



## **TDC Meeting Minutes**

April 11, 2024

Vice Chair, Jay Johnson called the Lee County Tourist Development Council meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

### **Council members in attendance**

Dan Allers, Robert Wells III, Jay Johnson, Pamela Cronin, Bill Steinke, Bill Waichulis, Liston Bochette, Tony Lapi, and Holly Smith.

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass, Larry Fiesel, Brian Kramer, Nigel Fullick and Fran Myers were excused.

### **Approval of previous meeting minutes**

Dan Allers made a motion to approve the Feb. 8, 2024, TDC meeting minutes. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

### **Public to be heard**

Beth Oliver, Vice President of Sales & Marketing, Offshore Sailing School, shared they are back on Fort Myers Beach at the Pink Shell starting in May. They will have full fleet and staff at all their six locations: Fort Myers Beach, Captiva, St. Petersburg, Key West, (a new site which was added in January), as well as Scrub Island and Tortola in British Virgin Islands. Oliver thanked Tony Lapi and Tween Waters for hosting them after Ian.

### **Municipalities to be heard**

Chadd Chustz, Environmental Projects Manager, Town of Fort Myers Beach, gave an update on beach renourishment projects and berm projects post-Ian. The Town completed the FEMA Berm Project in Dec. 2023 which installed more than 15,000 shoreline feet of berm between Margaritaville and Big Carlos Pass. Fort Myers Beach had record shorebird nesting following the completion of the berm, most notably the Snowy Plovers were thriving with the most productivity, along with other four species of shorebirds. Sea Turtle hatching had an emergent success rate of 70% and one nest had a 100% emergent rate. Fort Myers Beach rebuilt its beach accesses, and they are looking forward to the 1 million cubic yard renourishment dredge project to start in June that will tie into the berms. They are looking forward to having a healthy, resilient, and inviting beach for all to enjoy by 2025.

Joe Petrella, Parks and Recreation Director, City of Cape Coral, inquired about Beach and Shoreline funding for nature centers, specifically regarding Yellow Creek Preserve boardwalk trails. The city requested funding which was deemed ineligible through the Beach & Shoreline program, but eligible based on Florida Statute 125.0104 5B which permits use of funds for nature centers. Yellow Creek Fever is a 195 acre preserve located in northeast Cape Coral. The preserve includes a cypress nature forest, created wetlands, a 20-acre pond, and a variety of other ecosystems. This project is asking for \$792,100 with a match of \$142,000 from the city. Andrea Fraser, county attorney, Lee County Government, advised that the project qualifies for TDC general funding but not specifically Beach and Shoreline funding.

Andreana Petersen, Business Recruitment and Retention Specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some upcoming events. April events include Bike Night on April 13<sup>th</sup> along with the Full Throttle Car Show, Earth Day Celebration at Four Freedoms Park on April 20<sup>th</sup> and Cultural Fest on April 27<sup>th</sup>. 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 1,293 sign ups, 3,245 locations checked, 241 prizes claimed, 81 coupons redeemed, 69 people entered to win a 2-night stay at the Westin contest, 30 check-ins completed the entire scavenger hunt and 21 people entered to win a Sunsplash Season Pass. The Cape Coral Mural and final quest location is a project in partnership with the VCB, City of Cape Coral, and Fort Myers Mural Society. The artists are currently implementing augmented reality (AR) features to the mural.

### **Report of the executive director**

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for February 2024 was \$5,714,467, an 31.6% increase over February 2023 preliminary collections of \$4,343,495. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$20,038,912 an increase of 18.8% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for February 2024 was 80.9%, which is down 3.0% from February 2023. The average daily rate for February 2024 was \$234.29, down 4.0% from February 2023 and RevPAR for February 2024 was \$189.49, down 6.9% from February 2023.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for February 2024 was 67%, which is up 43.0% from February 2023. The average daily rate for February 2024 was \$305, up 7.6% from February 2023 and RevPAR for February 2024 was \$205, up 54.2% from February 2023.

During February 2024, 1,223,761 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 26.5% compared to February 2023. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is up 22.7% from the same period last year.

### **Communications update**

Ray Sarracino, VCB communications director, reported that second quarter coverage and UVM numbers remained strong with a large spike in March. This was due to two articles being distributed by Yahoo and MSN. Total quarterly impressions were 3,195,183,083. Jan-March brought 14 domestic and international journalists to the destination. Focus moving forward is on what's happening and available now, and less on Hurricane Ian recovery. Highlights of FAM articles include: The Points Guy, Thrillist, Readers Digest, AFAR, Forbes, and The Toronto Sun. Upcoming media visits include: Canada, Brazil (via Visit Florida), UK and domestic.

### **Sales update**

Jill Vance, VCB director of sales, reported that the team is ahead of pace for all six sales goals for FY23-24. She shared highlights of successful second-quarter group media buys and sales activities. The sales team attended a variety of in-person meeting planner and travel trade shows, including RCMA Emerge, Visit Florida's Florida Encounter, and Travel & Adventure Shows. Vance also presented upcoming sales activities for April through June including ConferenceDirect Annual Partners Meeting, HelmsBriscoe Annual Business Conference and Travel Advisors of the Mid-South Annual Conference & Tradeshow. Charm Evans, global sales manager, provided a recap on the sales activities including Visit Florida's Florida Huddle and ITB Berlin. Evans also presented an update on the international sales activities taking place in the coming months such as the UK Sales Mission with Visit Florida, U.S. Travel Association's IPW, and Brand USA's inaugural Canada Connect event.

### **Visitor Services update**

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director reported that the VCB's tourism ambassador volunteers assisted 222,841 visitors during the second quarter of FY24. Additional community support included tourism ambassadors helping at ArtFest Fort Myers, Southwest Florida Ag Expo and a Global Entry Enrollment event at RSW, as well as staffing the VCB baseball booths at all spring training games. Tourism Ambassadors attended various destination education training sessions compliments of our industry partners. Visitor services looks forward to hosting the 24th annual Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards on Aug. 23. To learn more or to nominate, visit EAwards.org.

### **New Business**

#### **Beach & Shoreline update**

Nancy MacPhee, VCB product development manager, gave an update of the Beach & Shoreline Program. The TDC will review requests for FY25 funding at a workshop on April 24, 2024 at 2PM.

#### **Beach Renourishment update**

Steve Boutelle, Marine Operations Manager, Lee County Natural Resources, presented an overview of the beach renourishment projects in Lee County. Lee County has more than 40 miles of sandy beaches, and the focus of these projects is on designated critically eroded beaches with public beach access. Boutelle reported that virtually all Lee County beaches, except for Gasparilla Island, reached condition IV levels of erosion following Hurricane Ian, which is categorized as "major dune erosion". Gasparilla Island is a federal project which means it is controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers, the project cost \$10.3 million and Lee County is currently negotiating with Jacksonville and Atlanta to determine an easement resolution for the Gasparilla project. Captiva, Estero Island, Lovers Key, Bonita Beach, and South Bonita Beach are currently out to bid for construction contracts to complete the renourishment projects slated for later this year and 2025. Blind Pass and Western Sanibel beaches renourishment projects are complete with the rest of Sanibel currently under construction. The County has strategically sequenced the renourishment projects to occur in a cost-effective manner by having the vendor remain in the County rather than loading and unloading machinery, equipment, and personnel at different time intervals.

#### **TDC member items**

- Pamela Cronin had no comment.
- Dan Allers shared that the Times Square beach access on Fort Myers Beach is the most visited beach access in Lee County, and requested clarification on why it has never been eligible to receive funding through the Beach and Shoreline program. The town would like to apply for assistance with getting a stop light and crosswalk fixed in the Times Square area. The crosswalk has become dangerous for pedestrians and the Town would like assistance from Lee County on the eligibility of funding these projects as soon as possible.
- Bill Waichulis had no comment.
- Holly Smith thanked the VCB for coming out to support the reopening of Sanibel Siesta on The Beach. With 50 of their 62 units online, 17% of hotels rooms are now open on Sanibel. The groundbreaking for Shalimar Beach Resort reconstruction was also recently celebrated. Island Night is next week on April 17<sup>th</sup> at the Mighty Mussels baseball game at Hammond Stadium. The Edison Awards are April 17-19<sup>th</sup> and they are sponsored by the Horizon Foundation, Lee County, and City of Fort Myers. Sanibel is partnering with the VCB and Fort Myers Mural Society on doing a Mural at the Sanibel-Captiva Chamber of Commerce.
- Bill Steinke thanked the Cape Coral staff for their monthly presentations to the TDC and invited everyone to come out to Bike Night on April 13<sup>th</sup>. The Cape Coral Yacht Club rebuilding is making progress. Sunsplash Water Park will have a new wave pool by next season.

- Liston Bochette shared that there are two Los Angeles film companies that would like to relocate in Florida, one is currently based in Sarasota, but they are interested in our area because they see more opportunity. Liston would like to meet with the VCB to discuss film companies from LA moving to SWFL and how we could best leverage that for our area.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Tony Lapi had no comment.

### **Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.

### **Next TDC meeting**

The next regularly scheduled TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, May 9, 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](http://LeeVCB.com). Contact: Tamara Pigott, [TPigott@leegov.com](mailto:TPigott@leegov.com), Lee County VCB, 239-338-3500.