



TDC Meeting Minutes

May 14, 2026

Vice Chair Jay Johnson called the Lee County Tourist Development Council (TDC) meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

Council members in attendance

Robert Wells III, Jay Johnson, Bill Steinke, Pam Cronin, John Lai, Liston Bochette, Nigel Fullick, Scott Safford, Tony Lapi and Bill Waichulis.

Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass, Holly Smith and Brian Kramer were excused.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Bill Steinke made a motion to approve Apr. 9, 2026, TDC meeting minutes with one correction noted by Jay Johnson. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Bo McMahon and Kaleb Johnson, owners, Southern Fresh Farms, reported that the farm is currently operating successfully and that they have assumed leadership of the family-owned agricultural business from Bo's parents, Shelly and Robert McMahon. They shared that the farm has attracted substantial visitor attendance through a limited social media presence, including approximately 4,200 attendees at GatorFest and 1,200 attendees at its Easter event. They also expressed their commitment to working collaboratively with local tourism and agricultural organizations to further promote agritourism as a valuable economic diversification strategy for the region.

Ron Congdon, General Manager of Hometowne Studios by Red Roof, reported that the property officially opened on April 23, with its first guest checking in on April 25. The hotel features 124 studio accommodations and is located on Executive Circle, adjacent to Colonial Boulevard and across from McGregor Baptist Church. Congdon also announced that the property's grand opening celebration is planned for June or July.

Municipalities to be heard

Joe Petrella, Director, Cape Coral Parks & Recreation, requested that the TDC reconsider Beach and Shoreline funding for Jaycee Park now that the park has officially reopened. The funding request was previously denied because the park was not yet open when it was presented during the Beach & Shoreline Workshop.

Ashley Anderson, City of Cape Coral, thanked the TDC for its support and funding of the Sirenia Vista Park Boardwalk and Overlook project. She provided an update on recent visitor activity, noting that Cape Coral Bike Night attracted approximately 8,000 visitors, BrewFest at Cultural Park welcomed 900 attendees, Cape Coral Culture Fest drew 2,200 visitors, and Jaycee Park Grand Opening and 50th Anniversary Celebration attracted approximately 2,000 attendees.



Anderson also highlighted upcoming 4th of July events, including Red, White & Boom, which will commemorate America's 250th anniversary, as well as the Freedom 5K and Kids Fun Run.

The Tourism Spotlight featured Wicked Dolphin Distillery, which offers complimentary distillery tours, rum tastings, a gift shop, and private event opportunities. She also noted that the distillery hosts a monthly Tiki Garden Party on the third Thursday of each month.

Special presentations

Lee County Port Authority Director, Steve Henningan, provided TDC members with a comprehensive presentation on major expansion initiatives at the Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW).

Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation Coastal Watch Director, Kealy Pfau, reported on how the organization has utilized TDC Attractions Marketing funds to promote voluntourism.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for March 2026 was \$9,567,291, a 19.0% increase over March 2025 preliminary collections of \$8,042,582. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$34,872,419, an increase of 22.9% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for March 2026 was 77.7%, which is up 4.8% from March 2025. The average daily rate for March 2026 was \$255.96, an increase of 2.9% from March 2025 and RevPAR for March 2026 was \$198.91, up 7.8% from March 2025.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for March 2026 was 68.5%, which is up 14.5% from March 2025. The average daily rate for March 2026 was \$371.90, up 2.1% from March 2025 and RevPAR for March 2026 was \$254.64, up 16.9% from March 2025.

During March 2026, 1,521,149 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 3.9% compared to March 2025. Calendar year-to-date, airport traffic is up 1.9% compared to the same time last year.

Tamara Pigott announced a new staff member to the Visitor & Convention Bureau, Brooke Prout.

January – March research report

James Brendle, DSG Research, reported that Jan-Mar 2026 delivered exceptional results with more than 1 million visitors (up 28% YoY), 1.7 million visitor nights (up 16% YoY), \$1.4 billion in direct spend (up 24% YoY), and \$1.9 billion in total economic impact (up 24% YoY). Lodging metrics showed strong performance across both hotels and vacation rentals despite a 10% growth in supply. Key insights reveal that promotional effectiveness is rising with 54% of visitors recalling promotions influencing plans, and that beaches and relaxation remain the primary visit drivers. Top origin markets include the Midwest and Northeast, with Minneapolis, Boston, and Chicago leading



domestic markets and Canada and Germany leading international visitation. Beginning July 2026, the visitor survey will be updated to track AI-related trip planning questions to capture emerging travel planning trends.

Sports report

Jeff Mielke, Sports Development Director, reported that 35,006 room nights were sold from January through March 2026, generating \$18.1 million in visitor spending. He shared that Spring Training 2026 was a major success, with the Red Sox and Twins combined drawing 258,000 spectators (145,000 and 112,000 respectively), making Lee County one of only four Florida counties with teams exceeding 100,000 in attendance.

New Business

Rob Wells made a motion to approve the Lee County Parks & Recreation request to reallocate unspent funds from previously approved hurricane recovery beach and shoreline projects to other approved but incomplete projects. The reallocation is intended to prevent project delays and mitigate increasing construction costs. Pam Cronin seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Tony Lapi made a motion to approve the FY2026 second quarter budget reports. Rob Wells seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

Following the required legislative findings for 13 projects, Bill Waichulis made a motion to approve funding recommendations totaling \$12,909,962 for 17 beach and shoreline projects. These recommendations will be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners for final consideration as part of the FY2026-27 budget process. Rob Wells seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

It was also announced that a discussion will be scheduled in the near future to review and discuss funding requests eligible under Florida Statute 125.0104(5)(b).

TDC member items

- Tony Lapi shared that Beachview Villas is scheduled to open over Memorial Day weekend. He also thanked the Beach & Shoreline Committee for its efforts and dedication.
- Rob Wells noted the importance of improved water quality consistency in the region, observing that ongoing drought conditions may be assisting current efforts. He expressed that achieving better and more consistent water quality would be beneficial not only for tourism but for the broader community and residents of Lee County.
- John Lai reported that the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association (FRLA) April Luncheon was well attended and highlighted local culinary and hospitality students at the Lee County School District headquarters. He noted that an FRLA culinary cook-off is planned for October in Shangri-La Springs in Bonita. Lai also thanked local Parks & Recreation departments for their support of a successful Island Nights and Spring Training season and the many amateur sporting events hosted throughout the year. Additionally, he



shared that Hasbro and Avalon Hill's *Sanibel* board game won recognition at the UK Games Expo for Best Family Game, and will be featured as Walmart's Game of the Month in June and at Barnes & Noble in July. Lai thanked the VCB for its collaboration and support of the *Sanibel* game.

- Scott Safford announced that Fort Myers Beach will be holding the second annual JobuFest on May 30 at The Whale to bring good vibes to the island community for the season ahead. He also reported that funding has been secured for Fourth of July fireworks as part of the nation's 250th anniversary celebrations.
- Nigel Fullick expressed his appreciation to Nancy MacPhee for her recent presentation to the Bonita Springs Downtown Alliance. He also shared that Tamara Pigott is scheduled to present at the City of Bonita Springs Council meeting on June 3. Fullick noted that the City of Bonita Springs will host a Memorial Day celebration, including an address from former Blue Angels and Navy fighter pilot Ray Sandelli, who is also a former Lee County Commissioner.
- Lori Fayhee had no additional comments.
- Bill Waichulis announced that the Spa at Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina will officially open on May 18, marking the completion of the final repairs from Hurricane Ian-related damage at the resort.
- Bill Steinke thanked the TDC for reconsidering Beach and Shoreline funding for Jaycee Park. He also reported that the City of Cape Coral has received an offer from the City of Palms Park for the donation of mature trees removed from the property to be relocated and replanted at Jaycee Park to enhance shade and landscaping. The City of Cape Coral appreciates the offer and is taking it into consideration. He also shared that following the park's ribbon cutting on April 9th, a movie night was held on April 10th featuring a floating barge positioned off the shoreline, allowing the movie to be viewed both from the water and land-based attendees. The movie event drew over 6,500 people, demonstrating strong community and visitor interest in the facility.
- Pam Cronin had no additional comments.
- Liston Bochette had no additional comments.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:05 a.m.