



TDC Meeting Minutes

January 8, 2026

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass called the Lee County Tourist Development Council meeting to order at 9:03 a.m.

Council members in attendance

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

Lori Fayhee and Dan Allers were excused.

Commissioner Pendergrass welcomed the new District 5 Commissioner Trish Petrosky. Petrosky introduced herself to the TDC.

Guests First recognizes newest graduates

Crystal Wanke, VCB customer service hospitality training specialist, recognized the newest Certified Guest Service Professionals (CGSPs), bringing the program's total to 1,241 graduates and marking a significant milestone in elevating service quality. She also celebrated Bowditch Point Park as the latest fully certified property in Lee County. Through its partnership with the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute, the Guests First program continues to offer both in-person and virtual sessions to help frontline staff strengthen their skills, improve visitor satisfaction and support the destination's goal of increasing repeat visitation.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Bill Steinke made a motion to approve the Dec. 11, 2025 TDC meeting minutes. Jay Johnson seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Earl Morgan, advisor to Restore Fort Myers Beach Arches, Inc., gave a progress report on their goal of building a commemorative replica of the 1924 Tom Phillips Arches that stood at the entrance of Fort Myers Beach for more than 55 years. To date, 90% of the funds have been raised to build a replica, including a walkway and educational signage. There are 275 bricks remaining that are available for purchase. They hope to secure the permits and approvals to begin construction in 2026.

Zachary Markham introduced himself as the owner of the Anchor Inn & Cottages on Sanibel Island. Markham announced there will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Jan. 20 and the property will officially open and begin taking reservations in February. Markham thanked the TDC, chambers of commerce and community for their support.

Municipalities to be heard

Ashley Anderson, business recruitment and retention specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some upcoming events and visitor data. Anderson reported that in the past year, 854,000 overnight trips from visitors 50 miles or farther generated \$370 million in visitor spending. She shared that Cape



Coral's New Year's Eve Celebration & Ball Drop on Dec. 31 attracted 13,000 visitors. Upcoming events include the 41st Annual Cape Coral Art Festival & Market Jan. 10-11 on Cape Coral Parkway, the 35th Annual Tour de Cape from Jan. 23-25, beginning at Rotary Park and the 24th Annual Burrowing Owl Festival on Feb. 28 from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. at Rotary Park Environmental Center. This month, the Tourism Spotlight featured The Belle Theatre. It is a family-friendly cultural attraction for residents and visitors, and hosts professional live theatre performances year-round. It also offers youth, teen and homeschool theatre education programs, after-school productions, classes and summer camps.

Special Presentation

Mack Young, director of Parks and Recreation, Lee County, gave a parks project update on Bowditch Point Park, Lynn Hall Memorial Park, Crescent Beach Family Park, Fort Myers Beach Pier, Matanzas Pass Preserve and Causeway Islands Park. Young encouraged the use of the [Parks Project Information Tool](#) available on the Lee County website as a resource for viewing the current status of all Lee County Parks projects.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for November 2025 was \$3,216,347, a 14.8% increase over November 2024 preliminary collections of \$2,800,641. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$6,047,824 an increase of 23.0% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for November 2025 was 59.3%, which is down 12.9% from November 2024. The average daily rate for November 2025 was \$144.53, a decrease of 0.4% from November 2024 and RevPAR for November 2025 was \$85.76, down 13.2% from November 2024.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for November 2025 was 25.0%, which is up 1.8% from November 2024. The average daily rate for November 2025 was \$236.08, up 6.6% from November 2024 and RevPAR for November 2025 was \$58.92, up 8.2% from November 2024.

During November 2025, 940,689 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 2.4% compared to November 2024. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is up 1.5% from the same period last year.

Pigott also mentioned that Sanibel & Captiva were featured in the NY Times as one of the [52 places to go in 2026](#).

Brian Ososky, VCB chief marketing officer, and Wendy Nicodemus, director of commercial strategy for South Seas, announced respective partnerships with Sports Illustrated Swimsuit. Plans include the destination and South Seas serving as the backdrop for both the February digital issue and the print edition in May, generating significant social media engagement and earned media impressions while increasing the destination's visibility globally.



Sales report

Erin Lester, VCB senior sales manager, reported that the sales team is ahead of pace on three of the six sales goals for FY 25-26. The sales team attended a variety of in-person meeting planner and travel trade shows, including Meetings Made Easy Experience, IMEX Americas, Smart Meetings and AAA Threads. Lester also presented upcoming sales activities for January through March including PCMA Convening Leaders, Florida Encounter, and Peninsula Tradeshows Texas. Pamela Johnson, VCB deputy director, reported that during Q1, the VCB conducted a robust schedule of international travel trade shows, trainings, and networking events typical for the start of the fiscal year and essential to influencing future bookings. Engagement focused on key European markets and Canada, with Brand USA Travel Week in London delivering 40 pre-qualified business appointments. A United Kingdom travel agent familiarization trip in December showcased the destination's unique neighborhoods, beaches, and vacation rental product most commonly booked by UK travelers. These efforts support international travel demand for 2026 and beyond and reinforce Lee County's position in priority international markets.

Visitor services report

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director, reported that during Q1, tourism ambassador volunteers assisted 200,620 visitors and residents and worked 8,845 volunteer hours, a value of \$307,718 to Lee County. Highlights during the fall months included Tourism Ambassadors assisting at Roy Hobbs World Series, American Sand Sculpting Championship and greeting Allegiant Air's and Delta Air Line's inaugural flights, as well as attending a wide variety of 10 Destination Education Training sessions compliments of our industry partners. Visitor Services looks forward to hosting the 36th Annual Volunteer Tourism Ambassador Appreciation Luncheon on April 2.

New business

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 Councilman Nigel Fullick.

TDC member items

- Tony Lapi had no comment.
- Rob Wells wished everyone Happy New Year and a great 2026.
- John Lai thanked Zach and Erica from the Anchor Inn on Sanibel for being at today's meeting to announce their upcoming ribbon-cutting ceremony and grand opening. Lai shared a copy of the Sanibel board game with each TDC member and thanked the VCB for their support in rolling it out last month. The board games will go on sale to local stores on January 15, and Amazon and big box stores will be able to carry it beginning in June. Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association will be participating in Tourism Day on Jan. 21 at the state capital in Tallahassee. Visit Florida will be in town next week filming "Twin Cities Live" out on Sanibel and Captiva along with the Minnesota Twins mascot, T.C. Bear.
- Nigel Fullick appreciated all the support for their holiday lighting in downtown Bonita Springs and believes it will be made an annual tradition. This weekend kicks off their first art festival of the season with Arts Bonita. The Wonder Gardens will be holding their 90th anniversary



celebration at the end of the month. Fullick encouraged the council to review the economic data that came out today as the report was very uplifting and promising.

- Holly Smith congratulated the owners of the Anchor Inn on their reopening and their commitment to rebuilding one of Sanibel island's iconic small businesses. Smith shared that "A Bit of Bailey's" general store has had their grand opening on Rabbit Road. There will be a 50th Anniversary closing of the time capsule this Saturday, Jan. 10 at 11 a.m. at Sanibel City Hall. The time capsule will be reopened in another 25 years. Smith will be attending meetings in Tallahassee for the next three weeks and will also attend Tourism Day on Jan. 21 representing Southwest Florida. As president of the Florida League of Cities, Smith will be focused on what is happening with the property tax and offered to gather any needed information, or be a guest speaker on the topic at any meetings.
- Brian Kramer is looking forward to a fantastic 2026 for everyone.
- Bill Waichulis echoed Brian Kramer's comments that he believes it is going to be a great 2026 for the tourism industry. Waichulis asked for a status update on the traffic light at the base of Fort Myers Beach. Commissioner Pendergrass replied that they are working through FEMA bid requirements and will bring the project back to the board for a vote this coming month to vote for funding for the traffic light.
- Jay Johnson shared that his restaurant in Cape Coral, Bubba's Roadhouse has seen a lot of international customers lately, but specifically Germans.
- Bill Steinke shared that the permits for the Cape Coral Yacht Club and the seawalls have been approved, and work is expected to begin shortly. The Boathouse Restaurant that burnt down has opted out of the opportunity to bring temporary food and beverage to visitors at the Yacht Club beach. The City of Cape Coral will bring in food trucks to fill the need for F&B for visitors to the Yacht Club beach until the restaurant is rebuilt and reopened. Steinke reminded everyone about the Cape Coral Art Festival taking place this weekend, and shared that he will also be in Tallahassee at the end of month representing his municipality as well as the interests of the county for the Florida League of Cities.
- Liston Bochette shared that he is encouraged to see the support that Downtown Fort Myers is receiving in becoming a culinary district.
- Pamela Cronin had no comment.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:33 a.m.