



New 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.: 25-26-040*

POLICY:

OVERVIEW

Grant funding is available to organizations for New Events staged in Highlands County that are designed to attract large numbers of visitors from outside Highlands County.

Consideration for New Event grant funding is determined by scoring of the submitted application, 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 New Event Funding Request Levels section below.

New Event Grant Criteria

The following requirements apply to a grant for a New Event in Highlands County that attracts out-of-county attendees any time between **April and December**:

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 be planned to re-occur in Highlands County for three (3) years.
3. The Event must not have previously been held in Highlands County.
The Event must be at least a two-day event with at least one overnight (either night or early morning) component.
4. Funding is not intended to support administrative costs. Funding is intended to support marketing and promotional efforts, venue/site rentals, and costs directly related to hosting the event, etc.
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 outlined 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 grants funds in the form of advertising, public relations, promotions or marketing programs 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 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. change prior to the Event execution, a letter must be sent to the TDC office regarding the changes. Date changes require approval by the TDC staff for first occurrence and Amendment to Grant Agreement and must be submitted 90 days prior to the originally approved date or new date (whichever is first). Any additional date change will require a vote by the TDC and Amendment to Grant Agreement and must be submitted 90 days prior to the current approved date or new date (whichever is first).
18. 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, videotapes 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, videotapes 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 the 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.

NEW EVENT FUNDING REQUEST LEVELS

There is a maximum funding level of \$20,000 for year #1, \$10,000 for year #2, and \$10,000 for year #3, based on scoring of the submitted grant application. There is also an opportunity for additional grant funding for \$20.00 per verified room night, based on the verified actual room nights generated by the Event. Grant funds will only be distributed for reimbursement of approved expenses as outlined below (Eligible Use of Funds).

For grant funding based on room night verifications, Highlands County will only disburse grant funds for the actual, verified number of room nights. For example:

If a grant is approved for \$22,000 total, consisting of a \$20,000 base, plus \$2,000 tied to room night verifications (based on a projection of 100 room nights in the Grant Application), the Grantee will need to verify all 100 room nights in order to receive the full \$22,000 (assuming Grantee has complied with all other Grant requirements). However, if the Grantee is only able to verify 30 room nights after the Event, the payment to the Grantee from Highlands County will be calculated based off of those 30 room nights. If the Grantee's grant application scored high enough to qualify for the full \$20,000 base grant amount, the total grant payment for the Event will be \$20,600 (consisting of the \$20,000 base amount and \$600 for room nights), regardless of the originally approved \$22,000.

The final funding recommendation will be determined at the sole and absolute discretion of the TDC. Neither the scoring of the grant application nor the guaranteed number of room nights stated in the Grant Application will guarantee the level of funding at which the grant for the Event may be approved. As an example, if the TDC believes an Applicant has overstated the room nights, the TDC has the right to place the 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.

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 of Highlands County to increase participation, attendance and awareness of the Event and generate hotel room nights. The *Visit Sebring* logo must appear with or in 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

Promotional items for the Event must include *Visit Sebring's* logo and must be pre-approved by Highlands County Tourism staff before they qualify for reimbursement. Please consult Highlands County Tourism staff regarding ideas for promotional items.

3. Event Fees

Event fees may include:

- A/V equipment rental
- Entertainment (for events open to the public)
- In-county group transportation/tours
- Maintenance of Traffic fees
- 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).
- Necessary event-related operational expenses, as permissible under Florida Statute 125.0104 and indicated in the final motion by 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/Venue 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
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 promotional purposes
14. Sales tax
15. Website design
16. Ongoing or annual facility maintenance
17. Any use not authorized by the 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 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 New Event Grant Program is to position Highlands County as a must-experience destination in Florida through quality events and initiatives. The TDC recognizes events as a major contributor to the overall tourism economy. In order to assist these new tourism events, the TDC has guidelines for 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 revenue and expense budgets, and grant application checklist. Not Applicable or N/A should only be marked if needed.
2. Completed SMART Objective Worksheet
3. Marketing Plan for event, including but not limited to out-of-county marketing plan and its audience reach, which must be at least 51% out-of-county
4. Business Plan for the Event that highlights how the event will increase out-of-county visitors each year for at least three years.
5. W-9 for the organization
6. Copy of Florida Division of Corporations form for the organization

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
(863) 402-6909

REIMBURSEMENT/ACCOUNTABILITY:

Within 60 days after the completion of the Event, 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 part of 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 “per verified room night” portion of the reimbursement. It is recommended that Applicant attempt both options to greater their chances of successful capture of room night generation from the event.

NOTE: To calculate 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, 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.