Highlands County TDC Quarterly Report

VISIT Sebring
AVON PARK & LAKE PLACID, FL

FY26 Q4: July – September 2026



Clay Wallace of Classic Caladiums leads a field tour during the annual Open House, an anchor event of Garden Week.



The team won two Flagler awards at the 2027 Governor's Conference on Tourism.



Owl & Otter and Bouquets by Yoana hosted a Garden Week vase painting and floral arranging workshop.



UF/IFAS Master Gardener, David Austin, parterned with Robbin's Nursery to host a Vegtable Talk as part of Garden Week.

Travel & Tourism Trends

- Travelers are looking to unplug: 62% say disconnecting helps them feel closer to nature, as off-the-beaten-path destinations gain appeal for 2027. *(TravelPulse/Skyscanner)*
- Travelers want to do, not just see: 80% say hands-on activities tied to a destination deepen their appreciation of local culture. *(Euronews)*
- Gen Z is embracing small-town travel: 90% surveyed said small towns and under-the-radar destinations appeal to them for fall travel. *(Globetrender/Airbnb)*
- U.S. hotel outlook improves: Stronger travel demand prompted an upward revision to 2026–27 hotel forecasts. *(CoStar/Tourism Economics)*

Digital Marketing • Madden Media

110,702	47%	6,424	1,264
SESSIONS IN Q4	ENGAGEMENT IN Q4	OUTBOUND CLICKS IN Q4	Q4 E-NEWSLETTER SIGN UPS

Website traffic remained strong in Q4, generating 110,702 sessions and 6,424 outbound link clicks, both increasing year over year. Garden Week emerged as a standout digital campaign, with its webpage attracting 6,698 visitors—nearly 9% of all site visitors—while Meta ads generated a 5.55% click-through rate, more than twice the industry benchmark. Madden also developed new Garden Week web content and two seasonal blog posts.

TOP WEBSITE VISITOR MARKETS:

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

TOP WEBPAGES VISITED:

1. Homepage
2. Events
3. Garden Week

Public Relations • MuchPR

114	13.1M	1.44B	14.4K
MEDIA STORIES OCT-SEPT	EST. VIEWS OCT-SEPT	POTENTIAL REACH OCT-SEPT	ENGAGEMENTS OCT-SEPT

KEY INITIATIVES THIS QUARTER:

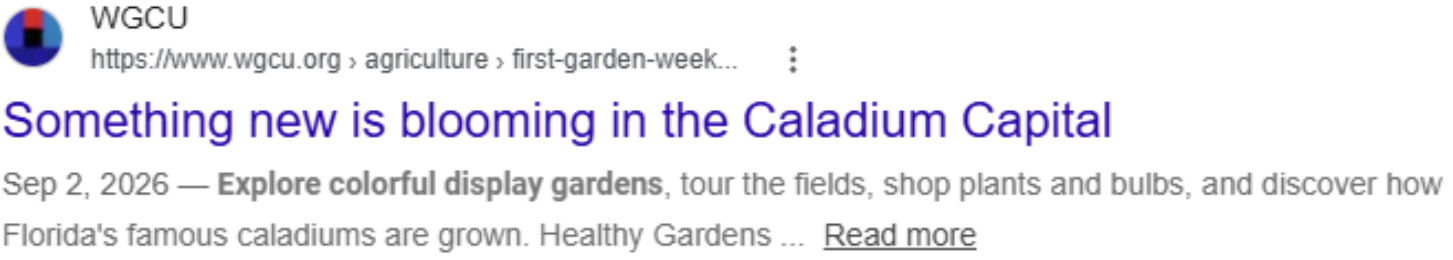
- Garden Week media outreach
- Caladium Festival PR
- Home Town Takeover Emmy PR
- Garden Week partner communications

FEATURED COVERAGE THIS QUARTER:

- Southern Living
- Travel + Leisure
- WGCU
- Better Lawns & Gardens Podcast

**Click Title to View Article*

MuchPR continued building Highlands County's visibility through strategic media relations and storytelling, ending FY26 with 114 earned media placements and an estimated 13.1 million views. Q4 efforts focused heavily on Garden Week, including communications support and outreach to more than 175 Florida and garden-focused media. Additional efforts supported the Caladium Festival and Home Town Takeover Emmy nomination, while national coverage continued showcasing Sebring to broad travel audiences.



Sports Tourism Marketing • Airstream Ventures

16	3	40	5
TOTAL EVENTS IN FY26	NEW BOOKINGS IN FY26	EVENTS IN CONVERSATIONS	TV/STREAMING EVENTS IN FY26

Airstream Ventures continued expanding Highlands County's sports tourism pipeline through aggressive event recruitment and business development. During Q4, efforts focused on NCAA and NJCAA championship opportunities while growing the pipeline to 40 events in active conversations for 2027 and beyond. New bookings included Major League Fishing and two flag football events expected to help launch FY27.

COMPLETED EVENTS IN Q3:

1. Pro Watercross – Avon Park (CBS Sports)
2. MotoSurf – Sebring (CBS Sports)

Industry and Community Relations • Biggest Fish

4	2	2	1
HOSPITALITY TRAININGS	REGIONAL TEAM MEETINGS	STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS	BOCC PRESENTATION

Biggest Fish continued strengthening tourism industry relationships through hospitality training, stakeholder engagement and regional collaboration. Q4 efforts supported Garden Week, agritourism and fishing development, arts engagement and ongoing opportunities related to Home Town Takeover, while continuing to connect local businesses and tourism leaders with destination initiatives.

TRAINING & INDUSTRY OUTREACH:

- Two general Everyone Matters sessions
- On-site trainings at Sandhill Grill/Pinecrest Golf Club and Holiday Inn Express
- Agritourism & Fishing Stakeholder Meeting
- Local art educator discussion
- Downtown Sebring Merchant Meeting
- Coffee with the Mayor

PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATION:

- Two Regional Tourism Leadership Team meetings and facility tours
- Garden Week planning, outreach & post-event partner call
- Chamber of Commerce Garden Week planning
- "Community Collaboration" presentation to BOCC

Keeping Up with TDC Staff

Throughout Q4, TDC staff advanced major destination development and planning initiatives while launching the inaugural Garden Week, strengthening state and local partnerships, and preparing for the transition of Tourist Development Tax collections. Staff also represented Highlands County at the state level and earned statewide recognition for Visit Sebring's marketing efforts.

DESTINATION & FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

- Met one-on-one with all five County Commissioners regarding sports facility development.
- Participated in multiple Max Long Sports Complex stakeholder 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.

TOURISM & EVENT DEVELOPMENT

- Completed the inaugural Garden Week, coordinating nearly 50 community partners and extensive on-the-ground support.
- Participated in the Classic Caladiums VIP Tour during Garden Week.
- Continued pre- and post-event coordination with existing and prospective sporting event organizers.
- Prepared accommodations and rental partners for the transition of TDT collections to the Tax Collector.
- Discussed FY27 Media + Marketing Plan with Madden Media.

LEADERSHIP, PLANNING & INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

- Secured a $50,000 state grant for Strategic Planning Services and completed the RFP selection process. Staff attended the grant announcment in Lake City.
- Attended the Florida Governor's Conference on Tourism, earning a Henry Award for Come Full Circle campaign and Bronze Award for VisitSebring.com redesign.
- Met with Sen. Erin Grall and Rep. Kaylee Tuck regarding Highlands County tourism initiatives.
- Participated in VISIT FLORIDA's PR Roundtable and discussed rural tourism opportunities with VISIT FLORIDA.
- Drafted the RFP for Public Relations Services.

COMMUNITY & DESTINATION OUTREACH

- Attended the State of the Community Luncheon.
- Attended Economic Development Council meeting.
- Conducted orientation for a new TDC Board member.
- Continued coordination with the Tax Collector's Office on the TDT collection transition.
- Participated in monthly Downtown Sebring merchant meetings.
- Participated in Downtown Sebring ArtWalk coordination meeting.
- Attended AdventHealth's "At The Table" luncheon.

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 October 29. Meetings are open to the public.
- Highlands County will welcome the VISIT FLORIDA President & CEO for a destination visit on October 29.
- 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 continue.
- An agency was 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, including a planned update to the County Commission.
- Staff will present tourism and community collaboration efforts to Leadership Highlands and the Avon Park City Council in November.
- A refresh of the Visit Sebring Travel Guide will begin in the new fiscal year.
- A VIP tour will be hosted in conjunction with the Spartan Central Florida Trifecta in December.
- Planning will continue for the inaugural Connected Communities Summit, scheduled for 2027.

Next Quarter's TDC-Sponsored Events

- Oct. 12-14: Visit Sebring Classic
- Nov. 18-20: Citrus Golf Trail Open
- Nov. 30-Dec. 3: International Network of Golf (ING) Fall Conference
- Dec. 4-7: Last Paddler Standing
- Dec. 6-9: Major League Fishing
- Dec. 19-20: Spartan Race
- Dec. 28-31: Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational