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

Draft Regular Meeting

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:15 a.m. by Commissioner Campbell.

Roll Call

Council Members Present:
Commissioner Campbell
Cindy Garren
Elizabeth Compton
Jennifer Littlejohn
Stacy Malone
Brittany Mcquire
Kristyn Robbins
Josh Stewart

Absent:
Andy Kesling

Also, Present:
Casey Hartt, Lead Marketing Consultant
Reagan Fultz, Tourism Marketing & Project Manager
Leah Sauls, Development Services Director
Paola Cruz, Tourism Development Coordinator
Bryan Griffin, Visit Florida CEO
Alex Noto, Madden Media
Alan Verlander, Airstream Ventures
Greg Wingo, Last Paddler Standing

Ms. Fultz established that a quorum had been met.

2. Presentation by Visit Florida CEO Bryan Griffin

3. Acceptance of TDC Meeting Minutes of April 30, 2026.

Commissioner Campbell asked if there were any comments or questions to the minutes of August 20, 2026. No comments or corrections were noted.

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

All Council members voted in favor, and the motion carried.

4. Financial and Office Reports

Ms. Fultz noted that the packets provided included financial reports for review. She pointed out that August and September figures were not yet included, as they had not yet been received. Moving forward, the County will begin receiving financial figures from the local Tax Collector. She expressed interest in monitoring turnaround times for receiving the reports. Charts and graphs were also provided for comparison and review. The floor was then opened for questions.

Ms. Garren made a motion to approve the financial report. The motion was seconded by Ms. Robbins.

5. Marketing and Event Updates

A. Destination and Budget Update

Ms. Hartt began the presentation by thanking the CEO of VISIT FLORIDA for attending the TDC meeting. She highlighted the awards earned by the team at the Governor's Conference and identified Garden Week as the primary initiative for the quarter. She then presented a compilation video featuring contributions from Garden Week participants, showcasing the event and its activities.

Ms. Hartt provided additional background on Garden Week, noting that the event exceeded expectations and would not have been possible without the support and involvement of local partners and TDC staff. She then invited the Board to share some feedback. Ms. Garren shared her experience attending Garden Week activities, highlighting how much she learned and experienced throughout the event. Commissioner Campbell asked if there were any additional questions or comments and then thanked everyone who participated in making Garden Week a success.

Ms. Hartt then transitioned into budget and departmental updates, beginning with a review of Garden Week highlights and key takeaways, including plans for moving forward with future initiatives. She noted that the TDC is currently searching for a new public relations firm and will continue the transition process once a new firm is selected. She also presented the awards and grants received by the TDC during the last quarter. Ms. Hartt provided an update on facility development efforts, including individual conversations held with each Commissioner, with plans to schedule a meeting with the newly appointed Commissioner. She also discussed ongoing conversations with Sebring City Council, local landowners, and the Parks Department.

She addressed the transition of Tourist Development Tax collections to the Highlands County Tax Collector, noting that the transition went smoothly and expressing optimism about future collections.

Ms. Hartt then reviewed the budget for the new fiscal year, outlining approved expenditures and funds that have already been earmarked. She also highlighted upcoming TDC-sponsored events and provided an overview of future initiatives, including a new Destination Strategic Plan, Destination Channel, Travel Guide refresh, and the 75th Anniversary of the Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring.

The floor was then opened for questions and discussion.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 24:50 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=1490

B. Digital Marketing Update from Madden Media

Ms. Noto began her presentation by congratulating the team on their accomplishments at the Governor's Conference. She then reviewed website analytics and highlighted key performance indicators, noting that Garden Week and the Caladium Festival ranked among the top five most-viewed website pages. She also reported approximately 500 visitor guide downloads, with the Fishing Guide being the most downloaded.

Ms. Noto reviewed paid media performance and highlighted the significant interest generated by the Garden Week campaign. She discussed the growing importance of original content as AI-driven search continues to expand, emphasizing the value of creating relevant, engaging content to maintain visibility in search results. She also highlighted the success of the Garden Week landing page, increased traveler interest in finding additional things to do, and improved blog rankings.

She provided an overview of initiatives planned for the new fiscal year, focusing on attracting more visitors, encouraging longer stays, and increasing visitation during traditionally slower seasons. She also discussed the team's efforts to test marketing campaigns in out-of-state markets to evaluate their performance and identify opportunities for future growth.

Commissioner Campbell then opened the floor for questions and discussion.

During public comment, a member of the public asked about efforts to encourage visitors to spend more time on the Visit Sebring website and whether Madden Media was working toward improving visitor engagement. Ms. Noto explained that increasing time spent on the website through engaging content is one of the team's primary focuses for the new fiscal year, while also ensuring visitors can quickly find the information they need. Ms. Compton added that the engagement rate stood out to her and commented that the reported numbers looked very positive.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 32:52 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8.

C. Sports Events Updates from Airstream Ventures

Mr. Verlander began his presentation with a review of sports tourism conferences attended by the team, as well as upcoming conferences. He highlighted the Sports ETA conference as an important event within the sports tourism industry.

He provided an overview of industry trends, discussing how private equity firms are acquiring smaller event organizations and consolidating them into larger entities rather than maintaining independently operated businesses. He noted that although the team has held numerous discussions with event planners, Highlands County currently lacks the facility size and capacity needed to accommodate some of these events.

Mr. Verlander reviewed sporting events held during the previous quarter, along with upcoming events scheduled for the remainder of the year, highlighting the anticipated economic impact of each. He also provided updates on confirmed events for the upcoming year, returning events, submitted proposals, and ongoing conversations with prospective event organizers.

He discussed several events that were canceled during the quarter and explained the contributing factors, including teams outgrowing existing fields, insufficient interest to sustain certain events, and smaller event organizers being acquired by private equity firms.

Looking ahead, Mr. Verlander addressed the challenges of continuing to attract larger sporting events without additional facility development. He emphasized the opportunities for Highlands County to become a more competitive destination for sporting events as facilities expand.

He concluded by presenting the Board with the sports performance dashboard and opened the floor for questions and discussion.

Mr. Stewart raised several questions following the presentation. He first asked about a federal bill aimed at rolling back private equity conglomerates and whether it had any traction toward passing. Mr. Verlander stated that while he was not certain of the bill's likelihood of passing, his expectation was that it would not.

Mr. Stewart then asked whether facility expansions in nearby competing destinations could potentially oversaturate the market, resulting in continued challenges attracting events to Highlands County. Mr. Verlander expressed that he did not believe this would be the case, noting that even before the consolidation of event organizations, event planners were drawn to Highlands County because of its strong community support and the many opportunities the area offers visitors.

Mr. Stewart's final question addressed whether turf fields were a significant differentiating factor when attracting sporting events. Mr. Verlander explained that turf provides an advantage by allowing events to resume play sooner following rainfall. However, he added that well-maintained grass fields are also suitable for events and would not prevent Highlands County from securing bookings.

Commissioner Campbell also asked about the potential for injuries associated with turf fields. Mr. Verlander explained that injuries are not a significant concern for the level of sporting events expected to come to Highlands County. He noted that while athletic trainers may argue that grass is easier on athletes' knees, the concern is not substantial enough to rule out turf installation. He also acknowledged that turf fields can become hotter during Florida's summer months but explained that many teams are accustomed to playing on turf and that available technology allows teams to monitor weather conditions, including humidity, to help manage these concerns.

Ms. McGuire asked whether the destination currently has sufficient accommodations, including hotels and available room nights, to support the larger sporting events that could be attracted through facility expansion. Mr. Verlander explained that Highlands County has the necessary lodging and additional amenities to support these events,

noting that the area offers advantages over other destinations with sports facilities but fewer surrounding attractions, such as restaurants and the Sebring International Raceway.

He acknowledged that larger events, such as Spartan, can result in hotel rooms reaching capacity. However, he noted that this is a positive indicator of visitor demand and explained that as the sports complex expands, alternative lodging options, including Airbnb and Vrbo properties, will help accommodate additional visitors when traditional hotel inventory reaches capacity.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 46:03 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=2763.

D. Citrus Golf Trail Marketing Update

Ms. Frakes was absent from the meeting.

E. Tourism Collaboration Initiative Update

Ms. Phelps provided an overview of her fourth-quarter activities and initiatives. She highlighted an initial brainstorming meeting with art and welding teachers to discuss opportunities for incorporating students into the County's creative placemaking and public art efforts.

She also discussed stakeholder meetings focused on agritourism and fishing tourism. The agritourism meeting explored opportunities for collaboration among local farms, distilleries, wineries, breweries, and coffee businesses to develop tourism packages centered around the area's agricultural assets. The fishing stakeholder meeting focused on changes affecting the region's lakes and the potential impact on the future of fishing tourism.

Ms. Phelps provided updates on regional collaboration efforts, including a Regional Chamber of Commerce meeting focused on increasing collaboration across the County. She also highlighted the first-ever Garden Week, noting that the week-long collaborative event exceeded expectations, along with the planning meetings held before and after the event.

Additional updates included presenting Highlands County's collaborative regional tourism model at Destinations Florida, with a condensed version also presented to the Board of County Commissioners. She reviewed the Everyone Matters hospitality training initiative, which included two general sessions and industry-specific sessions at Pinecrest and Holiday Inn Express.

Ms. Phelps also highlighted regional team meetings held in August at the Sebring Garages and in September at Lake June Water Park in Lake Placid. Looking ahead, she discussed plans for 2027 focused on strengthening regional collaboration across Highlands County.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:06:49 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=4009

6. Items for Voting

A.Sports Complex Expansion Update & Recommendation

Mr. Boudrie of Synergy Sports presented an executive summary of the proposed Highlands County Sports Complex renovation and expansion. The presentation provided an overview of the findings from the Phase I study, including facility needs, potential event demand, projected costs, financial outlook, and anticipated economic impact.

He presented an executive summary of the proposed Highlands County Sports Complex renovation and expansion. The presentation provided an overview of the findings from the Phase I study, including facility needs, potential event demand, projected costs, financial outlook, and anticipated economic impact.

The existing Multi-Sports Complex was reviewed, including its current facilities and limitations in accommodating larger tournament operators. The proposed expansion would incorporate approximately 43 additional acres recently acquired through a Florida Communities Trust grant, bringing the overall site to nearly 100 acres. Conceptual improvements include additional multipurpose fields, youth baseball and softball fields, expanded parking, and upgraded amenities.

The presentation outlined the results of outreach to potential users, identifying approximately 51 potential annual events involving nearly 600 teams, more than 23,000 participants, and approximately 57,000 spectators. Interest spans several sports, including soccer, softball, football, rugby, lacrosse, and others. The study also identified opportunities to increase weekday utilization through local leagues, clubs, schools, and camps.

Two development scenarios were presented, with estimated capital costs of approximately $20 million for basic renovations and $50 million for full construction. The financial projections included anticipated operating revenue, expenses, and the timeline for reaching positive earnings. The projected annual economic impact ranged from approximately $15.6 million to $29.2 million, with additional anticipated revenue from visitor spending, sales taxes, and Tourist Development Tax collections.

Mr. Boudrie also reviewed potential operating models, recommending a hybrid County and partner structure in the near term, with the possibility of transitioning to a full third-party operator following completion of the expansion. The proposed approach would balance local community access with tournament and sports tourism opportunities, prioritizing local leagues and programs during the week and larger tournaments on weekends.

Additional topics included facility pricing and fee waivers, strategies for managing operating costs during the initial years, potential naming rights and sponsorship revenue, and available capital funding options. A public-private partnership was presented as the preferred funding approach, with the potential to combine private financing and operational expertise while maintaining County ownership and public-use protections.

The presentation concluded with an overview of the next steps toward implementation, including determining the preferred procurement approach, consulting with County

administration and legal and financial advisors, and establishing expectations for ownership, operations, pricing, maintenance, and community access.

Following the presentation, Mr. Stewart clarified that the TDC serves in an advisory capacity and that the Board was not being asked to vote on the proposed project itself. He expressed support for the overall concept but emphasized the importance of addressing several outstanding considerations before bringing the proposal before the Board of County Commissioners. These included determining potential naming rights opportunities, establishing realistic event projections for budgeting purposes, and identifying the level of financial support the County would be comfortable providing if needed.

Mr. Stewart asked how much the existing Sports Complex currently operates at a loss annually. Ms. Sauls responded that the last figure she recalled was approximately $200,000 per year, although she was unsure whether that amount had changed. Commissioner Campbell added that he believed the annual loss was slightly more than $200,000.

Mr. Stewart also asked how much the TDC could reasonably contribute toward annual operating support and how the proposed financial model accounted for tourism-driven events compared to local community use.

Ms. Garren made a motion to approve TDC support, as presented, for the Highlands County Sports Complex expansion concept as a sports tourism priority and to recommend that the Board of County Commissioners review and consider advancing the project to Phase II. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:16:04 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=4564.

B. Indoor Facility Development and Recommendation

Mr. Boudrie presented the Phase I Executive Summary for the proposed Highlands County Indoor Sports Complex, outlining the findings and recommendations for advancing the project into pre-construction planning

The presentation included an overview of the proposed 110,000-square-foot indoor facility, which would accommodate multiple sports and events. The conceptual facility would include basketball courts convertible for volleyball and pickleball, along with medical and physical therapy space, performance training areas, a café, family entertainment areas, and tournament support facilities.

Mr. Boudrie reviewed the results of outreach to regional, state, and national event organizers, which identified a potential pipeline of 62 events annually, approximately 290 teams, 32,550 participants, and 109,375 spectators. Potential uses included basketball, volleyball, wrestling, gymnastics, adaptive sports, martial arts, and consumer shows. The presentation also highlighted a preliminary letter of intent from a national youth sports organization interested in hosting up to 30 events annually.

Projected financial performance and economic impact were also discussed. The 10-year financial model indicated that the facility could stabilize financially by Year 5, with positive net income thereafter. The projected total economic impact was estimated to grow from $30.6 million in Year 1 to $64.8 million by Year 10. A planning-level construction cost estimate of approximately $50.9 million was also presented.

The presentation reviewed potential funding options, identifying a public-private partnership through a municipal lease purchase as the recommended funding pathway. Additional topics included sponsorship and naming rights opportunities, strategies for managing early-year operating losses, and the use of a private operator to oversee daily operations while the County retains ownership and policy oversight.

The proposed operating model would prioritize local leagues, youth programs, and community access Monday through Thursday, while reserving Friday through Sunday for tournaments and destination events. This approach would provide opportunities for local use while generating visitor spending, hotel room nights, and Tourist Development Tax revenue.

The presentation concluded with an overview of recommended next steps for continued project planning, including further evaluating potential site considerations, working with County legal and financial advisors to determine the appropriate procurement and financing structure, coordinating with municipal and public agency partners, and defining the TDC's role in tourism promotion, event recruitment, and eligible funding support.

Mr. Stewart made a motion to approve TDC support, as presented, for the Indoor Sports Facility development and to recommend that the Board of County Commissioners review and consider advancing the project to Phase II, pending confirmation of the land and proposed location. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 1:54:14 mark at https://youtu.be/hwr8E9490xU?t=6854.

C. Spartan Advertising Buy Request

Ms. Hartt presented a request to restructure the previously approved funding for the 2026 Spartan Race from a High Impact Signature Event Grant to reimbursement of eligible tourism advertising expenses. She explained that many attendees stay outside of Highlands County, making it difficult to capture their lodging information and accurately measure the event's direct impact on local accommodations. She noted that the event's highly targeted and aggressive advertising efforts provide another opportunity to support the event while reaching potential visitors and generating tourism interest.

Commissioner Campbell opened the floor for questions. No questions were raised.

Mr. Stewart made a motion to approve the requested restructuring of the 2026 Spartan Race funding from the previously approved High Impact Signature Event Grant structure to reimbursement of eligible tourism advertising expenses, up to $110,000. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:44:54 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=9894.

D. Letter of Support for Highlands County Fair Association

Ms. Hartt presented a letter of support for the Highlands County Fair Association as they seek funding to make improvements to their facility. Commissioner Campbell opened the floor for questions, and no questions were raised.

Ms. Sauls clarified that a motion was necessary because the letter of support would be coming from the Board of County Commissioners, with the TDC also expressing its support. She explained that the Fair Association had applied for funding the previous year but was denied and was encouraged to obtain letters of support to strengthen its application for the following year.

Ms. Garren made a motion to approve the letter of support. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:46:26 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=9986.

E. 2027 TDC Meeting Dates

Ms. Fultz presented the proposed 2027 TDC meeting schedule and provided background regarding the request to align TDC meetings with weeks when Board of County Commissioners meetings are held. She explained that while most meetings would fall on a Thursday, the January meeting would take place on a Friday due to the holiday schedule that week.

Commissioner Campbell opened the floor for a motion. Mr. Stewart made a motion to approve the following 2027 TDC meeting dates:

Friday, January 22, 2027

Thursday, April 22, 2027

Thursday, August 19, 2027

Thursday, October 21, 2027

Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:47:56 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=10076

F. 2027 TDC Chair and Vice Chair

Ms. Fultz opened the floor for nominations for the TDC Chair and Vice Chair positions for the 2027 calendar year.

Mr. Stewart made a motion to appoint Commissioner Campbell as Chair. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Garren then made a motion to appoint Mr. Josh Stewart as Vice Chair. Ms. Robbins seconded the motion. All members voted in favor, and the motion passed unanimously.

The presentation and any discussion are available for public viewing at the following link, beginning at the 2:49:12 mark at https://youtu.be/NfNcH8rPsN8?t=10152.

7. Old Business / Discussion / Informational

A. FY26 Q4 Quarterly Report

Ms. Fultz provided an update on the quarterly report, noting that it was included in the Board's meeting packets. She explained that the report offered a condensed overview of the topics and updates covered during the meeting, making it easier to distribute and share.

B. Last Paddler Standing Update

Mr. Greg Wingo, owner of Last Paddler Standing, presented an overview of the event scheduled to take place in Lake Placid December 5–7. He provided background on the event, including its format, duration, and location. He highlighted the event's growing recognition, noting that approximately 300,000 people have watched the race, generating more than one million hours of viewing worldwide. He also shared that viewers host watch parties around the world. Mr. Wingo concluded by thanking Highlands County for hosting the event.

Ms. Hartt encouraged Mr. Wingo to also highlight the additional activities planned around the event, including a Friday evening gathering at Wet Dogs Brewing and the creation of a "Camp Hub" along the lake's shoreline, where competitors can take breaks and connect with others. Mr. Wingo also mentioned meet-and-greet opportunities at the park, event broadcasts, and encouraged community members to come out and experience the event.

C. Destination TV Channel Update

Ms. Hartt provided an update on the Destination TV Channel, announcing that the name has been selected as "Along the Ridge: Stories from Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid." She expressed excitement about the project and noted that additional information and updates would be brought before the Board as they become available.

D. TDT Local Tax Collection Update

Ms. Hartt provided an additional update regarding the transition of Tourist Development Tax collections to the local Tax Collector. She noted that the transition is already underway and expressed interest in monitoring how quickly collection figures will be received now that collections are being handled locally.

E. Strategic Plan Update

Ms. Hartt provided an update on the Destination Strategic Plan, noting that the agreement was scheduled to be presented to the Board of County Commissioners on November 17, 2026. Following approval, the next step would be to hold a kickoff call with the selected consultant to begin the process.

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

- Nov. 18-20: Citrus Golf Trail Open
- Dec. 4-7: Last Paddler Standing
- Dec. 6-9: Major League Fishing
- Dec. 18: VIP Tour of Spartan Race
- Dec. 19-20: Spartan Race
- Dec. 28-31: Citrus Golf Trail Ladies Invitational
- Jan. 22: Quarterly TDC Meeting (pending 2027 schedule approval)

10. Adjournment

Commissioner Campbell adjourned the meeting at **11:19AM.**

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

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