



# Sport or Special Event Grant Funding Program Policy

*This program is administered by the Highlands County Tourist Development Council ("TDC"), which is an advisory council to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners.*

*Approved by TDC on October 30, 2025*

*Approved by the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners on December 2, 2025, through Resolution No.: 25-26-029*

## POLICY:

### **OVERVIEW**

Grant funding is available to organizations for major Sport or Special Events staged in Highlands County that are designed to attract large numbers of visitors from outside Highlands County. Such an Event must generate a **minimum of 100 TOTAL verified room nights** to be considered for funding. An example would be a state, regional, national, or international sporting event, conference, corporate meeting, or other.

Consideration for grant funding is determined by the number of room nights and the overall economic impact the Event will bring to Highlands County. This is a reimbursable expense grant, for which the awarded funds will be distributed as explained in the Sport & Special Event Funding Request Levels section below.

### **Sport & Special Event Grant Criteria**

The following requirements apply to a grant for a Sport or Special Event staged in Highlands County any time between **April and December** that attracts overnight visitors in Highlands County:

1. Upon awarding of the grant, the Grantee must enter into a Highlands County Grant Agreement specific to the Event, which will incorporate the requirements stated herein.
2. The Event must generate at least 100 verified room nights.
3. This grant is not applicable to exclusive events such as weddings, family reunions, class reunions, birthday parties, etc.
4. Funding is not intended to support administrative costs. Funding is intended to support marketing and promotional efforts outside of Highlands County, venue/site rentals and costs, bid fees, etc. that are directly related to hosting the Event.
5. The *Visit Sebring* logo block must appear prominently in all advertising and publicity (written or electronic) for the Event.
6. Hotels/accommodations secured for the Event must be located within Highlands County.
7. Funding shall be provided as reimbursement for approved actual expenditures upon completion of the Event. The Grantee must provide proof of payment of approved expenditures. Proof of payment may be submitted in the form of a vendor

receipt and a front and back copy of cleared check or credit card receipt. Cash receipts will not be accepted for reimbursements.

8. The Grantee will only be reimbursed for facility fees that are pre-approved and upon submission of the receipt showing payment in full.
9. To be eligible for payment, the Grantee must submit completed post-Event reporting documentation as required by Highlands County Tourism staff not more than 60 days after the Event concludes. Failure to submit the required documentation will result in disqualification for payment.
10. The required post-event reporting documentation includes, but may not be limited to a written report and signed Room Block Report(s)/Room Night Certification Form(s)/Room Night Verification Form, reflecting the actual room nights generated by the Event in comparison to the initial room night guarantee indicated in the grant application submitted by the Grantee. It is the responsibility of the Grantee to provide proof of room nights generated by the Event; this is not the responsibility of Highlands County Tourism staff. Highlands County Tourism staff may confirm accuracy of the Room Night Verification Form at staff discretion. Any funds granted to Grantee will be subject to audit by the Highlands County Clerk of the Court – Internal Auditor or other representative the County may designate.
11. Prior to the Event, Grantee must provide to Highlands County Certificates of Insurance naming “Highlands County” as an additional insured for each policy listed below. The term of coverage must include not only all days of the Event, but set up days and take down days, as well. Required insurance coverages and amounts include but may not be limited to:
  - a. \$1,000,000 General Liability each occurrence
  - b. \$1,000,000 Automobile Liability (Combined Single Limit)
  - c. Workers Compensation with statutorily required limits. The policy must include Employer Liability coverage with limits not less than \$1,000,000 each occurrence, \$1,000,000 each employee, and \$500,000 policy limit for disease.

A request to be exempt from the requirements of the insurance requirements listed above must be submitted with the grant application. The request for exemption must include a detailed explanation justifying the request, and will be reviewed by Highlands County on a case by case basis.

12. Highlands County reserves the right to lend assistance or administer approved grant funds in the form of advertising, public relations, promotions, or marketing programs directly or through an outside vendor on behalf of the Grantee.
13. Recognition of the *Visit Sebring* brand must be included where appropriate on all marketing materials for the Event, on the Grantee’s website, and referred to in public relations activities. All printed materials with the *Visit Sebring* logo must be presented with the Grantee’s reimbursement request.
14. Upon award of the grant, the Grantee must provide Highlands County with at least four (4) media passes for use by Highlands County Tourism staff to attend and cover the Event for the Highlands County Tourism’s marketing and public relations purposes.
15. The Grantee is to have only one designated contact (“Designee”) for the duration of the grant process. Designee is responsible for submitting all required documents,

including any follow up paperwork needed prior to the Event. Additionally, Designee will be responsible for executing the Highlands County Grant Agreement and providing a W-9 for the Grantee. Grant funds will be released only to Designee upon submission of all completed required post-Event documentation, including Room Block Report(s)/Room Night Certification Form(s)/Room Night Verification Form. Should the Designee change at any point during the grant process, written notification to the Highlands County Tourism office is required. Failure to provide notification will adversely affect funding.

16. After the awarding of the grant, any changes to the details of the Event (date, time, name of event, etc.) must be approved in writing by Highlands County Tourism. A request to change the date of the Event must be submitted to the Highlands County Tourism office ninety (90) days prior to the current approved date or the proposed new date (whichever is first). Highlands County Tourism staff is authorized to decide whether or not to approve one (1) date change for the Event. Any additional date change will require a vote by the TDC. All date changes will require an Amendment to the Grant Agreement to reflect the new date.
17. By submission of the Grant Application, the Grantee grants Highlands County and all of its employees, officers, contractors, subcontractors, volunteers, and agents (collectively referred to in this paragraph as "Highlands County representatives"), the right to use and reproduce any and all photographs, digital images, videos or recordings made at or made in relation to the Event, including those of Grantee's employees, volunteers, invitees, and those that contain Grantee's name, artwork, logo or trademark. This includes the right of Highlands County to copyright and/or use, reuse, publish, and republish photographic pictures, digital images, videos or recordings. Grantee affirms that it is the legal owner of any artwork, logo or trademark used by Grantee for the Event and acknowledges that Highlands County is relying on this representation and to the extent there is any claim by any third party against Highlands County or its representatives, Grantee will indemnify and hold Highlands County and its representatives harmless as to any such claim or damages arising from such claim. Grantee is required to grant Highlands County permission for the photographs, digital images, video, or recordings to be used in their entirety and/or edited versions as deemed necessary by Highlands County. Grantee accepts and understands those items will become the property of Highlands County and all rights to inspect or approve those items, as well as any royalties or other such compensation are waived by Grantee. Grantee further grants Highlands County permission to use the photographs, digital images, videos, or recordings at any time in the future without provision of notice. Highlands County's use may include use for trade, commercial, and advertising purposes, to promote the product or service of Highlands County, and to simply report happenings in Highlands County, and may include the use of items on Highlands County websites. Grantee shall inform its invitees of Highlands County's intentions and rights as described in this paragraph and Grantee shall obtain executed Release and Waiver forms regarding the same from all Event participants.

## **SPORT & SPECIAL EVENT FUNDING REQUEST LEVELS**

**There is a maximum funding level of \$20,000.** The guaranteed number of room nights stated in the Grant Application will not guarantee the level of funding at which the grant for the Event may be approved. The final funding recommendation will be determined at the sole and absolute discretion of the TDC. The TDC has the right to place any application at a lower funding level without providing justification for its decision. All grant funding requests will be submitted as a recommendation by the TDC to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners (“BCC”) or its authorized designee, which makes the final decision. The Highlands County Administrator is authorized by the BCC to approve or disapprove grant funding requests that do not exceed \$50,000.00. Periodically, the Highlands County Administrator shall notify the BCC, by way of an informational agenda item, of any grant funding requests so approved. Approval of any such grant funding request will not be invalidated in the event notice of the approved grant funding request is not provided to the BCC.

Grant funds will only be disbursed for the actual, verified number of room nights. For example: If a grant is approved for \$20,000, based on a Grant Application projecting 1,000 room nights, but the Grantee is only able to verify 700 room nights after the Event, the payment to the Grantee from Highlands County will be calculated based off of those 700 room nights. Accordingly, the total grant payment for the Event will be \$14,000 (assuming Grantee has complied with all other Grant requirements), regardless of the originally approved \$20,000.

### **Exceptions for extraordinary circumstances**

The TDC may recommend increasing funding in extraordinary circumstances. These extraordinary circumstances will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis for consideration and recommendation to the BCC or its authorized designee, which makes the final decision.

### **ELIGIBLE USE OF FUNDS**

The following is a list of permissible expenses that are reimbursable by the grant:

#### **1. Out-of-County Advertising Expenses**

Advertising and publicity outside Highlands County to increase participation, attendance and awareness of the Event and generate hotel room nights. The *Visit Sebring* logo must appear in or with the advertisement, which must be pre-approved by Highlands County Tourism staff. Advertising examples include:

- Digital Online Advertising: geofencing, social media, retargeting, SEO/SEM, display ads, targeted email campaigns, digital content creation via online storytelling, etc.
- Print: advertising, direct mail, flyers/posters, etc.
- Radio & TV Advertisements placed outside Highlands County
- Public Relations/Media Events
- Targeted Audience Outreach, such as trade show booth rental
- Photography or Videography to be used for promotion of future events and that will be provided to Highlands County with full usage rights

## **2. Promotional Items/Shirts**

Promotional items for the Event must be tied to a direct “experience” with the Event (i.e. themed reception, activity, etc.). Additionally, the *Visit Sebring* logo must be included on the shirt or promotional item, and the item with logo must be pre-approved by Highlands County Tourism staff before they qualify for reimbursement. Please consult Highlands County Tourism staff regarding any direct experience ideas and ideas for promotional items.

## **3. Hosting, Bid, Facility or Event Fees**

- Bid or Hosting Fee (Must be considered an authorized use as determined by Florida Statute 125.0104).
- Facility/venue rental fees - for Events that take place at venues or facilities within Highlands County (this requires pre-approval from Highlands County Tourism staff)
- Maintenance of Traffic fees.
- Necessary event-related operational expenses, as permissible under Florida Statute 125.0104 and indicated in the final motion by the TDC to approve funding.

## **4. Trophies, Plaques, and Non-Monetary Awards**

These types of items must include *Visit Sebring*'s logo in the design and be pre-approved by Highlands County Tourism staff before they qualify for reimbursement.

## **5. Field/Facility Related Expenses**

These expenses must be outlined in the Grant Application and will be approved at the discretion of the TDC.

### **INELIGIBLE USES OF FUNDS:**

1. Prize money, scholarships, monetary awards
2. Shirts or other apparel that are not pre-approved by Highlands County Tourism staff and/or do not include the *Visit Sebring* logo
3. Any travel expense (includes, but is not limited to, mileage reimbursement, car rental fees, airline tickets, hotel/accommodations, food, luggage fees, etc.)
4. Private entertainment, food, beverages, or any type of concession
5. Annual operating expenditures not directly related to the Event/Project
6. Legal, medical, security, engineering, accounting, auditing, planning, feasibility studies or other consulting services
7. Employee salaries
8. Real property or capital improvements to facilities
9. Tangible personal property including but not limited to office furnishings or equipment
10. Interest or reduction of deficits and loans
11. Expenses incurred or obligated prior to or after the grant Event period
12. Advertising/promotional materials distributed in Highlands County, during or after the Event

- 13. Receptions, social functions, and the like, other than those specifically designed for pre-Event media promotional purposes
- 14. Sales tax
- 15. Website design
- 16. Ongoing or annual facility maintenance
- 17. Any use not authorized by Florida Statute 125.0104

## **GUIDELINES:**

### **AUTHORIZATION HISTORY:**

Created pursuant to Highlands County Ordinance 17-18-13 and operates in accordance with [Florida Statute 125.0104](#), The **Highlands County Tourist Development Council (TDC)** is a nine-member advisory board to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners. The TDC (also known as **Visit Sebring**) administers funds collected from the County's 5% Tourist Development Tax (TDT) levied on occupied transient lodging sales, i.e. hotels/motels, campgrounds, and other short-term lodging rentals. The TDT Revenues are designated to promote Sebring/Highlands County as a preferred visitor destination and assist with increasing tourism to the county in the non-peak tourism months.

Uses of the Tourist Development Tax are restricted by Florida Statute and County Ordinance. Simply put, the TDC's Grant Program is permitted only as a means of advertising and promoting tourism. **Therefore, events funded through this grant program must demonstrate the intent and effect of attracting visitors to Highlands County.**

### **Event Grant Funding Program**

Visit Sebring leads and supports the Highlands County tourism industry by providing innovative marketing programs and promotions to ensure the continued growth of tourism and travel from visitors. The purpose of the Sport & Special Event Grant Program is to position Highlands County as a must-experience sport and meeting destination in Florida through quality events and initiatives. The TDC recognizes sport events and meetings as major contributors to the overall tourism economy. To assist sport-related tourism events & special events, the TDC has guidelines for sporting and special events seeking funding.

All requests for funds from organizers (Applicants) seeking to host an Event must be reviewed and approved by TDC Staff, the TDC and the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners or an authorized designee within the HCBOCC organization, either of which makes the final decision. Funds that will be submitted for TDC reimbursement cannot be spent until final approval by BOCC or an authorized designee within the HCBOCC organization has been granted, and contract with County has been fully executed. Once a funding amount has been approved, funds will not be disbursed until after the Event has been completed and all required post-event documentation is produced and timely submitted to the TDC for review.

### **APPLICATION COMPLETION:**

The following must be submitted to the TDC office to consider the application complete:

1. Application **completely filled out**, including grant application checklist. Not Applicable or N/A should only be marked if needed.
2. W-9 for the organization
3. Copy of Florida Division of Corporations form for the organization
4. Marketing Plan
5. Sample Visitor/Attendee Survey

### **APPLICATION DEADLINE AND GUIDELINES:**

- Applications will be reviewed quarterly at TDC meetings. Please refer to **VisitSebring.com/about** for the current fiscal year's meeting schedule.
- Applications are due no later than the Thursday THREE WEEKS before the meeting which the application will be voted on.
- If the deadline falls on a holiday, then the applications are **due the last County business day prior to the posted deadline.**
- One application will be accepted per Event/Project.
- **To be considered for the maximum award available, applications shall be submitted at a MINIMUM of six (6) months prior to the Event/Project start date.** Exceptions can be made for tournaments with late notice by host organization.

### ***ALL FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS REQUIRE FINAL APPROVAL BY THE HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OR OTHER AUTHORIZED DESIGNEE WITHIN THE HCBOCC ORGANIZATION***

You may e-mail, mail or hand deliver the **ORIGINAL** application to:  
Highlands County Tourist Development Council (TDC)  
Attn: Reagan Fultz  
501 S. Commerce Ave.  
Sebring, FL 33870  
[RFultz@highlandsfl.gov](mailto:RFultz@highlandsfl.gov)  
(863) 402-6909

### **REIMBURSEMENT/ACCOUNTABILITY:**

Within 60 days after the completion of the Event/Project, Applicant must submit the following:

1. Completed Post Event Report
2. Room Night Verification Documentation reporting all room nights generated by the event. This includes all staff, competitors, volunteers, spectators, officials,



etc. that stayed in paid accommodations. TDC will use the higher results from the options of:

- a. Room Night Verification Forms verified directly by a hotel, motel, or for Airbnb/VRBO's, organizers own survey supporting numbers for Airbnb/VRBO's
  - b. Online Visit Sebring Attendee Survey. **Only surveys completed within 10 days of the event will be counted!**
3. Invoice from Grantee to Visit Sebring / Highlands County for reimbursement of TDC/BOCC approved funds (addressed to Visit Sebring / Highlands County Tourist Development Council).
  4. Collateral supporting the expenses grantee is requesting reimbursed (Vendor receipt(s); or Invoices/Orders with proof of payment in form of front and back copy of cleared check, online payment confirmation, credit card receipt or bank statement). Please refer to Eligible/Ineligible Use of Funds from grant application.
  5. Copies/samples of advertising or promotional materials TDC funds are reimbursing expenses for, and proof of Visit Sebring logo included in said advertising or promotional item.

If original award amount must be prorated due to the actual room nights being less than the guaranteed room nights, an updated invoice will be required with the new award amount.

The TDC will conduct audits to promote accuracy of attendance and room nights reported in Post Event Report.

Incomplete reports will not be considered. A request for an extension of the 60-day deadline will require approval from the Tourist Development Council.

### **ROOM NIGHT TRACKING:**

To assess the impact of each Event on the Sebring/Highlands County lodging industry, the TDC requires the tracking of the number of overnight visitors attending the Event.

Applicant will have two options for tracking room nights:

1. To provide all Highlands County based accommodations where attendees may be staying with **Room Night Certification Forms** and submit the **Room Night Certification Form** to TDC staff at the conclusion of the Event. The form requires signature by an authorized representative of the lodging partner.
2. To provide Visit Sebring Post-Event Survey to attendees to complete online. The survey will also collect room night data from attendees. **ONLY responses received within 10 days of the completion of the event will count towards the verified room nights to determine reimbursement amount.**

The TDC will use the greater of the two towards the determination of actual

reimbursement. It is recommended that Applicant attempt both options to greater their chances of successful capture of room night generation from the event.

*NOTE: For the purpose of calculating creditable overnight stays, only rooms subject to Tourist Development Tax shall be included, i.e., rooms exempt from payment of tax or provided on a complimentary (free of charge) basis shall be excluded from the calculation.*

Following the Event, the TDC reserves the right to conduct an audit of information presented for each funded Event. All lodging accommodations listed may be contacted to confirm the number of room nights generated for the Event/Project.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT ANY MISLEADING OR FALSE INFORMATION PRESENTED CAN AND WILL ADVERSELY AFFECT CURRENT AND FUTURE FUNDING AWARDS.** Not tracking your rooms and/or visitors could void your post-event funding.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Applicants are encouraged to not contact members of the TDC, Board of County Commissioners or non-TDC County staff to provide a fair and equitable process of consideration of each applicant.

Applicant may contact TDC staff to address any concerns or deliver updates. Additionally, the Event director, fiscal administrator or other contact person may be called upon by TDC staff at any time during the review process.

TDC meetings are held (unless otherwise noticed) on the last Thursday of October, January, April, and the second Thursday of August. Applicant is required to attend the TDC meeting (either in person or via phone) for which the Event application is scheduled for review. This will be the only opportunity to speak directly to the TDC regarding the Event application.