

Highlands County TDC Quarterly Report



FY26 Q3: April – June 2026



Winners of 2026 Winner's Circle Tourism Awards



Staff attended Sophie's Cafe Grand Opening in Avon Park with EDC Staff



Staff created Garden Week this quarter, set to take place Sept. 8-13. Logo pictured.



Casey and Shellie Present at Destinations Florida Marketing Summit

Travel & Tourism Trends

- Move over, Euro Summer — Americans are staying closer to home this year. Closer, cheaper trips on the rise. (Axios.com)
- Travelers shifting toward shorter-duration and lower-cost trips, including regional and drive markets, in response to greater costs (USTRavel.org)
- Enrichment driven travel trends: “Whycation” becomes more about why we are going than where we are going (USChamber.com)
- Literary Tourism Trend: “55% of travelers say they’ve booked, or would consider booking, a trip inspired by literature” (Vice.com)

Digital Marketing • Madden Media

33,164

SESSIONS IN Q3

52.7%

ENGAGEMENT IN Q3

6,828

OUTBOUND CLICKS IN Q3

1,291

Q3 E-NEWSLETTER SIGN UPS

Website traffic continued to generate strong visitor engagement, producing 6,828 outbound link clicks—a 6% year-over-year increase. Growth was fueled by exceptional paid media performance, including a 596% increase in Paid Social and a 21% increase in Paid Search. Although accommodation outbound clicks were down 12% overall, primarily due to Organic Search, paid marketing channels posted substantial gains, with Paid Social increasing 275% and Paid Search increasing 113%.

TOP WEBSITE VISITOR MARKETS:

1. Sebring
2. New York
3. Orlando
4. Tampa
5. Miami

TOP WEBPAGES VISITED:

1. Homepage
2. Things to Do
3. Events

Public Relations • MuchPR

87

MEDIA STORIES OCT-JUNE

12.6M

EST. VIEWS OCT-JUNE

1.38B

POTENTIAL REACH OCT-JUNE

8.79K

ENGAGEMENTS OCT-JUNE

KEY INITIATIVES THIS QUARTER:

- Caladium Festival PR
- Garden Week communications
- Hosted Jen Ruiz
- Garden media outreach

FEATURED COVERAGE THIS QUARTER:

- [Southern Living](#)
- [TimeOut](#)
- [Florida Rambler](#)
- [My Family Travels](#)
- [Islands](#)
- [Flamingo Magazine](#)

**Click Title to View Article*

MuchPR continued expanding Highlands County's visibility through strategic media relations and storytelling through the quarter, expanding the fiscal year's successes to 87 earned media placements with an estimated 12.6 million views. Coverage highlighted signature experiences including the Caladium Festival, Garden Week, fishing, and Sebring's unique downtown, while hosted media visits and targeted outreach continued to generate statewide and national exposure.



Southern Living

<https://www.southernliving.com> › Travel › Florida

[This Scenic Florida Town Is Known For Its Unique Circular ...](#)

Jun 12, 2026 — **Sebring is one of the country's last remaining circular cities**, which means its main downtown district is situated around a circular park from ... [Read more](#)



Sports Tourism Marketing • Airstream Ventures

26

TOTAL EVENTS IN FY26

11

NEW BOOKINGS IN FY26

38

EVENTS IN CONVERSATIONS

5

TV/STREAMING EVENTS IN FY26

Airstream Ventures continued expanding Highlands County's sports tourism portfolio through aggressive event recruitment and business development. During the quarter, the team pursued national championship opportunities through USA Track & Field and the NCAA championship bid portal while continuing to build a strong pipeline of future events generated through industry trade shows.

COMPLETED EVENTS IN Q3:

1. DockDogs at Sebring Soda Fest
2. Pro Watercross (TV Show)
3. 5v5 Soccer with YMCA
4. Inspire Dance Competition

Industry and Community Relations • Biggest Fish

3

HOSPITALITY TRAININGS

2

REGIONAL TEAM MEETINGS

2

DESTINATION TOURS

1

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

Biggest Fish continued strengthening Highlands County's tourism industry partner outreach and network through hospitality training, stakeholder engagement, partnership development, and regional collaboration. Work during the quarter included advancing Garden Week, exploring opportunities tied to Home Town Takeover, supporting restaurant and accommodations stakeholders, and connecting local attractions and businesses with broader tourism initiatives.

TRAINING & INDUSTRY OUTREACH:

- Two general Everyone Matters sessions
- On-site training launched at Faded Bistro
- Pinecrest Golf Club session scheduled
- Restaurant & Accommodations Stakeholder Meeting
- Downtown Sebring Merchants meeting

PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATION:

- Archbold Biological Station tour
- Strangely Warmed Coffee tour
- Visit Natural North Florida meeting
- Regional Tourism Leadership Team meetings
- Garden Week stakeholder outreach
- Home Town Takeover planning with RTR Media

INDUSTRY RELATIONS HIGHLIGHT OF Q3:

Shellie and Casey co-presented Highlands County's collaborative regional tourism model at the Destinations Florida Conference in May, sharing the county's approach with destination marketing organizations, tourism professionals, and industry leaders from across Florida. The presentation was well received and has since been adapted for local presentations.

Keeping Up with TDC Staff

Throughout Q3, TDC staff balanced destination development, event recruitment, strategic planning, community engagement and new tourism initiatives. Work continued across multiple long-term priorities while staff also strengthened industry partnerships, represented Highlands County at the state and local levels, and laid the groundwork for upcoming shoulder-season tourism efforts.

DESTINATION & FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

- Met one-on-one with four County Commissioners regarding sports facility development.
- Participated in multiple Sebring City Council meetings related to facility development.
- Continued discussions with landowners regarding development of an indoor facility.
- Advanced procurement of a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment for newly acquired Sports Complex property.
- Continued coordination with the Parks Department regarding the Sports Complex and events held at the facility.

LEADERSHIP, PLANNING & INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

- Coordinated and hosted the Tourism Insights & Awards Breakfast featuring Nerissa Okiye and a keynote presentation on ecotourism.
- Represented Visit Sebring at the Destinations Florida Marketing Summit, where Visit Sebring was selected to present.
- Drafted the RFP for Strategic Planning Services.
- Drafted and secured County Commission approval of the National Travel & Tourism Week Proclamation.
- Served as guest speaker for the Avon Park Noon Rotary Club.

TOURISM & EVENT DEVELOPMENT

- Launched Garden Week, a new, county-wide initiative designed to drive September visitation.
- Continued pre- and post-event coordination with existing and prospective sporting event organizers.
- Worked with Sebring International Raceway and Seven Sebring Raceway Hotel to identify opportunities to increase August visitation.
- Advanced planning for the inaugural Connected Communities Summit (2027), featuring Santiago Corrada, President & CEO of Visit Tampa Bay, as keynote speaker and facilitator.

COMMUNITY & DESTINATION OUTREACH

- Coordinated the itinerary and hosted German travel media focused on family travel.
- Attended SFSC Performing Arts Reveal Dinner.
- Attended the Avon Park Baseball Museum Grand Opening.
- Participated in monthly Downtown Sebring merchant meetings.
- Toured High Grove with EDC staff, member, County Commissioners, and County Leadership.
- Attended ribbon cuttings for Sophie's Cafe and Liam's Ice Cream and Soda Works in Avon Park, and Mamma Mia in Sebring.

Looking Forward

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

- The next TDC Quarterly Board Meeting will be held Thursday, August 20. Meetings are open to the public.
- The inaugural Garden Week will take place September 8–13, with experiences and offerings throughout Sebring, Avon Park and Lake Placid.
- Staff will attend the 2026 Governor’s Conference on Tourism in West Palm Beach in September. Visit Sebring is nominated for Flagler Awards for the VisitSebring.com website redesign and the “Come Full Circle” marketing campaign.
- Additional hospitality training sessions will continue to be offered and open to the public.
- Stakeholder meetings will continue with communities and sectors of the local tourism industry to help inform destination development efforts.
- Development of the new Destination TV Channel will begin.
- A strategic planning agency will be selected and development of the TDC’s new Strategic Plan will begin.
- Research, planning and stakeholder discussions related to tourism and sports facility development will continue.
- A refresh of the Visit Sebring Travel Guide is planned to begin in the new fiscal year.

Next Quarter’s TDC-Sponsored Events

- July 24-26: Caladium Festival in Downtown Lake Placid
- August 14-16: Pro Watercross at Donaldson Park
- August 26-27: #SurfSebring - The public can come ride the Motosurf boards for free
- August 28-30: Motosurf at Pier Beach and Rotary Park in Sebring
- September 8-13: Garden Week - a county-wide initiative