



Special Event/Conference Grant Funding Program Guidelines & Application

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 August 10, 2023

*Approved by the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners
on September 19, 2023, through Resolution No.: 22-23-186*

SPECIAL EVENT GUIDELINES

Funding is available for Special Events/Conferences staged in Sebring/Highlands County by organizations that attract large numbers of visitors from outside Highlands County. Such an Event must generate a **minimum of 50 TOTAL room nights** to be considered for funding.

Consideration for funding is determined by the number of room nights and the overall economic impact the Event will bring to Sebring/Highlands County. The funding level will be determined strictly based on \$20 per each verified room night that the Event brought to Sebring/Highlands County lodging partners.

Special Event/Conference Criteria

For special events/conferences staged in Sebring/Highlands County April-December that attract overnight visitors in Highlands County- grant program criteria include:

1. Room night minimum: At least 50 verified room nights
2. Not applicable to exclusive events such as weddings, family reunions, class reunions, etc.
3. 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.
4. The Visit Sebring logo block must appear prominently in all advertising and publicity (written or electronic) for the Event/Project.
5. Hotels/accommodations secured for the Event must be located within Highlands County.
6. Funding shall be provided as reimbursement for approved actual expenditures upon completion of the Event. Proof of payment must be provided. 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.
7. The TDC will only pay the agreed upon facility fees directly to the Applicant upon submission of the receipt showing payment in full.
8. To be eligible for payment, Applicant must timely submit completed, signed and verified Room Block Report(s)/Room Night Certification Form(s). Failure to submit completed Room Block Report (s)/Room Night Certification Form(s) will result in disqualification for support. Applicant must provide the written report including documentation of the actual room nights generated in comparison to the initial room night guarantee indicated in the application not more than 60 days after the Event/Project concludes. It is the responsibility of Applicant to provide proof of room

nights generated. This is not the responsibility of Visit Sebring. Visit Sebring staff may confirm accuracy of the Room Night Verification Form at staff discretion. Any funds granted will be subject to audit by the Highlands County Clerk of the Court – Internal Auditor or other representative the County may designate.

9. To qualify for reimbursement, Applicant must provide proof of liability/medical insurance from the host organization. A Commercial General Liability Insurance Policy should be obtained for the Event of \$500,000 / \$1,000,000 limits, with the “Highlands County, a political subdivision of the State of Florida, its officials, employees and volunteers” being named as an additional insured on the policy. The term of coverage must include not only all days of the Event, but set up days and take down days, as well.
10. The TDC may lend assistance or administer funds approved in the form of advertising, public relations, promotions or marketing programs through an outside vendor on behalf of Applicant.
11. Recognition of Visit Sebring must be included where appropriate on all marketing materials, on Applicant’s website & referred to in public relations activities. All printed materials with the Visit Sebring logo must be presented with the reimbursement request.
12. Upon approval of funds, Applicant must provide at least four (4) media passes for use by TDC staff to attend and cover the Event for the TDC’s marketing and public relations purposes.
13. Applicant is to have only one designated contact (Designee) for the duration of the Event Funding process. Designee is responsible for turning in all application documents, as well as follow up paperwork needed prior to the Event/Project. Additionally, Designee will be responsible for executing the funding contract and providing a W-9 for Applicant. Funds will be released only to Designee upon completion of post-Event/Project documentation and room night certification. Should Designee change at any point during the process, written notification to the TDC office is required. Failure to provide notification will adversely affect funding.
14. If any details (date, time, name of event, etc.) change prior to the Event execution, a letter must be sent to the TDC office advising of the changes. Date changes require a vote by the TDC and Amendment to Grant Agreement and must be submitted 90 days prior to the originally approved date or new date (whichever comes first).
15. By submission of an application, the applicant grants Highlands County and all of its employees, officers, contractors, subcontractors, volunteers and agents, the right to use and reproduce any and all photographs, digital images, videotapes or recordings made at or made in relation to the Event/Project, including those of Applicant’s employees, volunteers, invitees, and those that contain Applicant’s name, artwork, logo or trademark, for use by Highlands County, and the right to copyright and/or use, reuse and/or publish, republish photographic pictures, digital images, videotapes or recordings. Applicant affirms that applicant it is the legal owner of any artwork, logo or trademark used by Applicant 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, Applicant will indemnify and hold Highlands County and its representatives harmless as to any such claim or damages arising from such claim. Applicant is required to grant Highlands County permission for the photographs, digital images, videos, or recordings to be used in their entirety and/or edited versions as deemed necessary by Highlands County. Applicant 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. Applicant further grants Highlands County permission to use the photographs, digital images, videotapes or recordings to be used by Highlands County at any time in the future without provision of notice being provided and that 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. Applicant shall inform its invitees aware of Highlands County’s intentions and rights as described in this paragraph and obtain executed Release and Waivers from Applicant’s invitees as a requirement to participate in the Event.

SPECIAL EVENT FUNDING REQUEST LEVELS

There is a maximum funding level of \$10,000. The guaranteed number of room nights stated by the Applicant does not guarantee the level of funding at which the Event may be approved. The final funding recommendation will be based on the TDC's sole and absolute discretion. The TDC has the right to place the application at a lower funding level with providing justification for its decision. All requests will be submitted as a recommendation by the TDC to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners which makes the final decision.

Exceptions for Extraordinary Circumstances

While it is not possible to legislate for the unknown, it is possible to identify and anticipate the potential for exceptional 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 Highlands County Board of County Commissioners for final approval.

The TDC will only reimburse for actual, verified room nights only. For example:

If the TDC approved a grant for \$10,000 for an event that guaranteed 500 room nights and the event actually only generated 300 total room nights, the TDC would determine the total percentage of what was produced based upon what was guaranteed by taking $300/500 = 60\%$. The maximum total amount awarded in this case based upon the % formula would be 60% of \$10,000 which equals \$6,000.

ELIGIBLE USE OF FUNDS

The list below is how Tourist Development Funds may be used to promote tourism for Highlands County.

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 in or with the ad, which must be pre-approved by TDC 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

2. Promotional Items

Must be tied to a direct "experience" with the event (i.e. themed reception, activity, etc.) and the Visit Sebring logo must be included on the promotional item, and the item with logo must be pre-approved by TDC staff before they qualify for reimbursement. Please consult TDC staff regarding any direct experience ideas. Promotional items will only be funded with a robust marketing plan as generating attendance is the TDC's priority.

3. Event Fees

- A/V equipment rental, MOT fees, in-county group transportation/tours, entertainment (for events open to public; an event that is not for conference attendees only)
- Facility fees - for Events that take place at Highlands County facilities.

- Necessary event-related operational expenses, as approved per Florida State Statute 125.0104 and indicated in the final motion to approve funding.
- Event fees will only be funded with a robust marketing plan as generating attendance is the TDC's priority.

4. Trophies, Plaques, and Non-Monetary Awards

Items must include Visit Sebring's logo in the design, and be pre-approved by the TDC staff before they qualify for reimbursement. Items will only be funded with a robust marketing plan as generating attendance.

5. Field/Facility Related Expenses

Must be outlined in grant application and will be approved at the discretion of the TDC.

INELIGIBLE USES OF FUNDS:

1. Prize money, scholarships, monetary awards
2. Any and all travel expenses (includes, but is not limited to, mileage reimbursement, car rental fees, airline tickets, hotel/accommodations, food, luggage fees, etc.)
3. Private entertainment, food, beverages, or any type of concession
4. Annual operating expenditures not directly related to the Event/Project
5. Legal, medical, security, engineering, accounting, auditing, planning, feasibility studies or other consulting services
6. Employee salaries
7. Real property or capital improvements to facilities
8. Tangible personal property including but not limited to office furnishings or equipment
9. Interest or reduction of deficits and loans or sales tax
10. Expenses incurred or obligated prior to or after the grant Event period
11. Advertising/promotional materials distributed in Highlands County, during or after the Event
12. Receptions or social functions other than those specifically designed for pre-event promotional purposes
13. Website design
14. Ongoing or annual facility maintenance
15. Any use not authorized as determined by the Florida State Statute 125.0104

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 Special Event/Group Meeting or Conference Grant Program is to position Highlands County as a must-experience destination in Florida through quality events and initiatives. The TDC recognizes special events, group meetings and conferences as a major contributor to the overall tourism economy. To assist these special events, the TDC has guidelines for 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 (BOCC). Funds that will be submitted for TDC reimbursement cannot be spent until final approval by BOCC 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 both a post-event economic impact report and the final Room Night Verification Form(s) have been produced and timely submitted to the TDC for review.

APPLICATION DEADLINE AND GUIDELINES:

Applications will be reviewed quarterly at TDC meetings as outlined in the schedule below. Applications are due no later than the deadlines listed herein. If the deadline falls on a weekend or holiday, then the applications are **due the last County business day prior to the posted deadline**. One application will be accepted per Event/Project. The application **must be completely filled out**. Not Applicable or N/A should be marked if needed. **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.

The TDC Staff and TDC will review funding for Special Event Funding Requests as outlined on the next page:

Submittal & Meeting Schedule for Special Event Funding

Grant Application Submittal Deadline	TDC Meeting*
October 10	Last Thursday in October
January 10	Last Thursday in January
April 10	Last Thursday in April
July 30	Second Thursday in August

ALL FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS REQUIRE FINAL APPROVAL BY THE HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS *Dates are subject to change

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/Project, Applicant must submit the following:
 - Completed Post Event Report (Page 9-10)
 - Room Night Verification Forms (Page 8) reporting all room nights generated by the event. This includes all staff, competitors, volunteers, spectators, officials, etc. that stayed in paid accommodations, verified directly by a hotel, motel, or vacation rental.
 - Invoice from Grantee to Visit Sebring / Highlands County for reimbursement of TDC/BCC approved funds (addressed to Visit Sebring / Highlands County Tourist Development Council).
 - 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.
 - 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:

In order to assess the impact of each Event on the Sebring/Highlands County transient lodging industry, the TDC requires the tracking of the number of overnight visitors attending the Event/Project.

Applicant will be required to provide all Highlands County based accommodations where attendees may be staying with room night certification forms and submit the **Room Night Certification Form** (page 8) to the TDC at the conclusion of the Event. Applicant is strongly encouraged to conduct their own room night surveys to verify room nights and hotels in order to complete the **Room Night Certification Form** for back up documentation should there be any discrepancies in determining the total number of room nights generated from the event. All documents verifying room nights must be signed by an authorized representative of the lodging partner.

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 in order to provide a fair and equitable process of consideration of each applicant. Applicant may make contact with 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 in regard to the Event application.



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Room Night Certification Form**

*A form should be completed by each accommodation that housed event attendees/staff.
Due to the TDC office no later than 60 days after the end of event.*

Attention: Hotel Representative / Contact

The Event, _____, was awarded Funding through the Highlands County Tourist Development Council (TDC) to assist in the advancement of bringing additional economic impact through tourism into our community. The purpose of this form is to certify the number of room nights in Highlands County that were attributable to the Event.

Name of Hotel/Accommodation: _____

Contact Person: _____

Telephone: _____ **Email:** _____

TRACKED ROOM NIGHTS							
EVENT NAME							
DATE (s)							
PAID ROOM NIGHTS							
COMP ROOM NIGHTS							

Hotel Contact Signature: _____

The TDC thanks you for your help and partnership in making Highlands County a choice destination!

GRANT APPLICANT: I certify that Event listed above consumed the reported room nights.

Name of Applicant: _____

Signature: _____ **Title:** _____

The TDC reserves the right to unilaterally reduce the maximum amount of reimbursement if Applicant's room night guarantee is not satisfied or documented with this Room Night Certification Form. This SIGNED form must be completed and returned before final payment is delivered to Applicant.



**Highlands County Tourist Development Council
Post Event Report**

Due to the TDC office no later than 60 days after the end of event.

Event Name: _____ **Event Date(s):** _____

Event Organizer: _____

1. To the best of your knowledge, please fill in the following with estimates for the number of room nights and attendees resulting from your event:

Total Paid Room Nights: _____

Attendee Origin & Type

	From Out of State	Overnight, From Florida	Day Trip/In State	Average # of Nights Stay
Participant/Coach/Official				
Spectators				
Media				
Totals:				

2. Were there any extenuating circumstances that lead to actual attendance or room night generation falling below projections? If yes, what were those circumstances:

3. Did your event garner any media coverage? If yes, please describe in detail.

4. Was your event a room night generating event? If yes, please submit completed "Room Night Certification Form(s)", found on page 8 of the grant application. One (1) form must be submitted for each participating hotel/accommodation.

Note: If any attendees stayed in Airbnb/VRBO/Short Term Rentals, please complete a form for those as well, with explanation of how you confirmed those numbers.

Event Organizer Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Please submit this completed report within 60 days following your event. To review additional items required to be submitted for reimbursement process, see page 6-7 of Grant Application.

APPLICATION

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

The application **must be completely filled out**. “Not Applicable” or “N/A” should be marked as appropriate.

Copies of the following items must be attached to your application:

- List of Applicant’s current Officers and/or Board members (if applicable)
- Applicant’s W-9 tax form for post-Event payment
- Sample Visitor/Attendee Survey for the Event
- Overall & detailed Marketing Plan for the Event. This plan must outline product (event); market position/competitive analysis; target audience; target markets; marketing goals, objectives and tactics; market strategy; budget and evaluation metrics.

Please note: All final paperwork as outlined in the application must be submitted to the TDC **within 60 days of the conclusion of the Event**. The request for reimbursement will be considered incomplete until all of the required forms are submitted to the TDC.

HIGHLANDS COUNTY TDC SPECIAL EVENT FUNDING REQUEST APPLICATION

Total Amount Requested from TDC: \$ _____

I. General Information

1. Name of Applicant:
2. Name of Event:
3. Contact person:
4. Contact person e-mail:
5. Complete address of Applicant:
Cell phone:
6. Applicant’s Chief Official/Event Coordinator:
Title:
Address if different from above:
Cell phone:
Email:
7. Has Event ever received funding from the TDC? Yes No
 - a. If yes – list years and amounts:
8. Amount Applicant is requesting for the Event/Project: \$
9. Intended use of funds (*Refer to page 7 – Eligible and Ineligible Uses of Funds*):

II. Details about Applicant (describe business or organization):

III. Schedule of Event:

Grant Application Checklist

Please initial next to each item and fill in the blanks below. This list must accompany your grant application.

Initials

_____ This application is being submitted at least four months (120 days) prior to the event start.

Date of Event: _____

Date of Application: _____

_____ I understand that the reimbursement request must be completed and submitted to the Tourism Office with all back up and supporting material no later than 60 days after the event ends, which will be on _____ (date 60 days after event ends).

_____ I will obtain the signatures of the organization's President & Secretary on the proposed grant contract by _____. (date one week after the application is submitted to and accepted by the Tourism Office)

_____ I understand that the "Visit Sebring" logo must appear in any print advertisements that are funded by the TDC. For digital ads, the "Visit Sebring" logo must either be featured on the advertisement or on website/landing page linked to the ad or the ad must link to the TDC's website, VisitSebring.com. I will also use the #VisitSebring hashtag on at least one event social media post.

_____ I have included an IRS **W-9 Form** and a copy of the Florida Division of Corporations form with the application.

_____ I understand that someone representing this grant application must be available at the TDC meeting when it considers the application for funding or the application will not be considered.

_____ I understand that no expenses incurred before the TDC recommends approval of the grant application will be reimbursed under any circumstances. I also understand that no funding has been approved until the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) approves execution of the Grant Contract and that no expenditures will be reimbursed if the BOCC does not approve execution of the Grant Contract.

_____ I understand that reimbursements following the event will only be made for itemized, authorized expenses approved by the BOCC in the fully executed Grant Contract.

_____ I understand each reimbursement request must include copies of paid invoices, screenshots of digital ads, copies of the ad/tear sheets, invoice for reimbursement amount to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners, copy of front and back of cleared checks paying for advertising, and outreach figures identifying the

number of people your ad reached outside Highlands County and inside Highlands County.

_____ I understand Reimbursement will only be provided at a rate of \$20/verified room night. And all funds will only be reimbursed after the event is complete.

_____ I agree that the funds I receive will ONLY be used in accordance with the eligible and ineligible uses of funds. (pages 3-4)

_____ I understand that I am required to submit a **Room Night Certification Form** from each participating hotel in order to track the number of hotel room nights the Event produces in order to receive funding. (page 8)

_____ I have reviewed the **Highlands County Special Event Permit Flow Chart** and will proceed with any required county permits. (Contact: Rachel Barry; (863) 402-6638)

_____ I have included a list of my business/organization's current Officers and/or Board members (if applicable) with the application.

_____ I will provide the Visit Sebring office with a Certificate of Insurance (COI) naming "Highlands County Tourism Office" as additionally insured no later than 15 days before the event begins. If required, I will also provide the Visit Sebring office with a Certificate of Insurance (COI) naming "Florida Sports Foundation" as additionally insured no later than 15 days before the event begins.

_____ I have included a detailed **Marketing Plan** for the Event.

_____ I have included a sample **Visitor/Attendee Survey** for the Event, and will submit survey results to the Visit Sebring office no later than 60 days after the event takes place.

_____ As an authorized representative of Applicant, I (the person submitting this application) acknowledge that I am also the person required to execute the contract and prepare the **Post-Event Report** (page 9-10) for the Event within 60 days after completion of event to receive payment. This report should include: total number of participants, total number of coaches, spectators, staff, media, etc., information regarding where attendee came from, feedback about destination (what did they like/not like).

_____ I also acknowledge that I am required to submit documentation that confirms my authority to act on behalf of the Applying Organization, such as a corporate resolution or a copy of a record from the State of Florida Division of Corporations that lists me (the person submitting the Application) as an officer who has statutory authority to represent and bind the Applying Organization.

_____ I acknowledge that any material made or received by Highlands County in connection with my request for Program funding is a public record and subject to public inspection unless there is a legislatively created exemption that makes it confidential and not

subject to disclosure. I acknowledge that I cannot dictate to Highlands County what material is open to public inspection or the circumstances under which material is deemed confidential.

_____ I understand that as a requirement to receiving funding, I will execute a release to permit Highlands County to photo and/or record the Event and I must make Event invitees aware of this and make the signing of a release a requirement to participate in the Event.

_____ I understand that all funds received are subject to audit by the Highlands County Clerk of the Court – Internal Auditor or other representative as Highlands County may designate.

_____ I understand that this event may require a Highlands County Special Event Permit, and it is up to me to complete that permit request and pay the required permit fee.

Authorized Agent: _____

Title: _____ *Date:* _____

Authorized Agent Signature: _____

CERTIFICATION OF APPLICANT

Applicant has reviewed this Application for Funds from the Tourist Development Council. Applicant is in full agreement with the information contained herein. To the best of Applicant's knowledge, the information contained in this Application and its attachments is accurate and complete.

Applicant Name: _____

Date: _____

By: _____
(Signature)

Its: _____
(Title)

STATE OF FLORIDA
COUNTY OF _____

The foregoing instrument was acknowledged before me by means of physical presence or online notarization this ____ day of _____, 20__ by _____ (name) as _____ (title) for _____ (applicant, name of party on behalf of whom instrument was executed).

(NOTARY SEAL)

(Signature of Notary Public-State of Florida)

(Name of Notary Typed, Printed, or Stamped)

Personally Known _____ OR Produced Identification _____

Type of Identification Produced
