



TDC Meeting Minutes

April 9, 2026

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

Council members in attendance

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

Lori Fayhee was excused.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Tony Lapi made a motion to approve the Mar.12 TDC meeting minutes. Jay Johnson seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Ron Connelly, Daruv Management, announced the upcoming opening of a new extended-stay hotel, Hometowne Studios by Red Roof, in Fort Myers. The property will include 124 studio units. He shared the location as 4470 Executive Circle off Colonial Boulevard, across from McGregor Baptist Church, and noted the hotel will begin operating within the next week.

Joe Gratz, Captain with Big Tiki and Sandbar Joe's LLC introduced the idea of creating a publicly supported Lee County water taxi network. He explained that other destinations, including Tampa and Miami, already use similar systems and noted that heavy traffic on the bridges to Sanibel, Cape Coral, and Fort Myers Beach underscores the need for one here. He believes a water taxi network would improve transportation, visitor mobility, and overall tourism experience. He expressed interest in potentially forming a task force and indicated local residents and business owners would support exploring the concept.

Paul Stopper introduced himself as the new General Manager of the Holiday Inn Express in Cape Coral. He shared that he has been in the role for about a month and looks forward to participating in future meetings.

Municipalities to be heard

Ashley Anderson, City of Cape Coral Economic Development, reported on recent visitor activity and upcoming events. In the past four weeks the Cape Coral Yacht Club Beach has received 26,000 visits. The Cape Coral Mural continues to generate significant interest, with 17,000 views on the Google Business profile since January. Upcoming events include Cape Coral Bike Night on April 11, Brew Fest at Cultural Park on April 18, and Cape Coral Culture Fest on April 25. The Tourism



Spotlight features The Cove at 47th in downtown Cape Cora which now has four fully operational restaurants: Aqua, Oak & Stone, Big Nick's Barbecue and Seed & Bean Market.

Special presentation

Bryan Griffin, President and CEO of VISIT FLORIDA, spoke about emphasizing his goal of maintaining Florida's position as the top U.S. tourism destination while expanding international visitation. He reported Florida still leads the nation in domestic market share at 14.6%, ahead of California, and highlighted strong hotel performance, including record room sales in 2024 and continued growth in 2025 despite a brief dip early in the year. International travel showed strong momentum, especially from South America, with Brazil now the state's top overseas market and significant growth from the U.K., Argentina, Spain, and Italy; Canada showed signs of recovery as well. VISIT FLORIDA is focusing on dispersing visitors across the state and encouraging longer stays through marketing and partnerships with local DMOs. Major marketing efforts include the "Live More Floridays" brand refresh, winter and family travel campaigns, co-op streaming advertising, and the "One Fun Day" content series featuring destinations like Sanibel and Captiva to support post-hurricane recovery. Griffin also highlighted new international trade shows and the America250FL.com initiative as opportunities to further drive visitation and statewide tourism growth.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for February 2026 was \$7,475,818, a 23.0% increase over February 2025 preliminary collections of \$6,080,446. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$25,842,953, an increase of 24.7% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for February 2026 was 80.9%, which is up 3.2% from February 2025. The average daily rate for February 2026 was \$234.85, an increase of 0.4% from February 2025 and RevPAR for February 2026 was \$190.01, up 3.6% from February 2025.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for February 2026 was 71.2%, which is up 25.9% from February 2025. The average daily rate for February 2026 was \$348.66, up 6.3% from February 2025 and RevPAR for February 2026 was \$248.13, up 33.8% from February 2025.

During February 2026, 1,190,070 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 1.4% compared to February 2025.

Pigott announced that State House Bill 4047, which expands TDC membership, has passed both the House and Senate and is now awaiting the Governor's signature. Once enacted, the Lee County ordinance and TDC bylaws will be updated to reflect the addition of two new council seats: one designated for the largest municipality, Cape Coral, and another for a representative from the



tourism community. Staff is currently working with the county attorney's office and county administration on a draft ordinance update, with bylaw revisions to follow. Draft bylaws will be provided electronically to council members for review prior to a vote. The formal approval process will include placement of the item on a Board agenda and a public hearing before the Board.

Staff update

Executive Director Tamara Pigott announced her official retirement from Lee County. Assistant County Manager, Amanda Condomina announced that current Deputy Director, Pamela Johnson, will lead the VCB upon Tamara's retirement.

Communications report

Miriam Dotson, VCB communications manager, reported a total of 4.6 billion coverage impressions for January and February. The communications team credits the spike in February numbers (3.9 billion) to the coverage following the first Sports Illustrated digital release showcasing the "Wives and Girlfriends" (WAGS) photoshoot. Dotson reported successful press trips with Glen Turk from Midwest Golfing Magazine who produced an article featuring five Lee County golf courses. Dotson also reported press trips with German travel writer Holger Jacobs and Allison Arthur with Dishing Park City and Dishing Jackson Hole along with a VISIT FLORIDA partnership press trip with Andrew Couthinho and Marcella Thompson from Brazilian outlet Band TV.

Jackie Parker, VCB communications manager, reported on the successful Minnesota Twins Spring Training partner promotion where 5 partners were interviewed and featured live in the broadcast booth at Lee Health Sports Complex/Hammond Stadium. Parker shared plans of upcoming April press trips, including one with outdoor writer and fly fisherman Robert Annis with Go RVing and an upcoming group press trip with Canadian journalists. Plans for a pre-IPW press trip in May called Gulf Coast Getaway were shared to incorporate multiple journalists from the UK and Canada ahead of IPW in Fort Lauderdale, May 17-21. In addition, two national group press trips are planned focused around the idea of a Girls Gone Mild theme in June and a Guys Getaway in July.

Sales report

Natalie Duran, VCB sales director, reported that group and domestic sales are performing well for FY 25-26, with strong conversion rates and group room nights ahead of pace despite a decline in RFP volume. The sales team participated in key meeting planner and travel trade shows, including Florida Encounter, RCMA, the Travel & Adventure Shows, and the Peninsula Tradeshow, generating qualified leads and reinforcing advisor relationships. Upcoming priorities include HelmsBriscoe, ASTA, and PCMA's Business Events Summit, all focused on driving future group and travel trade business. 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 and ITB Berlin in Germany. Additionally, Evans presented on upcoming activities such as the Icelandair Nordic Fam in May and U.S. Travel Association's IPW international appointment show in Fort Lauderdale, May 17-21. These efforts support international travel demand and reinforce Lee County's position in priority international markets



Visitor services report

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director, reported that the VCB's tourism ambassador volunteers assisted a record number of 461,842 visitors and residents during the second quarter of FY26. Additional community support included tourism ambassadors helping at ArtFest Fort Myers and 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 26th annual Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards on Aug. 20. To learn more or to nominate, visit EAwards.org.

Beach and shoreline report

Nancy MacPhee, VCB destination development manager, presented the beach and shoreline program update. Since fiscal year 2000, the TDC has allocated nearly \$220 million to beach and shoreline projects. The TDC has begun their review of projects submitted for fiscal year 2027 funding. \$31.6 million has been requested for 24 projects. The TDC will conduct their annual Beach & Shoreline Workshop on April 23 at 2:00pm. Recommendations made at the workshop will be considered for approval by the TDC at their May meeting.

TDC member items

- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Nigel Fullick announced that the Bonita Springs City Council has approved placement of a \$35 million Bonita Estero Rail Trail (BERT) referendum on the August 3 ballot. Fullick noted that the primary obstacle is public perception that the project has already been purchased. Significant public education and communication efforts are planned to build support before the August vote.
- John Lai shared several upcoming events and updates, including the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) luncheon scheduled for April 21 at 11:30 a.m. at the School District of Lee County, which will highlight Culinary Certificates. He also noted that Norman Love will be the featured speaker at the Greater Fort Myers Chamber event on April 14, and that the Sanibel Captiva Chamber's Islands Night at Hammond Stadium will take place on May 8. Lai added that the Sanibel Captiva Annual Meeting was held at Sanibel Harbour on April 8 and expressed appreciation to Tamara for her contributions.
- Scott Safford reported continued positive momentum for Fort Myers Beach, noting that March performance exceeded February and announcing the opening of Fort Myers Beach Fire Station #31.
- Bill Waichulis congratulated Tamara on her retirement and welcomed Pamela as the new Executive Director.
- Brian Kramer also congratulated Tamara on her retirement and shared that the destination is experiencing its best year, best March, and what appears to be shaping up as the best April on record.
- Holly Smith thanked Tamara for guiding the community through challenging times and recognized Bryan Griffin, President and CEO of Visit Florida, for his engagement with the



TDC. She reported that Sanibel has opened Fire Station #172 and is progressing on Station #171, highlighted the Wild Mile as a new local attraction, and praised the recent volunteer luncheon as inspiring. Smith also congratulated Tony Lapi on being named Citizen of the Year, noted that the Florida League of Cities and National League of Cities are now aware of the community's efforts, and shared that CROW has opened its new turtle hospital, helping fill a regional care gap between Sarasota and the Florida Keys.

- Pam Cronin thanked Tamara for the 26 years they worked together.
- Tony Lapi shared that Beachview Villas is expected to open by the next TDC meeting on May 14, with guests anticipated to arrive by May 15. He also noted that he was named Citizen of the Year at the Sanibel Captiva Annual Meeting.
- Jay Johnson reported that the FRLA Board recently met in Amelia Island and that Tony Lapi has been named 2026 FRLA Hotelier of the Year. He added that the FRLA Gala will be held in Clearwater this October.
- Bill Steinke thanked Tamara for her public service and congratulated Pamela. He also thanked Ashley Anderson for her presentation and Nancy MacPhee for the Beach and Shoreline workshop. Steinke reported that seawall replacement has begun at the Cape Coral Yacht Club, two requests have been submitted for Cape Coral through the Beach and Shoreline funding program, and the city is awaiting Army Corps of Engineers approval for the Cape Coral Pier. He added that public donations will fund a 250-foot flagpole in Cape Coral, set to be the largest in Florida, which will debut on America's 250th birthday.
- Liston Bochette shared that City of Palms Park will be demolished and redeveloped into a 300,000-square-foot indoor facility by developers from Indianapolis. He also noted the scale of the sports industry and announced that the NBA Commissioner will attend the Edison Awards, while thanking Tamara for her hard work.
- Commissioner Pendergrass shared that he will be touring the RSW Airport expansion.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:45 a.m.