



TDC Meeting Minutes

August 8, 2024

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

Council members in attendance

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

Dan Allers, Pamela Cronin, and Brian Kramer were excused.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

Jay Johnson made a motion to approve the June 13, 2024, TDC meeting minutes. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Public to be heard

Christopher Lopez, FRLA Regional Director, shared news about a vibrant and event-packed fall season ahead, filled with networking and educational opportunities. The season kicks off with a networking event on August 20 at Chips, located at the Luminary Hotel. Following that, their annual golf tournament is set for September 20 at The Dunes Country Club on Sanibel Island, with proceeds supporting culinary programs in Lee County schools. It's shaping up to be a dynamic season for business connections and community growth.

Municipalities to be heard

Andreana Petersen, Business Recruitment and Retention Specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some upcoming events: Bike night October 12, Trunk or Treat October 25, Veterans Day Parade November 9, Music & Arts Fusion November 16, Holiday Nights on the Lawn November 29-December 1, Reindeer Run December 14, Holiday Boat-a-long December 21 and New Year's Eve celebration December 31. The Cape Coral Quest 2.0 mobile app developed in partnership with the VCB has been refreshed, and the new challenge began Dec. 1, 2023. To date, there have been 1,791 sign ups, 5,154 locations checked, 331 prizes claimed, 139 coupons redeemed, 126 people entered to win a 2-night stay at the Westin contest, and 70 people have completed the entire scavenger hunt and have been entered to win a Sunsplash Season Pass. The Tourism Spotlight is on Cape Coral Kayak which opened in 2018, and they offer daily guided and self-guided tours, 7 days a week 7am-6pm.

Special Presentations

Chadd Chustz, environmental project manager, Town of Fort Myers Beach, gave an update on the Estero Island beach renourishment and hurricane recovery project. The notice to proceed was issued on July 8, 2024, and the project area includes the north, central, and south segments of the island. Tropical Storm Debby impacted the project timeline, and the expected completion date has been slightly delayed. The

state made \$35 million in grant funds available for hurricane restoration reimbursement, and the Town of Fort Myers Beach will take advantage of this program by submitting for eligible grants.

John Lai, Sanibel Captiva Chamber of Commerce, gave updates on the recovery on the islands. The chamber has worked to acquire new image and video assets to launch marketing campaigns to highlight open businesses for the summer and fall season. By their calculations, they are at 35% of available rooms open on Sanibel and Captiva and 76% of non-accommodation businesses are open in some form. This year's summer campaign to compliment Savor the Shore is called Summer of Fun. The campaign features their outdoor recreation offerings on the islands, and all clicks link back to the open businesses page on their website. The Wander app available on mobile devices allows visitors to see what businesses are open on the islands, where they are located, and the hours they are open. The visitor center is now open 7 days a week, and the most asked question is what is open on the islands. Sanibel's 50th anniversary celebration is planned for November 5 with an array of events that are available to view on the events page of their website.

Report of the executive director

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for June 2024 was \$2,934,880 an 22.0% increase over June 2023 preliminary collections of \$2,405,557. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$37,078,137 an increase of 23.1% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for June 2024 was 58.5%, which is down 12.9% from June 2023. The average daily rate for June 2024 was \$137.70, increase of 2.6% from June 2023 and RevPAR for June 2024 was \$80.54, down 10.6% from June 2023.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for June 2024 was 32%, which is up 25.8% from June 2023. The average daily rate for June 2024 was \$248, up 26.6% from June 2023 and RevPAR for June 2024 was \$80, up 59.3% from June 2023.

During June 2024, 696,867 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, an increase of 8.3% compared to June 2023. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is up 19.5% from the same period last year.

Strategic plan update

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, gave an update of the destination strategic plan. She reviewed the three overarching goals for the destination that were established to ensure the visitor economy continues to create economic opportunity and contribute to the quality of life in Lee County. The three goals are: (1) Optimization of Visitor Economy Impacts (2) Thought-leadership in Placemaking, and (3) Destination Adaptability. She then gave updates on each objective in the plan and how the internal VCB teams are implementing them using prioritized strategies as guidelines.

April – June 2024 research report

Joseph St. Germain, DSG, presented an overview of April-June visitor research. Lee County welcomed 808,900 visitors during this time, an increase of 36.7% compared to 2023, resulting in direct visitor spending exceeding \$747 million. He added that 66% of visitors flew to the Fort Myers area, with one in two flying in through RSW. He reported that the international market accounted for 8.6% of visitors during the April through June timeframe, with Canada representing the largest share at 5.0%. He reported that 40% of our visitors were families, and 40% were a couple.

Sports update

Jeff Mielke, Sports Development director, reported that 37,384 room nights sold in the months April through June 2024 with direct visitor spending of more than \$14.9 million.

Old business

Jay Johnson made a motion to approve the May 9, 2024, TDC meeting minutes. Fran Myers seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Fran Myers made a motion to approve the FY2024-25 proposed budget report. Bill Waichulis seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

New business

Bill Waichulis made a motion to approve the third quarter FY23-24 budget reports. Jay Johnson seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Tony Lapi made a motion to approve the formalized recommendations for BoCC approval of FY24/25 Events Marketing funding, for twelve events totaling \$192,500. Jay Johnson seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Bill Waichulis made a motion to approve the formalized recommendations for BoCC approval of FY24/25 Attractions Marketing funding, for 35 attractions totaling \$600,000. Rob Wells seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

TDC member items

- Commissioner Pendergrass shared that there have been recent drownings near the coastline in the area and across Florida due to strong currents or rip currents. Pendergrass asked if accommodations provided education or life vests for their guests and he shared that he will talk to county staff about possible solutions to mitigate the problem.
- Bill Steinke announced that the City of Cape Coral has reacquired the former Cape Coral Golf Club, with plans to transform it into a botanical garden and the "Central Park" of Cape Coral, aiming to draw more visitors to the area. The city is also finalizing the branding and naming of its new tennis and pickleball courts, with the first tournament already scheduled, expected to attract both statewide and nationwide participants. Steinke expressed gratitude to the TDC and BOCC for their support in securing TDT reserve funding for the Yellow Fever Creek project.
- Holly Smith shared that Sanibel is steadily recovering from Tropical Storm Debby, with beaches gradually reopening. Blind Pass and Bowman's beaches are already open, and Algiers is expected to follow soon. Lighthouse Beach and Tarpon Bay Beach have accumulated a lot of sand, which is currently being scraped and reused, while assessments are ongoing to address the displaced renourishment sand. The city council has approved a temporary "Daycations" program on Sanibel, with Sundial being the first location available for bookings online. Smith also expressed excitement for the upcoming Governor's Conference, offering congratulations to John Lai for his new role as Visit Florida chair. She noted that the impacts of Hurricane Ian are still being felt, particularly with many residents facing ongoing insurance challenges, though permits are being processed quickly to help accommodations and condos get back on track. She extended gratitude to Commissioner Pendergrass for the marketing funds supporting recovery efforts and mentioned that the City of Sanibel may request emergency funds to further aid in the recovery process.

- Fran Myers thanked Air Service Development Director Carol Obermier for her work at RSW airport. She also thanked VCB for the work they have done these past two years regarding marketing the destination post-Hurricane Ian.
- Nigel Fullick shared that this year's Fourth of July celebration featured a drone, laser, and fireworks show, which was well received with the public. He also announced changes at the Wonder Gardens, where a new leadership team including a newly appointed executive director, is now in place. The city has entered a 10-year partnership with the Gardens, and there's a lot of enthusiasm for what lies ahead. Additionally, a Request for Proposals (RFP) has been issued for the city's mural program, which has expanded beyond downtown Bonita in search of mural artists and new locations.
- Bill Waichulis echoed Fran's comments regarding commending the VCB for their hard work the past two years.
- Jay Johnson had no comment.
- Liston Bochette had no comment.
- Larry Fiesel had no comment.
- Rob Wells had no comment.
- Tony Lapi had no comment.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 10:48 a.m.

Next TDC meeting

There is no TDC meeting next month. The next TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, October 10, 2024**, 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.