



TDC Meeting Minutes

January 11, 2024

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass called the Lee County Tourist Development Council meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

Council members in attendance

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass, Larry Fiesel, Jay Johnson, Pamela Cronin, Bill Steinke, Bill Waichulis, Robert Wells III, Liston Bochette, Tony Lapi, Brian Kramer, Holly Smith and Nigel Fullick.

Dan Allers and Fran Myers were excused.

Guests First recognizes newest graduates

Dr. Nicole King-Smith, Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) training and development manager, and Crystal Wanke, VCB Hospitality Customer Service Training Specialist, awarded certificates to the newest certified guest service professionals (CGSPs), bringing the total to 1,124 CGSP graduates and 16 certified properties in Lee County.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Jay Johnson made a motion to approve the December 14, 2023, TDC meeting minutes. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

None to be heard.

Municipalities to be heard

Claudia Miller, economic development manager, shared Cape Coral has launched a Parks & Rec Activity Guide with 4,000 printed copies distributed at the Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce, City Hall, Libraries, City Parks, and Recreation Centers. There is also a digital version with easy registration links on the website. She also gave an update of events and new projects coming to Cape Coral. January events include the Tour De Cape, and events in February include a Concert in the Park, Bike Night motorcycle festival, and Music & Arts Fusion Walks.

Miller announced that the city has started a Tourism Spotlight initiative, and this month's feature is Rotary Park Environmental Center. She also gave an overview of the advertising campaign at the Punta Gorda Airport that will run for six months. There will be seven monitors throughout the terminal promoting Cape Coral events, outdoor activities, family friendly and business friendly community events. All ads will be rotating with QR codes on the monitors.

The 39th Annual Cape Coral Art Festival and Marketplace takes place on January 13-14 showcasing over 300 artists and craftsmen from around the world. Over 140,000 attendees are expected to visit the more than half mile of exhibitors presented by the Cape Coral Rotary in partnership with the VCB.

The city has also launched an Economic and Business Development Business Spotlight which supports new and existing businesses. Weekly posts highlight local retail, restaurants, services, and unique businesses. They have 23K followers on Facebook and just over 3,400 followers on Instagram.

The city is hosting two sessions of the VCB's Guests First Customer Service Training on January 18.

The Cape Coral Quest 2.0 mobile app developed in partnership with the VCB has been refreshed, and the new challenge began Dec. 1. To date, there have been 502 sign ups, 742 locations checked, 43 prizes claimed, 13 coupons redeemed, and 11 people entered to win a 2-night stay at the Westin contest.

Liston Bochette, Councilman, City of Fort Myers, announced that the city is hosting the first annual "Forum on Contemporary Issues in the Olympics in conjunction with the Fort Myers Champions for Health Expo" in partnership with Tiffin University on February 1 in downtown Fort Myers at the Collaboratory.

Jeff Hauge, Culture, Parks & Recreation Director, Town of Fort Myers Beach, thanked the TDC for their continued support with the rebuilding of Fort Myers Beach. He shared that heavy seasonal traffic on the island has resumed due to many businesses reopening helping to drive tourism to the Town. The New Year's Eve fireworks event was well attended and well received. Times Square continues to be a tourist hotspot with visitors enjoying the new clock and proximity to the beach. The Mound House is continuing to offer tours Wednesday through Saturday. The grounds are open seven days a week and the observation pier is also open, with numerous people enjoying fishing from the pier. Kayak tours are available on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, and the lecture series continues monthly. Bayside Park has been renamed 'Bayside Veterans Park' and hosts a weekly concert series on Sundays from 4-7 p.m. featuring all genres of music. Bay Oaks Recreation Center and campus will be open starting on Tuesday January 16 after completing renovations. The weight room and cardio room feature all new equipment, indoor and outdoor pickleball will be offered, they will host open gym volleyball and fitness classes, as well as BOSS events (Bay Oaks Social Seniors) four times per month. The Farmer's Market is held every Friday morning in Times Square, and it has been very well attended. The Town is continuing with their beach renourishment program to get the beaches back to where they were pre-lan and have seen increased tourism as a result.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for November 2023 was \$2,731,183, an 14.5% increase over November 2022 preliminary collections of \$2,386,100. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$5,065,807 an increase of 10.0% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for November 2023 was 68.3%, which is down 16.7% from November 2022. The average daily rate for November 2023 was \$147.42, down 17.7% from November 2022 and RevPAR for November 2023 was \$100.67, down 31.5% from November 2022.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for November 2023 was 28%, which is up 12.4% from November 2022. The average daily rate for November 2023 was \$184, up 6.3% from November 2022 and RevPAR for November 2023 was \$52, up 18.1% from November 2022.

During November 2023, 953,025 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 17.3% compared to November 2022.

Communications report

Tam Pigott, VCB executive director, reported total impressions for October, November and December 2023 were 431,463,374. The communications team ended 2023 with a strong showing of group press trips including a group of Georgia outdoor writers, a group of travel writers from Germany and domestic writers with assignments for The Boston Globe and Cosmopolitan already resulting in positive coverage of the destination. More notable coverage came from a partnership with Visit Florida and photographer, Michael Meyers who posted impressive photos of Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel and Captiva. He enjoyed the destination so much he extended his stay. The communications team also hosted individual journalists including Germany's premier golf writer Dr. Bernard Obst. In early December, the team hosted a media event to show off the destination anthem, "Feels Like Home to Me" co-written by Fort Myers native, Brian Sutherland and Clint Daniels, both alums of Island Hopper Songwriter Fest. The communications team is also the recipient of two gold Adrian awards from the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association's (HSMIA) Adrian Awards competition. Our winning entries were a series featured on Fox Weather focusing on recovery following Hurricane Ian and our work to showcase J.N. 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge on CBS Sunday Morning's "A Moment in Nature."

Sales report

Jill Vance, VCB sales director, reported that the team is ahead of pace on five of the six sales goals for FY23-24. She shared highlights of successful third-quarter group media buys and sales activities. The sales team attended a variety of in-person meeting planner and travel trade shows, including AMX INTERaction, IMEX America, NTA Travel Exchange, and CCRA Power Solutions. Vance also presented upcoming sales activities for January through March including PCMA Convening Leaders Conference, Rendezvous South and CMP Advance. Charm Evans, global sales manager, provided a recap on the sales activities including Brand USA Travel Week and CEO Summit, FTI North America Roadshow, and Visit FL Canadian and German Discover Airlines familiarization trips. Evans also presented an update on the international sales activities such as the Pre-Florida Huddle product manager familiarization trip and ITB Berlin taking place in March.

Visitor Services report

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director, reported that tourism ambassador volunteers assisted 390,448 visitors and residents during calendar year 2023, resulting in 27,411 volunteer hours worked, a value of \$847,596 to Lee County. Highlights during the fall months included Tourism Ambassadors assisting at Roy Hobbs World Series, Fort Myers Tip-Off and greeting Breeze Airlines' inaugural flight from Norfolk. Ambassadors attended 14 unique destination education training sessions compliments of our industry partners. Visitor services looks forward to hosting the 34th Annual Volunteer Tourism Ambassador Appreciation Luncheon on April 12.

New Business

- Nancy MacPhee, product development manager, shared the updated Beach and Shoreline Program guidelines as the application cycle for fiscal year 2024-25 funding will open with a webinar on January 18. The program timeline, guidelines and eligibility information related to this program can be viewed at <https://www.visitfortmyers.com/lee-vcb/funding-programs/beach-and-shoreline/funding-request-information>
- After a request for volunteers by Chairman Pendergrass, the following members were unanimously approved to serve as the Events & Attractions Subcommittee: Pamela Cronin, Jay Johnson, Councilwoman Holly Smith, Councilman Bill Steinke, and Bill Waichulis.

TDC member items

- Commissioner Pendergrass thanked Lee County Port Authority Executive Director and CEO Ben Siegel for his dedication to the community and RSW. He is set to retire April 1st, 2024, after 32 years of service.
- Holly Smith congratulated Tam on her “Meeting Pros to Watch” award from Convention South. She shared an update on the Sanibel causeway that on December 27 FDOT completed the paved areas and expect the project to be fully completed by 2027. Smith thanked everyone for their patience as Sanibel works towards its recovery. Sanibel Moorings recently reopened with 62 units available, and she thanked the VCB for attending their reopening ceremony, as well as numerous other business openings on the island as well. Only 13.5% of Sanibel’s accommodations are open now, but she expects more to open in 2024. Chico’s has a soft opening today at Periwinkle Place Shops, and on January 29 the State of the Islands Summit will take place at Sanibel Harbour Marriott in partnership with the Charitable Foundation of the Islands and the Sanibel Captiva Chamber of Commerce.
- Bill Waichulis had no comment.
- Bill Steinke invited everyone to come out to the Cape Coral Art Festival & Marketplace this coming weekend and he shared the groundbreaking for Crystal Lake Park will occur February 23.
- Larry Fiesel had no comment.
- Pam Cronin had no comment.
- Nigel Fullick shared that Bonita Springs had their soft opening of the food truck park Rooftop at Riverside. Also, Sugar Shack will be open in the summer and two high-end restaurants will be opening in 2025.
- Jay Johnson shared that on Monday January 15, the Pine Island Chamber of Commerce will have their annual meeting and Executive Director Tamara Pigott of the VCB will be the guest speaker.
- Liston Bochette had no comment.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Tony Lapi shared that ‘Tween Waters will be hosting a concert series on the patio of the resort on Friday night and on the beach Saturday night.
- Brian Kramer had no comment.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:03 a.m.

Next TDC meeting

The next regularly scheduled TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, February 8, 2024**, at the Lee County Admin East Building, Room 118, 2201 Second St., Fort Myers. To view a complete tax collections report, go to LeeVCB.com. Contact: Tamara Pigott, TPigott@leegov.com, Lee County VCB, 239-338-3500.