



TDC Meeting Minutes

March 12, 2026

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass called the Lee County Tourist Development Council (TDC) meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

Commissioner Pendergrass held a moment of silence in honor of Michael Peceri, who passed away at age 99. Peceri was a founding member of the Lee County TDC, a WWII U.S. Navy veteran, foreign service officer, and respected hospitality leader who served as president and chairman of Marquis Hotel & Resorts. He was recognized as Florida Hotelier of the Year in 1986.

Council members in attendance

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass, Robert Wells III, Jay Johnson, Bill Steinke, John Lai, Liston Bochette, Nigel Fullick, Scott Safford, and Bill Waichulis.

Pam Cronin, Holly Smith, Lori Fayhee and Tony Lapi were excused.

Presentation of CGSP Designation

Crystal Wanke, customer service hospitality training specialist with the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB), presented Certified Guest Service Professional (CGSP) designation plaques to the Sanibel Recreation Center and to the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau. The plaques acknowledge that all front-line staff at these organizations have earned their CGSP credentials through the VCB's Guests First customer service program.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Jay Johnson made a motion to approve the Feb.12, TDC meeting minutes. Bill Steinke seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

None to be heard.

Municipalities to be heard

Ashley Anderson, City of Cape Coral Economic Development, reported on recent visitor activity and upcoming events. February events drew strong attendance, including approximately 500 visitors for the Model T Car Show & Ice Cream Social, 9,000 for Cape Bike Night, and 2,300 for the Burrowing Owl Festival. She noted appreciation to the VCB for referring the Model T event. The Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) tournament attracted an estimated 7,200 visitors and generated \$2.29 million in direct visitor spending. Upcoming events include Sounds of Jazz & Blues (March 28), the Model Aircraft Show (March 14–15), the Music & Arts Fusion Walk (March 14), Florida State Championship Races (March 13–15), Brew Fest at Cultural Park (April 18), and Cape Coral Culture Fest (April 25). The Tourism Spotlight highlighted live music at Cape Harbour featuring The Joint Tiki Bar, Rumrunners, and Fathoms Restaurant & Bar.



Liston Bochette, City of Fort Myers Councilmember, provided an update on City of Palms Park and reported progress on plans for a 300,000-square-foot multi-use facility in Midtown Fort Myers. The venue would be among the largest of its kind in Florida, second in size only to facilities in Miami. He noted that the Indianapolis-based developer has expressed interest in partnering with Lee County on the project.

Special presentation

Alison Hussey, CROW Executive Director, presented statistics from the Sanibel Wild Mile mobile pass, a collaborative initiative among Sanibel conservation partners including CROW, SCCF, the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum and Aquarium, and the Ding Darling Wildlife Society, with support from the Lee County VCB. Since its launch on March 1, 2025, the program has received more than 1,360 sign-ups and 731 check-ins. Over 55% of participants were out-of-state visitors, representing 12 different countries. Due to the program's strong performance, it will be renewed for 2026.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for January 2026 was \$6,313,796, a 16.3% increase over January 2025 preliminary collections of \$5,428,529. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$17,888,771, an increase of 25.1% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for January 2026 was 67%, which is down 1.6% from January 2025. The average daily rate for January 2026 was \$183.35, a decrease of 2.8% from January 2025 and RevPAR for January 2026 was \$122.86, down 4.3% from January 2025.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for January 2026 was 43.3%, which is up 12.3% from January 2025. The average daily rate for January 2026 was \$274.86, up 0.5% from January 2025 and RevPAR for January 2026 was \$119.06, up 12.9% from January 2025.

During January 2026, 1,063,645 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, a decrease of 0.4% compared to January 2025.

Marketing update

Lesley-Ann Thompson, VCB marketing director, provided an overview of our recent marketing initiatives, key results, and upcoming campaigns. Highlights included the strong performance of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit digital issue (3.1 billion impressions), results from our Kind Traveler program, and integrated winter-spring media partnerships spanning Tastemade, Atlas Obscura, TravelZoo and more. She also previewed new wedding promotions, our FIFA World Cup strategy, and gave updates to the digital visitor guide, National Seashell Day Sweepstakes and plans to highlight area wildlife this summer. She ended with sharing details on the return of VCB Marketing & Sales Meetings and opportunities for partners to participate in upcoming programs.



TDC member items

- Rob Wells shared that the season is in full swing for everyone and encouraged the group to stay focused and power through the busy period.
- Nigel Fullick announced that the Executive Director of the Wonder Gardens, Niel Anderson, is retiring and relocating to Green Bay, WI. A national search is underway for a replacement. Fullick also attended a recent public forum where an outside consultant reported that Bonita Springs' parks system was rated above average to exceptional. Fullick commended the residents of Bonita Springs for taking care of their city.
- John Lai shared that Good Housekeeping magazine reported that the *48 Coolest New Toys to Get Excited for This Year* included the Sanibel board game as one of the Top 10 best board games to get.
- Scott Safford reported that the Fort Myers Beach Lions Club raised twice as much funding at this year's Shrimp Festival than last year, indicating the beach is doing well. The Town of Fort Myers Beach celebrated its 30th anniversary last week. Furthermore, a St. Patrick's Day parade is scheduled for Saturday, March 14 at 10 a.m., followed by concerts at Bayside Park and Nervous Nellies.
- Bill Waichulis shared that the Fort Myers Beach Shrimp Festival Parade went unbelievably well and the Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina earned first place for its parade float. Additionally, he shared that the Pink Shell was the most searched resort in Florida for spring break destinations based on a national article from Fox News.
- Brian Kramer had no comments.
- Jay Johnson had no comments.
- Bill Steinke had no comments.
- Liston Bochette had no comments.
- Commissioner Pendergrass invited Steven Hennigan, Executive Director/CEO of the Lee County Port Authority, to provide an update on Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW). Hennigan reported significant roadway congestion extending to the nearby 7-Eleven and advised travelers to allow additional time due to Transportation Security Administration screening constraints. He noted that Concourse E is expected to open in just over two years, with additional expansion phases anticipated within three years. Commissioner Pendergrass also shared that he will soon participate in an internal tour of the RSW expansion project.
- Tamara Pigott shared that Steven Hennigan will provide an RSW update at the May TDC meeting along with an update from Visit Florida President & CEO Bryan Griffin.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 9:52 a.m.