



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Highlands County Government Center Boardroom
Regular Meeting
January 29, 2026 @ 8:15 a.m.**

Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:27 a.m. by Josh Stewart, acting chair.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:
Josh Stewart (Acting Chair)
Elizabeth Compton
Andy Kesling
Kristyn Robbins
Debra Worley

Absent:
Commissioner Campbell
Christine Hatfield
Lydia Capote
Cindy Garren
Kate Strickland

Also, Present:
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourism Marketing & Project Manager
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director
Paola Cruz, Tourism Development Coordinator
Alex Noto, Madden Media
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures
Shellie Phelps-Whitfield, Biggest Fish Consulting
Cherie Bortnick, Spartan Race Inc.
Scott Noethlich, City of Sebring

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum had been met.

Mr. Stewart welcomed Paola Cruz as a new staff member, serving as the Tourist Development Coordinator.

2. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of October 30, 2025.

Mr. Stewart asked if there were any comments or questions to the minutes of October 30, 2025. No comments or corrections were noted.

Ms. Worley made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve the meeting minutes.

Upon roll call, all Council members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

3. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Fultz presented the Revenue and Office Reports to the Board. She explained that the packets distributed included updated charts reflecting revenue generated throughout Fiscal Year 2025, demonstrating year-over-year growth. She reported an overall 10% increase in revenue from Fiscal Year 2024 to Fiscal Year 2025. Leads from October 2025 through December 2025 were also included in the materials for review.

Ms. Fultz asked if there were any questions from the Board.

Mr. Stewart inquired whether the differences between March 2024 and March 2025 were related to race events. Ms. Hartt responded that the international component of the 12 Hours of Sebring event did not occur, according to hoteliers, in the years referenced. Ms. Robbins added that there was a schedule change in 2024 but not in 2025 and stated she would verify the event schedules and report back to the Board. Mr. Stewart clarified that his question was for informational purposes.

Board members received detailed printouts of the financial and office reports. Staff addressed questions regarding report formatting and titles. There were no further questions.

4. Marketing and Event Updates

A. Destination and Budget Update

Ms. Hartt presented an overview of the economic impact of tourism and current tourism development trends affecting small markets. She discussed collaboration as a strategic advantage and highlighted ongoing efforts to leverage technology to better connect Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid.

Ms. Hartt reviewed the role of events and curated experiences as key economic drivers for the community. She noted continued growth in travelers seeking small-town experiences, as well as increasing interest in outdoor, nature-based, and wellness travel. She stated that the goal for 2026 is to welcome visitors in a manner that supports and enhances the local community.

Ms. Hartt also provided an update on staff activities, including changes to grant programs, enhancements to visitor kiosks, and hospitality training initiatives. Additional updates included a public relations report, progress on facility development projects, the opening of the tourism award nomination portal, and a preview of upcoming events scheduled for later this year.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 0:00 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U>.

B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media

Ms. Noto provided an update on website performance and digital marketing efforts. She presented website overview statistics, noting an increase in total users following the launch of the new website. She explained outbound clicks and provided additional insight into website engagement metrics.

Ms. Noto reviewed traffic analytics, including data on travel guide downloads, and reported growth in lodging search results, with notable increases in searches related to outdoor accommodations. She also shared the results of a recent SEO audit, indicating that the website is in good overall health.

Additional updates included a media performance overview, highlights from paid media campaigns, and summaries of Google and Meta platform performance. Ms. Noto concluded with an overview of upcoming initiatives, including the development of new web pages and upcoming blog content.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 24:16 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U>.

C. Sports Events Updates from Airstream Ventures

Mr. Verlander presented an update on current and upcoming sports tourism activity in Highlands County. He reviewed association trips planned to connect with sports tourism event organizers to attract additional events to the county.

Mr. Verlander highlighted new events, including the Spartan Race and Last Paddler Standing. He also provided an overview of booked events and events currently in advanced discussions.

He concluded with a review of the annual contract report, noting that it reflects actual numbers through January 29, 2026, and does not include figures from the Sebring International Raceway.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 37:30 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=2250>.

D. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update

Ms. Strickland was absent and did not present.

E. Tourism Collaboration Initiative Update

Ms. Phelps provided an update on the positive outcomes of the recent community stakeholder meetings, noting strong participation and collaboration from all three communities in discussions related to destination development and tourism. She emphasized that each community contributed valuable input to the overall conversation. Ms. Phelps reported that she attended the American Bus Association National Conference in Reno. She also shared updates on recent hospitality training sessions,

highlighting strong engagement, as well as a productive arts and culture stakeholder meeting.

Additionally, she discussed ongoing regional team meetings being held with all three communities to ensure broad representation and collaboration. Ms. Phelps concluded by stating that the overall objective is to align the destination so it can be more effective.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 53:39 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=3219>.

5. Items for Voting

A. Spartan High Impact Signature Event Grant Request

Ms. Cherie Bortnick, Vice President of Business Development for Spartan Race, Inc., presented on the success of the Spartan Race event held in Sebring, Florida.

Ms. Bortnick provided attendance figures and highlighted the organization's extensive social media following and marketing reach. She reviewed post-race summary data, including participation numbers and performance metrics, and presented return on investment (ROI) justification supported by marketing and advertising analytics.

The Board received the presentation as part of the voting item under consideration.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Compton, to approve the grant funding request from Spartan Race, Inc. for the Central Florida Trifecta Weekend as a five-year High Impact Event Grant, with annual funding of up to \$110,00 for 2026-2030. Upon roll call, council members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:04:21 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=3861>.

B. Premier Girls Fastpitch (PGF) New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a new event grant request on behalf of Premier Girls Fastpitch (PGF) for the FL PGF Softball event. The request was for a three-year New Event Grant to host the event at the Highlands County Sports Complex.

Mr. Kesling made a motion to approve the request as a three-year New Event Grant with funding not to exceed \$35,000 for Year One (2026), \$29,500 for Year Two (2027), and \$31,500 for Year Three (2028). The motion was seconded by Ms. Worley.

Prior to seconding the motion, Ms. Worley requested clarification regarding the funding years, noting that the documentation referenced past years. Ms. Fultz clarified that the discrepancy was a typographical error from the TDC and confirmed that the correct years were 2026, 2027, and 2028. She advised that the documentation would be corrected accordingly.

Following this clarification, Ms. Worley proceeded with her second. Upon roll call, Council members voted in favor of the motion, and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:15:27 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=4527>.

C. G-Ville 7 on 7 Sebring Classic New Event Grant Request

Mr. Verlander presented a funding request on behalf of Florida Prep Lacrosse for the G-Ville 7 on7 Sebring Classic to be held at the Highlands County Sports Complex in Sebring on May 3-31, 2026, with additional events proposed in subsequent years.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Worley, to approve the request as a three-year New Event Grant with funding of up to \$30,000 for Year One (2026) and up to \$22,500 for Years Two (2027), and Three (2028). Upon roll call, all Council members voted in favor of the motion, and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:27:08 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5228>

D. USFA Facility Rental Fee Grant Request (Cinco de Mayo)

Mr. Verlander presented a facility rental fee grant request on behalf of Kim Largin with US Fastpitch for their Cinco de Mayo Softball Tournament to be held at the Highlands County Sports Complex on May 2-3, 2026.

Ms. Fultz clarified that this grant differed from the New Event and High-Impact Event grants, as it does not require a scoring sheet and only covers facility costs.

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Ms. Worley to approve the Facility Rental Fee Grant Request from USFA in an amount of up to \$5,000 for their Cinco de Mayo Softball Tournament taking place on May 2-3, 2026, at the Highlands County Sports Complex Upon roll call, all council members voted in favor of the motion and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:29:33 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5373>.

E. USFA Facility Rental Fee Grant Request (Summertime Softball)

Mr. Verlander presented a second facility rental fee grant request on behalf of Kim Largin with US Fastpitch for their Summertime Softball Tournament to be held at the Highlands County Sports Complex on June 13-14, 2026.

Mr. Kesling made a motion, seconded by Ms. Worley to approve the Facility Rental Fee Grant Request from USFA in an amount of up to \$5,000 for their Summertime Softball Tournament taking place on June 13-14, 2026, at the Highlands County Sports Complex. Upon roll call, all council members voted in favor of the motion and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 01:32:14 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5535>.

F. Sport or Special Event Grant Request from Florida Prep Lacrosse (Crabs Summertime Slam)

Mr. Verlander presented a funding request on behalf of Florida Prep Lacrosse for the Crabs Summer Slam Tournament to be held in Lake Placid at Lake June Park May 9-10, 2026.

Ms. Compton made a motion, seconded by Mr. Kesling to approve the Sport or Special Event Grant Request from Florida Prep Lacrosse in an amount up to \$20,000 reimbursed at \$20 per room-verified night for their Crabs Summer Slam Tournament. Upon roll call, all council members voted in favor of the motion and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:33:30 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5610>.

G. City of Sebring Synergy Cost Share Request

Mr. Noethlich presented the City of Sebring's request for a 50% cost share of \$37,500, inclusive of travel expenses, for the next phase in the study of the Max Long Sports Complex expansion with Synergy Sports.

Mr. Kesling made a motion to approve a 50% cost share of \$37,500 inclusive of travel, in the amount of \$18,750, between the TDC and the City of Sebring. The motion was seconded by Ms. Worley. Upon roll call, all council members voted in favor of the motion and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:35:32 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5722>.

H. County Sports Complex Expansion Agreement

Ms. Hartt presented the cost proposal for the TDC to pay 100% of the \$37,500 inclusive of travel expenses, for the next phase in the study of the Highlands County Sports Complex expansion with Synergy Sports.

Ms. Compton made a motion to approve the cost proposal for the TDC to pay 100% of the \$37,500 inclusive of travel expenses, for the next phase in the Highlands County Sports Complex expansion. The motion was seconded by Ms. Worley. Upon roll call, all council members voted in favor of the motion and the motion carried.

The presentation, discussion, and vote are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:38:50 mark: <https://youtu.be/SQHy8scqo5U?t=5930>.

6. Old Business / Discussion / Informational

A. TDC Member Terms

Tourist Development Council Meeting Minutes of January 29, 2026

Staff provided Council with a listing of member term expiration dates for informational purposes, noting that questions are frequently received regarding appointment timelines. No questions or comments were made, and the council proceeded with the next agenda item.

B. Key Data 2025 Executive Market Summary

Council received the 2025 Key Data Executive Market Summary for informational purposes. The report included data on short-term rentals, specifically Airbnb and VRBO performance. Staff noted that while the proprietary STAR report cannot be shared, this summary provides insight into occupancy, revenue, guest nights, and RevPAR trends.

Council observed that most metrics were trending upward, with slight softening in VRBO average daily rates, but overall growth in revenue and guest nights. No further questions or comments were made.

C. TMAP Launching FY27

Ms. Fultz gave a verbal update on the next steps for launching. No action was taken.

D. Guidelines for 3rd Penny Uses

Ms. Sauls presented a preliminary discussion on developing a policy for 3rd penny use. Council was asked for input on potential policy components, such as marketing requirements or tourism performance metrics.

Mr. Stewart emphasized the importance of including a marketing plan and ongoing marketing funding strategy to demonstrate efforts to attract out-of-county visitors and generate tourism dollars. Ms. Sauls also noted that additional suggestions could be submitted via email as staff prepare a draft policy to be brought back for the council to review.

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

- February 16: Hospitality Training at Avon Park Community Center
- April 30: TDC Quarterly Meeting
- Early May: Annual Tourism Awards & Insights Program

10. Adjournment

Mr. Stewart adjourned the meeting at 10:41 a.m.

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