

Highlands County TDC Quarterly Report



October – December 2025



November's Hospitality Training attendees pose with their certificates of completion

Shellie Phelps spoke about regional tourism efforts in Highlands County at FREDA conference

Paddlers launching from H.L. Bishop Park for the 50+ hour long event, Last Paddler Standing

Travel & Tourism Trends

- US hotel occupancy fell for 9th consecutive month in November: CoStar
- Canadian Trips to US Fall 28% in 2025
- Federal Shutdown Cut U.S. Travel Spending by \$136.8M Per Day
- 83% of Travelers Using or Interested in AI for Trip Planning
- Sports Tourism Poised for Continued Growth in 2026
- KeyData Identifies 2026 Travel Trending Towards Smaller U.S. Markets

Updates & Highlights

Public Relations with MuchPR



- Participated in VISIT FLORIDA media missions in Nashville and New York City (Oct. 13–15), conducting in-person meetings with national media and influencers and completing post-event follow-up pitching.
- Prepared for IMM NYC (Jan. 22), including auditing 500+ media, requesting 72 appointments, and securing targeted meeting requests with priority outlets.
- Produced and distributed a Highlands County holiday events press release to 75+ media outlets.
- Generated national earned media placements highlighting Highlands County, including coverage from National Geographic, Thrillist, Only In Your State, World Atlas, and Investopedia.
- Secured additional earned coverage during Q1 FY 2025–26 from GolfPass.com, Road Runner Travel, and Travel & Tour World.

Updates & Highlights Continued

Website Traffic & Digital Marketing with Madden Media



Note: A review of administrative access to our website analytics account identified that duplicate tracking had been in place following prior changes in digital marketing agencies. This caused certain engagement metrics to be overstated in past reporting periods.

The duplicate tracking has since been removed. As a result, current engagement metrics may appear lower when compared to prior years. The data now reflects consistent, one-time counting of website visits, providing a more reliable baseline moving forward.

- Engaged Sessions on VisitSebring.com – up 4% YOY
- Engagement Rate for website visitors – down 44% YOY
- Avg. Session Duration – down 23% YOY
- Outbound Link Click to Partner Sites - up 7% YOY
- Guide Downloads & Newsletter Sign Ups for Q1: 720
- Top Web Pages for Q1: Home Page, Events, Morty & Edna's, Cities
- Top Markets Site Visitors Originating From: New York, Sebring, Tampa, Orlando
- Total Outbound Link Clicks: 9.095
- Total Accommodation Outbound Link Clicks: 1,344, up 29% YOY

Sports Marketing with Airstream Ventures (ASV)



- In Q3, the TDC provided financial assistance to 6 sports tourism events recruited by ASV:
 - **GFNY Florida, Oct. 25-26**
 - **Visit Sebring Classic, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1**
 - **Citrus Golf Trail Open, Nov. 10-12**
 - **Last Paddler Standing, Dec. 5-8**
 - **Spartan Trifecta Weekend, Dec. 12-13**
 - **Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational, Dec. 28-31**
- Twenty-two (22) sports tourism new or recurring events have been recruited by Airstream Ventures for fiscal year 2025-2026. Some of these events will not be TDC-funded events but will still bring tourism to Highlands County.
- ASV has booked 20 events so far in Highlands County for FY25
- ASV is in serious talks with seventeen (17) events for 2026 & 2027
- ASV will attend six (6) sports tourism trade shows in FY 2026 to recruit new events and represent Highlands County.

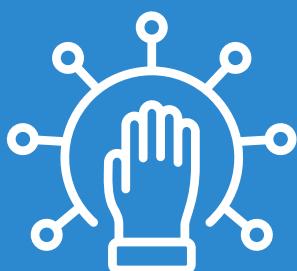
Updates & Highlights Continued

Stakeholder & Industry Outreach



- Attended the Florida Rural Economic Development Association (FREDA) Conference in Ocala.
- Hosted Spartan VIP site tours for community leaders (Dec. 12).
- Facilitated two (2) in-person Everyone Matters hospitality training sessions to strengthen visitor experience and service excellence across the region.
- Conducted three (3) one-on-one meetings with County Commissioners to discuss the mission, purpose, and collaborative goals of the Regional Team.
- Presented on the role of the arts in destination development at the Arts & Cultural Stakeholder Meeting, focusing on creative placemaking across Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid.
- Prepared for the American Bus Association National Marketplace (Reno, NV), scheduling 30+ in-person meetings with tour operators and industry partners.
- Facilitated Regional Team meetings in October and November to support strengthening destination development efforts
- Participated in virtual meetings related to the Citrus Golf Trail, and a potential Destination Channel and Tourism Improvement District.
- Continued planning for the Regional Team Retreat scheduled for February 2026.

Keeping up with Staff



- Onboarded new Tourism Development Coordinator, Paola Cruz
- Presented on facility and tourism development to the BOCC, City of Sebring, Town of Lake Placid, and Leadership Highlands.
- Coordinated call with the City of Avon Park on Donaldson Park study recommendations.
- Hosted the International Network of Golf (ING) Fall Conference for national golf media (Nov. 18–21).
- Conducted TDC Board Member Orientation for a newly appointed representative.
- Advanced sports tourism and facility development initiatives with Airstream Ventures, Huddle Up Group, Synergy Sports, and County Parks.
- Coordinated with County Legal on TDC grant updates, agreements, and facility development matters.
- Implemented TDC grant program updates, including the launch of a new grant category.
- Oversaw installation of True Omni visitor kiosks; continued coordination with vendor to address post-installation issues.

Looking Forward

Below are current and future projects and initiatives you should expect to see from the TDC:

- Next TDC Quarterly Board Meetings– Thursday, January 29. Meetings are open to the public.
- TDC staff will be joining Economic Development staff at Rural Counties Days at the State Capitol in January
- True Omni kiosks will continue to be finetuned to provide optimal user experience as a visitor information resource
- Grant was approved to expand Sports Complex. Staff is working with Legal on the land purchase process with closing scheduled for April 1.
- Land donation – Staff is working with Legal on the proposed donation of land across from Fred Wild Elementary for the purpose of developing an indoor, multi-use facility.
- Highlands County Annual Tourism Awards Ceremony will be held in May 2026
- Ongoing Hospitality Training sessions open to the public
- Ongoing Stakeholder Meetings to discuss Destination Development with specifics sectors of local tourism industry, and with communities overall

Upcoming Quarter's TDC-Sponsored Events

The TDC does not provide financial assistance for events held January through March, as these months are considered peak tourism season. TDC funding is strategically reserved for April through December to help encourage visitation during the region's traditionally slower tourism months.