

Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, March 26, 2026

9:00 a.m.

The regularly scheduled meeting for the Tourist Development Council was held both in person and via Teams.

Mr. Christopher Fernandez read into the record, members of the public are advised that this meeting/hearing is a public proceeding, and the clerk to the board is making an audio recording of the proceedings, and all statements made during the proceedings, which recording will be a public record, subject to disclosure under the public records law of Florida. Be aware, however, that the audio recording may not satisfy the requirement for a verbatim transcript of the proceedings, described in the notice of this meeting, in the event you desire to appeal any decision adopted in this proceeding.

Roll Call

Present:

Christopher Fernandez, Danny Gaekwad, Rich Larkin, Commissioner Ron Livsey, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Commissioner Michelle Stone and Bobby Walker.

Staff:

Loretta Shaffer, Sky Wheeler, DeeDee Busbee, Bryan Day, Jessica Heller, Corry Locke, Samantha Solomon, Heidi Villagomez, Candace Shelton, Carlos Medina, Coleen Robinson

Guests:

Ileana Frascone, Miles Partnership; Tammy McCann, Marion County Tax Collector's Office; Jason Varnum, ProAm Softball; Paresh Chhatu, Hilton Garden Inn; Ben Baugh, 352 Today; Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney, Marion County

Notice of Publication

Notice was published on the County Website on January 5, 2026 including Teams information.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Rich Larkin, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to adopt the minutes from the February 26, 2026 Tourist Development Council Meeting with scrivener's corrections. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).

Acknowledgment of Financials – February 2026

Mr. Danny Gaekwad inquired if there were any extraordinary items in the financials.

Ms. Sky Wheeler replied there was nothing unusual and added that there will continue to be some budget amendments as finance has made some adjustments in alignment with finance's accounting standards.

A motion was made by Commissioner Michelle Stone, seconded by Bobby Walker, to review and approve February 2026 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).

Report from Chair

Presentation: Tourist Development Tax Collection Update, Marion County Deputy Tax Collector, Tammy McCann

Ms. McCann advised that 23 new accounts were created with Deckard from February 26 to March 26, 2026 with a total of 1,359 accounts. Ms. McCann expressed collaborating with the VCB team to present a Meet and Teach regarding short-term rentals on April 22nd, with more to come in future, as she believes short-term rental owners need help with understanding ordinances and how to pay via the tax collector's website.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to the number of accounts.

Ms. McCann replied that there are 1,359 accounts which encompass all short-term rentals including hotels.

Motion: TDC Chairman/Vice-Chairman Vote

Mr. Fernandez instructed members to cast votes on ballots found at their seats and to hold them up for collection.

Mr. Gaekwad verified with Mr. Fernandez that Mr. Rus Adams was current Chairman and Mr. Fernandez was Vice-Chairman.

Ms. Wheeler tallied the collected votes and announced that Mr. Fernandez received the appropriate votes to be Chairman. Mr. Wheeler then distributed new ballots to take a new vote for Vice-Chairman as Mr. Fernandez also received majority vote for Vice-Chairman.

Mr. Bobby Walker advised he would prefer not to be considered for Vice-Chairman explaining he is still new to the council and inexperienced.

Ms. Shaffer added that Mr. Rus Adams, although not in attendance, communicated to her he would consider coming back on as Vice-Chairman.

Mr. Corry Locke collected the ballots.

Mr. Gaekwad left the meeting at 9:10 A.M.

Ms. Wheeler announced that Mr. Rus Adams received the appropriate votes for Vice-Chairman.

A motion was made by Commissioner Michelle Stone, seconded by Mr. Rich Larkin, to approve Mr. Christopher Fernandez as the TDC Chairman and Mr. Rus Adams as the TDC Vice Chairman. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Funding Requests

Mr. Fernandez announced that the following funding requests meet all of the criteria for consent consideration under Resolution 25-R-219 which governs the 4 funding programs and can be moved as one item if the board chooses to do so, however due to the nature of item 6.4, staff is recommending that it be moved separately since the event planners have contracts with several Tourist Development Council hotel partners that may create a conflict of interest.

A motion was made by Commissioner Michelle Stone, seconded by Mr. Bobby Walker, to approve items 6.2-6.3 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Mr. Gaekwad returns to the meeting at 9:12 A.M.

Ms. Dana Olesky recommended that 2 present board members. Mr. Larkin and Mr. Gaekwad, abstain from voting advising the vote will still have a quorum.

A motion was made by Commissioner Michelle Stone, seconded by Commissioner Ron Livsey, to approve items 6.4 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0) with Mr. Gaekwad and Mr. Larkin abstaining.

Mr. Larkin asked for a brief explanation of the funding.

Mr. Locke answered that the intended use of funding on the application reflected marketing expenses, advertising, and event production expenses.

Staff Updates

Presentation: Revised America 250 Media Plan

Ms. Shaffer then spoke regarding the America 250 Media Plan, which originally had a \$500,000.00 approved budget, explaining that the department had found ways to use the current media plan to be proactive and deliver initiatives through an efficient and effective marketing plan. Ms. Shaffer explained that this plan will even be carried out beyond July 4th into the shoulder seasons for summer and fall in which the most activity is needed. Ms. Shaffer then introduced Ms. Ileana Frascone of Miles Media and advised several of the Miles Media team members had joined remotely to help guide through the media plan.

Ms. Frascone advised it was a pleasure to join the meeting again to review the progress and planning for the America 250 plan, what the team has been working on, and outline the strategy. She advised the purpose of the campaign was to celebrate America's 250th birthday by positioning Ocala/Marion County as a premier Florida travel destination for a patriotic

celebration during the shoulder season of late spring, summer and leading into fall to generate community pride and economic impact. Ms. Frascone elaborated that the timing included onboarding, Mr. EJ Neives, the content creator for programming starting in March to July with the full plan activating in May through August. She explained that the target audience is leisure travelers, which is aligned with the marketing plan at large with some notable differences, aged 25-64, especially families, couples, and multigenerational road-trippers seeking affordable, outdoorsy escapes.

The secondary audience is history buffs, equestrian enthusiasts, empty-nesters, nature enthusiasts and regional travelers exploring America 250 heritage routes and national park/monument stops. Ms. Frascone moved onto the campaign's theme which is to Celebrate, Explore, Remember – America 250 in Ocala/Marion County with the strategies of destination awareness and amplification. She continued explaining that the plan included telling the good story of Ocala/Marion County as an all-American destination, unified messaging across all touchpoints, integration of local events including dining, things to do and places to stay which is all the reliable content to drive economic impact and encourage return visitation. She advised they are instilling a concept for future return travelers. Ms. Frascone advised the success measure would be similar to all of their media programming by very targeted Key Performance Indicators (KPI). She continued to explain the breakdown as Awareness KPIs which included impressions, reach, and video completion rate, Engagement KPIs like click-through rate, content interaction and landing page visits, Conversion KPIs which include bookings, Arrivalist lift, spendlift, and online travel agency referrals, and lastly advocacy KPIs which encompasses PR programming, social sharing, and work with content creators. She advised they will be providing post-campaign reports monthly to assure benchmarks are being meant.

Ms. Frascone then explained the primary geographic focus was the Florida drive markets being Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, Tallahassee and Gainesville and secondary markets being the southeast drive markets within 6-9 hours away including Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Birmingham and Nashville. She added a couple national channels, VF co-ops and AAA On the Go, layered in contextual targeting for road trips, family travel, and Florida vacations. Ms. Frascone transitioned into the integrated media funnel approach to the paid media strategy which consisted of three tiers. She further explained at the top is Awareness which consisted of Out of Home, Connective TV and PR initiatives with the objective to build reach and visibility. The next tier explained was Engagement where there are display tactics, eblast and social to encourage interaction and site traffic. The final tier was Conversion being OTA, like Expedia, and Search where they drive to actually book and find measurable ROI within purchasing. Ms. Frascone recommended the first buy to be with Carvertise, a partner they have worked with previously, which would involve deploying a fleet of 13 boldly wrapped patriotic "Road to Ocala" creative rideshare vehicles over a 12-week period with activation at 6 high-impact swarms assigned to Tampa.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired if all vehicles would have the same wrap and graphics.

Ms. Frascone answered that the graphics will be the same for consistency and in the past they have worked with some minor color differences.

Ms. Frascone continued to explain the vehicles would be at major events in Tampa for example the Tampa Bay versus Red Sox baseball game, Chris Stapleton and Jellyroll concerts, and the Florida Seafood Festival.

Mr. Gaekwad queried if cars were in use when not at an event and for verification if using Uber vehicles.

Ms. Frascone advised the vehicles were rideshare, both Uber and Lyft, and they would be an branded experience geared to surprise and delight at events adding that within the vehicles there will be a QR code linking to the America 250 landing page to drive the measurable engagement and awareness. She supplemented that reach will be extended through digital re-targeting as they anticipate about 14 million impressions to reinforce the messaging with a May through July timing.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to the meaning of the slogan on vehicles of “Find Your Freedom Here!” as opposed to relating more to celebrating America’s 250th slogan.

Ms. Wheeler answered advising it meant the freedom to do what you want to do.

Mr. Larkin agreed with Mr. Gaekwad and inquired as to the thought process on how the slogan was achieved.

Ms. Frascone advised her team works on the media buying and they don’t handle the creative and that when working with the creative team they did not want to be too specific allowing for broader time period travelers.

Ms. Wheeler advised the creative is managed internally and can be revisited further explaining the wrap picture shows people jumping into the springs which is an intended target market receiving the most engagement on other platforms. Ms. Wheeler added that adjustments can be made and the messaging refined.

Mr. Larkin reflected that he doesn’t feel people relate Ocala with the springs from Tampa and Orlando.

Ms. Wheeler explained that there is considerable data that supports the relationship. She pointed out there are two sides to the wrap and the other pulls the equine perspective adding that the back window is the call to the website. Ms. Wheeler explained that targeting starts from the rider’s digital device through location sharing serving them directed follow up digital content.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to how many events will be targeted, how long will the vehicles stay and who pays for the wrap.

Ms. Frascone indicated four vehicles would stay two hours at six events and the wrap price is included with the buy. She further explained that Carvertise guarantees impressions, a certain amount of traffic and often there is flexibility with good media partner buys, and they bundle in an extra event.

Mr. Gaekwad queried as to whom Carvertise was and had there been past business.

Ms. Wheeler advised that the VCB have done business previously and won awards doing campaigns with Carvertise.

Ms. Frascone transitioned into marketing with the AAA Travel Media to reach highly engaged regional travelers across trusted AAA platforms. She further explained in order to do that they will leverage a Florida-targeted eNewsletter, with distribution at 1 million, to drive awareness during peak summer planning period and extended the impact with a full page with On the Go digital publication that goes to 3.2 million members which includes a 400-word story and a sponsored event feature to deepen engagement, adding they like opportunities with the editorial mix. Ms. Frascone continued that they would highlight “Road Trip to History” and America 250 messaging positioning Ocala/Marion County as an easy, family-friendly getaway.

Mr. Gaekwad added that they need to give specifics of why visitors would come to Ocala for the “Road Trip to History” potentially putting that on the Carvertise wrap.

Ms. Frascone continued that the campaign with AAA Travel Media would encourage trip planning through itinerary driven storytelling and drive market accessibility with the flight being in May or June.

Ms. Frascone moved onto the next approach with the Expedia Group to reach high-intent travelers actively planning trips and redirect consideration to Ocala/Marion County. She continued that they would implement competitive conquering within searches for nearby destinations which is a very targeted approach at Orlando, Tampa and Gainesville. She continued explaining they plan to leverage placements including Homepage Marquee, Partner Gallery, and listings across Expedia and Vrbo to maintain visibility through the booking journey. She advised they are going to target travelers using a combination of IP-based geo targeting and search intent signals, including Florida drive markets and key Southeast feeder cities such as Atlanta, Nashville and Charleston and align targeting to family travelers and history/culture travel themes to support America 250 messaging.

Ms. Frascone moved into explaining the social approach with a targeted social campaign promoting Fourth of July events, including creative tailored by location, interests, and behaviors to reinforce the “Celebrate, Explore, Remember” theme including Independence Day fireworks celebrations at Wrigley Fields, Ocala/Marion County Veterans Memorial Park, Dunnellon High School and Belleview Sportsplex and a patriotic parade. She further detailed their plan to use carousel and single-image ads to drive site traffic and trip planning, paired with video formats, vertical and horizontal, that immerse audiences in America 250 visuals while implementing retargeting to re-engage warm audiences already interacting with the site and social content, converting awareness into visitation intent. She advised the platforms would be Facebook and Instagram.

Mr. Larkin inquired if the images would all be stills.

Ms. Frascone advised that there will be video also.

Mr. Larkin expressed that people are more drawn to videos.

Commissioner Michelle Stone verified that target area is out of Marion County and asked if the

contract approved last month with Mr. EJ Neives will link together with this initiative.

Ms. Frascone advised the presentation will cover that shortly and this initiative is the paid piece that goes out of market whereas Mr. Neives is the organic piece involving him traversing around regionally with editorial freedom to capture events through his local eye perspective.

Ms. Frascone then moved onto the topic of search advising they maintain a strong always-on SEM presence through the traditional media plan which is dedicated to the America 250 branding. She continued that they also plan to work with performance max and demand generation campaigns to optimize around the event targeting high-intent users searching for travel in Florida's drive markets directing them to campaign landing pages that feature itineraries, events, and partner offers. They also plan to integrate campaign creative and copy tied to the "Road Trip to History" theme to connect search intent with the larger America 250 story. Ms. Frascone added they plan to align creative to America 250 and "Road Trip to History" reinforcing Ocala/Marion County as an accessible, experience-rich destination which would be exciting to maximize impact through a 25% Visit Florida co-op match, increasing media efficiency and overall reach.

Ms. Frascone transitioned to the Visit Florida co-op Digital Out-of-Home buy explaining that it's a high-impact unit in key feeder markets to drive consideration for Ocala/Marion County which includes billboards, transit and pedestrian environments reaching travelers in high traffic moments. She explained the plan would be to utilize programmatic targeting to align placements with travel, lifestyle, and cultural environments that index with target audience positioning Ocala/Marion County as an easy, drive-market getaway for Atlanta, driving consideration and trip planning.

Ms. Frascone then presented the next Visit Florida co-op as Amazon Streaming TV reaching travel audiences through premium, full-screen video environments across Prime Video, Freevee, and live sports/news inventory to deliver broad, high-impact awareness. She added that it would be nationwide, excluding Florida, targeting using Amazon's first party data to reach users based on behaviors, interests, and purchase signals around Arts & Culture, Culinary, Outdoors & Nature and Sports. She continued to explain that Amazon tracks purchases so the content being served later is based on purchase history. She added that the creative aligned with America 250 and "Road Trip to History" using sight, sound and motion to inspire visitation again with a 25% Visit Florida co-op match.

Ms. Frascone explained the next Visit Florida Co-op would be with TripAdvisor displaying native programing leveraging display and native placements to stay present through the consideration phase and influence destination selection. She continued explaining that it would target nationwide, excluding Florida, and in-market users researching Florida and competitive destinations to redirect demand to Ocala/Marion County. She added the creative would align with the themes and highlight cultural attractions, events, and nearby experiences. Ms. Frascone advised they would utilize Visit Florida's first-party data and co-op efficiencies to maximize reach and cost efficiency.

Mr. Larkin asked how would we know who the audiences is for TripAdvisor as he looks at it like

a fading platform similar to Priceline.

Ms. Frascone advised periodically they do an audit of TripAdvisor and Expedia to verify their relevancy and it continues to be one of the best ways to measure conversion.

Ms. Frascone continued the presentation explaining the PR portion to bring the story to the media by coordinating an America 250 Satellite Media Tour in the early summer creating buzz, boost media coverage and drive traveler intent across Florida and key Southeast drive markets. She outlined that a VCB spokesperson would conduct interviews with multiple media outlets to promote Ocala/Marion County as an All-American destination leveraging both earned and owned channels to maximize reach and awareness. She further explained hosting a media FAM trip, with 4-6 regional journalists, in mid to late summer to keep the momentum and bolster the off-season by experiencing the region's patriotism, heritage, equine culture and outdoor adventures to develop stories showcasing these experiences advising the goal is to generate rich, lasting content that inspires travel.

Ms. Frascone moved her presentation onto the Content Creator program collaborating with local content creator, Mr. EJ Nieves, who will tell the story of Ocala/Marion County as an All-American destination leading up to the America 250 celebration through the lens of local businesses and events with 6-10 posts a week on Facebook and Instagram in March through July. She advised the program was approved by the TDC in February and they are excited to see how the program materializes.

Ms. Frascone closed with a media plan flowchart showing the partner, placement, markets to be targeted, run periods and spend.

Mr. Larkin verified that total spend for America 250 was roughly \$378,000.00 and commented every community is going to be pushing America 250 thinking realistically that people will not come from Atlanta to Ocala as Atlanta will have their own celebration. He inquired if we are looking to pull travelers to Ocala from Atlanta or traveler's passing through.

Ms. Frascone answered with a hypothetical situation explaining that if you lived in Atlanta full time and were tired of the hustle and bustle of the city, you may be looking to get out and have a road trip with your family during the summer off-season to come down and enjoy hence why they are targeting families and day-trippers who are trip planning to explore some unique offerings out of their hometown. She added that Atlanta is a strong market for Ocala/Marion County and their placements are trying to catch others driving down I75.

Mr. Larkin requested to return the presentation to the visual stills of a horse jumping and the Marion County America 250 logo advising that those images grabbed him as he views them and then reads the content. He continued that the car wrap does not do the same and the colors are too soft and blending.

Mr. Fernandez advised his wife has been using ChatGPT to plan family road trips and it leads to individual events. He added he likes the diversity in the whole marketing package. He asked how long traditional advertising methods will be valid with the evolution of artificial intelligence chatbots or will they remain valid as through the advertising chatbots get information and how

should we tailor our spend to enhance chatbot driven information.

Ms. Frascone advised that is why their plan is diversely tailored to catch different people at various planning stages. She communicated that search is an important buy as certain settings through Google can be set for AI Generative search as there are still paid pieces within that. She added that search engines will produce the most qualified sites which by nature are DMO sites so making sure the website is up to date as possible as that is where the information is pulled from. She supplemented that ChatGPT is going to help with the inspiration process and from there people would move onto TripAdvisor or Ocala/Marion County's website to get more information on specifics. Ms. Frascone counseled that she doesn't feel that one will replace the other but it is something that needs to be planned for in content approach.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that he was looking through the website at the celebration events and asked who is paying for all of it and how much.

Ms. Shaffer answered that it was approved for \$500,000 but after reviewing the media plan it was decided to optimize efficiency and present a spend of \$377,000 to the council in which the TDC is paying for with Visit Florida components picking up 25% costs.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if the department missed some of the Visit Florida monies.

Ms. Shaffer advised some, but the options presented by Ms. Frascone were the most prudent in the remaining inventory and could extend market penetration.

Mr. Gaekwad requested an explanation of the mathematics.

Ms. Wheeler explained that Visit Florida's co-op programs are structured where we have an investment and they plus up the investment by 25% so we do not see those funds just the results of the funds as they go in and buy a bigger piece of the media.

Mr. Larkin asked what the spend was for in August.

Ms. Wheeler answered it was to continue to drive the summer season and added that a clarifying point that not everyone is going to come on the 4th of July, but we would like to be in their thought process before children go back to school for road trips. She supplemented that working with the Miles team it was decided to push through Labor Day.

Mr. Larkin asked if it would utilize the America 250 campaign language or generic marketing.

Ms. Wheeler advised it would have some of the America 250 components but not the come for fireworks aspect more aligned with visit for fun.

Mr. Gaekwad conjectured that 4th of July was the main event although he could not find much on the website.

Mr. Fernandez asked if the website was still being developed.

Ms. Wheeler advised that VCB does not manage the Marion Celebrates 250 website.

Mr. Gaekwad asked what the TDC website was.

Ms. Wheeler explained OcalaMarion.com has an America 250 page which navigates all our traffic with our messaging and itinerary building that is more tourism based.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he felt for the \$370,000 there would be a monumental event, like a concert, in which thousands of people would attend.

Ms. Shaffer counseled that the plan is to extend the opportunity to come to an All-Americana place by marketing the entire destination with messaging that drives the shoulder season of summer and launch into fall destination wide. She added that there are so many people that have children going back to school but the empty-nesters and people with expendable funding will come for culinary, arts and culture. She supplemented the plan will be capitalizing on creating messaging around those audiences to help build the shoulder season opportunities.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he believes it is a “feel good” campaign which he feels good about.

Mr. Larkin added that you cannot measure the ROI but it is something we need to do.

Ms. Frascone presentation ended and Ms. Shaffer introduced Ms. Heller to present the Marketing and Communications Update.

Marketing and Communications Update

Ms. Heller advised this would be a brief update adding the marketing and communications update would be for this month and the breakdown for digital placements that are January through February. She explained the report is for the currently running media, some industry and advocacy communication efforts and a recap of recent PR efforts. She stated that this type of report will be presented when she is not doing the quarterly report. She advised the current running media consists of Visit Florida Vacation Guides, Sports Planning Guide, CEP Relocation Guide and Atlanta Parent explaining that with the print media there is also complimentary digital media that comes with it like Geoblast. She listed the billboard ads and digital media like banner ads in which some are videos. Ms. Heller explained there are what appears to be organic articles that are paid media placements along with podcasts. She explained a unique placement in Simpli.fi which places a geofence around select conferences and industry events, whether we attend or not, reaching planners through media planner messaging and after the event we can use re-targeting to continue to show our destination to those planners. She continued onto the next slide which outlined the Industry/Advocacy Communications showing some of the communications sent out, events attended and presentations completed. Ms. Heller reviewed the Public Relations portion which comprised recent press trips and press releases.

Ms. Shaffer then introduced Mr. Corry Locke to present the sales update.

Sales Update

Mr. Locke started with today’s approvals of Patriot Games Invitational and the JFCA and one other being the ProAm Road to the World Series Qualifier which is to take place May 22-23rd, 2026 at the Ocala Regional Sports Complex. He further advised ProAm was late to secure May funding, but they were able to move forward on funding for the July tournament. He added

that they are working on a 3rd tournament to take place in later summer to is to be presented to the board in the next couple months. Mr. Locke then moved into the Leads section.

Mr. Larkin asked what JFCA Hottest Show on Earth stood for.

Mr. Locke responded it was the Junior Florida Cattlemen's Association which was approved this morning for the July show at the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion.

Mr. Locke continued onto Uncle Charlie's softball tournament, which is a mid-west brand based out of Ohio doing a lot of tournaments in the mid-west who have never been to Florida. He continued that they have made contact to come into the Florida market and are currently working with Parks and Recreation at Shocker Park. He added that an RFP went out to the hoteliers last month. Mr. Locke then moved onto another opportunity which was the Going on Faith Conference and Group Travel Con which are under the same conference organization called Group Family Travel. He explained he is working with them to host one or both conferences and going through the details of their RFPs while planning to keep the council updated on progress. He then moved onto the Millennial Health Care Annual Summit which was sent to the sales team through Cvent and they are potentially trying to bring the event in November. He next reviewed the Florida BASS Nation Youth Tournament, which is a statewide organization for fishing, the youth division, to be potentially hosted at the Heagy-Burry boat ramp on Orange Lake on February 19-21, 2027. Mr. Locke's lead list ended with Connect South, also known as Informa, which also hosts Connect Marketplace, a large tradeshow staff attends every year. He continued that they have multiple conferences that they do and is to be potentially held in October of 2027. He added that Connect had a site visit last month that went very well and they are working on the RFP. Mr. Locke moved onto the Ongoing Leads list in which the only change was the Florida and Alabama RV Park and Campground Association which has a planned site visit in June, adding it is a big conference and opportunity which is being hosted in Daytona this year. Mr. Locke moved onto Lost Business being the Florida Rolls Royce Owners' Club which was lost to The Villages as the venues we offered did not work out for 2026.

Mr. Gaekwad asked what the venues were.

Mr. Locke advised that an RFP was sent out and several hotels responded and they were not able to come to an agreement. He advised he was not privy to the direct conversations.

Mr. Locke lastly presented the Conferences/Tradeshows portion of his update explaining the department is a member of MPI which does a Spring Showcase which is to be held in Jacksonville on April 2nd with Mr. Bryan Day in attendance to represent Ocala/Marion County.

Mr. Larkin posed a question to Commissioner Stone inquiring whether the county has ever studied the opportunity of a meeting facility considering the growth of hotels being built.

Commissioner Stone advised that the VCB had done a study within the last 18 months and suggested he should be provided with a copy.

Ms. Shaffer noted that she was recently provided with a large 423 page binder that she could review with him advising there could be a phase 2 added which will look at all the parks in the

county that could potentially be converted into regional parks. She continued explaining that the long-range tourism plan for the county is being prepared looking at the next 3 to 5 years which will contain the steps needed to answer that question.

Mr. Larkin advised that being close to Tallahassee that there may be state associated business that may not fit into one hotel but may be able to be accomplished here and asked if the study was complete.

Commissioner Stone advised the study was complete and they identified gaps such as that and there were at least nine identified locations adding, as Mr. Gaekwad previously identified, the World Equestrian Center recently built a conference center which allows a big gap to be filled. She continued to explain that it was not within the Ocala city limits but again that would be in private market to determine.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that it is good to have a convention center as the demand is there, adding it cannot be just one building as people want food and entertainment unless potentially downtown, as WEC is completely different.

Mr. Larkin replied that state associations may not be able to afford WEC.

Commissioner Stone reasoned that with the new hotels coming downtown plus the one already here, and The Forge being close to being completed plus there being a lot of entertainment downtown to compliment a convention center.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed Tuscowilla Park, with the lake, should be identified as a potential site adding when people go to a convention they also visit downtown.

Councilmember Barry Mansfield advised that the City of Ocala works hard to bring business downtown and what needs to happen is getting across 40. He added they need investment, like The Forge and Midtown have done, and people interested in areas across 40, the section from main downtown to the north side of town near Florida Feed & Seed. Councilmember Mansfield said that there are some sections that need to go and be reinvested. He added that Mr. Doug Cone building a new hotel is great.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he strategically bought the SunTrust building, which is 6 acres, the same size as the downtown per his hired architects, and he is awaiting the hotels to be built to verify supply and demand but stated a hotel cannot do everything.

Councilmember Mansfield advised Mr. Gaekwad was correct and what they need to encourage is retail downtown like "Mom and Pop" shops. He pointed out that now that they have raised the price downtown and with the rent increased "Mom and Pops" cannot afford it.

Councilmember Mansfield expressed they want to break that cycle and potentially get more restaurants.

Mr. Gaekwad advised the city is not in the business to do business and that the city is in the business to facilitate what the businessman wants to do.

Councilmember Mansfield agreed that the city wants to encourage developers to come and spend money. Councilmember Mansfield expressed that Ocala needs to advertise their rich vast

history, as there is always talk about the springs and horses, for example the battles fought here and Ft. King along with America 250. He felt that there is a demographic of people that will come to see the history and spend money as opposed for just coming for one day, July 4th.

Mr. Gaekwad agreed with Councilmember Mansfield.

Commissioner Stone added that the America 250 website should include some historical content as well as the trolley car.

Councilmember Mansfield expressed hope that the new electric trolley car will arrive soon as it has been ordered and currently there is a bus service running the routes.

Mr. Fernandez expressed the importance of the connectivity of crossing 40 and how the trolley will help.

Councilmember Mansfield brought up that people living downtown are wanting to cross 40 in golf carts which they are working on trying to make Ocala a user-friendly city.

Commissioner Stone stated she believes they are narrowing the lanes on 40 to slow down traffic to make it more pedestrian and golf cart friendly.

Mr. Larkin asked if the routes for the trolley car are online somewhere.

Councilmember Mansfield advised yes.

Ms. Wheeler advised there is a robust interactive map that shows the bus location in real time.

Mr. Gaekwad reasoned the Silver Springs attraction appeal has gone with visitors opting to go to Disney. He continued that the attraction is too old, and he does not know how many people go there. He stated they need to establish new attractions to appeal to people for example the swimming competitions. He believed that not many people attended Light Up Ocala and the traffic just comes and goes and people are disinterested. He relayed that the downtown rents per square foot are too high for retail to survive with online retailers such as Amazon replacing traditional brick and mortar retailers. He encouraged Councilmember Mansfield to think innovatively about what else can be brought downtown other than retailers.

Councilmember Mansfield disagreed and clarified that when referring to retail he means more Mom-and Pop, crafts, unique products, boutique-like stores.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that Mom and Pop businesses cannot afford the rent downtown at \$40 a square foot.

Councilmember Mansfield advised he believes there are still businesses on this side of 40 that are vacant properties that would require investment but will recoup the monies and agreed that not everyone can afford \$40 a square foot.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he just rented to a "Mom and Pop" cookie shop at \$70 a square foot and is uncertain as to whether they will be able to afford the space long term.

Commissioner Stone realigned to the agenda and expressed that maybe a brainstorming

session could be in order.

Mr. Fernandez suggested that convening a separate brainstorming session or workshop for downtown discussion is in order.

Ms. Wheeler advised that there is an upcoming long-range tourism plan with ample opportunity for input all throughout that process and encouraged members to stay excited over the next few months to express insights. She added that the consultant that is selected to do the long-range tourism planning work will have today's information provided for reference.

Ms. Shaffer introduced Ms. Wheeler to provide the TDT Collections/STR and Key Data update.

Commissioner Stone left the meeting at 10:13 A.M.

TDT Collections/STR and Key Data Update

Ms. Wheeler advised that the TDT Collections were formatted slightly differently, post the tax collector's office presentation last month. She explained the corrections have been made to the month's actuals which were previously reported incorrectly for the prior fiscal year. The updated numbers are shown in yellow and reflect the new numbers from the tax collector's office with a new total for fiscal year 2025 of just over \$6.1 million dollars which far exceeds the prior year.

Ms. Wheeler continued to explain that further into the current fiscal year we will benchmark against the actual numbers and not the numbers that were duplicated. She then covered the reporting period for February, which covered January's revenues. Collections totaled \$605,405.05 which was a decrease from last year of 3.14%. She added that after reviewing with the tax collector last month, that when looking back at the minutes or collections in November there was a catastrophic outbreak scenario in the equine industry that cancelled a lot of events which will reflect in both the collections and STR/Key data. She advised that she did not get a chance to discuss previously and reported that it is easy to remember a hurricane as it affects everyone whereas an equine outbreak may not be as forward facing. She moved onto the next part of the report which covered the Marion County STR then the Visit Florida STR followed by the Key Data for Marion County. Ms. Wheeler advised the trend data for Marion County occupancy rate was at 70.2% which was a decrease of 2.8% year over year, the average daily rate was \$145.05 which was a decrease of 4.1% from last year and the RevPAR was \$101.89 which was a decrease of 6.8% from last year. She advised from the running 12 months occupancy was down 8.5%, ADR down 4.2% and RevPAR was down 12.4%.

Commissioner Stone returns to the meeting at 10:16 A.M.

Ms. Wheeler then moved into the Visit Florida data explaining the orange marker line was the Visit Florida figures and occupancy statewide was at 78.6% which was a decrease of .3%, average daily rate was \$247.35 which was an increase of 4.7% from last year and RevPAR was \$194.43 that was up 4.4%. She then moved into Key Data, which was the grey line on the slide, which showed the short-term rentals but not Deckert Technologies that the tax collector's office works with, it is a different set of information that is just looking for the occupancy, the average daily rate and room nights available and it does not affect the compliance side. She

advised occupancy was at 58.7% which was down 1% from last year, the average daily rate was \$257 which was down \$19 from last year and RevPAR was \$126 which was a decrease of \$6 from last year, nights available was 5,195 which was up 2% from the previous year and the running 12 months occupancy was down 10%, average daily rate was down 3% and RevPAR was down 10% and nights available decreased 2%. She explained that nights available figure is normalizing as people appear to be deciding if this is a business they want to be in and due to the tax collector's efforts it will continue to standardize so we will have a better understanding of what the other data imparts as the room nights were fluctuating very heavily for a period of time. Ms. Wheeler ended with offering to sit down with anyone individually to review more in depth or look at back or forward trends.

Ms. Shaffer referred to the upcoming events in the packet and if there was any interest in attending to please let the department know and reminded that Saturday is Marion County Day at the McPherson Complex from 10 AM to 3 PM. She added the event is attended by thousands being part of the celebration of the grand year with America 250 advising that the public relations team has done a amazing job planning amazing events for the community. She added that the VCB will be represented at the entry with the Gateway blow up and a welcoming table.

Mr. Fernandez thanked the staff and asked if there was any old business, new business or public comment.

Mr. Paresh Chhotu from the Hilton Garden Inn offered a public comment regarding the America 250 celebration regarding the calculation of the ROI.

Mr. Fernandez thanked Mr. Chhotu for the comment and advised the next meeting of the Tourist Development Council would take place on April 23, 2026 at 9:00 AM and adjourned the meeting at 10:20 AM.

Christopher Fernandez, Chairman