



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council  
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom  
Regular Meeting  
August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025 @ 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  
Maritza Christiansen  
Christine Hatfield  
Andy Kesling  
Josh Stewart  
Debra Worley

*Absent:*

Elizabeth Compton  
Cindy Garren

*Also, Present:*

Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant  
Reagan Fultz, Tourism Marketing & Project Manager  
Sarah Maldonado, Tourism Development Coordinator  
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director  
Jen Carlisle, Madden Media  
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures  
Shellie Phelps-Whitfield, Biggest Fish Consulting  
Kate Strickland, Wander Media  
Alexa Chapa, Downtown Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA)  
Kim Piesek, Sebring Historical Society  
Jennifer Bush, Lake Placid Chamber of Commerce

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum had been met.

**2. Financial and Office Reports**

Ms. Fultz presented the revenue and office reports. It was noted that Tourist Development Tax (TDT) collections remain above prior year levels, with year-to-date collections showing continued growth.

Ms. Fultz also shared that Sarah Maldonado, the Tourism Development Coordinator, would be leaving her position for another opportunity, and that this would be her final meeting with the TDC.

Council members received detailed printouts of the financial and office reports. There were no questions or comments.

### **3. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of May 1, 2025.**

Commissioner Campbell asked if there were any comments or changes to the minutes of May 1, 2025. No comments or corrections were noted.

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

All Council members voted aye, and the motion carried.

### **4. Marketing and Event Updates**

#### **A. Destination and Budget Update**

Ms. Hartt presented a destination and budget update, noting that occupancy rates remain up compared to the prior year. Staff activities included presentations to city councils and organizations throughout the County; continued promotion of Visit Sebring's digital and print materials; and coordination with partners on tourism initiatives. She also shared takeaways from staff's participation in the 2025 Destinations Florida Marketing Summit in Cape Coral, Florida.

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

Ms. Carlisle provided the TDC with updates on digital marketing performance and the Visit Sebring website. Key indicators such as engagement, session length, and conversion metrics were noted as trending positively. Copies of the presentation were provided in the agenda packets.

Ms. Carlisle also presented marketing initiatives for the upcoming fiscal year, including building upon the HGTV spotlight, increasing dedicated SEO hours to keep up with evolving search behavior driven by generative AI, and related efforts.

#### **C. Sports Events Updates from Airstream Ventures**

Mr. Verlander presented current and upcoming sports events in Highlands County. He highlighted the County's central location and strong relationships with event organizers as drivers of recent bookings. He also noted progress in strengthening Sebring's positioning as a sports tourism hub.

#### D. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update

Ms. Strickland gave an update on marketing efforts for the Citrus Golf Trail. Campaigns promoting the trail continue to gain traction, and preparations for upcoming tournaments are underway.

#### E. Tourism Collaboration Initiative Update

Ms. Phelps-Whitfield reported on the Tourism Collaboration Initiative, outlining recent engagement with local partners and emphasizing the importance of strengthening industry relationships. She noted early positive outcomes from collaboration efforts.

#### F. HGTV Passport Update

Ms. Chapa shared details on the CRA's process for building out an 'HGTV Home Town Takeover Tour' passport on the Bandwango platform, which is funded by the TDC. She provided data on the passport's performance, including the number of downloads; the number of check-ins at locations within the tour; the number of prizes redeemed; and related engagement metrics.

### **5. Items for Voting**

#### A. Lake June Lagoon Update

Ms. Smoyer presented an update on Lake June Lagoon's progress to the TDC. She shared that due to increases in tariffs, freight costs for the inflatables needed to build out the splash park have increased by 85%–215%, depending on the item. As a result, the purchase and delivery of the inflatables have been delayed, with only a few received to date. In order to avoid opening the park before it is fully equipped to the intended standard, she requested to postpone the opening and to postpone the reimbursable grant payments accordingly.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Christiansen, to shift the grant timelines and deadlines from starting in the original period of FY24/25 to start in FY25/26 and run for three years.

All Council members voted aye, and the motion carried.

#### B. 2025 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational Grant Request

Mr. Beaty presented a grant request from the Citrus Golf Trail for the 2025 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational taking place at Sun 'N Lake Gold Club December 27-30, 2025.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Mr. Kesling, to approve Sports Event Grant request for the 2025 Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational with funding up to \$15,000, based on \$20 per verified room night. Reimbursable grant funds are to be used for facility rental, event officials, and digital marketing. Funds to come from cost center 5305.

All council members voted Aye, and the motion carried.

### C. Facility Development Update

Ms. Hartt presented updates on facility development planning. The discussion included ongoing work with consultants, potential land opportunities, and future funding considerations. The full presentation can be found at the URL <https://youtu.be/T9PgX5oizSU> beginning at the **1:15:56** mark, and continues at the URL <https://youtu.be/EllZulwS6MY> with Council discussion and direction beginning at the **6:38** mark.

There was no formal motion or vote. The Council provided consensus for staff to bring back more information on the financials of the top three recommendations from the recent study, as well as on third-party management options.

### D. FY2025-2026 Budget

Ms. Hartt presented the staff proposed FY2025-2026 budget to the TDC. The full presentation of the budget and related discussion between council members, staff, and vendors can be found at the URL <https://youtu.be/EllZulwS6MY> beginning at the **38:45** mark.

Mr. Stewart made a motion, seconded by Ms. Capote, to approve the proposed FY2025–2026 budget as presented.

Upon roll call, all Council members voted aye. The motion carried.

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

### A. Caladium Festival Update

Ms. Bush provided a verbal update on the successes of the 2025 Caladium Festival and shared appreciation for everyone who made the event possible.

### B. TDC Grant Recommendations

Ms. Fultz presented proposed updates to the TDC grant program.

The full presentation can be found at the URL <https://youtu.be/EllZulwS6MY> beginning at the 1:18:11 mark, and continued/completed at the URL <https://youtu.be/tbO9XfmVM3U>.

Ms. Fultz explained that the policies discussed were under review with the County's Legal Office and would come before the TDC at the next meeting.

### C. TDT Payment Reminder Letter

Ms. Fultz shared that a TDT reminder letter would be sent to all relevant parties and would be updated as needed, depending on whether the TDC and the Tax Collector determine that TDT will be collected locally rather than through the Florida Department of Revenue.

### D. True Omni Update

Ms. Fultz shared that the office continues to work on finalizing the True Omni project to install interactive digital kiosks in downtown Avon Park, Sebring, and Lake Placid. She noted that coordination among multiple internal departments, municipalities, and private property owners had caused some delays but that installations were now anticipated for October.

**E. Tourism Insights & Awards Luncheon Update**

Ms. Hartt reminded the TDC that the annual Tourism Insights and Awards Luncheon would be taking place on September 10, 2025, at Seven Sebring Raceway Hotel.

**F. County Comp Plan Update**

Ms. Sauls reported that there are no evaluation recommendations for tourism at this time, but she expects that tourism will expand from its current single sentence under Economic Development to a full paragraph.

## **7. Public Input**

Ms. Piesik from the Sebring Historical Society shared that the county's museums had formed a collaborative group to meet quarterly to discuss shared challenges and opportunities. They plan to produce a rack card and may explore creating a Bandwango tour. She also noted partnerships with Small World Tours and Highlands Transportation to increase both day trip and local tours, and expressed interest in launching a YouTube channel or hosting social media influencers.

## **8. Board Member Roundtable**

Ms. Worley shared that the developer responsible for the Journal Plaza renovations had purchased a new building in downtown Lake Placid to renovate into a restaurant and boutique hotel. She also mentioned discussions regarding the tower in Lake Placid.

Mr. Kesling suggested reducing the number of printed agenda packets, with several members expressing interest in using digital copies instead. Staff will work individually with members to determine their preferences for future meetings.

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

- Aug. 16–17: Pro Watercross Jet Ski Racing at Donaldson Park
- Sept. 10: Tourism Insights & Awards Luncheon
- Sept. 29 – Oct. 1: Visit Sebring Classic Golf Tournament at Sun 'N Lake Golf Club
- Oct. 26: GFNY Cycling at The Barn at Paso Fino
- Oct. 30: TDC Quarterly Meeting

## **10. Adjournment**

Mr. Campbell adjourned the meeting at 11:28 a.m.

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