



## **TDC Meeting Minutes**

January 16, 2025

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

### **Council members in attendance**

Commissioner Kevin Ruane, Pamela Cronin, Larry Fiesel, Robert Wells III, Jay Johnson, Bill Steinke, Liston Bochette, Nigel Fullick, Tony Lapi and Holly Smith.

Dan Allers, Brian Kramer, Bill Waichulis and Fran Myers and were excused.

### **Approval of previous meeting minutes**

Rob Wells made a motion to approve the December 12, 2024, TDC meeting minutes. Jay Johnson seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

### **Public to be heard**

None to be heard.

### **Municipalities to be heard**

Ashley Anderson, Business Recruitment and Retention Specialist, City of Cape Coral, shared some upcoming events: Tour De Cape January 17-19, 2025, Second Annual Water Ways Science Festival February 1, 2025, and Cape Coral Bike Night, February 8, 2025. Upcoming Industry Roundtables feature Workforce & Education on January 17 and Healthcare on February 21. The current Tourism Spotlight is on Four Mile Cove Ecological Preserve & Rotary Park. They offer a 2-hour full moon kayak paddle, day and night guided hikes and Native American Medicine/Edible plant nature walks. Preserve hours are daily 8-dusk year around.

### **Special Presentations**

John Lai, Sanibel Captiva Chamber of Commerce President & CEO, gave updates on the recovery of the islands. By their calculations, this month, they are hovering around a 35% hotel room open rate on Sanibel and Captiva but are excited that they are forecasted to be at a 46% open rate by February 2025. Lai highlighted the Luminary Stroll event which occurred on Dec. 6 & 7 as a top 20 high traffic event with nearly 9,000 attendees counted. 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. Lai showcased some new media emphasizing welcoming back visitors to the islands as part of their comeback story.

### **Report of the executive director**

Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, reported the preliminary resort tax collected for November 2024 was \$2,800,641 a 2.54% increase over November 2023 preliminary collections of \$2,751,560. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$4,916,402 a decrease of 2.95% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average hotel occupancy rate for November 2024 was 68.8%, which is up 0.7% from November 2023. The average daily rate for November 2024 was \$144.06, a decrease of 2.2% from November 2023 and RevPAR for November 2024 was \$99.09, down 1.5% from November 2023.

For vacation rentals, the average occupancy rate for November 2024 was 31.5%, which is up 9.0% from November 2023. The average daily rate for November 2024 was \$207, up 11.6% from November 2023 and RevPAR for November 2024 was \$65, up 21.6% from November 2023.

During November 2024, 919,108 passengers traveled through Southwest Florida International Airport, a decrease of 3.6% compared to November 2023. Year-to-date, passenger traffic is up 10.4% from the same period last year.

### **Communications report**

Ray Sarracino, VCB communications director, reported that their department has hosted 22 journalists from four countries since Oct. 1. 10 of these visitors were the direct result of coordination with Visit Florida. Total impressions for Q1 of the FY are 1,553,620,239. Upcoming media visits include two Canadian broadcasters, one British, and one German journalist.

### **Sales report**

Erin Lester, VCB senior sales manager, reported that the sales team surpassed all six sales goals for FY23-24 and are ahead of pace for two of the six goals for FY24-25. She shared highlights of some successful fall group media buys and Q1 sales activities. The sales team attended a variety of in-person meeting planner and travel trade shows, including IMEX America, Meetings Today Live! South, NTA Travel Exchange, and Retreat Resources Southeast Showcase. Lester also presented upcoming sales activities for January through March including RCMA Emerge, Florida Encounter and Travel & Adventure Show, Washington, DC. Charm Evans, VCB global sales manager, provided a recap on the international sales and marketing activities including Brand USA Travel Week and CEO Summit in London. Evans also presented an update on the international travel trade activities taking place in the coming months such as Visit USA Switzerland's Island-Hopping Event, Florida Huddle, and ITB Berlin taking place in March.

### **Visitor services report**

Simone Behr, VCB visitor services director, reported that our tourism ambassador volunteers assisted a record number of 724,478 visitors and residents during calendar year 2024. During Q1, tourism ambassador volunteers worked 8,178 volunteer hours, a value of \$260,061 to Lee County. Highlights during the fall months included Tourism Ambassadors assisting at Roy Hobbs World Series, American Sand Sculpting Championship and greeting Breeze Airlines' 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 35th Annual Volunteer Tourism Ambassador Appreciation Luncheon on April 4.

### **Sports update**

Jeff Mielke, Sports Development director, reported that 44,123 room nights sold in the months July through September 2024 with direct visitor spending of more than \$18.5 million.

### **TDC member items**

- Holly Smith shared how fortunate we all are to have John Lai as the chair of the Visit FL Board. Sanibel is continuing their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations with many events. Additional information can be found on the website [www.50yearsofsanibel.com](http://www.50yearsofsanibel.com). The State of the Islands conference will be held on January 22 beginning at 8:00 a.m. at Sanibel Harbour Marriott. Smith was impressed with the strong presence

for the Holiday season, especially at the Luminary Stroll. Smith thanked City of Sanibel Vice Mayor Mike Miller for attending today's TDC meeting.

- Bill Steinke thanked Ashley for her presentation to the board, and for being a great ambassador for Cape Coral. He also thanked the VCB for their partnership in the creation and execution of the Cape Coral Quest. The new racquet and paddle facility in Cape Coral is the shining star of the city right now. They have more than 1,500 memberships and 400 people playing per day with zero marketing efforts to date. Yesterday, the facility landed on their official name, "The Courts, Cape Coral."
- Jay Johnson announced that Pine Island Chamber of Commerce will have their annual meeting on February 10, and the speaker will be Annisa Karim from the Randall Research Center.
- Liston Bochette thanked the TDC for being one of the most productive committees he had the pleasure of serving on.
- Larry Fiesel wished everyone a Happy New Year. Fiesel said that Coconut Point in Estero was very busy for the holiday season. He mentioned that the Village of Estero obtained a 99-year lease on the property for the sports park being developed at Estero High School from the County. They are thankful for the partnership with the County. Final design approval is still needed from Village Council.
- Nigel Fullick announced that the Holiday Lights ceremony for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bonita Springs was well attended and received lots of positive comments. Fullick thanked Lee County leadership for the beach renourishment project that is ahead of schedule. Sugar Shack is getting closer to opening; they had lost the restaurateur which caused the recent delays. Cold Plunge Spa is opening in Downtown Bonita next month. Wonder Gardens has new leadership and a new board, and the place looks unrecognizable from the past. The board has been doing a tremendous job updating the facilities. Fullick gave an update on the City signage program. He thanked everyone for their support and condolences for Councilmember Bogacz for the loss of her young son.
- Rob Wells is looking forward to seeing properties coming back online after all of the recent hurricanes.
- Tony Lapi surprised everyone with the announcement that he has written a book after 49 years in the hotel business, and it's been published. It is called "Tales from an Innkeeper." All proceeds of the book will go to the Captiva Island Historical Society.
- Pam Cronin wished everyone a great 2025!
- Commissioner Kevin Ruane said the county has received a \$19.23 Million grant from the EPA to bolster environmental resilience and put an emphasis on the importance of voluntourism. The county has been working on updating its resiliency plan following hurricanes Helene and Milton. Big Arts is hosting an event to celebrate volunteers on Sanibel, and he thanked Sanibel for their volunteerism.

### **Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 10:24 a.m.

### **Next TDC meeting**

The next TDC meeting will be held at **9 a.m. Thursday, February 13, 2025**, 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](http://LeeVCB.com). Contact: Tamara Pigott, [TPigott@leegov.com](mailto:TPigott@leegov.com), Lee County VCB, 239-338-3500.