Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom
Regular Meeting
August 20, 2026 @ 8:15 a.m.

Draft Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:23 a.m. by Commissioner Campbell.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:
Commissioner Campbell
Cindy Garren
Andy Kesling
Jennifer Littlejohn
Stacy Malone
Brittany Mcquire
Kristyn Robbins
Josh Stewart

Absent:
Elizabeth Compton

Also, Present:
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourism Marketing & Project Manager
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director
Paola Cruz, Tourism Development Coordinator
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures
Stephanie Frakes, Citrus Golf Trail Marketing

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum had been met.

2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of April 30, 2026.

Commissioner Campbell asked if there were any comments or questions to the minutes of April 30, 2026. No comments or corrections were noted.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Garren, to approve the meeting minutes.

All Council members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

3. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Fultz directed the Board to the graphs included in their packets and reviewed the financial reports through May, including current financial standing and trends compared to the previous two years. Ms. Fultz also introduced two new spreadsheets detailing TDC financials, grant expenditures, and advertising spending.

Following the report, the floor was opened for questions. Ms. Garren asked about the 6% decrease in collections. Ms. Hartt explained that the decline is reflective of economic conditions impacting travel nationwide. Ms. Fultz added that while people are continuing to travel, they are staying for shorter periods.

Ms. Garren also asked what happens to funding that is not spent and where those funds are allocated. Ms. Sauls explained that unspent funds remain within the tourism balances and are not returned to the General Fund.

4. Marketing and Event Updates

<u>A. Destination and Budget Update</u>

Ms. Hartt provided an update on TDC staff activity and stakeholder outreach. She began by commending the City of Avon Park for hosting a successful and hospitable Pro Watercross event the previous weekend.

She then provided an overview of current TDC initiatives, including the development of new and unique visitor experiences, strategies to increase visitation during slower periods, and the continued development of indoor and outdoor facility projects. She also provided an update on the TDC's public relations outreach, including media coverage received to date and anticipated coverage.

Ms. Hartt also provided a brief update on facility development, including the current phase of the process and the anticipated timeline for the matter to return to the Board for a potential vote in October, should the Board decide to proceed.

She highlighted several upcoming events, including Motosurf, Surf Sebring, and Garden Week. Ms. Hartt also reviewed the TDC budget and discussed future plans and initiatives, including attendance at the Governor's Conference, where the TDC is expected to be announced as the winner of a category to be revealed, changes in TDT collections, and Destination Channel updates.

Ms. Hartt concluded her update and opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Garren commended the organization and layout of the website and the TDC's overall efforts.

Commissioner Campbell asked about the attendance of visitors from different countries at the Pro Watercross event in Avon Park.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 15:15 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=915.

<u>B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media</u>

Ms. Carlisle began her presentation by introducing the company's new brand and explained that the Board may hear the name "KHM" moving forward. She clarified that the rebrand does not involve any changes to the team or staff.

She then provided an update on website engagement, noting increases in time spent on the website, total sessions, and total users. She explained that outbound clicks from lodging pages are currently the best available indicator for measuring lodging interest.

She also reviewed paid media efforts, including the increased advertising budget, how funds were allocated, visitor origin markets, and seasonal travel trends. She also highlighted top-performing advertisements and provided an overview of how artificial intelligence is currently being incorporated into the website, along with planned AI and website enhancements.

Ms. Carlisle concluded by announcing that Visit Sebring is a winner of a Flagler Award and expressed excitement regarding the recognition.

The floor was then opened for questions.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 26:03 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=1563.

<u>C. Sports Events Updates from Airstream Ventures</u>

Mr. Verlander began his presentation by reviewing sports conferences attended by Airstream, as well as upcoming conferences. He highlighted the Florida Sports Foundation Summit attended by two members of his team and provided updates on previously completed sporting events held in Highlands County.

He reviewed the remaining secured events for 2026 and discussed new sporting events anticipated to come to Highlands County later in the year, including the potential impact each event could have on the local community. He provided an update on the status of each prospective event, identifying those that were confirmed, submitted, or in active discussions.

Mr. Verlander also discussed canceled events and the challenges facing youth sports. He explained that youth sports organizations are increasingly being acquired by larger entities, resulting in a need for larger fields and facilities that exceed what is currently available in Highlands County.

He also identified the need for larger fields as one of the department's primary challenges and discussed goals for the remainder of the year. He then opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Garren asked whether challenges with the grant process were related to the timing of the grants or the process itself. Mr. Verlander explained that the issue was not with the grant process, but rather with some smaller event organizers expecting a quick approval instead of following the established procedures.

Mr. Stewart expressed concern regarding the future outlook for sports events. Mr. Verlander addressed the concern, explaining that expanded facilities would provide additional opportunities to attract various age groups and continue bringing visitors to Highlands County.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 47:18 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=2838.

D. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update

Ms. Frakes provided an overview of current marketing efforts, including social media, email marketing, and website redesign. She reviewed audience growth and engagement statistics and identified the website redesign as the team's primary project, with a focus on converting visitor interest into travel.

Ms. Frakes also highlighted the availability of a dashboard providing insights into content performance, audience growth, and monthly analytics. She concluded with current and upcoming initiatives, including promoting upcoming events, increasing group travel, and expanding seasonal marketing efforts.

Ms. Frakes then opened the floor for questions.

Ms. Garren had a question regarding the group incentive and Mr. Kesling along with Ms. Frakes provided clarification regarding the incentive. Commissioner Campbell asked about informational materials that could be provided to interested parties. Ms. Frakes explained that the information would be available on the website and stated that the team could also work on developing printed materials for distribution.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 01:33:10 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=5590.

E. Tourism Collaboration Initiative Update

Ms. Phelps provided an overview of insights gathered through stakeholder meetings held throughout the County. She noted that increasing visitation during the off season was a recurring priority among stakeholders, which contributed to the development of Garden Week.

Ms. Phelps provided a synopsis of her presentation at Destinations Florida and discussed the continued interest in hospitality training, which has expanded into industry specific training. She also highlighted regional team meetings, an HGTV rerun, and an Emmy nomination.

Ms. Phelps concluded by discussing upcoming initiatives, including continued collaboration, the launch of Garden Week, and development of an art trail in collaboration with Highlands County schools. She then opened the floor for questions.

The Board had no questions. Commissioner Campbell commended the Garden Week initiative as a non sports event and recognized the collaboration with local art teachers.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:42:10 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=6130.

5. Items for Voting

A.CGT Ladies Invitational Event Grant Request

Mr. Jason Beatty with Citrus Golf Trail opened the item for consideration by thanking the Board for its previous support. He provided a brief history of the event and discussed its impact on tourism in the County, including visitation from out of state and internationally, length of visitor stays, and an annual participation of approximately 80 to 100 players.

Ms. Garren made a motion to approve the Sport or Special Event Grant Request from Citrus Golf Trail in an amount of up to $12,000 for their 2026 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational Event taking place at Sun N Lake Golf Club. The motion was seconded by Mr. Stewart.

All board members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:52:03 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=6723.

B. 2026-2027 TDC Budget & Marketing Plan

Ms. Hartt presented the draft TDC and tourism budgeting plan to the Board. She reviewed collection statistics, including monthly and total collections to date, and presented the available balance and tentative funding for future operations.
Ms. Hartt outlined key funding recommendations, including redesigning the Lakes Guides, destination development and experiences, an organizational strategic plan, local TDT collection, visitor research, and facility development.

Ms. Hartt noted that once final collections are accounted for, the proposed budget would be brought back before the Board for final decisions. She then opened the floor for questions.

Mr. Stewart expressed support for the proposed luxury and international dining initiatives. Mr. Kesling asked about the proposed funding for visitor research. Ms. Hartt provided clarification on the process and steps the TDC would take before allocating funds toward visitor research.

Commissioner Campbell entertained a motion to approve the preliminary budget as presented. Mr. Stewart made the motion, which was seconded by Ms. Robbins.

All board members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:54:14 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=6854.

C. MC Elite Softball (Texas) Event Grant Requests

Mr. Zenner opened the item for consideration by providing background on the MC Elite organization and its interest in bringing events to Sebring with grant support. He then opened the floor for questions.

Before the motion was made, Ms. Garren clarified that staff had recommended funding at 75% of the requested amount.

Mr. Stewart made a motion to approve the grant funding requests from MC Elite for its Spooky Season events, scheduled for October 10–11 and November 14–15, as three-year New Event Grants, with funding for each event as follows:

- **Year 1 (2026):** Up to $20,000, including up to $15,000 based on application scoring and up to an additional $5,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 250 verified room nights at $20 per room night.
- **Year 2 (2027):** Up to $15,500, including up to $7,500 based on application scoring and up to an additional $8,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 400 verified room nights at $20 per room night.
- **Year 3 (2028):** Up to $17,500, including up to $7,500 based on application scoring and up to an additional $10,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 500 verified room nights at $20 per room night.

All grant funds are reimbursable and may be used for umpires, facility fees, event marketing, event staffing, and awards featuring the Visit Sebring logo in a pre-approved design. Funds will come from Cost Center 5305, Marketing & Events.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Kesling.

All board members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:09:01 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=7741.

D. Race Time Marathon Event Grant Request

Mr. Zenner presented the Racetime Marathon event for consideration of grant funding. He provided background on the event and its coordinator and explained that the event's goal is to showcase the Sebring racetrack. Mr. Zenner noted that the event coordinator anticipates continued growth and hopes to establish the event as a staple in his event calendar. Mr. Zenner then opened the floor for questions.

Mr. Stewart asked whether the distance of the race could impact participation. Mr. Zenner stated that while he could not be certain of the impact, he had confidence in the event organizer's experience and ability to manage the event. Mr. Kesling expressed support for the event.

Commissioner Campbell entertained a motion. Mr. Kesling made a motion to approve the grant funding request from Racetime LLC for the 12 Miles of Sebring & 5K Run/Walk event as a three-year New Event Grant, with funding amounts as follows:

• **Year 1 (2026):** Up to $20,000, including up to $15,000 based on application scoring and up to an additional $5,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 250 verified room nights at $20 per room night.
• **Year 2 (2027):** Up to $13,500, including up to $7,500 based on application scoring and up to an additional $6,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 300 verified room nights at $20 per room night.
• **Year 3 (2028):** Up to $15,500, including up to $7,500 based on application scoring and up to an additional $8,000 based on verified room nights, with up to 400 verified room nights at $20 per room night.

All grant funds are reimbursable and may be used for facility fees, event marketing, shirts, signage, and awards featuring the Visit Sebring logo in a pre-approved design. If deemed an eligible expense by legal counsel, funds may also be used for off-duty police. Funds will come from Cost Center 5305, Marketing & Events.

The motion was seconded by Ms. Robbins.

All board members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:11:44 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=7904.

6. Old Business / Discussion / Informational

A. Lake June Lagoon Update

Ms. Smoyer provided an update on operations since opening in May, including current goals and opportunities for growth. She noted that while the lagoon is focused on attracting visitors, community needs and engagement remain a priority.

Ms. Smoyer reviewed in-county and out-of-county attendance, noting an increase in outside visitation during the late summer, particularly on weekends. She also highlighted the lagoon's focus on employing local youth and noted that 10 young adults have received lifeguard certification.

Ms. Smoyer discussed community integration efforts and special offers for local residents. She identified public perception that the inflatable park is free as a challenge and explained that she has worked to educate the public on the grant process and how the funding supports the operation.

Ms. Smoyer also discussed feedback received from visitors who experienced the lagoon and how that feedback has helped guide future additions and investments. She concluded by discussing plans for continued tourism growth, improved lakefront safety, investment in new attractions, public communication, and community partnerships.

The floor was opened for questions. A member of the public asked about protocols during severe weather. Ms. Smoyer explained that, in accordance with their insurance requirements, the park utilizes applications to monitor severe weather. She stated that if lightning is detected within a 10-mile radius, the park closes for 30 minutes before conditions are reassessed.

B. Destination Transformation Presentation

Ms. Hartt and Ms. Phelps presented a shortened version of their presentation from Destinations Florida. They discussed the steps taken to develop sustainable tourism initiatives following the HGTV exposure and provided examples of challenges commonly faced by destinations.

Ms. Phelps emphasized that collaboration and working together are key to a successful destination. Both presenters noted that tourism extends beyond generating tourism dollars and can contribute to long-term community improvements for future generations. Ms. Hartt and Ms. Phelps recognized the contributions of regional leadership teams, external consultants, and community partners. They concluded by emphasizing that destination leadership involves not only marketing, but also collaboration and bringing the community together, and provided an overview of future projects.

They then opened the floor for questions.

C. Garden Week Flyer

Ms. Fultz presented a flyer promoting the inaugural 2026 Garden Week, the first countywide event. She also noted that staff is working to develop additional printed materials for distribution and encouraged Board members and attendees to participate.

D. FY26 Quarterly Report

Ms. Fultz provided an update on the quarterly report, noting that it was included in the Board packets. She also discussed a new format designed to make the report less text heavy and efforts to distribute it more widely.

E. TDT Local Tax Collection Update

Ms. Hartt provided a brief verbal update regarding local TDT collection, noting that the change will officially take effect October 1. She stated that the TDC office will send an email to TDT collectors notifying them of the change, followed by a letter from the Tax Collector's Office.

F. Strategic Plan Update

Ms. Hartt provided a brief verbal update on the strategic plan, noting that Brian London of London Tourism Publications was selected for the project. She stated that the Board would receive an update on the plan in the near future.

7. Public Input

Time was made for public input.

8. Board Member Roundtable

Time was made for board member roundtable.

9. Upcoming Meetings & TDC-Sponsored Events

- Aug. 26-27: Surf Sebring @ Sebring’s City Pier Beach
- Aug. 29-30: Motosurf @ Sebring’s City Pier Beach
- Sept. 8-13: Garden Week – countywide collaboration initiative
- Sept. 9-11: Governor’s Conference on Tourism - Palm Beach
- Oct. 12-14: Visit Sebring Classic Golf Tournament @ Sun ‘N Lake
- Oct. 29: TDC meeting
- Nov. 18-20: Citrus Golf Trail Open
- Dec. 4-7: Last Paddler Standing
- Dec. 19-20: Spartan Race
- Dec. 28-31: Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational

10. Adjournment

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at **11:27AM.**

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