that they are asking for higher amounts of funding than the TDC typically awards to events of their size, but that opportunity is still under discussion.

## **5. Items for Voting**

### A. TDC Event Grant Program Recommendations

Ms. Hartt provided a review of the recommendations that the grant committee proposed after their meeting on June 26<sup>th</sup> to review the TDC's event grant program. The changes were outlined in notes in the council members packets. The changes are as follows:

1. Remove the \$65,000 cap on the High Impact Signature Event grant.
2. Move Plaques, Awards, Trophies and Certificated from "Ineligible Use of Funds" to "Eligible Use of Funds" provided the design includes the Visit Sebring Logo and is approved by TDC staff. This does not include monetary prizes.
3. Add "Field/Facility Related Expenses" to "Eligible Use of Funds" in grant policies
4. Adjust reimbursement process for facility rentals fees of Highlands County - owned facilities so that TDC Staff can transfer the funds directly to the Parks and Recreation Department, with the amount still coming from the grant funds awarded to the event

Ms. Hatfield made a motion, seconded by Mr. Wilson to approve the TDC grant committee's (4) recommended changes to the TDC Event Grants. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

### B. GFNY 2023 Marathon Contract – Request for Changes

Ms. Fultz provided a brief explanation of the changes that GFNY is requesting to the contracts in Agenda Items 5B and 5C as they go hand-in-hand. She shared that by having the two separate event grant contracts on one weekend for the same organization, there are complications that arise in trying to verify the room nights and determine the designation of the room nights between the two events. There is a similar issue with expenses, especially with both events being held at the same location. To make things cleaner and lessen the room for error in inaccurate room night verification reporting post event, TDC staff and GFNY discussed combining the events into one contract. To do so, GFNY felt they would need to increase the funding request on the contract to still receive the funds they need to support both the marathon and cycling events together. Agenda Items 5B and 5C are proposed to implement the changes needed/requested by GFNY to combine the two events under one contract for 2023 and the coming years.

Lidia Fluhme, organizer of the events, called in to be available for any questions.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to recommend approval of the change request from GFNY for the 2023 GFNY Marathon Sebring Contract, adding the Cycling Event into the contract, renaming the event to “GFNY Sebring Endurance Sport Festival”, and increasing the reimbursable funds to \$90,000.00 for Year 3 (2023).

For Year 3 (2023), applicant will receive a base of \$10,000. for reimbursable expenses after the event + up to an additional \$80,000 based on verified room nights (up 4,000 verified room nights at \$20/room night).

Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for promotional items with the Visit Sebring logo, marketing, post-race participant event, A/V equipment, MOT/TTC/traffic control, course safety and policing, and facility rental fees. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### C. 2023-2025 GFNY Cycling Contract – Request for Changes

Ms. Fultz explained that GFNY held an existing contract for their Cycling event for years 2023, 2024 and 2025. By including their cycling event under the marathon’s contract for the 2023 year, they would need to delay the start of this contract to begin in 2024, also covering years 2025 and 2026. Additionally, the changes for the previous contract would need to be made to include the marathon event under this contract.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield to recommend approval of the change request from GFNY for the 3-Year GFNY Cycling Sebring contract, changing the years of contract to 2024, 2025 and 2026; adding the Marathon event into the contract; renaming the event to GFNY Sport Endurance Sport Festival; and increasing the reimbursable funds to up to \$90,000 per year for Year 1 (2024), Year 2 (2025) and Year 3 (2026).

For each year (2024, 2025 and 2026), applicant will receive up to \$90,000.00 based on verified room nights (up 4,500 verified room nights at \$20/room night) for reimbursable expenses.

Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for MOT, traffic control, light towers, promotional items with Visit Sebring logo, facility rental, marketing and graphic design, post-race meal for athletes, in county transportation for athletes, and A/V services. Funds to come from Cost Center 5305 for Marketing & Events.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

Approval of all mentioned in the motion is contingent on the Board of County Commissioners approving the recommendation to remove the maximum funding cap for the TDC High Impact Signature Event Grants.

#### Item 6A. Additional Penny Update

*Upon TDC Staff request, Commissioner Campbell moved Item 6A to before Item 5D to give some pertinent background to components that will be discussed in Item 5D.*

In preparation for the discussion on the TDC's FY2023-2024 budget, Ms. Sauls presented background on items from the June 30, 2023, Board of County Commissioners meeting in which the vote for increasing the Tourist Development Tax to 5% took place. She explained that an item requested by some of the Commissioners was that TDC assist in helping close the financial gap for maintenance expenses at the sports complex, with a request of \$200,000 from TDC funds. In further detail, she explained \$186,000 of this would go towards maintenance costs at the sports complex, with a recommendation of the remainder being used for maintenance expenses at fishing facilities from the county. In discussions with the County Attorney, TDC staff determined that Istokpoga Park and H.L. Bishop Park were the two county owned fishing facilities that met the requirements of the state statute on use of TDC funds for maintenance.

Commissioner Campbell also shared his thoughts on the June 30<sup>th</sup> meeting, explaining that he felt committing to the \$200,000 was the only way to secure the vote needed to pass the increase in TDT collections, as it required a super majority vote.

Ms. Sauls also clarified that the \$200,000 was not requested for every year moving forward, and that as the financial shortfall decreases at the sports complex, that funding request might also decrease.

Ms. Hatfield shared her feelings on the June 30<sup>th</sup> meeting, stating that she was surprised at the direction the tone went at the meeting, and that she was surprised at a comment from Commissioner Elwell that the TDC was fiscally irresponsible. She felt questioning directed at Ms. Hartt in that meeting was quite strong and could have been taken before the meeting.

At Ms. Hatfield's request, Ms. Hartt provided information on what the pennies could be used for and the procedure in which the TDC recommends the usage of the funds. She clarified that per the state statute the use of TDT funds are to be recommended from the TDC to the County Commission.

Mr. Kesling shared that he thinks the TDC is doing a great job and that it shows in the reports from year to year.

Ms. Sauls explained that the additional penny would begin to be collected in August 2023, and would be available for use in the FY24/25 budget.

Ms. Hatfield shared that she had received a phone call from the Florida Department of Revenue notifying Inn on the Lakes of the increase in the tax.

Mr. Verlander shared that they did a study on the rental rates of the sports complex and found that they are extremely low in comparison to other counties in the area and state. He and TDC Staff have been in discussions with the Parks and Recreation department to increase the rental rates for tourism events that use the facility. He explained that the event organizers don't have as much concern over what they pay for the facility, knowing that if they are awarded a TDC grant, the facility fees will be paid using those funds. He hopes this will help to decrease the shortfall in the budget for the sports complex as well.

#### 5D. 2023-2024 Proposed TDC Budget & Marketing Plan

Ms. Hartt presented a proposed budget for the TDC for FY2023-2024.

Mr. Kesling questioned if with the collections of the 5<sup>th</sup> penny, the TDC should be a little more aggressive with their marketing budget. Ms. Hartt clarified that the 5<sup>th</sup> penny will begin being collected in August of 2023, but will not be included in the budget until FY24/25.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen to approve the TDC Budget for Fiscal Year 2023/2024 as presented. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### E. Lead Marketing Consultant Contract Renewal

Ms. Sauls explained to the members that Ms. Hartt's 6-year contract as Lead Marketing Consultant is renewed on an annual basis before the start of a new fiscal year. FY 2023-2024 would be year three of the contract. The TDC can vote if they would like to move forward with renewing the contract for the year. If so, that contract will be brought before the County Commissioners for approval. She explained that Ms. Hartt is not looking for any changes to the scope of work in the contract, and that per the contract, there would be a 3% increase to the contract for the next fiscal year.

Ms. Worley made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield, to approve the renewal of the Lead Marketing Consultant's contract for Fiscal Year 2023/2024. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

### **6. Old Business/Discussion**

#### A. Additional Penny Update

Item was moved to be discussed before Item 5D during meeting.

## B. Tourism & Recreation Facility Study Update

Ms. Hartt provided an update to action items that have taken place as result of the Tourism and Recreation Study, including collaboration with the Public Information Officer to better promote the county's playgrounds, meetings with recreation stakeholders in the county, meetings with the Parks & Recreation department and administration on the sports complex fee structure, meetings with the Highlands County Fair Association about the fairgrounds indoor space, and the next steps with a feasibility study for a sports facility.

## C. Istokpoga Fishing Tournament Projects Update

Ms. Sauls provided an update on project status and next steps for the Istokpoga Park fishing tournament project, which includes a survey of the property that will be submitted to DEP, and then applying for the DEP permit, which will be done by the County's Natural Resources division.

## D. AJGA Visit Sebring Preview Review

Ms. Hartt shared an update on the reports from AJGA following their Visit Sebring Preview. All members received a one-page snapshot of economic impact, where players originated from, their digital footprint for the tournament, and more.

## **7. Public Input**

Time was made available for public input.

## **8. Board Member Roundtable**

Time was made available for board member roundtable discussion.

## **9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events**

- A. USFA Sebring Invitational (Fastpitch Softball), Aug 19 – 20
- B. Motosurf/Motoskate, Sept. 1 – 3
- C. The Florida State Games (Lacrosse), Sept. 30 – Oct 1
- D. USSSA Senior Draft Softball Tournament, Oct. 6 – 8
- E. Visit Sebring Classic, Oct. 10 – 12
- F. USFA Pumpkin Smash Tournament, Oct 14 – 15
- G. GFNY Marathon & Cycling, Oct. 21 – 22
- H. TDC Board Meeting October 26**
- I. CGT Open, Nov. 13-15
- J. Spartan, Dec. 2-3
- K. CGT Ladies Invitational, Dec. 27-30

## **10. Adjournment**

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at 9:45 a.m.

Tourist Development Council Meeting Minutes of August 10, 2023

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

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