

## **Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting**

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, October 23, 2025

9:00 a.m.

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

Mr. Rus Adams 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. Please note the published agenda had a scrivener's error noting the start time as 8am however all communications and Sunshine Notices have the correct time of 9am.

### **Roll Call**

Present:

Jeff Bailey, Christopher Fernandez, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Bobby Walker, Commissioner Carl Zalak, Rus Adams

Staff:

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

Guests:

Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Elodie Badoual, Miles Partnership; Hayley Radich, Miles Partnership; Illeana Frascone, Miles Partnership; Kyle Rose, Hilton Ocala; Danielle Trees, HITS LLC; Tammy McCann, Marion County Tax Collector's Office; Sarah Thacker, World Equestrian Center, Erin Santangelo, World Equestrian Center; Paresh Chhotu, Holiday Garden Inn, Jason Reynolds; Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park

### **Notice of Publication**

Notice was published on the County Website on January 29, 2025 and subsequently updated to

include Teams information on March 13, 2025.

#### ***Approval of Minutes***

**A motion was made by Jeff Bailey, seconded by Commissioner Carl Zalak, to adopt the minutes from the September 25, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

#### ***Acknowledgment of Financials – September 2025***

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Christopher Fernandez, to review and approve September 2025 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

#### **Report From Chair**

##### ***Introduction of Incoming TDC Member, Bobby Walker***

Mr. Rus Adams introduced Bobby Walker, a new member of the Tourist Development Council, representing Canyons Zipline & Adventure Park.

Mr. Adams welcomed Mr. Walker and asked if he had any questions or comments for the Council or the Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB) staff.

Mr. Walker shared that he was happy to be part of the Council, noting that he represents Canyons Zipline and would be glad to answer any related questions. He expressed enthusiasm about serving on the Council and mentioned that, as a new member, he would likely remain fairly quiet during his first meeting.

Mr. Adams jokingly remarked that he did not expect Mr. Walker to remain quiet in future meetings.

Mr. Walker replied that he was not shy and would contribute more as he became familiar with the Council's proceedings.

##### ***Recognition of outgoing TDC Member, Jason Reynolds***

Mr. Rus Adams recognized Mr. Jason Reynolds for his contributions to the Tourist Development Council. Mr. Adams thanked Mr. Reynold's for his decision to communicate his scheduling constraints with the Council. Mr. Adams presented Mr. Reynolds with a plaque on behalf of Marion County and the Tourist Development Council, reading:

“Your excellence in leadership is appreciated. Thank you for your dedication and hard work.”

Mr. Reynolds expressed his appreciation to the Council and staff, noting that he greatly enjoyed his time on the board. He commended Loretta Shaffer and her team for their outstanding work and explained that his decision to step down was based on scheduling conflicts that prevented him from attending meetings consistently.

#### ***Presentation: Short Term Rental Compliance Update, Marion County Tax Collector, George Albright and Deputy Tax Collector, Tammy McCann***

Mr. Rus Adams introduced Deputy Tax Collector Tammy McCann, who presented the Short-Term Rental Compliance Update.

Ms. McCann explained that this presentation marked the first time the Tax Collector's Office had provided a fiscal year-end summary, which she hoped the Council would find informative. Ms. McCann advised that Marion County Tax Collector, Mr. George Albright would not be present for the presentation due to a scheduling conflict. She shared that the presentation would include additional details about the RISE Agreement, noting that one of the Council members who had inquired about it was not present. Ms. McCann clarified that, under Florida State Statute, the County Tax Collector serves as an agent for the Florida Department of Revenue (DOR). As such, all financial information related to short-term rentals or other taxable accommodations is confidential. She emphasized that she is legally prohibited from disclosing specific taxpayer information, such as the identity or earnings of individual property owners, as doing so would constitute a misdemeanor offense. Quoting a fellow tax collector, Ms. McCann humorously remarked, "I'm too pretty to go to jail". She stated that this prohibition also extends to disclosing the names of top Airbnb or other short-term rental operators in the county. Ms. McCann assured the Council that all data included in her presentation had been reviewed by their legal counsel to ensure that no identifiable or confidential information was included. She reiterated that the office could only provide generalized data, and that staff members would not share specific taxpayer information with the public.

Mr. Jeff Bailey noted that this confidentiality requirement was similar to STR data reporting practices, where averages may be shared but not individual occupancy or rate details.

Ms. McCann confirmed this, stating that while generalizations can be provided, specific taxpayer data cannot be disclosed. Ms. Tammy McCann continued her presentation with a visual overview of short-term rental activity across Marion County. She displayed a map generated from the Deckard Technologies software, which identifies short-term rental properties throughout the County. Ms. McCann explained that the map groups properties by general area rather than specific parcel information. Notably, there has been significant growth in short term rental properties near World Equestrian Center (WEC), where 322 short-term rentals have been identified, as well as an increasing concentration around Rainbow River. The Deckard software allows the Tax Collector's Office to further drill down into property-level detail and classifies short term rentals using a three-color system: grey being properties that have been identified as short term rentals but the owners of the properties have not been identified, red being properties that have been identified and notified of non-compliance but are not yet in compliance and green being properties that are fully compliant with the county ordinance and are reporting and remitting tax properly. Ms. McCann stated that the system has proven to be highly effective in improving compliance and tracking short-term rental activity countywide.

Mr. Bailey inquired about enforcement efforts concerning properties identified in red.

Ms. McCann responded that her office continues to pursue those properties actively. She shared that the Tax Collector's Office recently redesigned its notification letters to use firmer language, especially in the third and final notice, which strongly urges property owners to comply. She noted that some recipients initially mistake the letters for scams but typically follow up once they

verify the legitimacy of the notice.

Mr. Bailey asked whether the presentation included totals or percentages showing the number of identified short-term rentals, those in compliance, and those remaining out of compliance.

Ms. McCann stated that while the current presentation did not include those percentages, future updates could include that level of detail.

Mr. Bailey added that he was interested in understanding how much overall progress had been made in improving compliance rates.

Commissioner Carl Zalak inquired whether the data included campgrounds or other similar accommodations and requested clarification on how state statute applies to such properties.

Ms. McCann confirmed that campgrounds are included in the dataset. She explained that, under Florida Department of Revenue guidelines, a property is exempt from the Tourist Development Tax if more than 50% of its sites are rented on a long-term basis.

Commissioner Zalak commented that there had been past discussions at the state level about making such exemptions easier to obtain, citing concerns that this was being tied to affordable housing legislation. He emphasized that such changes could negatively impact tourism revenue and suggested that Marion County, along with its Restaurant and Lodging Association, should consider opposing any proposed legislation that broadens these exemptions.

Mr. Bailey noted he was documenting that recommendation during the meeting. He also asked what is considered a long-term rental.

Ms. McCann answered that long-term rentals are defined as any rental which takes place for six months and one day or longer.

Commissioner Zalak further stated that, given the large number of RV sites in Marion County, these exemptions likely remove several hundred units from the county's active tax roll.

Ms. McCann agreed and added that many local RV parks operate a mix of RV sites and mobile homes or cottages, which further complicates classification under state tax regulations.

Ms. Dana Olesky provided clarification on the applicable Florida Statute regarding exemptions for trailer camps, recreational vehicle parks, and mobile home parks. She explained that when more than 50% of the total rental units within such a property are occupied by tenants who have continuously resided there for more than three months, the property owner may file for an exemption from the Tourist Development Tax.

Commissioner Carl Zalak noted that this confirmed a recent legislative adjustment, which reduced the qualifying threshold from six months to three months.

Ms. McCann further explained that the exemption is not automatic; property owners must formally file with the Florida Department of Revenue to receive the exemption. Once the Department of Revenue processes the request, either the Department of Revenue or the property itself provides written verification to the Marion County Tax Collector's Office

confirming that the exemption has been granted.

Commissioner Carl Zalak inquired about how the Marion County Tax Collectors Office and Department of Revenue would be updated if the status of a property were to change.

Ms. McCann advised that she was unsure but assumed the property owner would be required to notify the Department of Revenue of any changes in their exemption status.

Ms. Dana Olesky further clarified that the Florida State Statute does require that a mobile home park has at least ten or more mobile home lots be rented or leased for a period of at least one year along with other nuances related to the type of property that is being rented. The language also applies to trailer camps, recreational vehicle parks and mobile home parks exempt certain mobile home lots which are taxable.

Commissioner Carl Zalak stated that his main concern was ensuring that, from a tourism standpoint, any discussion surrounding exemptions for recreational vehicle parks or mobile home parks does not become tied to affordable housing legislation. He cautioned that if this issue becomes wrapped up in affordable housing, emphasizing that such a change would have a greater impact on hoteliers and the collection of tourist development tax than even the effects of Airbnb or other short-term rental platforms.

Ms. McCann presented a slide provided by Deckard Technologies showing the types and platforms of short-term rentals identified throughout Marion County. She noted that the majority of listings were found on Airbnb and VRBO, though several lesser-known platforms had also been identified, including one called Hipcamp. Ms. McCann explained that Hipcamp was unknown to her until a resident called about it, describing it as a barter-style system where, for example, an individual might rent out an RV site in exchange for purchasing products, such as soap, from the host. She reported that there were currently 117 Hipcamp listings identified in Marion County.

Commissioner Carl Zalak asked whether the entire transaction model for Hipcamp was based on trade.

Ms. McCann responded that this type of arrangement represented a gray area for the Tourist Development Tax, noting that her office was actively consulting with other jurisdictions to determine how similar listings were being handled.

Ms. Olesky added that Hipcamp listings can include campgrounds, RVs, or tent camping sites, often connected to agritourism properties. She noted examples such as a campground in Fort McCoy offering 103 tent sites and another farm venue that also hosted weddings and agritourism events, such as blueberry farms or small agricultural properties offering overnight stays.

Commissioner Zalak asked whether these types of operations are required to be permitted.

Ms. Olesky clarified that permitting depends on the nature of the structures. Existing buildings used as part of an ongoing farm operation may fall under agritourism exemptions; however, any new construction, RV hookups, or transitional lodging typically requires a permit and, in some cases, a special use permit.

Mr. Jeff Bailey commented that one Hipcamp property in Lakeland listed 84 sites starting at \$50 per night, noting that at that scale, the operation functions similarly to a hotel.

Ms. McCann also mentioned another emerging platform, Campspot, which appeared to operate in a similar manner as Hipcamp by offering RV and camping sites through private landowners.

Mr. Christopher Fernandez added that he had personally used Campspot, explaining that the platform generally promotes private, low-density camping experiences, often featuring one or two secluded sites on rural properties for travelers who prefer nontraditional accommodations.

Ms. McCann continued her presentation, referencing a discussion from a recent Tourist Development Tax Conference regarding RV delivery services. She described a common scenario in which an individual rents an RV and delivers it to a destination, such as Disney's Fort Wilderness Lodge, for a guest's stay. She clarified that in such cases, the tourist development tax is still applicable, and the guest is responsible for paying the tax as part of their stay, since Fort Wilderness Lodge remits the tax on behalf of the rental. The RV owner, however, is not the one paying the tourist tax directly in this arrangement.

Ms. Olesky added that there are several RV rental platforms, such as RV Share and Outdoor RV, that operate under similar models. She noted that some of these platforms do not automatically collect or remit taxes if the RV owner delivers the unit themselves.

Commissioner Zalak asked whether Hipcamp and similar platforms are also required to pay tourist development tax.

Ms. McCann confirmed that they are. She explained that although the classification was initially unclear, any property owner renting space should be paying both the 4% Tourist Development Tax and state sales tax. Ms. McCann concluded this portion of her report by noting that it was interesting to see how these new types of rental arrangements are emerging.

She then transitioned to a review of the enforcement letters sent to property owners. She displayed a chart illustrating the number of letters sent by Deckard Technologies each month since the start of the program. She explained that the blue line represented the first-round letters sent to newly identified property owners. She stated that the first letter had been an introductory notice informing property owners of the county's partnership with Deckard Technologies, but that she had recently revised the letters to reflect the county's changes in registration system, since Deckard's platform was no longer being used for that purpose. When the program first launched in January, 18 letters were issued. By March, the number had risen to 444 letters, followed by 297 in April, 64 in May, 12 in July, and 85 in August. She noted that the increase in August likely reflected seasonal property owners returning to Marion County or listing their homes for rent before leaving for the summer. The yellow line, she explained, represented the second letter which was a more formal notice referencing the Marion County ordinance and outlining violations for unregistered rentals. For the second letter, 393 notices were sent in April, 247 in May, 74 in June, 29 in July, and 26 in August.

Mr. Jeff Bailey asked whether owners who only rent seasonally would receive new letters each

time they relisted their property.

Ms. McCann responded that they should not receive a new first letter once identified.

Ms. Olesky clarified that Mr. Bailey's question referred to seasonal reactivation, where a property stops renting and then resumes during the high season.

Mr. Bailey followed up, asking what happens if a property owner receives all three letters and still fails to comply.

Ms. McCann replied that her office is still developing a process for those cases, but noted that under Florida State Statute, the county is authorized to assess penalties and interest.

Chris Fernandez out at 9:28am

She continued stating that the County can also retroactively collect unpaid Tourist Development Taxes for up to three years if the owner has never been compliant. She added that the red line on the chart represented the third and final letter, which formally warns of potential penalties and back taxes. She reported 341 third letters sent in May, 149 in June, 151 in July, and 31 in August.

Chris Fernandez in at 9:29am

Ms. McCann also reviewed the number of new short-term rental accounts created by month: 13 in February, 11 in March, 79 in April, 115 in May, followed by 58 each in June and July, 20 in August, and 8 in September. She noted that the current total number of registered short-term rental accounts is 1,269. Ms. McCann concluded that the declining number of new accounts likely reflects that most seasonal operators have now been identified, adding that she expects activity to increase again during the winter months when snowbirds return to the area. Ms. McCann continued her presentation by discussing the updates made to the enforcement letters sent to short-term rental property owners. She stated that the letters included in the council's packet reflected a complete overhaul of the previous versions, which were initially designed when the county first contracted with Deckard Technologies. She explained that the original first letter had simply introduced Deckard and explained that the county would be using their platform to identify short-term rental properties. However, it provided limited guidance about the registration process and did not establish a specific timeline for compliance. Ms. McCann said the new version now clarifies that Marion County is not contracted with any third-party platform and that it is the sole responsibility of each property owner to register directly with the Marion County Tax Collector's Office. The letter now specifies a 30-day registration requirement, which had previously not been introduced until the second letter. She explained that if a property owner fails to register within 30 days, a second letter is issued, granting an additional 10 days to comply. The language was also revised from "10 business days" to simply "10 days," since registration can be completed online at any time. Ms. McCann emphasized that the new letters make clear that failure to register is a misdemeanor, and that property owners are personally responsible for compliance, regardless of the online platform they use. She noted that Airbnb, VRBO, and similar companies do not collect or remit local Tourist Development Taxes on behalf of Marion County. She shared that some property owners have disputed this, believing that Airbnb collects all

applicable taxes. However, she has referred them directly to Airbnb's website, which lists the counties in Florida where the company has collection agreements, confirming that Marion County is not included.

Mr. Adams asked whether the county had researched the process for becoming contracted with Airbnb.

Ms. McCann responded that her office had not yet pursued that option. She noted that only 23 of Florida's 67 counties currently have such agreements.

Mr. Adams asked whether those counties were larger or smaller than Marion County.

Ms. McCann replied that it was a mix, citing Lee County and Orange County as examples of counties currently under contract with Airbnb. She added that the contract language was often the reason many tax collectors chose not to participate, explaining that Airbnb's standard terms prohibit counties from conducting audits of their records.

Ms. Olesky added that under Airbnb's current structure, even when the platform collects taxes, the payments are aggregated and reported as a single total, without any breakdown by individual property or location.

Ms. McCann stated that both the Florida Tourist Development Tax Association (FTDTA) and Tourist Development Councils statewide are hopeful that future legislation will require greater transparency from these platforms. She stated that if such a law passes, it could allow counties to receive a single remittance directly from the platforms, simplifying compliance tracking and enforcement. Ms. McCann continued by reviewing the details of the third and final enforcement letter issued to noncompliant short-term rental property owners. She explained that this letter is more strongly worded than the previous notices and serves as the final warning before penalties and interest are applied. In the earlier version of the process, the third letter allowed property owners an additional 30 days to comply. However, under the new structure, that timeframe has been reduced to 10 days following the second letter. Ms. McCann stated that, collectively, a property owner now has a total of 40 days from the time of the initial notification to complete their registration before penalties are assessed. She further explained that once the final 10-day window expires, the county is authorized to implement penalties and interest in accordance with the Marion County Ordinance and Florida State Statute. The applicable interest rate is 11–12% compounded daily over the course of a year, and while the Marion County Ordinance specifies a \$10 penalty, the state statute allows for a \$50 penalty.

Mr. Adams stated that after reviewing the revised letters, he agreed they were much improved, but had a question regarding the language in the third letter. He read aloud the section stating, "the county will calculate the estimated taxes due including penalties and interest for up to three years if you continue to operate the rental property in noncompliance with Marion County." He asked whether the three-year period referenced in the letter applied retroactively or began after the notice was issued.

Ms. McCann clarified that it applies retroactively.

Ms. Olesky noted that the county had not been pursuing back taxes.

Ms. McCann confirmed that that was correct, adding that Tax Collector George Albright's approach has been to focus on encouraging compliance moving forward rather than penalizing operators for past nonpayment. She noted that most property owners have been grateful for the opportunity to register without retroactive penalties.

Mr. Adams suggested adding the phrase "in arrears" to the third letter for clarity. He explained that doing so would make the language more clear. He also recommended softening the tone slightly to encourage cooperation, noting that the potential of being charged for 36 months of back taxes at once could deter voluntary compliance.

Ms. McCann acknowledged the suggestion, stating that the third letter typically generates the most phone calls from property owners.

Mr. Adams then asked whether any of the letters, particularly the third notice, were sent as registered mail or otherwise required proof of delivery.

Ms. McCann responded that the Deckard system sends all letters, so no certified mail is used for the initial correspondence. However, in cases where her office must issue an invoice directly or pursue long-term delinquencies, she sends registered letters to ensure the recipient receives them. She added that this step is taken when the letter includes a detailed breakdown of taxes owed based on prior reporting history. She concluded this portion of the presentation by asking if there were any additional questions regarding the letters, to which no questions were raised. Ms. McCann transitioned to the next portion of her presentation, reviewing the revenue comparison between fiscal years 2023–2024 and 2024–2025. She stated that overall revenue increased by approximately \$700,000 between the two fiscal years. She noted that the first slide represented FY 2023–2024, and the second represented FY 2024–2025, which reflects the first year of implementation with Deckard Technologies beginning on February 28, 2025. Ms. McCann explained that she consolidated all categories of short-term rental properties including mobile homes, individual apartments, and single-family residences into a single reporting group labeled "Short-Term Rentals". She shared that for fiscal year 2023–2024, revenue from short-term rentals totaled \$409,730.71. The hotel, motel, and inn category, which continues to serve as the largest contributor to Tourist Development Tax collections due to its higher occupancy volume, generated roughly \$4.07 million during that same period. Property management companies, which represent owners renting individual homes but are categorized separately in the county's system, brought in \$122,057.53. Meanwhile, RV sites and campgrounds produced \$311,333.64, which Ms. McCann noted was slightly lower than short-term rental revenue but higher than the amount collected from property management companies. When comparing those figures to fiscal year 2024–2025, Ms. McCann emphasized the positive impact of the Deckard technology system, explaining that short-term rental revenue rose by approximately \$173,000, increasing to \$582,731.83. Hotels, motels, and inn collections reached \$5.3 million, which she attributed in part to the tourism team's efforts and major events such as Rock the Country, which significantly boosted visitation and overnight stays. Property management company revenue remained consistent year over year, with only a slight decline compared to the prior fiscal period.

Mr. Bailey initiated a discussion by observing that both the property management and RV park categories had shown slight declines compared to the previous year. He noted that, as

Commissioner Zalak had mentioned earlier, there may be value in increasing communication and outreach to campground operators to clarify their obligations and close potential loopholes. Mr. Bailey commended the progress made in short-term rental compliance, remarking that the same approach could yield positive results with RV parks and campgrounds.

Mr. Adams added that some of the year-to-year variance might be the result of reclassification once the new Deckard system was fully implemented. He pointed out that while short-term rental revenue increased by approximately 25%, the decreases in the other categories were comparatively small.

Ms. McCann explained that RV site rentals are fluid by nature, as many individuals may rent a site one year and then sell the property or stop renting the following year. She noted that similar turnover occurs with short-term rentals, where owners frequently sell their homes or relocate, leading to fluctuations in the data. She further explained that some RV owners may transition their properties into property management arrangements if they no longer wish to handle operations themselves, which could account for minor shifts between the two categories. She added that several property owners had sold entirely, choosing to exit the short-term rental market. Ms. McCann reported that total revenue for fiscal year 2024–2025 increased by \$784,834.45 compared to the previous fiscal year which exceeded initial expectations. She attributed much of that success to improved compliance and enforcement efforts.

Mr. Adams noted that hotel revenue accounted for approximately 84% of total collections in 2023–2024, which he described as significant, adding that the distribution was “getting closer to that 80/20 rule that applies to so many things.”

Ms. McCann agreed, stating that hotels would likely continue to lead revenue collections, especially as new hotel construction particularly long-term stay properties continues.

Mr. Adams thanked Ms. McCann for her thorough and detailed presentation

Ms. McCann concluded by informing the Council that she would be out on leave and therefore unable to attend the November TDC meeting or the December annual meeting, but she planned to return in January. She encouraged members to reach out to her office with any questions in the meantime.

#### ***Proposed Tourist Development Council Meeting Dates 2026***

Mr. Adams welcomed Ms. Sky Wheeler to discuss potential future Tourist Development Council meeting dates for 2026.

Ms. Wheeler noted that the proposed schedule was included in the meeting agenda packet and followed the typical meeting structure with the exception of the January meeting which was proposed for the third Thursday of the month rather than the fourth as staff would be in Tallahassee for Florida Tourism Day late into the evening on the Wednesday of the fourth week. She noted that since there is no December TDC meeting, but rather the Annual Tourism Industry Meeting, staff felt they could effectively turn around and prepare for a Council meeting by January 15. Ms. Wheeler also noted that the November meeting was proposed for the third Thursday to avoid conflict with the Thanksgiving holiday. She stated that all remaining meetings

would follow the standard cadence. Ms. Wheeler clarified that staff was not seeking a vote at this time, but instead presenting the schedule for review and feedback. The proposed dates would return to the Council in November for formal adoption, providing ample time for members to ensure their calendars align.

Mr. Adams asked if there were any questions or comments regarding the proposed schedule, none were raised. He thanked Ms. Wheeler for the update.

### ***Annual Membership Eligibility Attestations***

Mr. Adams asked Ms. Wheeler to present on the Annual Membership Eligibility Attestations.

Ms. Wheeler explained that each Council member had a copy of the Marion County Tourist Development Council Annual Membership Eligibility Attestation form at their seat. She noted that this process originated several years ago as part of the County's response to audit recommendations, which emphasized the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date records verifying each member's eligibility to serve in their designated capacity on the Council. Ms. Wheeler requested that members complete the attestations before leaving the meeting so staff could collect and file them for recordkeeping. She added that this step is performed annually around the same time of the year.

Marion County Tourist Development Council Annual Membership Eligibility Attestation forms were completed by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Mr. Bobby Walker, Mr. Chris Fernandez, Mr. Jeff Bailey and Mr. Rus Adams and submitted for the record.

Mr. Adams thanked Ms. Wheeler for her presentation.

### **Funding Requests**

Mr. Adams welcomed Mr. Corry Locke to present on funding requests.

### ***Fiscal Year 2026 Event Funding Allocations***

Mr. Locke advised that there were no bid fee funding requests on the agenda so he would not be reviewing the bid fee funding allocations during the meeting and would focus on the room night generating funding allocations. He advised that there were three proposed funding requests on the agenda, two for HITS, LLC at \$10,000 per request and one for American Youth Football (AYF) for \$4,000. Mr. Locke advised that the funding requests for HITS, LLC were aligned with the funding guidelines and that the organization would need to achieve the estimated number of room nights in order to receive the requested funding of \$10,000. He noted that funding for AYF was previously approved for funding in August, however at that time AYF anticipated hosting a cheerleading competition along with a football competition however, the organization was unable to obtain the required equipment needed to host the cheerleading competition in Marion County and moved the cheerleading portion of the event outside of Marion County thus what would be presented was adjusted to account only for the football competition being hosted in Marion County. Mr. Locke asked if there were any questions. None were raised.

Mr. Adams advised that the voting process had changed to streamline the meeting. He stated that the Council would vote to approve the funding requests presented collectively rather than

as individual items. He asked for members of the Council to voice their opinions on separating the items if they choose to do so. No members expressed a desire to separate the items.

***Motion: HITS Ocala Winter Circuit Weeks 4-7 (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$10,000)***

***Motion: HITS Ocala Winter Circuit Weeks 8-10 (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$10,000)***

***Motion: Revised AYF Football Southeast Regional Championship (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$4,000)***

***A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Christopher Fernandez, to approve the funding requests for HITS Ocala Winter Circuit Weeks 4-7, HITS Ocala Winter Circuit Weeks 8-10 and Revised AYF Football Southeast Regional Championship for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).***

#### **Staff Updates**

***Motion: America 250 – Media and Marketing Plan***

Mr. Rus Adams welcomed Ms. Loretta Shaffer to provide staff updates.

Ms. Shaffer began by presenting on the America 250 – Media and Marketing Plan. Ms. Shaffer began by noting that, as discussed at the prior meeting, the America 250 celebration will be a major initiative at the local, state, and national levels. She stated that Marion County is fortunate to have strong support from local and state leadership, including Governor Ron DeSantis, Visit Florida, county administration, and the county Commissioners. Ms. Shaffer stated that the presentation would outline a proposal for a seven-month, multi-channel marketing and public relations campaign , which staff would continue to refine and finalize over the coming months. The purpose of the campaign is to ensure that Ocala/Marion County is among the first destinations in Florida to launch a dedicated America 250 initiative, allowing the community to capitalize early on executing a robust and targeted America 250 campaign. She advised that staff would be seeking approval to spend \$500,000 from the tourism reserve line item to fund the campaign. The proposed initiative would promote events and activities scheduled to begin in March and continue through July 4, 2026. Ms. Shaffer advised that the campaign would strategically align with Visit Florida's cooperative program, which offers a 50/50 cost-share match opportunity. This collaboration would also allow staff to maximize exposure during shoulder season months in late spring and early summer, driving both visitation and local participation. She went on to explain that the creative direction of the campaign would have an All-American theme, capturing the patriotic spirit of the celebration appealing to first-time visitors and encouraging residents and brand loyalists to get out and experience the destination during this unique time. Staff intended to partner with the local tourism industry stakeholders and the business community to promote destination wide packages, brand awareness, and generate long-term economic impact. Ms. Shaffer noted that Miles Partnership, the County's contracted

marketing agency, would serve as the lead consultant for this project. She shared that Ileana Frascone with Miles Partnership, who is expecting a child, would be joining the meeting remotely to present the campaign overview. Ms. Shaffer concluded by stating that both County staff and the Miles team were prepared to answer any questions from the Council before turning the floor over to Ms. Frascone to present the campaign details.

Mr. Bailey asked if the \$500,000 would come from the County's General Fund.

Ms. Shaffer clarified that the funding would come from Tourism Development funds, not from the General Fund.

Mr. Bailey then asked whether the funding would be matched by the state.

Ms. Shaffer explained that while the State of Florida has not yet finalized its America 250 media plan, both the County and Visit Florida share the same media agency, which allows for strategic alignment. She stated that Visit Florida is expected to announce its cooperative advertising opportunities in November, and once those details are available, staff will identify the most cost-effective partnerships that align with Marion County's marketing goals. She noted that Visit Florida's larger budget will likely provide additional co-op opportunities that the County can leverage to extend its campaign reach. Ms. Shaffer added that today's presentation includes new marketing components, some modeled after successful Visit Florida initiatives, and stated that the campaign plan is still being refined. She stated that staff would return to the Council early next year with a detailed breakdown of expenditures once the campaign launches.

Mr. Bailey confirmed that the funding request was for \$500,000, not \$1 million.

Ms. Shaffer affirmed and stated that the goal is to achieve approximately \$1 million in total marketing value through state cost-share opportunities and partnership leverage.

Commissioner Zalak asked whether a project number had been established.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed that it had.

Ms. Ileana Frascone, representing Miles Partnership, joined the meeting remotely and began by expressing appreciation for the opportunity to present, noting that the team was excited to share the campaign update even though they were unable to attend in person. She mentioned that Ms. Elodie had the presentation ready to display and offered to share the Google link with attendees if that would be easier.

Ms. Sky Wheeler responded that the Miles team was welcome to share the presentation if able, and that staff also had the file pulled up on their end.

Ms. Elodie Badoual, representing Miles Partnership, noted that she did not have screen-sharing permission to advance the slides.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that those settings could not be changed during the meeting and advised that Ms. Candace Shelton would advance the slides for the presentation.

Ms. Ileana Frascone thanked the Council for allowing the Miles Partnership team to join remotely

and expressed enthusiasm about sharing a dedicated media strategy and approach for promoting the America 250th anniversary celebration. She noted that there has been significant national excitement about how destinations across the country plan to celebrate and that it was exciting to see Ocala/Marion County's proactive approach come to fruition. She explained that the purpose of her presentation was to highlight key promotional opportunities for the destination tied to this celebration. Ms. Frascone introduced her team. Joining her as co-presenter was Ms. Elodie Badoual, the Account Director managing the Marion County account. Also supporting behind the scenes was Ms. Haley Radich, the Account Supervisor, who was unable to present due to illness. Ms. Frascone introduced herself as the Vice President of Client Services at Miles Partnership and said she was pleased to represent the team for this important presentation.

Ms. Frascone began with an overview of the America 250 campaign, explaining that the goal is to position Ocala/Marion County as Florida's premier travel destination for patriotic celebration during the late spring and summer shoulder season, helping to generate both community pride and economic development. The campaign will be supported by a \$500,000 budget and implemented over a seven-month period, running from January 1 through July 4, 2026. She described the target audiences for the campaign, noting that the primary audience includes leisure travelers aged 25–64, particularly families, couples, multigenerational travelers, and road trippers seeking affordable outdoor getaways. The secondary audience, she said, includes history enthusiasts, equestrian travelers, nature lovers, and regional visitors exploring America 250 heritage routes, national parks, and historic landmarks. Ms. Frascone then described the core campaign strategies which focused on amplifying destination awareness, telling the story of Marion County as an All-American destination, and creating unified messaging across all touchpoints. The campaign will integrate local events, dining, and package offerings, with the ultimate goal of driving economic impact and encouraging repeat visitation. She outlined the three main objectives for the campaign which were to elevate awareness of Ocala/Marion County through emotional storytelling, drive measurable ROI through engagement and visitation that leads to economic growth and generate long-term return on opportunity (ROO) by inspiring community pride, advocacy, and participation that extend beyond the America 250 celebration. Ms. Frascone stated that campaign success would be evaluated through a comprehensive set of performance metrics, with monthly wrap-up reports provided by media partners. The metrics included Awareness KPIs which were impressions, reach, and video completion rates, Engagement KPIs which were click-through rates, content interactions, and landing page visits, Conversion KPIs which were online travel agency (OTA) referrals, bookings, arrival lift, and spending lift and Advocacy KPIs which were social shares, earned media coverage, and partner participation. She also discussed the geographic focus of the campaign, which would remain consistent with previous strategies but with some notable changes. The primary markets will include Florida drive markets such as Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Tallahassee, excluding Ocala/Marion County itself. The secondary markets will target southeastern drive markets within a 6–9.5-hour drive time, including Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Birmingham, and Nashville. Ms. Frascone then turned the presentation over to Ms. Badoual to review the paid media tactics included in the proposed campaign plan, noting that she would return later in the presentation.

Ms. Elodie Badoual began her portion of the presentation by explaining that this section would outline how the paid media strategy comes together for the America 250 campaign. She noted

that the plan being presented represented the big-picture framework, which would continue to be refined and solidified once Visit Florida's co-op program opportunities were finalized, allowing the County to maximize its investment. She explained that the campaign was designed to move travelers through the marketing funnel from awareness to engagement and ultimately to conversion. At the top of the funnel, the campaign would focus on building reach and visibility through digital, out-of-home, and video streaming media. In the middle stage, engagement would be driven through display ads, social media, and native content, encouraging interaction and traffic to the campaign website. Finally, at the conversion level, tactics would focus on online travel agencies (OTAs) and search advertising to move consumers from discovery to booking.

She then transitioned into a review of the media mix, starting with digital advertising, which would provide a consistent campaign presence from January through July. This approach would keep Ocala/Marion County top-of-mind with audiences as they scrolled, streamed, and planned trips particularly ramping up around Memorial Day and July 4th, when travel interest peaks. AdGenuity would be used for connected and display advertising, targeting users engaging with patriotic, event-related, and travel-related content. This always-on placement would run from January to July 1<sup>st</sup> to keep Ocala/Marion County visible across screens and devices aiding in building awareness. She noted that Smithsonian Media would provide a national storytelling platform, offering both credibility and historical connection through an interactive America 250 map that would feature Ocala/Marion County within a broader historical context. Ms. Badoual advised that Miles Partnership was still reviewing partnership details, but that the Smithsonian collaboration would be a strong fit for enhancing the campaign's credibility. Next, she highlighted partnership with AARP and stated that it would be perfect for reaching snowbirds and active travelers, especially those who love Florida road trips through short adverts in January, March and May all timed around the shoulder season and key planning windows when the audience is looking for travel inspiration. AAA, with its extensive membership base, would complement this effort by promoting Ocala/Marion County's America 250 storytelling across its travel media channels, connecting drive-market travelers during the early spring season. Ms. Badoual continued with an overview of social media and search advertising, which she described as working hand in hand to connect all aspects of the campaign. Social media would drive storytelling and engagement, while search would capture travel intent and drive conversions. These components would run continuously from January through July 1<sup>st</sup>, utilizing Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube with carousel ads, short videos, and retargeting strategies to maintain visibility once users engaged with the content. Google's Performance Max campaigns would be used to capture searches for Florida trips, patriotic events, and summer road trips, directing users to the dedicated campaign landing page featuring itineraries, things to do, and partner offers. The next focus was out-of-home (OOH) advertising, which Ms. Badoual described as the top-of-funnel driver meant to dominate key highways and travel routes with bold, patriotic creative. Digital billboards would be placed in Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Gainesville, ensuring multiple points of exposure for travelers headed toward Ocala/Marion County that would also run from January through July. Complementing this effort, a mobile extension would be introduced through Carvertise, deploying a fleet of wrapped vehicles featuring "Road to Ocala" creative and scannable QR codes linking directly to the campaign website. This 12-week campaign would run in high-traffic areas such as Orlando and Tampa, serving as a moving awareness tool.

In addition, LED trucks would be deployed during major weekends and events, such as Memorial Day and local community celebrations, acting as mobile billboards for 5–30 days at a time. Ms. Badoual also discussed the use of audio streaming which would allow for connectivity with people while they are traveling on the road. The messaging would be paired with OOH creative so that travelers hear it, see it and remember it, this would help inspire visitation to turn planning and intent into booked stays. Ms. Badoual advised Miles Partnership was exploring platforms like SiriusXM, iHeart and Spotify for its audio streaming initiatives to reach travelers during drivetime, road trips and streaming moments. Miles Partnership would pair history podcasts, road trip playlists and car ads with OOH presence for full coverage across the entire journey which would reinforce the America 250 messaging. This initiative would run for approximately twelve weeks. Transitioning into the lower-funnel tactics, Ms. Badoual described efforts focused on driving direct bookings from travelers already researching Florida getaways and America 250-related experiences. Through Tripadvisor, Ocala/Marion County would be featured with a sponsored destination page for three months, showcasing events, lodging, and attractions related to the America 250 celebration. Similarly, Expedia would be used to target travelers searching for Florida vacations, redirecting those considering Orlando or Tampa to Ocala/Marion County through creative ad placements and promotional offers. Both campaigns would also run for three months. She then handed the presentation back to Ms. Frascone to continue the discussion.

Ms. Ileana Frascone resumed the presentation to discuss the earned media and public relations (PR) amplification component of the campaign, explaining that this strategy would play a key role in reinforcing mid- and lower-funnel engagement by extending the campaign's reach beyond paid media. She stated that many of the ideas being presented would include content partnerships to drive visitation, build advocacy and deliver long term return on opportunity that would continue beyond the America 250 celebration. She explained that this approach was focused on generating buzz and media coverage, while also driving traveler intent through a mix of owned and earned channels, targeting both Florida and Southeast drive markets. Some of the opportunities under consideration include America 250 satellite media tours, press and media familiarization (FAM) trips, and grassroots advocacy efforts designed to engage both residents and visitors. One such initiative would invite the community to participate in a storytelling campaign centered on the theme "What America Means to Me in Ocala." Ms. Frascone noted that these efforts would be timed along a sample campaign timeline running from late spring through early summer, leading directly into the July 4th events. Ms. Frascone then summarized the four key phases of the integrated media approach. The first phase was to launch and inspire, this initial phase would establish baseline awareness and introduce the America 250 theme in connection with Ocala/Marion County's identity as an All-American destination. The second phase was to engage and educate which would deepen engagement and planning intent through storytelling and interactive content. The third phase was the peak season crescendo which would capitalize on summer travel energy and patriotic pride, encourage bookings, drive attendance and showcase community celebration. The final phase was to sustain and celebrate which would focus on reinforcing advocacy and community pride. She went on to outline the anticipated timeline for campaign execution. Planning and strategy development would occur in November and December, during which the creative concepts, campaign framework, and media planning would be finalized. Production would begin in December, quickly followed by campaign activation in

January, when the first wave of paid media would launch. The peak season, from May through July, would capture the summer visitation period and culminate with the July 4th "crescendo". The campaign would conclude at the end of July, with a comprehensive performance report and return-on-investment summary. Ms. Frascone closed by expressing gratitude to the Council for their time and engagement, noting that both she and the Miles Partnership team were available to answer any questions.

Mr. Adams thanked the presenters for a well-thought-out and detailed presentation. He then opened the floor for questions from the Council.

Mr. Bailey inquired about the Carvertise mobile advertising component, asking how the program functioned in practice. He questioned whether the cars were driven by county staff or if the vehicles were specifically contracted for the campaign. He added that, from a public perspective, seeing a wrapped vehicle might not immediately appear as an official advertisement.

Ms. Badoual explained that the program utilized a fleet of wrapped vehicles, typically between five and ten cars, that were both driven and strategically parked around major events to maximize visibility. The campaign team would coordinate with event organizers to ensure that the audiences at those venues matched the target demographics. The vehicles would display the campaign's creative design and include QR codes that linked directly to the America 250 campaign landing page, allowing audiences to access more information.

Ms. Wheeler added further detail, noting that the cars were typically rideshare vehicles. As passengers were picked up and dropped off in geofenced event areas, the campaign's technology would allow for retargeted digital ads to be served to those passengers later on. She explained that the program was highly effective and that the County had recently won a Flagler Award for its use of this strategy. She added that the campaign provided a strong return on investment.

Ms. Frascone added that Carvertise also implemented what they call a "swarm" activation, in which multiple vehicles gather in one location during high-profile or strategically aligned events such as major sports or entertainment gatherings.

Ms. Wheeler noted that the County had used this "swarm" strategy at several recent events, including the Arnold Palmer Invitational and a sold-out Orlando Magic game at the Kia Center when LeBron James was playing, which created significant visibility for the campaign.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer shared a letter from Mr. Danny Gaekwad, noting that he was currently out of the country but had expressed his full support for the America 250 Media and Marketing Plan. In his letter, Mr. Gaekwad noted that he serves on both the Visit Florida Board and Tourist Development Council, commended the proposed initiative and recognized Visit Florida's continued partnership with Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) across the state. He emphasized the importance of highlighting Florida's hidden gems, particularly those in Central Florida, and conveyed his enthusiasm for the opportunities this campaign would bring to Ocala/Marion County. Ms. Shaffer added that Mr. Gaekwad had reviewed the proposal and was fully informed and aligned with the plan.

A copy of the Marion County - America 250 - Media Strategy presentation deck was submitted

for the record.

***A motion was made by Jeff Bailey, seconded by Christopher Fernandez, to approve the funding for the America 250 – Media and Marketing Plan, not to exceed \$500,000 for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).***

Commissioner Carl Zalak provided an update to the Council on broader America 250 initiatives being coordinated by Marion County. He began by explaining that, as part of the county's efforts to celebrate , the Marion County Public Library System was conducting interviews with local veterans to build a database of service stories. The goal, he said, was to preserve these accounts for future generations, allowing families decades from now to access and honor the contributions of Marion County's veterans. He noted that this archival project would be one of several initiatives launching in conjunction with Marion County Day in March. Commissioner Zalak shared that the Daughters of the American Revolution had completed a plaque honoring Francis Marion, "The Swamp Fox," for whom Marion County is named. He went on to describe a series of events being planned to mark the occasion, including four simultaneous fireworks shows across the county on July 4th, complemented by a week of community activities. He explained that the County is currently pursuing sponsorship opportunities, with a goal of securing a title sponsor contributing approximately \$150,000 to help fund the fireworks and related festivities.

Mr. Bailey asked when the plaque for "The Swamp Fox" would be unveiled.

Commissioner Zalak confirmed that the unveiling was expected to take place around Marion County Day in March. He added that the County was also exploring the possibility of hosting a "250th Anniversary Ball" as a fundraiser to support America 250 activities. He invited members of the Council to share ideas or participate in the planning. Commissioner Zalak emphasized that the County wanted to fully embrace the "Liberty Lives Here" theme, with the goal of creating a strong visual display of patriotism throughout the area. Efforts are underway to encourage businesses, neighborhoods, and residents to display flags, banners, and yard signs, so that anyone entering Marion County would immediately feel the spirit of Americana. In collaboration with the Marion County School Board, organizers are developing a Battle of the Bands competition to take place during Marion County Day, with the winning band leading the 1776 Parade later that year.

Mr. Chris Fernandez asked if the Battle of the Bands would feature marching bands.

Commissioner Zalak responded that he was unsure but assumed the event would feature marching bands. He noted that the school district was also exploring additional creative student projects. For instance, West Port High School was planning a play, and art students would participate in art contests related to the celebration. Commissioner Zalak also shared that the County was working closely with the City of Ocala to coordinate festivities, which would likely include daytime events at Fort King followed by the evening fireworks displays in Belleview, Dunnellon, and two additional locations to be determined. He concluded by thanking the Council for their support.

### ***North Central Florida Regionalism***

Mr. Adams then welcomed Ms. Shaffer to continue with staff updates.

Ms. Shaffer advised that staff has been working with Visit Florida on the possibility of regional collaboration focused on the North Central Florida brand. She explained that Visit Florida has introduced a pilot program that has already seen strong success in Northwest Florida and is now being extended to North Central Florida destinations. Visit Florida has approached area destinations to explore the feasibility of creating a unified regional brand that could promote the area's shared strengths in outdoor recreation and natural attractions. Ms. Shaffer explained that the goal of this initiative is to highlight North Central Florida as Florida's outdoor playground as key differentiators from other parts of the state. She emphasized that she was not seeking a formal motion from the Council at this time, but rather consensus to explore the opportunity further with Visit Florida and regional partners. If the Council agreed, staff would return at a future meeting with a formal plan and partnership framework for review.

Mr. Adams asked what the relationship was like with neighboring CVBs (Convention and Visitor Bureaus)

Ms. Shaffer responded that the bureau had positive relationships with neighboring CVBs. She further advised that the initial discussions with Visit Florida included Marion, Citrus, Pasco, Hernando, and Lake Counties as the core partners. She added that Visit Florida was also in conversation with the three adjacent rural counties, Levy, Putnam, and Sumter, which could be added to the partnership as the project develops. She reiterated that the discussions were still in the preliminary stage, and no commitments had yet been made.

Mr. Adams stated that he was surprised that Alachua County had not been included in the initial list of potential partners, noting that given its economic size and population, it seemed like a natural fit for collaboration with Marion County.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged that while Alachua County was not part of the early conversations, that could change as discussions evolve. She noted that Pasco County, for example, might opt out because of its southern proximity which could lead the regional effort to lean further north. However, she stressed that no destinations were excluded or locked out, and that Visit Florida's approach was flexible and inclusive as the program was still in its infancy stage.

Mr. Adams made a remark, saying that after more than 30 years in Marion County, he was still waiting to see Marion and Alachua Counties successfully collaborate on a project.

Ms. Shaffer continued the discussion, reiterating that if the Council was comfortable with staff moving forward, she would begin conducting further research with Visit Florida and regional partners. Her goal would be to return to the Council with a formal scope of work and a high-level outline of what participation in the North Central Florida regional branding initiative could look like, including potential benefits and deliverables for Marion County. She emphasized that she simply wanted to gauge the Council's interest before the next phase of exploration.

Mr. Jeff Bailey expressed support for exploring the opportunity but shared similar concerns to Mr. Adams, noting that he envisioned a collaboration of this nature being more closely aligned

with Alachua County.

Ms. Shaffer responded that the broader the participation, the greater the potential matching investment from Visit Florida. She explained that if six counties participated, and each contributed \$100,000, the regional fund would total \$600,000 and Visit Florida would match those funds dollar-for-dollar, creating a \$1.2 million regional marketing budget. She added that Visit Florida had also indicated they may be able to provide additional seed funding to further enhance the initiative's reach.

Ms. Wheeler added a point of clarification, noting that Visit Alachua County is already a member of the Natural North Florida brand which operates as an established regional brand under Visit Florida's partnership structure. That affiliation may have influenced why Alachua was not included in the initial list for this new pilot program. However, she confirmed that staff would look into this further.

Mr. Adams agreed, stating that the explanation "made a lot of sense."

Ms. Wheeler noted that Natural North Florida is an older regional entity, and it would be worthwhile to gather updated information.

Mr. Rus Adams added a lighthearted reflection, noting that from his years of experience in an industry that often intersected with politics particularly during his time with Clear Channel he had frequently worked with both Marion and Alachua Counties. He remarked that he had long believed the reason the two counties were 35 miles apart with a prairie between them was so that people had time to change their minds along the way. He stated that if the two counties worked together, they could accomplish a great deal.

Ms. Shaffer thanked the Council's for their feedback and support.

#### ***Marketing Assistance Funding Program FY25 Report***

Ms. Shaffer provided an update on the Marketing Assistance Funding Program. She shared that the program had been very well received by the community and expressed her appreciation to Ms. Shelton for her hard work and management of the initiative. Ms. Shaffer explained that during the program cycle, there were a total of 13 funded applicants, and out of the \$75,000 allocated budget, \$36,000 was reimbursed. The funding supported a variety of marketing channels across participating partners and helped provide effective promotional opportunities for small businesses and cultural organizations within Marion County. She stated that the program achieved measurable results, including increased bookings, improved visibility, and stronger regional reach, all of which aligned with the goal of empowering community partners to serve as extensions of the County's tourism brand. Ms. Shaffer directed the Council to the report in their packets, which contained details of the campaigns which demonstrated the program's value. She concluded by underscoring the importance of continued investment in targeted marketing support and then asked Ms. Wheeler and Ms. Shelton if there was anything additional they would like to highlight from the report.

Ms. Wheeler added that the report presented represented the recap of the recently concluded Marketing Assistance Funding Program and reminded the Council that the newly approved

program cycle had officially taken effect on October 1st. She explained that staff would return at this same time next year to present outcomes report for the new program. Ms. Wheeler also took a moment to highlight that this program is one of several managed by Ms. Shelton in her new role and shared that Ms. Shelton was recognized by the Marion County Board of County Commissioners as Employee of the Quarter for the final quarter of the fiscal year. One of the key reasons for that recognition, she noted, was the growth and success of this very program, which continues to generate increased participation and stronger outcomes each year. She added that the Tourist Development Department represented 50% of all Employee of the Quarter award recipients in FY25.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer congratulated both Ms. Samantha Solomon and Ms. Shelton, noting that the recognition was well deserved. She expressed excitement to bring back a full year of data on the new marketing assistance program in the future.

### ***Third Tourism Annual Meeting – December 11, 2025***

Ms. Shaffer shared details for the Third Tourism Annual Meeting. She advised that professionally printed invitation tickets had been created for Councilmembers to distribute guests they wished to invite. Ms. Shaffer encouraged everyone to attend the meeting along with their teams, noting that this year's event would be hosted at the World Equestrian Center (WEC). She expressed excitement about holding the annual meeting at WEC, explaining that the venue was eager to showcase its continued growth and ongoing developments.

### ***TDT Collections/STR and Key Data Update***

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

Ms. Wheeler advised that upon publication of TDC meeting agenda the STR information was unavailable however, Councilmembers were provided a printed copy of the data. She began by reviewing the TDT collections adding that the reporting periods for fiscal year 25 had been finalized. For the reporting period of September, which reflects August revenues collections totaled \$349,779.09, representing a 1.16% decrease year over year. She clarified that this slight dip was partly due to reconciliation ("truing up") adjustments that occurred across several months during the transition between Deckard Technologies and West Florida with the Tax Collector. While Deckard continues to handle data scraping and compliance letters, the remittance and collection process has now returned fully under the Tax Collector's Office through West Florida. Ms. Wheeler highlighted that the fiscal year closed very strong, with year-to-date collections totaling \$1,308,369.35, or 23.87% ahead of the previous year. The total reported collections for the fiscal year amounted to \$6,789,555.41, marking a successful year of growth and performance. Ms. Wheeler concluded by expressing enthusiasm for the future, remarking that with several new hotel properties expected to open in 2026, Marion County is well-positioned to continue building on this positive momentum.

Ms. Wheeler then transitioned to the Smith Travel Research (STR) and Key Data report, noting that the accompanying handout was not published in advance but was being displayed on the screen for review. She explained that this section summarized Smith Travel Research data for September and provided context regarding weather events that influenced statewide and local

visitation trends. Ms. Wheeler reminded the Council that Hurricane Helene affected Florida in September of the previous year, which led to a temporary increase in visitation. She cautioned, however, that while such storms may produce short-term economic boosts, they are not desirable overall due to their broader impacts. She added that Hurricane Helene was a relatively minor event for Florida but significantly impacted the Carolinas. In contrast, Hurricane Milton, which occurred the following month, caused substantial damage in coastal areas, indirectly benefiting Marion County as certain staging activities originally planned for Tropicana Field were relocated to the World Equestrian Center (WEC), generating increased local business. Ms. Wheeler then reported on data for September for traditional lodging. She reported that occupancy was 51.1%, a decline of 18.4% year over year. The average daily rate (ADR) was \$96.57, down 13.1%, and revenue per available room (RevPAR) was \$43.60, reflecting a 29.1% decrease compared to the same month last year. For the running 12-month period, the county's occupancy increased by 2.9%, ADR rose by 5.7%, and RevPAR improved by 8.8%. Ms. Wheeler then provided a statewide comparison using Florida's STR data for the same period. Across the state, occupancy averaged 56.3%, down 5.4% year over year. The average daily rate was \$148.82, a 1.5% decrease, and RevPAR stood at \$83.79, down 6.8% from the prior year. She next reviewed Key Data, which reflects the short-term rental market performance. For the month of September, short-term rental occupancy was 17.6%, a 17% decline year over year. The average daily rate was \$164, up slightly by \$2 from last year, while RevPAR was \$16, down \$2 from the previous year. The total nights available were 5,812, a 7% decrease from 6,263 nights last year. For the running 12-month period, short-term rental occupancy and ADR remained flat, RevPAR decreased by 3%, and nights available declined by 2%. Ms. Wheeler noted that these variations highlight the differing dynamics between traditional lodging and short-term rentals, explaining that hotels are often expected to provide shelter during weather emergencies under state guidelines, whereas short-term rental operators may independently choose to close or pause activity during storms. This operational distinction, she said, likely explains some of the fluctuations between the two accommodation sectors.

A copy of the STR Trend Data report was submitted for the record.

#### ***Marketing and Communications Update***

Ms. Shaffer welcomed Ms. Jessica Heller to provide the Marketing and Communications update.

Ms. Heller began by greeting the Council and noting how nice it was to be back, adding that she would explain her absence from the last month's meeting later in her presentation. She began with a review of the paid media as the fiscal year came to a close. She explained that September is typically a slower month for paid media, as most campaigns wind down before year-end. She shared on the screen details regarding digital media performance, noting that some continued to 'trickle' even after most campaigns had concluded. She then highlighted a new addition to the County's media placements an always-on Lamar billboard located just north of the future Buc-ee's site. Ms. Heller explained that this placement was strategically chosen to capture the attention of travelers in that high-traffic corridor. She added that the marketing team wanted to sweep up visibility in the area before the Buc-ee's opened, with the goal of encouraging travelers to continue their journey into Marion County rather than stopping short. From an industry

advocacy and communications perspective, Ms. Heller reviewed the team's ongoing community engagement efforts. She explained that this area includes presentations to local organizations and educational groups showcasing the bureau's messaging, the work it does and how it acts as a resource to the community. She shared that Ms. Shaffer recently guest lectured at a local hospitality school, speaking to students enrolled in an "Introduction to Tourism" course about destination marketing, tourism management, and the role of the VCB. Turning to public relations efforts, Ms. Heller highlighted the County's partnership with Visit Florida on a co-op satellite media tour. She noted that a similar campaign was carried out the previous year with excellent results, prompting them to repeat it. Reporting from Visit Florida showed that the latest campaign reached over 14.2 million views. She explained that the effort was a joint partnership between Marion County and Martin County, featuring a well-known travel journalist who conducted 25 interviews across various media channels, including television, radio, and podcasts. During these segments, b-roll footage of Marion and Martin Counties played while the journalist discussed both destinations, aligning with National Thrive Outside Day. Ms. Heller concluded by explaining the reason for her absence at the last TDC meeting. She had been in London attending Visit Florida's first-ever "Huddle" event in the UK and Ireland markets, which mirrors the Florida Huddle hosted locally in February. Ms. Heller continued her update by providing visuals and highlights from her participation in Visit Florida's first-ever International Huddle in the United Kingdom and Ireland markets, held in London. She described the event as an incredible opportunity to showcase Marion County alongside other Florida destinations. To provide context, Ms. Heller explained that the event spanned two full days of meetings with a diverse mix of travel agents, tour operators, travel suppliers, and media representatives. The attendees included both business-to-business (B2B) media outlets, those that serve travel agents and suppliers and consumer-facing leisure media, including traditional journalists and digital content creators who produce travel features and destination coverage. Ms. Heller shared several slides and images from the event, describing Marion County's booth setup, which featured a lighted kiosk-style station where she conducted dozens of meetings throughout the week. She also played a short video clip that offered a panoramic view of the event space, noting that Florida destinations occupied an entire exhibition floor. In addition to formal meetings, the event included networking breakfasts, lunches, and dinners designed to foster relationships among destinations, travel professionals, and media. She discussed the agent event held after the first day of meetings. During this session, each participating destination was invited to deliver a five-minute elevator pitch presentation.

Commissioner Carl Zalak out at 10:43am

Ms. Heller noted that she was the first presenter to go over time, though not the last, explaining that she used her time efficiently. Her presentation was accompanied by a dynamic visual display, inspired by a television screensaver theme that showcased Marion County's scenic videos and inspirational imagery, designed to capture attention and spark travelers' curiosity. The second day focused more heavily on media appointments, where Ms. Heller met one-on-one with travel journalists, content creators, and international media representatives. The event concluded with a signature dinner hosted by Visit Florida, during which Visit Florida formally launched its "Floridays" campaign to the international market. The dinner also provided an opportunity to connect with additional agents, media, and industry professionals who had not attended the

daytime meetings. Ms. Heller explained that Visit Florida arranged seating strategically to encourage new conversations. She shared that much of her discussion centered around introducing Ocala/Marion County as a Florida destination with goal of building destination awareness. The event also strengthened Marion County's relationship with Visit Florida's team, which provides ongoing opportunities for follow-up appointments and media familiarization trips. She shared that she had received interest from a content creator who plans to visit Ocala for a ziplining experience, demonstrating early success from the event. Ms. Heller concluded by noting that Ms. Shaffer had also recently participated in Visit Florida's domestic media mission, which took place the previous week. Ms. Shaffer met with national travel journalists and digital media influencers in Nashville and New York City, attending both morning networking sessions and evening media events.

Ms. Shaffer added that Marion County was one of only seven destinations statewide that selected to participate in Visit Florida's domestic media mission. She explained that the delegation represented a holistic cross-section of the state, including destinations from North, Northwest, and Southwest Florida. She noted that it was an honor for Ocala/Marion County to be included among such a limited group, and the opportunity provided tremendous exposure for the destination. Ms. Shaffer shared that some of the County's regional partners expressed a bit of envy over Marion County's inclusion. She concluded by emphasizing that the event offered excellent reach and visibility for the County's tourism brand.

Ms. Heller opened the floor for questions. None were raised.

A copy of the 2025 Florida Huddle UK and Ireland presentation deck was submitted for the record.

#### ***Sales Update***

Ms. Shaffer welcomed Mr. Locke to provide the Monthly Sales Update.

Mr. Locke began by stating that he would keep his report brief. He first presented on the Blue Knights, noting that the organization had officially submitted their funding application over the weekend, and therefore the event has now moved into "new business" since the agenda packet was printed. The group has also increased their estimated room nights from 300 to 500, with event dates set for April 12–15, 2026, at the Holiday Inn & Suites Ocala Conference Center. Next, he discussed 3STEP Volleyball Tournament. Mr. Locke explained that he met with the group at the Connect Miami tradeshow in August, where they expressed strong interest in hosting events in Central Florida. Volleyball is one of their core sports, and discussions are underway regarding potential tournaments at the World Equestrian Center in April and May of 2026, and possibly 2027. He added that 3STEP also manages other sports, including basketball, soccer, and outdoor athletic event. He then provided an update on the Babe Ruth Baseball Southeast Regional Tournament for 13U, 14U, and 15U divisions. Mr. Locke reminded the Council that Marion County has hosted several Babe Ruth and Cal Ripken-affiliated tournaments for five years. The organization has now expressed interest in bringing the Southeast Regional Tournament to Marion County in July 2026, with tentative dates of July 15–18. He noted that after hosting five consecutive World Series tournaments, Babe Ruth Baseball will be taking a one-year break, so

this event would fill that gap. Mr. Locke then discussed Fishers of Men, a Christian-based fishing organization, explaining that he initially met with them at Connect Miami, and later Mr. Bryan Day met with their representatives at Small Market Meetings in Buffalo. The organization is very interested in bringing one of its events to Marion County, capitalizing on the area's growing reputation as a fishing destination in Central Florida. He shared that staff are currently working to schedule a site visit with the organization. Under ongoing leads, Mr. Locke reported that the State Emergency Response Commission, which had been under consideration for Marion County, has officially selected Flagler County as its next event location, marking that as lost business for the record. Transitioning to trade show activity, Mr. Locke shared that he recently attended the Florida Society of Association Executives (FSAE) Education Expo in Tallahassee. He praised the event as a phenomenal opportunity for the County and highlighted the strong partner representation at the show, including Southeastern Livestock Pavilion, Hilton Ocala, Hilton Garden Inn, Everhome Inn, and the World Equestrian Center. The event was a one-day show. Mr. Locke also highlighted a student engagement initiative that took place during the event. In collaboration with Mohamed from the College of Central Florida, several CF students were invited to attend and participate in industry education sessions throughout the day. He noted that students from Florida State University also participated, creating a great opportunity for networking and collaboration. He added that this aligns with FSAE's goal of engaging students. Mr. Locke also mentioned that Mr. Bryan Day and Ms. Holly Castell from the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion will be attending the FSAE Central Florida Power Luncheon next month. He concluded by asking if there were any questions regarding the sales update. No questions were raised.

#### ***TDC Events Calendar***

Ms. Shaffer noted that the TDC event calendar was located in the agenda packet for review as is customary. Ms. Shaffer also shared an update from Mr. Angel Roussel regarding the schedule for I-75 construction stating that the engineering department shared that the auxiliary lanes were under construction and anticipated to be completed in three to four years and that Mr. Rousell would be inviting members of the engineering department to provide an update on the North Gateway as they work on that project.

#### ***Motion: Reallocate Unexpended Funds from FY 24-25 Marketing Assistance Funding Program in the Amount of \$38,347.06 to the FY 25-26 Room Night Generating Funding Allocation***

Mr. Adams stated that while Ms. Shaffer had been providing her earlier updates on the Marketing Assistance Funding Program, he received a text message that momentarily distracted him. Upon reviewing the figures, he noted that there remained \$38,347.06 unspent from the program budget. He asked that the Council consider reallocating the unused funds to the Room Night Generating Funding Program explaining that a significant portion of that category's budget had already been committed. He stated that he would present this opportunity to the Council if they choose to make a motion.

Mr. Bailey asked for clarification on where the funds were being moved from.

Mr. Adams explained that the Marketing Assistance Program was originally budgeted at \$75,000,

of which \$36,652 had been reimbursed, leaving \$38,347.06 unused. He further noted that prior to the meeting, the Room Night Generating budget had a balance of \$115,000, and with the \$24,000 in funding approved earlier in the meeting, that figure had dropped below \$100,000. He noted that this reallocation would fund the monies approved earlier in the meeting with excess remaining.

Ms. Wheeler offered a brief clarification, confirming that the current allocations already reflect the \$24,000 approved earlier in the meeting, meaning the most up-to-date totals in the report already accounted for that expenditure.

***A motion was made by Jeff Bailey, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to reallocate the unexpended funds from FY 24-25 Marketing Assistance Funding Program in the amount of \$38,347.06 to the FY 25-26 Room Night Generating Funding Allocation as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).***

#### **Old Business**

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

#### **New Business**

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

#### **Public Comment**

Mr. Adams called for any public comment and none was brought forth.

Mr. Adams stated that the next TDC meeting will be on Thursday, November 20, 2025 at 9am.

The meeting adjourned at 10:55 am.