



TDC Meeting Minutes

April 10, 2025

Vice Chair, Jay Johnson called the Lee County Tourist Development Council meeting to order at 8:59 a.m.

Council members in attendance

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

Commissioner Kevin Ruane, Brian Kramer, Nigel Fullick, Larry Fiesel, Liston Bochette and Fran Myers 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 1,181 CGSP graduates.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Dan Allers made a motion to approve the February 13, 2025, TDC meeting minutes. Tony Lapi seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Tom Shadrach from Cape Coral shared his concerns for the awareness of the council that the north end of Fort Myers Beach is still in disrepair after Hurricane Ian, specifically the boat docks at Bowditch Point Park, which is a Lee County facility.

Lisa Wilson, Edison & Ford Winter Estates, thanked the TDC for their continued support and announced their Orchid Symposium combined with their Grow Fort Myers event will take place this weekend from 9am-4pm. The event and classes are free to attend.

Elyzabeth Spires, Marketing Manager, Westin Cape Coral, gave an update on the resort. Bobby Nokley is the new General Manager of the Westin, having moved over from the Luminary in Downtown Fort Myers. She announced that the Silver King water taxi has returned with daily trips to and from Snug Harbour on Fort Myers Beach. Ribbon cutting for the reopening of the Silver King will be on April 16th at 9:30 a.m. Spires also gave an overview of the current resort promotions.

Chris Lopez, Southwest Florida Regional Manager, Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) provided an update on the advocacy efforts and events for the Lee County Chapter. On April 16, there will be an event with the Lee County School District in support of their culinary and hospitality programs that has a fundraising component to encourage students to consider a career in the tourism industry. Lopez attended Tourism Day in Tallahassee alongside other tourism industry leaders in support of the tourism industry. The FRLA continues to track issues in the Florida legislature's current session that impact the tourism community. Lopez stated that the budget proposals in all three legislative branches have indicated support for Visit Florida to receive full funding at \$80 million.



Municipalities to be heard

Holly Smith, Vice Mayor, City of Sanibel read a proclamation announcing the City's 50th anniversary as an incorporated municipality, and promoting that Sanibel is open for business and welcoming all visitors following the devastation of Hurricane Ian two and a half years ago. Andrea Miller, Director of Recreational Services, City of Sanibel, joined Smith for two walk-on items. The first was a request for Tourist Development Tax (TDT) funds for a Causeway Islands fireworks display on July 4th in the amount of \$15,250 with a match from the City of Sanibel. The second TDT funding request was for a Guinness World Record Shelling attempt on Sanibel Island in the amount of \$24,500 with a match from Sanibel and community sponsors. The Guinness event will tentatively take place on Sunday, November 16, 2025 at Bowman's Beach Park.

Jeff Hauge, Community Services Director, Town of Fort Myers Beach also approached the council with a walk-on item to request TDT funds for 4th of July Fireworks. Hauge explained that since the Town no longer has the option of setting off fireworks from the pier, they need to rent a barge. The barge rental for this year is \$37,500 and the Town of Fort Myers beach is requesting half the cost from TDC. Tony Lapi, TDC member suggested an alternate form of fireworks display called a "close up" display rather than the barge for potential cost savings.

Rob Wells made a motion asking the County Attorney's office to review funding fireworks displays in Lee County with tourist development tax revenues. Tony Lapi seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Following council discussion, the City of Sanibel agreed to apply through the TDC Events Marketing funding program's regular application cycle for FY26 funding of the Guinness World Record Shelling attempt event that will take place in November 2026.

Ashley Anderson, Business Recruitment and Retention Specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some statistics for their past events: Tour De Cape, January 17-19, 2025 had 648 registrations, Cape Coral Bike Night, February 8, 2025 had 18k visitors, 23rd Annual Burrowing Owl Festival had 2,400 visitors, Music & Arts Fusion Walk on March 15 had 6,700 visitors, Sounds of Jazz & Blues Concert held on March 22 sold 1,018 tickets and gave 100 away, PPA Tour Veolia Cape Coral Open welcomed over 19,500 people, the biggest 4 day pickleball tournament and streamed on pickleball TV; and APP US Collegiate Championships held on March 28-30 had 1,500 visitors. Anderson also shared upcoming events: April 12 is Cape Coral's final Bike night of the season, and April 11-13 is the Florida Amateur Pickleball Championships. The Cape Coral Mural is up and running and is now a tourist attraction on Google maps. The current Tourism Spotlight business is Gulf Coast Kayak. They offer guided eco tours and rentals (kayaks and stand-up paddleboards), kayak fishing trips, lessons for all skill levels, kids and group events and private tours. Anderson also informed the council that the Chiquita Lock removal project is underway and expected to be completed by June.

Special Presentations

Cynthia Welch, executive director, Pine Island Chamber of Commerce, gave an update on their activities on Pine Island from April through December of 2024, as well as a look ahead to the next few months. Welch shared videos produced with the grant funds received from Lee County highlighting their "Keep it Local" campaign and their "Adopt a Dolphin" wall art auction which was also a fundraiser for the chamber.



Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for February 2025 was \$6,080,446, a 6.4% increase over February 2024 preliminary collections of \$5,714,467. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$20,727,579 an increase of 3.4% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for February 2025 was 78.6%, which is down 1.1% from February 2024. The average daily rate for February 2025 was \$231.74, a decrease of 0.4% from February 2024 and RevPAR for February 2025 was \$182.23, down 1.5% from February 2024.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for February 2025 was 79.1%, which is down 11.9% from February 2024. The average daily rate for February 2025 was \$310, up 2.7% from February 2024 and RevPAR for February 2025 was \$244, down 9.5% from February 2024.

During February 2025, 1,173,638 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an decrease of 4.1% compared to February 2024. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is down 3.9% from the same period last year.

Communications update

Ray Sarracino, VCB communications director, reported that coverage and UVM numbers remained strong with a large spike due to the 26 interviews conducted as part of the Plan for Vacation Day event. Jan. through March 2025 saw eight journalist visits in the destination. 93 articles were published in target markets, resulting in a roughly 40% increase in impressions from the previous quarter. Upcoming media events include planned visits from domestic media, Great Lakes outdoor writers, Brazilian journalists, a United Kingdom familiarization tour, and a Satellite Media Tour commemorating National Seashell Day on June 20.

Sales update

Jill Vance, VCB director of sales, reported that the sales team is close to pace for five of the six goals for FY24-25. She shared highlights of successful Q2 sales activities and a meeting planner FAM. The sales team attended a variety of in-person meeting planner and travel trade shows, including Florida Encounter and Travel & Adventure Shows in Atlanta, Chicago, NYC, and Washington DC. Vance also presented upcoming sales activities for April through June including the East Coast Florida Travel Agency Sales Mission and Client Event, ASTA Travel Advisor Conference, and HelmsBriscoe ABC. Vance congratulated Erin Lester on earning the 2025 Smart Women in Meetings award. Charm Evans, VCB global sales manager, provided an update on international travel to the destination, marketing initiatives and travel trade activities. The international sales team engaged in various trade and consumer events such as Visit Florida's FL Huddle, ITB Berlin in Germany, and hosted a pickle ball sales activation in London. Additionally, Evans presented on upcoming activities such as the Brand USA Italy and Switzerland FAM in May and U.S. Travel Association's IPW international appointment show in June.

Visitor services update

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director, reported that the VCB's tourism ambassador volunteers assisted a record number of 348,005 visitors and residents during the second quarter of FY25. Additional community support included tourism ambassadors helping at ArtFest Fort Myers, Breeze Airline's inaugural flight, Project Cookie 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 25th annual Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards on Aug. 22. To learn more or to nominate, visit EAwards.org.

Marketing update

Lesley-Ann Thompson, VCB director of marketing, shared highlights of media buys implemented Jan-March and gave a preview of upcoming plans and programs for April through July intended to positively impact summer business. Examples of recent projects included the 2025 Digital Guide; participation in a 3-day statewide sale coordinated by Visit Florida on Hopper that generated 177 room nights and \$130k in travel sales; and a Travelzoo broadcast from Sanibel Island telling our destination's recovery story that generated 241M impressions.

Thompson also shared five new TV spots from the launch of the VCB's "Just Feels Right" brand campaign and showcased a soon-to-be-launched Mega Campaign, which will be an integrated effort that combines the power and reach of Dotdash Meredith (i.e. Southern Living, Travel + Leisure and Midwest Living) with VRBO. The goal is to connect inspiration messaging early in the trip planning process with a mechanism later in the consumer decision-making journey that offers travelers the ability to book vacation rentals in our area. She also mentioned integrated packages we have with premier publishers like Conde Nast, New York Times and Tastemade, as well as buys to drive hotel bookings with Hopper and Expedia. Combined, all marketing tactics are expected to yield just over 310M in paid impression for the summer.

New business

Mike Campbell, Lee County Natural Resources, provided an update on the nourishment projects for critically eroded beaches in Lee County, including Gasparilla Island, Captiva Island, Estero Island, Lovers Key, and Bonita Beach.

Nancy MacPhee, VCB product development manager, provided information to the TDC for their review of fiscal year 2025-26 Beach & Shoreline program funding requests. 24 eligible requests were received in the amount of \$29,155,238. Anticipated revenue available for these projects is \$12,509,879. The TDC will conduct their annual beach and shoreline review workshop on April 16 at 2 p.m. and formalize funding recommendations for the Board of County Commissioners at their May meeting.

TDC member items

- Dan Allers had no comment.
- Bill Waichulis had no comment.
- Bill Steinke shared that the Slip Away Food Truck Park & Marina located at the foot of the Cape Coral Bridge will be opening in June. Steinke also announced that the concrete has just been poured for the new wave pool at SunSplash Family Water Park. Steinke discussed exploring additional webcam placements in Cape Coral.
- Jay Johnson shared his concerns with FL House Bill 1221 that is currently being heard in committee. He announced that the next FRLA luncheon is on April 16 in partnership with the Lee County School District culinary programs.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Pam Cronin had no comment.
- Tony Lapi had no comment.



Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:16 a.m.

Next TDC meeting

The next TDC meeting will be held at **2 p.m. Thursday, May 8, 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.

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