



## **TDC Meeting Minutes**

February 13, 2025

Vice Chair, Jay Johnson called the Lee County Tourist Development Council meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

### **Council members in attendance**

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

Commissioner Kevin Ruane and Fran Myers and were excused.

### **Guests First recognizes newest graduates**

Crystal Wanke, VCB Hospitality Customer Service Training Specialist, awarded certificates to the newest certified guest service professionals (CGSPs), bringing the total to 1,174 CGSP graduates and 17 certified properties in Lee County.

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

Dan Allers made a motion to approve the January 16, 2025, TDC meeting minutes. Tony Lapi seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

### **Public to be heard**

Sean Niesel, Shalimar Beach Resort, reported that they are working to replace their 33 units that were destroyed by Hurricane Ian. They plan to reopen in October 2025 after 18 months of construction. Councilwomen and TDC member Holly Smith stated that they were the first property on Sanibel Island to break ground after Ian.

Chris Verrill, Executive Director, Florida Repertory Theatre, introduced himself to the council. He has been living in Lee County for four months. Verrill has been managing theatres for decades, most recently in historic downtown Flagstaff, AZ where he worked with their Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) to help drive visitation. He was also a member of the tourism commission in Flagstaff. He looks forward to working with the VCB staff here to help drive tourism in Lee County.

### **Municipalities to be heard**

Holly Smith, Councilwoman, City of Sanibel, announced that Sanibel is celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and are looking to break a Guinness World Record in November 2025. They are requesting the help of the TDC to make this Guinness Record a huge success for the island. Smith also mentioned that the Sanibel Causeway Islands should be reopened by the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and as Lee County's largest beach, they are a popular spot for watching the fireworks and celebrating. Smith suggested a possible collaboration with Fort Myers Beach in requesting TDC assistance with fireworks for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July to celebrate their islands.

### **Special Presentations**

Jacki Lyszak, Fort Myers Beach Chamber President, gave updates on the recovery of the island. TDC funds repaired the Roxie Visitor Information Center. The Town of Fort Myers Beach lent the property for the Roxie to serve as a visitor information booth and a venue for business networking events. Tear-off maps



were created to assist visitors on the island along with the creation of a Bayside Veterans Park concert series. Liszak also reported the chamber has 442 business members at this time.

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

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for December 2024 was \$3,602,161 a 2.06% increase over December 2023 preliminary collections of \$3,529,478. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$8,684,938 a decrease of 0.38% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for December 2024 was 64.8%, which is up 2.2% from December 2023. The average daily rate for December 2024 was \$154.29, a decrease of 1.4% from December 2023 and RevPAR for December 2024 was \$100.00, down 0.9% from December 2023.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for December 2024 was 38%, which is up 6.3% from December 2023. The average daily rate for December 2024 was \$271, up 11.9% from December 2023 and RevPAR for December 2024 was \$103, up 19.7% from December 2023.

During December 2024, 1,121,793 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 2.5% compared to December 2023. The airport finished 2024 with 11,028,182 passengers, which was a 9.5% increase compared to 2023.

#### **October – December 2024 research report**

Joseph St. Germain, DSG, presented a broad overview of the October-December 2024 visitor research. Lee County welcomed 867,200 visitors during this time, an increase of 36.7% compared to 2023, resulting in direct visitor spending exceeding \$679 million. He reported that in-state visitation increased from 6.7% to 8.6% with the most growth coming from Miami-Ft. Lauderdale and West Palm Beach-Ft. Pierce. He reported on a Hurricane Sentiment Study conducted in Lee, Charlotte, and Sarasota counties to assess consumer sentiment regarding future travel following a hurricane. Only 2% of potential visitors would not visit Lee County in the next six months because of Hurricanes Helene and Milton and only 5% of visitors have cancelled a trip to Lee County.

#### **Sports update**

Jeff Mielke, Sports Development director, reported that 64,264 room nights sold in the months October through December 2024 with direct visitor spending of more than \$30.3 million. For CY24, 178,680 room nights sold with direct visitor spending of more than \$77.4 million. Mielke reported that Lee County hosted 163 events, 20 more than 2023, and the Red Sox and Twins finished 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in total attendance for the 2024 Spring Training season.

#### **TDC Funding Requests**

The TDC recommended the Board of County Commissioners consider funding 2 projects from tourist development tax reserves:

- a. Rob Wells made a motion to approve the Sanibel Causeway Islands Improvements project totaling \$514,000. Dan Allers seconded the motion which passed unanimously.
- b. Tony Lapi made a motion to approve the design portion of the Adaptive Baseball Field Complex project with a 50% match from Lee County, and a presentation on the ROI of the project before more funds are considered. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.



### **New business**

- a. Tony Lapi made a motion to approve the first quarter FY25 budget reports. Rob Wells seconded the motion which passed unanimously.
- b. After a request for volunteers by Vice-Chairman Johnson, 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**

- Dan Allers shared that Fort Myers Beach will hold parades for both Shrimp Festival and St Patrick's Day this year. Beach renourishment has moved past the resorts to the south end of the island and seems to be on track to be completed before turtle nesting season in May.
- Bill Waichulis shared that he traveled to London in December to meet with the Pink Shell's hurricane insurance agency, and they just received notice that their premium has decreased by 25%.
- Bill Steinke shared some events coming up in Cape Coral, including the Burrowing Owl festival, multiple pickleball events, Music & Arts Fusion Walk on March 15, and 90+ miles of bike routes in the city. Thanks to the TDC for all of their support with the park's development taking place in Cape Coral.
- Jay Johnson had no comment.
- Liston Bochette had no comment.
- Larry Fiesel shared that the Estero Festival on March 15 will feature Ben Allen, and later in the evening, in the beer and wine garden will be a celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the village incorporation.
- Nigel Fullick shared that Bonita Springs is not currently designated as a critically eroded area, but the City Council voted to pre-fund beach renourishment monies as they lost between 36 and 38 feet of beach in the recent storms. The city plans to piggyback off a Lee County beach renourishment project, as the equipment will already be there, saving taxpayer money. Downtown Bonita Springs is really moving along and has a bioreactor parking lot that cleans the water coming in and out of the Imperial River. They plan to create a second bioreactor parking lot that will create an additional 96 to 98 free parking spaces in downtown Bonita Springs. Sugar Shack is open and doing great and graciously hosted over 350 first responders for a free night recently.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Pam Cronin had no comment.
- Brian Kramer echoed Nigel's comments that Downtown Bonita Springs is looking better than ever, and it's a great asset to have so close to the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point.
- Tony Lapi announced that the Captiva Erosion Prevention District (CEPD) will be bringing in barges and equipment in June for beach renourishment to begin in July.

### **Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 11:12 a.m.

### **Next TDC meeting**

There is no TDC meeting in March. The next TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, April 10, 2025**, 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.