

Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, June 27, 2024

9:00 a.m.

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

Mr. Jeff Bailey 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:

Rus Adams, Victoria Billig, Commissioner Ron Livsey, Jason Reynolds and Jeff Bailey.

Staff:

Loretta Shaffer, Sky Wheeler, Danielle Neron, DeeDee Busbee, Bryan Day, Jessica Heller, Corry Locke, Samantha Solomon

Guests:

Rodney Gutierrez, World Equestrian Center; Evelyn Morales, Hampton Inn; Breanna Dacks, Visit Florida; George Albright, Marion County Tax Collector; Dr. Joseph St. Germain, Downs & St. Germain Research; Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Lea Brayton, World Equestrian Center; Paresh Chhotu, Hilton Garden Inn; Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Angel Roussel, Assistant County Administrator

Notice of Publication

Notice was published on the County Website on January 2, 2024 and subsequently updated to include WebEx information on June 4, 2024.

Christopher Fernandez in at 9:02 am

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Victoria Billig, to adopt the minutes from the May 30, 2024 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

Acknowledgement of Financials – May 2024

A motion was made by Jason Reynolds, seconded by Rus Adams, to review and approve May 2024 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

Report from Chair

Presentation – Annual Economic Impact of Tourism and Visitor Tracking Study

Dr. Joseph St. Germain and Mr. Isiah Lewis from Downs and St. Germain Research were introduced. Dr. St. Germain stated research was conducted from April 2023 to March 2024 and compared to the previous year. He then advised over 2,400 surveys were obtained from visitors who attended or visited attractions, events, hotels and any other location which was representative of the tourism population in Ocala/Marion County. He stated that Florida, in a twelve-month period, saw a trend of normalization of the economic impact numbers due to a decline in people cruising or international travel in 2022. This was the first time the travel industry experienced a trade deficit as it related to travel abroad vs travel to the United States. In 2023, the tourism industry welcomed domestic visitors and cruises were back to pre-pandemic levels. The total economic impact of tourism in Marion County, for the last twelve-months, was \$1,057,024,200.00 which was a decrease of 7.4%. Dr. St. Germain stated visitors who traveled to Ocala/Marion County from April 2023-March 2024 generated revenue through accommodations, restaurants, groceries, transportation, attractions, entertainment and shopping totaling \$682,196,700.00 which was a decrease of 7.3%. He further stated that Marion County attracted 1,444,000 visitors, a slight decrease of 9.3%, who stayed in hotels and vacation rentals, as well as, visited friends and family. Those visitors resulted in 1,065,300 room nights in hotels and vacations rentals, a decrease year over year of 9.3%, and generated \$5,332,042 in TDT collected. Dr. St. Germain then went on to discuss a discrepancy in the estimated number of vacation rentals. He advised Downs and St. Germain previously used Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) to estimate Marion County's vacation rentals which was a more conservative estimate but more in-line with TDT. However, Key Data, the county's vacation rental provider, stated more rooms were available than what was indicated in DBPR. Therefore, Downs and St. Germain analyzed and noted the amount in TDT, visitation, room nights, direct spending and economic impact based on the number of vacation rental units provided by Key Data. Dr. St. Germain advised their company believed the numbers from Key Data were higher than DBPR stated but lower than those provided by Key Data. He then advised that occupancy from April 2023-March of 2024

was 59.2% which was down 11.3%, ADR was \$121.65 which was up 1.4% and RevPAR was \$71.98 which was down 10.1%. Mr. St. Germain stated that Ocala/Marion County supported 10,400 tourism jobs from April 2023-March 2024 which generated \$316,404,900 in wages and salaries. He then advised the estimated cost for visitors to use the local roads, sewers, etc. subtracted from the amount of money Marion County visitors spent in local taxes resulted in a net tax benefit to the county of \$6,643,314.00.

Mr. Jeff Bailey requested clarification on the amount noted at the bottom of the slide.

Dr. St. Germain advised the numbers shown at the bottom of the slide outlined that \$28,871,470 in local taxes supported by visitors less the estimated cost (to the county) to service visitors of \$22,174,156 totaled \$6,643,314 in net tax benefits.

Mr. Bailey then requested to know if the aforementioned numbers included occupancy taxes plus the ancillary numbers such as restaurants, stores and gas.

Dr. St. Germain affirmed and advised a program was used which estimated those costs. He then advised that visitors to Ocala/Marion County save local residents \$466 in state and local taxes per household per year.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer then requested that Dr. St. Germain discuss how Ocala/Marion County compared to other counties within the State of Florida.

Dr. St. Germain advised Downs and St. Germain has seen normalization across the state. He then introduced Mr. Isaiah Lewis with Downs and St. Germain to discuss the Marion County visitor.

Mr. Lewis stated normalization of visitors influenced the trends of the Ocala/Marion County visitor over the past year. The visitors were more familiar with the Ocala/Marion County area and most of them were return visitors. The trip planning cycle was up six percentage points year over year for those who traveled a month or less in advance. The shortest trip planning cycle was noted to be approximately six-days for return visitors. He then advised that 2 out of 5 visitors used search engines and talked to friends and family as their top trip planning sources. Next, visitors tended to use social media and airline websites, including Arrivalist, to help plan their trips.

Ms. Shaffer requested that Mr. Lewis explain Arrivalist for those individuals who were unfamiliar with the site.

Mr. Lewis began to explain Arrivalist and then Dr. St. Germain indicated the websites used by visitors would be similar to Expedia, not Arrivalist.

Ms. Sky Wheeler then explained Arrivalist and stated it was used in partnership with Downs and St. Germain as well as Miles Partnership. She advised it is anonymous cellphone data which would track behavioral, as well as, location data. The system provided better understanding of how digital advertising influenced the visitor travel experience.

Mr. Lewis then went on to discuss the Top Reasons for Visiting Ocala/ Marion County

and indicated those included visiting friends and family, attending horse shows, to relax and unwind as well as visiting the area springs. He then discussed Pre-Trip Recall of Advertising which was down slightly year over year and substantiated the trend of normalization. It also substantiated the increase in destination options. The number of potential visitors who were able to recall advertising and were influenced by the advertising has remained steady year over year. The sources of advertising increased by 8% for those individuals who saw the advertisement on social media with 3 out of 10 people using online advertisement and 2 out of 5 people who saw the billboards. Mr. Lewis discussed the Travel Party Profile which indicated the county experienced an increase in visitors from other areas of Florida and experienced a steady number of International visitors, with a one-percent decrease in visitation year over year. Next, he discussed the top Regions of Origin which confirmed the Visitors and Convention Bureau's marketing efforts were successful. The marketing of Ocala/Marion County resulted in Georgia and New York maintaining the top regions of origin after Florida. Next, North Carolina and a few other destinations within the Southeast and Midwest rated as top contenders for regions visitors originate from. The Drive Markets held steady with the top six being relatively close to Ocala/Marion County. Mr. Lewis stated the typical travel party was slightly larger than in the past and increased by .1% to three people. Also, 2 out of 5 visitors stated they traveled with children. The median age of a visitor to Marion County was 50 years old with an annual income of \$77,600 per year showing an increase in affluent visitors.

Dr. St. Germain stated the average age noted did not include children. The results were collected by speaking with the person who planned the trip but did not consider the child who may have traveled with them.

Mr. Lewis then advised first-time visitors to Ocala/Marion County held steady at approximately 3 out of 10 individuals but the county experienced a 6% increase in loyalist visitors. He then discussed the Trip Experience which noted 4 out of 5 visitors drove to Ocala/Marion County with 11% of all visitors utilizing the Orlando International Airport, 3% of visitors used Tampa International Airport, 2% used Jacksonville Airport and lastly, less than 1% of visitors used the Gainesville Airport. Mr. Lewis stated the typical visitor spent four nights in the county, a decrease of .1% year over year but there was an increase in the number of visitors who chose Ocala/Marion County as their primary destination.

Mr. Bailey requested to know the percentage of people Downs and St. Germain surveyed at local hotels vs those people surveyed at local events.

Mr. Lewis advised the information was not currently available but he would obtain the information and provide it to the council at a future meeting. He then discussed Top Accommodations which showed 2 out of 5 visitors used hotels or motels and showed a slight increase of 2% year over year for day trippers. The survey further indicated visiting friends and family, as well as, renting vacation homes followed as the top accommodations at 14% and 6%, respectively. The Top Activities included well known

tourism drivers such as visiting friends and family and visiting area springs as primary activities within the county. An increase in the number of people who visited the county to experience Downtown Ocala was also noted. The premier activity enjoyed by visitors was dining out because visitors can experience a great meal while participating in all of the other tourism drivers. Mr. Lewis went on to discuss the Quadrant Analysis which provided detailed information regarding the Ocala/Marion County tourism drivers as well as detailed marketing opportunities and successes. The tourism drivers experienced most often which exceeded the expectations of visitors were noted as visiting friends and family, visiting the area springs, relaxing and unwinding, attending horse-related activities and experiencing nature/the environment/birdwatching. Those things done less frequently by visitors but still exceeded their expectations were noted as canoeing/kayaking/tubing, biking/hiking/running, attending or participating in sporting tournaments/event attractions, attending horse-related activities and fishing/hunting. The aforementioned were further noted as great marketing opportunities. The tourism drivers which were done often or infrequently by visitors but met expectations were noted as visiting restaurants, visiting Downtown Ocala, shopping, visiting bars & nightclubs, playing golf or tennis, visiting Art galleries/museums or cultural events and enjoying the spa. Mr. Lewis advised six percent of visitors indicated the tourism drivers did not meet their expectations. He then stated travel parties visiting Ocala/Marion County spent \$342.00 per day totaling \$1,356.00 during their trip. The post trip evaluation indicated that 99% of visitors advised their trip met or exceeded expectations, 91% of visitors would recommend Ocala/Marion County to a friend and 96% would return to Ocala/Marion County in the future (2 out of 3 visitors or 66% would definitely return).

Dr. Jason Reynolds requested to know if the state of Florida numbers were reducing as it related to tourism.

Mr. St. Germain advised that Visit Florida's numbers fluctuate but overall, they were witnessing similar trends. The Visit Florida reports included visitors who traveled from out of state into Florida and Downs and St. Germain's reports include Floridians who travel within the state.

Ron Livsey out at 9:49

Tourist Development Tax Update, George Albright – Marion County Tax Collector

Mr. George Albright, Marion County Tax Collector, advised that Commissioner Carl Zalak reached out to him after the last TDC meeting to discuss concerns posed by members as it related to the collection of taxes for short-term rentals. He advised in January 2019 the Tax Collector's Office hired Host Compliance to assist with identifying short-term rentals and it cost \$25,000 for a six-month contract. Once the six-month term expired, the Tax Collector's Office barely recouped the \$25,000 spent to operate this collection operation. Host Compliance provided a list of raw data and the Tax Collector's Office would be required find the delinquent owners. Host Compliance then provided the county an additional six-month contract which ended with the COVID-19 pandemic. In

2020, another contract was secured with Host Compliance which was unsuccessful. Since that time, no other efforts were made regarding short-term rentals. Mr. Albright then advised he has located three companies as options to track short-term rentals. One of these companies goes by the name of Granicus, formerly known as Host Compliance. The Tax Collector's Office planned to review their options and discuss their findings over next few months to determine which company should be hired. Mr. Albright stated it would cost approximately \$70,000 to hire one of the aforementioned organizations and the other organizations would charge approximately \$110,000 a piece to track short-term rentals. At this time, he does not have a preferred organization. The county's in-house Certified Public Accountant started collecting the maximum amount of processing from the Tourist Development Department which generated \$35,000 in revenue to date.

Mr. Albright advised the Tax Collector's Office would have the necessary funds available to hire a vendor once a selection was made. He further stated their office was currently collecting between \$500-\$600 in short-term rental fees and was advised the amount should double after the implementation of this plan. Mr. Albright would like to decide which company to utilize by January 1, 2025.

Ron Livsey in at 9:53am

Funding Requests

Citrus County Kennel Club All-Breed Dog Show

Mr. Corry Locke, Group Sales Supervisor, presented a funding request from Citrus County Kennel Club All-Breed Dog Show. For the past three years, this event has been hosted at the World Equestrian Center. The event dates were July 5-7, 2024. The organization requested funding in the amount of \$5,012 which was also their recommended funding amount. The event planner estimated a room night guarantee of 358 rooms. Mr. Locke stated the estimated economic impact was noted at \$620,823 which was a 249% ROI. The event planner further advised the funds would be used for judges/officials, marketing, American Kennel Club Sanctioning Fee, printing, signage, equipment rental, video production and eligible event production expenses.

A motion was made by Christopher Fernandez, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to approve the recommendation for the requested funding amount of \$5,012.00 for the Citrus County Kennel Club All-Breed Dog Show to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

Staff Updates

Marketing and Communications Update

Ms. Loretta Shaffer, Tourism Development Director, introduced Ms. Jessica Heller who presented the Marketing and Communications Update. Ms. Heller discussed the Current Running Media which included some new print media sources such as a full-page ad in the Summer Edition of Flamingo Magazine, as well as, a full-page ad in Local Palate's summer issue. She then discussed some new digital placements which included a

commercial on Live TV developed through a Visit Florida Co-op that ran from April to June 2024. Additional media placements included Hulu Interactive and Disney+.

Ms. Heller then played the Hulu Interactive experience for the Tourist Development Council members.

Mr. Bailey requested to know the timeframe which the Hulu Interactive experience would run.

Ms. Heller advised the experience began on June 12, 2024.

Ms. Shaffer indicated she believe it would run either six or eight weeks.

It was clarified that the experience would end on August 30, 2024.

Ms. Heller then advised the Visit Florida Co-op normally runs four-weeks but they extended the timeframe until the end of June without any additional charge. She then discussed the Gateway Project Update Press Release, a partnership between the Tourist Development Department and the Marion County Public Relations team, which went out to the public on June 05, 2024. This purpose of this communication was to update the community on the Gateway progress and any potential road closures. At this time, specific road closure dates have not been provided but once the department is notified that communication would be shared with the public. Eight articles were published during the Press Release which reached 154.6 million people. Ms. Heller then discussed the Marion Insider's Guide video series hosted by Commissioner Zalak. The Tourist Development department distributed video teasers throughout the month of June and the first episode was released at the end of June.

Ms. Heller played the video teasers for the Tourist Development Council members and provided Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) to all members to prepare them for any questions posted by the community.

Ms. Wheeler stated the construction occurring on Interstate 75 currently was not a part of the Gateway Signage Project and this was emphasized through the public relations outreach.

Video was shown of Delamere creating the metal slabs used to build the Gateway Signage Project.

Florida Attractions Association Annual Conference Recap

Mr. Locke discussed the Florida Attractions Association Annual Conference which was held a few weeks prior to this meeting to celebrate their 75th Anniversary. The closing ceremony was held at Silver Springs State Park, one of the founding members of the organization. There were 280 total attendees which was more than originally anticipated. The Tourism Development Department sponsored the opening reception on Sunday June 9, 2024 which included an opening and welcoming address from Commissioner Michelle Stone and Ms. Loretta Shaffer. The department hosted a booth at the conference which housed a penny press and provided post-cards for attendees to

send to their family members. Congratulations was extended to the Tourist Development department for winning Best Booth out of 35 vendors who attended the Annual Conference.

Mr. Bailey advised the Florida Attractions Association Annual Conference was a major event for Ocala/Marion County. He indicated that a smaller city that hosts one large event has greater capacity to be attentive to large conference goers than a larger city with multiple large events occurring at the same time.

Mr. Locke then discussed the Accommodator's Focus Group which was held in June. There were about 15-17 hoteliers in attendance and the meeting lasted approximately two hours. The conversation included discussions about the STR report, room-night tracking and best practices. The staff would like to make this an annual meeting as it provided valuable information from hoteliers who interact with visitors on a daily basis.

Sales Update

Mr. Locke presented the Sales Update and discussed New Business which included the Charity Challenge Cup Gymnastics to be held March 7-9, 2025 with an estimated 200 room nights. This event was previously held in Gainesville, FL. Mr. Locke then directed the council to review the New Leads which included US Fastpitch and USSSA Fastpitch.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if different people would be playing in each of the events and if the attendees were all in the same age groups.

Mr. Locke advised some of the attendees may play in both events and there would be different age groups playing. He then discussed New Leads of The Sun Conference Swimming and Diving Conference Championships as well as the B.A.S.S. (Bassmaster) Fishing Tournament. He advised the staff was working to secure the B.A.S.S. Tournament. Mr. Locke then advised there were a number of great bodies of water in Marion County which allow for great Bass fishing. He stated that Orange Lake was recognized as either the #1 or #2 Best Fisheries by Bassmaster. He then advised that Orange Lake was not a large body of water and it would be hard to fit 150 boats on the lake. Therefore, the staff was trying to secure Lake Lochloosa in Alachua County which is connected to Orange Lake by a canal. The staff met with Marion County Parks and Recreation Department to propose the use of both bodies of water to create a larger fishing area. Mr. Locke advised there were no major updates to Ongoing Leads but noted the tradeshow and conferences the Sales Team planned to attend were listed.

TDT Collections/STR and Key Data Update

Ms. Wheeler advised the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) for the reporting period of May, which covered April revenues, totaled \$498,796.44. This was an increase of 17.36% or \$73,770.93 year over year with 2.77% from late taxes and penalties. The Smith Travel Research, STR Data, for May showed occupancy at 58% which was an increase of 2.6% year over year, ADR was \$114.81 which was an increase of 2.3% from last year and RevPAR was at \$66.59 which was an increase of 5% from last year. For the running

twelve months, occupancy was down 8.3%, ADR was up 2.7% and RevPAR was down 5.9%. The Visit Florida statewide data for May showed that occupancy was at 68.5% which was an increase of 2%, ADR was \$185.30 which was an increase of .4% from last year and RevPAR was \$126.98 which was an increase of 2.4%. Ms. Wheeler then discussed Key Data (Short-Term Rental Data) occupancy which was 34.2%, a decrease of 19% from last year. The Average Daily Rate or ADR was \$137.00 which did not change from last year, RevPAR was \$38.00 which was a decrease of \$8.00 from last year and Nights Available (nights that could be stayed in a short-term rental) were 6,290 which was an increase of 34% from last year's total of 4,681. For the running twelve-months, occupancy was down 9%, ADR was down 7%, RevPAR was down 20% but nights available increased 26%.

Ms. Shaffer advised the TDC Events Calendar was in the packet.

Notation for Record

Ms. Shaffer advised the Economic and Tourism Development Report as Required by Section 288.1226 and 288.904, Florida Statutes was in the packet.

Ms. Shaffer advised the Growth Services Department provided a pamphlet with a QR code regarding six community workshops to be held around the community.

Ms. Shaffer discussed the successful Fourth of July collaboration with the City of Ocala.

Mr. Bailey advised the Sales Report was in the packet.

Mr. Bailey advised the TDC Attendance record was in the packet.

Old Business

Mr. Bailey called for any old business and none was brought forth.

New Business

Mr. Bailey called for any new business and none was brought forth.

Public Comment

Upcoming Meeting

Mr. Bailey stated, that the next TDC meeting will be on Thursday, August 22, 2024.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.

Jeff Bailey, Chairman