



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
August 8, 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  
Josh Stewart  
Debra Worley

Maritza Cristiansen  
Cindy Garren  
Elizabeth Compton  
Christine Hatfield

Also, Present:

Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Reagan Fultz, Tourist Development Coordinator  
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Katie Houlihan, Assistant County Attorney  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures, LLC  
Alex Noto, Madden Media  
Kate Strickland, Wander Media  
Brandon Gunn, Parks and Facilities Director  
Margaret Dear, Lake Placid Historical Society  
Jared Lee, City of Sebring

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

**2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of April 25, 2024.**

Commissioner Campbell inquired if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of April 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 \$1,416,991.06 October – April for FY 23/24. She highlighted that collections were not coming in as high as expected, as the incoming collections were still helping to make up

the dip in October's numbers from October 2022, since 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.

#### **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 Q3 Media and PR Highlights; Staff Outreach & Events; and a 2023-2024 Budget Update.

###### *1. Public Relations Update*

Ms. Hartt shared that FY24 Q3 continued building off the opportunity of HGTV's Hometown Takeover with media outreach. She updated that media coverage of the 2024 Caladium Festival - including articles, media mentions, two radio interviews organized through MuchPR, and two Tampa TV appearances organized by Visit Sebring staff – totaled 68 pieces of media coverage, 508,000 estimated views and 121 million estimated audience.

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

Alex Noto presented a FY24 Q3 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. Noto noted Q3 saw a 50% increase in Engaged Sessions on VisitSebring.com YOY, and 124% increase in Engagement Rate, and an 24% in Average Session Duration on the website.

Ms. Noto also shared a bit on “what’s next” with Visit Sebring’s work with Madden Media, highlighting the upcoming video storytelling project that would include local tourism business owner interviews, video segments and editorial spotlights in partnership with Visit Florida and CycleHere Films, all to be distributed on website, Meta video and YouTube in the next FY. She also touched on planning for FY25, which would see an updated Visit Sebring travel guide printing in January 2025, a website refresh for VisitSebring.com launching in January 2025, and updated media plan and campaign materials.

##### 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 conferences attended and upcoming, 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 touched on the impact from the Florida Blast lacrosse event held at the Highlands County Sports Complex on June 7-9, which brought

62 teams with 1,906 participants, 5,428 attendees and 3,619 room nights to the area, generating an economic impact of \$1,502,471.

### C. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update

Kate Strickland of Wander Media presented an update on her company's marketing efforts as contracted by the Citrus Golf Trail. She noted that the Citrus Golf Trail saw a 98% increase in audience size across all social media platforms since October 2022, a 148% increase in inbound leads for email campaign distributions since October 2022, and that a website redesign project is slated to launch in October 2024. The website redesign would enhance the website from a simple landing page with Visit Sebring's website to include revised property features, elevated photography and video galleries, direct booking options, packages and promotions, enhanced navigability, and more.

## **5. Items for Voting**

### A. Sand Pro Machine Funding Contribution Request from Parks and Facilities

Brandon Gunn presented a request for a contribution of \$18,000 from the TDC towards the purchase of a \$36,452.08 Sand Pro machine for use at the Highlands County Multi-Sport Complex, citing the machine as replacing the current 11-year old model being used to perform necessary maintenance for the softball games and tournaments at the complex.

Ms. Garren posed concern over funding this machine when the previously TDC funded field lining machine for use at the sports complex was deemed unable to be used by a TDC recruited lacrosse event for lining auxiliary fields.

Commissioner Campbell and Josh Stewart both expressed feeling the two situations being different from one another.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve the funding request.

Upon roll call, Commissioner Campbell, Maritza Christiansen, Josh Stewart, and Debra Worley voted aye. Lydia Capote, Elizabeth Compton, Cindy Garren, Christine Hatfield, and Andy Kesling voted nay. The motion failed.

Ms. Garren made motion, seconded by Ms. Capote, to approve the request returning to the TDC at their next meeting on October 31, 2024 with direction from Legal on how to navigate situations in which Tourism Events taking place off of county-owned property would require use of assets purchased using Tourist Development funds. Upon roll call, all members voted aye. The motion carried.

### B. Final 2024-2025 TDC Budget Recommendations

Ms. Hartt provided three budgets for FY 2024-2025 for the TDC's consideration. The first was based on initial TDT collection projections being \$2,500,000, and was determined based on previous year's collections, having not received any collections at the time of needing to begin constructing the budget for County's budget procedures. This budget

would include \$1,700,000 for marketing. After receiving collections for October – April, the projections for the full year’s collections were reevaluated to be closer to \$1,800,000. To maintain the higher budget, this would require \$550,000 supplemental funding from TDC reserve funds.

The second budget was reduced to include just \$1,160,000 for marketing. This would require no supplement funding from reserve funds.

The third was a “hybrid” budget that would include \$1,420,000 for marketing. This would require \$260,000 from reserve funds.

Ms. Hartt clarified that once the final collections through September 2024 are received from the state, that the budget would be brought back to the TDC in January 2025 for any changes if actual collections were different than projected.

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve the “hybrid” budget which included a Marketing budget of \$1,420,000. Upon roll call, all members voted aye. The motion carried.

Ms. Garren raised concerns over having a specified contingency fund. Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to allocate 10% of TDC fund balance to a contingency fund. All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### C. Hurricane Junior Golf Tour New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a New Event Grant Request from the Hurricane Junior Golf Tour (HJGT) for two tournaments, one being held at Sun ‘N Lake in the Fall and one at Pinecrest in the Spring/Summer. The financial request was:

Year 1 (FY 2024/25): \$23,200 (\$20,000 base and \$3,200 room nights)

Year 2 (FY 2025/26): \$14,000 (\$10,000 base and \$4,000 room nights)

Year 3 (FY 2026/27): \$14,000 (\$10,000 base and \$4,000 room nights)

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

Ms. Garren made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve HJGT for funding up to \$18,200 for year 1 (FY 2024/25), \$11,500 for year 2 (FY 2025/26) and \$11,500 for year 3 (FY 2026/27).

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### D. Ozark Outdoors New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a New Event Grant Request from the Ozark Outdoors “Ozark Throwdown” fishing tournament at Lake Istokpoga in November 2024. The financial request was:

Year 1 (2024): \$30,000 (\$20,000 base and \$10,000 room nights)

Year 2 (2025): \$25,000 (\$10,000 base and \$15,000 room nights)

Year 3 (2026): \$25,000 (\$10,000 base and \$15,000 room nights)

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

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to approve Ozark Outdoors for funding up to \$30,000 for year 1 (2024), \$25,000 for year 2 (2025) and \$25,000 for year 3 (2026).

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

#### E. Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational

Ms. Strickland presented a Sports Event Grant Request from the Citrus Golf Trail for the 2024 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational fishing tournament at Sun 'N Lake in December 2024. The financial request was \$15,000 (based solely on room nights).

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Hatfield, to approve Citrus Golf Trail for funding up to \$15,000 for the 2024 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational.

All Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

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

#### A. Third Party Rental of Sports Complex Update

Ms. Sauls shared that the BOCC voted to instruct TDC staff to continue researching third-party rental of the sports complex, and that staff is currently conducting that research and would report back to the TDC in October.

#### B. TDC Grant Committee Meeting Update

Ms. Fultz shared that the grant committee had been interested in looking at alternative grant models for reimbursements that would look at origin zip codes of attendees rather than room nights generated by the event. She explained in her experience analyzing the reports provided post-event, that including both as requirements would be more beneficial than limiting to one or another, as the zip codes help get another capture of how many attendees likely stayed in the county overnight to help fill gaps that may come from the room night verification form process.

TDC members felt the room verifications from hotels are important, but that this falls on the event grantees to ensure they are getting the forms and communication from the hotels.

Ms. Compton suggested maybe looking at a program that would incentivize the hotels to contribute to the room verification process.

Mr. Stewart liked the idea of looking at additional data to help give event organizers the evidence-based benefit of the doubt on room numbers they claim their event generated when the hotel forms are not providing the full capture.

Ms. Fultz clarified this was not requiring a vote, was more just an updated on how things were being viewed from a staff perspective.

### C. TDC Welcome Monuments

Ms. Sauls provided an update that the monument mockup selected by the TDC was making its rounds to the BOCC members for their review. So far, all but one commissioner provided clear feedback. Staff would be working with the county administrator to clarify. The monuments will still move forward.

### D. Airstream Ventures Contract Renewal Update

Ms. Sauls shared that in conversations with the County Attorney, it was confirmed and clarified that so long as the TDC is paying for Airstream's contract, Airstream's services statutorily could not be managed by a department other than Tourist Development.

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

Ms. Hartt shared that the Tourism Insights & Award Luncheon would be on September 25<sup>th</sup> at the Circle Theatre, including Tourism Award presentations and a keynote presentation by Shellie Phelps from Wetumpka, Alabama. She shared there will be multiple stakeholder meetings with Shellie around Highlands County.

### F. Livestock Arena Update

Ms. Hartt directed the TDC to a memo in their packet outlining the work the TDC has done around the topic of a livestock/rodeo arena. She pointed out competitive analysis maps that Jason Boudrie of Synergy Sports created showing the competitive market for livestock facilities in the surrounding area and throughout the central/southern part of Florida. The maps do not show a plethora of tourism opportunity with a livestock facility but staff understands there is a community need that could provide some tourism benefit. Currently, TDC staff held a Zoom call with Commissioner Kirouac and Okeechobee arena managers, held a meeting with the Highlands County extension office to discuss the arena on George Blvd. in Sebring, and plan to host a tour of the arena on George Blvd. with livestock event operators to get their thoughts on what the facility would need to be able to attract events like theirs. On July 9, Highlands County Farm Bureau also organized a meeting on the topic that TDC staff attended. From the meeting it was determined that Farm Bureau would conduct a feasibility study for a livestock arena.

Ms. Garren asked if it would be a good idea to look at the potential growth of these activities. She feels this would help the TDC for future planning.

Ms. Compton commented that the Raceway was looking at hosting a rodeo. For timing reasons it did not workout, but she noted it was going to be a pretty expensive undertaking. She also noted concerns with maintenance of a livestock facility, where the responsibility would fall and what ongoing costs would be. But she does feel it would be a benefit to the community.

## 7. Public Input

Ms. Dear commented that she was looking for help in promoting Lake Placid and the arts and culture community, maybe in applying for assistance in website development or marketing ads, or maybe not for money at all, just visibility. She invited the TDC to come visit Lake Placid.

Ms. Garren shared that as an arts and culture representative on the TDC, there are grants that arts and culture groups can apply for. And that the TDC is always available to put events and activities on the website, that the information must be sent to the TDC staff for them to share. She also shared that the TDC holds arts and culture meetings. She reminded that a TDC's main focus is to bring people from outside of the county to stay in hotels and accommodations in the county. She encouraged Ms. Dear to take a look at the TDC's Community Grant.

Ms. Hartt shared that a meeting with Shellie from Wetumpka will be held in Lake Placid to help prepare the Lake Placid community for the ripple effects of the airing of season 3 of Hometown Takeover on HGTV featuring Sebring.

## 8. Board Member Roundtable

Ms. Garren wanted to share with her fellow TDC members that the governor vetoed all arts and culture funding in the state, and that SFSC lost \$90,000 in state funding, and that Highlands County Cultural Alliance, Highlands Art League, and Highway Park lost all their state-funding.

Commissioner Campbell shared that he has requested a TDC member be included in the county's Recreation and Parks Advisory Committee (RPAC), and that the BOCC was supportive of that. He advised members should see something coming up soon on that topic.

Ms. Worley shared her thanks for the welcome back to the TDC and looks forward to getting up to speed with the group initiatives and projects.

## 9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- **Sept. 7-8:** Southern Outlaw Dragboat Association (SODA) Fall Nationals Racing at Lake June
- **Sept. 7-8:** United States Fastpitch Association (USFA) Youth Softball Tournament at Sports Complex
- **Sept. 14-15:** UFFL (Flag Football) at Sports Complex
- **Sept. 20-22:** Motosurf at Pier Beach
- **Sept. 25: Tourism Insights and Awards Luncheon**
- **Sept. 28-29:** United States Fastpitch Association (USFA) Youth Softball Tournament at Sports Complex
- **Sept 30 – Oct. 2:** Visit Sebring Classic at Sun 'N Lake
- **Oct. 12-13:** Fast Pitch Softball at Sports Complex
- **Oct. 19- 20:** HJGT Visit Sebring Fall Junior Open at Sun 'N Lake
- **Oct. 20:** GFNY Cycling at Barn at Paso Fino
- **Oct. 31: TDC Quarterly Meeting**

## **10. Adjournment**

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at 10:22 a.m.

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