



TDC Meeting Minutes

May 8, 2025

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

Council members in attendance

Bill Waichulis, Fran Myers, Robert Wells III, Liston Bochette, Nigel Fullick, Jay Johnson, Bill Steinke, Tony Lapi and Holly Smith.

Commissioner Kevin Ruane, Pamela Cronin and Dan Allers were excused.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Rob Wells made a motion to approve April 10, 2025, TDC meeting minutes. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Juan Santiago introduced himself as the newly appointed Executive Director of ArtFest Fort Myers. Santiago thanked the TDC and VCB for their ongoing support of the annual event and played a promotional video recapping ArtFest's 25th anniversary event in 2025. He announced the dates for ArtFest 2026 will be February 6-8.

Chris Lopez, Southwest Florida Regional Manager, Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) provided an update on their advocacy efforts and events for the Lee County Chapter. The FRLA will continue to monitor the legislation involving tourist development tax and tourist development councils during the special session on the Florida budget beginning on May 12. Expressed gratitude to the FRLA members and tourism partners for their outreach to legislators.

Trish Fancher, Executive Director, Keep Lee County Beautiful, highlighted their work on waste reduction, recycling education, beautifying greenspaces, and educating our children on the importance of protecting our natural resources throughout the County since 1989. The organization has a strong focus on our waterways, beaches, and shorelines. In October 2024 during a morning clean-up, volunteers removed 25,000 pounds of litter and debris left over in the mangroves from Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve. Clean-ups like this are held about 200 times per year.

Tracy Ryan, National Sales Manager, Luminary Hotel & Co., introduced their new General Manager, Joe Schumer. Joe spent 13 years in Key West as a hotelier and TDC member. His primary role is to ensure the continued success of the Luminary Hotel, which he understands is dependent on community involvement as well as their involvement in the community.

Municipalities to be heard

Ashley Anderson, Business Recruitment and Retention Specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some statistics for their past events: Florida Amateur Pickleball Championships, April 11-13, 2025, had 132 players, Cape Coral Bike Night, April 12, 2025, had more than 10,000 visitors, and Culture Fest, April 26, 2025, had 2,400 visitors. Anderson also shared that the final federal permit was issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



for the Cape Coral Yacht Club, giving them the approval to move forward with the project. The current Tourism Spotlight business is Cruisin Tikis. They offer a floating tiki bar that is perfect for birthdays, celebrations or just a laid-back cruise with friends that can host up to 12 guests.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for March 2025 was \$8,042,582, a 4.42% increase over March 2024 preliminary collections of \$7,702,318. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$28,365,860 an increase of 3.64% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for March 2025 was 74.0%, which is down 4.1% from March 2024. The average daily rate for March 2025 was \$247.64, an increase of 1.4% from March 2024 and RevPAR for March 2025 was \$183.31, down 2.8% from March 2024.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for March 2025 was 67%, which is up 3.0% from March 2024. The average daily rate for March 2025 was \$334, up 4.3% from March 2024 and RevPAR for March 2025 was \$223, up 7.5% from March 2024.

During March 2025, 1,463,628 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, a decrease of 3.1% compared to March 2024. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is down 3.6% from the same period last year.

January – March research report

Joseph St. Germain, Downs & St. Germain Research, offered a tourism snapshot of calendar year 2024 as well as January through March 2025. In the calendar year 2024, Lee County attracted nearly 3.2 million visitors, resulting in direct visitor spending of \$3.1 billion. From January to March 2025, Lee County welcomed 782,000 visitors, a decrease of 5.6% compared to 2024, resulting in direct visitor spending over \$1.1 billion. The international market accounted for 8.3% of visitors during the January through March timeframe, with Canada representing the largest share at 5.0%.

Sports development report

Jeff Mielke, Sports Development director, reported that 34,827 room nights were sold from January through March 2025, generating \$16.3 million in visitor spending. He also noted that January 2025 recorded 21 events - the most in Lee County Sports Development (LCSD) history for that month. Additionally, February 2025 recorded the highest number of room nights for any February on record for LCSD.

New business

Fran Myers made a motion to approve second quarter FY25 budget reports. Nigel Fullick seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Nancy MacPhee, VCB product development manager, provided an overview of the TDC beach and shoreline funding request recommendations for fiscal year 2025-2026. MacPhee asked that the TDC formalize the funding recommendations for final approval by the Board of County Commissioners as part of the FY2025-26 budget.



After making legislative findings for 19 projects, Rob Wells made a motion to approve the amount of \$12,424,185 to fund 17 beach and shoreline projects. Tony Lapi and Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Tony Lapi made a motion to recommend that the Board of County Commissioners consider funding four beach and shoreline projects totaling \$16,638,356 from tourist development tax reserves. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Bill Waichulis made a motion recommending that the Board of County Commissioners consider funding seven nature park projects totaling \$1,356,263 from tourist development tax reserves. Tony Lapi seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Legislative Findings

2 - City of Sanibel - Beach & Shoreline Erosion Monitoring - Motion was made by Rob Wells, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

3 - Barrier Island Parks Society - Gasparilla Island Grounds Maintenance - Motion was made by Rob Wells, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

4 - Captiva Erosion Prevention District - Captiva Beach Park Maintenance - Motion was made by Tony Lapi, seconded by Rob Wells, which carried unanimously.

5 - City of Cape Coral - Beach Park Facility Maintenance - Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.

6 - City of Sanibel - Beach Park Operations & Maintenance - Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Rob Wells, which carried unanimously.

7 - Gasparilla Island Administration - Cayo Costa Utility Vehicles – Motion was made by Rob Wells, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

10 - Lee County Facilities Construction Mgmt.- Beach Front Park Maintenance - Motion was made by Nigel Fullick, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

12 - Lee County Parks & Recreation - Temporary Restroom Facilities - Motion was made by Nigel Fullick, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.

15 - Town of Fort Myers Beach- Beach & Shoreline Funding - Motion was made by Fran Myers, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

16 - Barrier Island Parks Society - Gasparilla Lighthouse Visitor Transportation - Motion was made by Rob Wells, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.

17 - City of Cape Coral - Jaycee Park Restrooms - Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.

18 - City of Cape Coral - Jaycee Park Boardwalk Overlook – Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.



22 - Village of Estero - Estero River Park – Phase 2 Trails – Motion was made by Nigel Fullick, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

23 - City of Sanibel - Shared Use Path Resurfacing - Motion was made by Fran Myers, seconded by Tony Lapi, which carried unanimously.

24 - Lee County Parks & Recreation - Lynn Hall Memorial Park Improvements - Motion was made by Fran Myers, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

25 - Lee County Parks & Recreation - Crescent Beach Park Improvements - Motion was made by Fran Myers, seconded by Bill Waichulis, which carried unanimously.

26 - Lee County Parks & Recreation - Sanibel Causeway Islands Improvements - Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Nigel Fullick, which carried unanimously.

14 & 28 - Lee County Transit - Tram Service- Operating & Capital Requests – Motion was made by Bill Waichulis, seconded by Fran Myers, which carried unanimously.

TDC member items

- Bill Waichulis had no comment.
- Nigel Fullick shared that on May 26, the City of Bonita Springs will be hosting a Memorial Day Service at Riverside Park featuring former Navy Top Gun pilot, US Navy Admiral Christopher Murray (retired) as the guest speaker. The very next day, the \$3 million renovation of Riverside Park will begin. After a long negotiation with the School District, it has been determined that the historic 1921 Bonita School House will be demolished. An agreement has been made to install a replica façade of the front of the building of the original schoolhouse at 94% of its original size. A new school will be built in its place. The Bonita Estero Rail Trail (BERT) project purchase price is estimated at \$78 million, and the City of Bonita Springs and the Village of Estero have each committed \$17 million towards the purchase. Seeking public-private partnerships to fully fund the project.
- 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 their website, slipawaycape.com will be live for the 4th of July events.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Tony Lapi had no comment.
- Liston Bochette had no comment.
- Brian Kramer had no comment.
- Fran Myers announced she is retiring from the TDC Board after 40 years. She joined the council in 1985. She shared that she has also retired from the RSW Airport Board. Fran expressed that it has been her pleasure to serve the past 40 years, and that she will miss being at the meetings and all the wonderful friends and colleagues she has met along the way.
- Holly Smith congratulated Fran Myers on her retirement from the board, wished her well, and expressed her hopes that their paths will continue to cross. Smith reported that she attended the Celebrate Bonita event, and commended Councilman Nigel Fullick and the City of Bonita Springs for the outstanding experience and sense of community at Riverside Park. Smith announced that the Causeway Islands reopened on May 1. Thanks to Lee County for getting them back open ahead of schedule. The Islands Night Baseball event was last night at the Lee Health Sports Complex in Fort Myers, and Sanibel



Mayor, Mike Miller threw out the first pitch. About 3,000 people were in attendance. On May 28, the "Love Sanibel Back" promotion begins with a focus to encourage people to visit the islands over the summertime. The promotion will run through August 28 and aims to support small businesses.

- Tamara Pigott shared that she along with the VCB staff appreciate the service Fran Myers has given the board and this community. She is a great mentor and champion of the Lee County Tourism Industry.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:16 a.m.

Next TDC meeting

The next TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, June 12, 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. Contact: Tamara Pigott, TPigott@leegov.com, Lee County VCB, 239-338-3500.