

## **Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting**

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, November 20, 2025

9:00 a.m.

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

Mr. Christopher Fernandez acted as chair, due to Rus Adam's absence and called the meeting to order at 9am. He read into the record, members of the public are advised that this meeting/hearing is a public proceeding, and the clerk to the board is making an audio recording of the proceedings, and all statements made during the proceedings, which recording will be a public record, subject to disclosure under the public records law of Florida. Be aware, however, that the audio recording may not satisfy the requirement for a verbatim transcript of the proceedings, described in the notice of this meeting, in the event you desire to appeal any decision adopted in this proceeding.

### **Roll Call**

Present:

Christopher Fernandez, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Bobby Walker, Rus Adams, Danny Gaekwad, Commissioner Ron Livsey

Staff:

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

Guests:

Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Chloe Reid, Live Oak International; Paresh Chhotu, Holiday Garden Inn; John Casse, Skylighters; Amy Agricole, HITS; Jess Schultz, Ocala CEP; Joe Reichel, Belleview CEP

### **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 Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to adopt the minutes from the October 23, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

***Acknowledgment of Financials – October 2025***

Mr. Danny Gaekwad inquired to staff if there were any items to report regarding the financials. Mr. Gaekwad advised that he did not review and wanted to inquire.

Ms. Sky Wheeler advised that there were two sets of financials due to the close out of the fiscal year on September 30<sup>th</sup> and then an allowance until October 25<sup>th</sup> for finance team to review.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer expressed her appreciation of the question as the council are the stewards and being fiduciarily responsible.

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

**Report From Chair**

Mr. Fernandez advised that on November 18<sup>th</sup> Doug Cone was appointed as the member for the Council seat vacated by Jason Reynolds. Doug Cone will be attending the meeting in January 2026 and cannot make today's meeting.

Mr. Gaekwad asked for clarification of seat replacement procedure.

Ms. Shaffer advised the seat was open for accommodators through February and then required re-application. Mrs. Shaffer further explained that everyone applies through the Board of County Commission's office and once a seat is appointed the administrative team contacts the applicants and they can choose to stay on file for a year to be automatically considered again. There were 6 applications for the open seat. Selection or re-appointment will take place in February 2026 for 2 to 3 open seats.

Mr. Fernandez asked for motion to adopt the Tourist Development Council's proposed 2026 meeting dates.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if there were any unusual dates.

Ms. Wheeler advised the only unusual dates were to be January 15, 2026 which is one week earlier than normal due to the following week being Tourism Day in Tallahassee and November follows the typical cadence as well, being one week earlier, due to Thanksgiving. There is to be no meeting in July due to industry trade shows and budget workshop schedules.

Ms. Shaffer reported the upcoming open-seat positions in February were to be an elected officials seat, two non-collector seats and one collector seat. Discussion ensued and it was determined a spreadsheet showing terms would be printed for council members.

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker, to adopt the Proposed Tourist Development Council Meeting Dates for 2026 as presented. The motion**

**was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

## **Funding Requests**

Mr. Fernandez welcomed Mr. Corry Locke to present the funding requests.

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

Mr. Locke advised that he would be presenting 8 funding requests, 7 in the first quarter which total \$47,000.00 and one event in the second quarter for \$2,500.00. Mr. Locke referred to page 83 in the packet which showed what is budgeted for the room night generating event program and amount there is remaining. He advised that if all the events were to be approved, the remaining balance would be \$70,485.00. Mr. Locke advised of a scrivener's error on page 97 on the cover page for the Big East Swimming and Diving Conference Championships it shows 2027 but it is actually for 2026. He advised that the rest of the documents have the correct dates. Mr. Locke asked if there were any questions about any of the documents.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if Mr. Locke could provide an overview.

Editor's Note: The above summary paragraph had corrections that are reflected below in individual explanations of funding requests.

### ***Motion: Grandview World Nights (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$9,000)***

Mr. Locke advised the Grandview World Nights is taking place at the World Equestrian Center on January 22<sup>nd</sup> through the 24<sup>th</sup> with a requested funding amount of \$9,000.00. There was an error in the funding allocation sheet on packet page 86 as it reads \$10,000.00. The \$9,000.00 for minimum room night guarantee of \$1,800.00 at a reimbursement rate of \$5.00 per room night. The anticipated economic impact is just over \$1.1 million and the intended use of funds is marketing, advertising, equipment rental and event production expenses. The dates are January 22<sup>nd</sup> through the 24<sup>th</sup> and it is a repeat event.

Mr. Gaekwad asked the meaning of Grandview in which Mr. Locke explained it is a draft horse event that has been here the last four years and at the World Equestrian Center. Mr. Locke further advised that Grandview moved its dates from February to January and is still in the same quarter.

Mr. Locke confirmed there were no further questions.

### ***Motion: Grandview Invitational (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$7,000)***

Mr. Locke presented Grandview Invitational which takes place the week after Grandview World Nights, January 29<sup>th</sup> through the 31<sup>st</sup> at the Florida Horse Park. Mr. Locke advised the event is hosted by same organization but a different event. The requested funding amount is \$7,000.00 and is eligible amount for \$5.00 per room night with a room night guarantee of 1,400. The intended use of funds is marketing, advertising, venue, equipment and bleacher rental.

*Ms. Wheeler distributed TDC roster with seat appointments.*

Mr. Gaekwad inquired if it is the same event and Mr. Locke clarified that it is a different event but same organization.

Mr. Fernandez inquired if the events were separated previously and Mr. Locke confirmed that the Grandview Invitational has been held the last 4 years at World Equestrian Center and the Grandview Invitational has been held the last 7 years in which we funded the last three years. Mr. Locke further explained that once the event grew larger, they expanded to 2 separate events, one at the Florida Horse Park and one at World Equestrian Center on consecutive weeks.

Mr. Locke confirmed there were no further questions.

**Motion: Ocala Equine Conference (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$1,300)**

Mr. Locke presented the Ocala Equine Conference which is put on by Florida Association of Equine Practitioners which is the Florida Veterinary Medical Association for the state. The requested funding is \$1,300 for dates of February 13<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> making it a 1<sup>st</sup> quarter event. The minimum guaranteed room nights are 260 at \$5 per room night with an anticipated use of funds being marketing and promotional activities, printing costs, signs and banners, instructor fees, conference related supplies, session presenters and speakers and audio-visual expenses. The Ocala Equine Conference has been held in Ocala/Marion County for several years although last year they did not hold the event. They now have scheduled for February and will be one of the first events being held in the Equestrian Manor at World Equestrian Center.

Mr. Locke confirmed there were no further questions.

**Motion: Big East Swimming and Diving Conference Championships 2026 (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$10,000)**

Mr. Locke advised of a scrivener's error that the Big East Swimming and Diving Conference Championships is for 2026 not 2027. The event is to take place at FAST, on February 17<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup>, with the requested funding amount of \$10,000 in which they are eligible for

based on the \$5.00 room night reimbursement with a minimum room night guarantee of 2,000. The intended use of funds is for promotional items, advertising, operational expenses, and graphic and artwork design. This is a first-year event to the county and they are looking to repeat it in 2027.

Mr. Locke confirmed there were no further questions.

**Motion: Santos Fat Tire Festival (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$10,000)**

Mr. Locke presented the Santos Fat Tire Festival advising it is to take place on March 5<sup>th</sup> through the 8<sup>th</sup> at Santos Trailhead and is a 1<sup>st</sup> quarter event. The requested amount is \$10,000 in return for 2,000 room nights. The use of funds is to be marketing, advertising, venue rental and cleaning, equipment rental, stage rental, security, photography and videography, bathroom rental and permitting expenses. The Santos Fat Tire Festival has been in the county for a few years and we did not have active funding program last year.

Discussion ensued with Mr. Gaekwad commenting that we should fund this new event so it grows larger and Mr. Locke agreed. Mr. Fernandez advised it is a 4-day event and attracts upward of 15,00 people.

**Motion: Live Oak International (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$4,000)**

Mr. Locke presented Live Oak International to be held March 11<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> to take place at Live Oak Plantation with a requested funding amount of \$4,000 and that is in return for 800 room nights at \$5.00 per room night. The use of funds would be for marketing, livestreaming, expenses, advertising, printing, video and photography, website, public relations expenses, event program and judges and official fees.

Mr. Locke inquired as if there were any questions.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that it is also a good event and that he likes it.

**Motion: Blue Knights Florida III Spring Meeting (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$5,000)**

Mr. Locke presented the only 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter event as the Blue Knights Spring Southern Regional Conference to be held April 12 through the 15<sup>th</sup> at the Holiday Inn Ocala Conference Center. The Blue Knights is a motorcycle group comprised of active and retired law enforcement members. The funding amount requested is \$5,000 and they are eligible for \$10.00 per room night, being a 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter event, and they would need to produce 500 room nights. The anticipated use of funds is marketing and promotional materials, printing costs, signs and banners, conference related supplies, and audio-visual expenses.

Mr. Fernandez inquired what the room night reimbursement is per quarter and Mr. Locke advised \$5.00 in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, \$10 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, \$15.00 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter and \$10.00 in the last quarter.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to why \$10.00 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter and if occupancy was robust. Mr. Locke advised that the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter April through June was similar to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter markets whereas July through September, the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, is the most demanded quarter which was determined at the funding workshop. Mr. Gaekwad requested that when Ms. Wheeler does an occupancy report that a comparison between the quarters be provided as he doesn't feel that October through December is as busy as April through June. Ms. Wheeler advised that in the spring they will have the information at the workshop in which they can readdress and make educated decisions.

Mr. Locke inquired as if there were any questions and asked if the board was ready to move forward with the motion.

**A motion was made by Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield to approve items 6.2 through 6.8 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

### **Staff Updates**

Ms. Shaffer thanked Mr. Fernandez for assuming role of chair as Mr. Rus Adams was unable to attend and was watching virtually.

Ms. Shaffer then introduced Mr. Carlos Medina, advising he is replacing Keleab Spencer who moved on to work in Gainesville, explaining that the department works closely with Public Relations division in which he transferred from. Mr. Medina joined the team in November, born in Miami, and he has a passion for comedy entertainment and the arts of all kinds. He has achieved two associates degrees, a bachelor's degree and focused on animation at Savannah College of Art and Design. He has become proficient in graphic design, video and photo editing, production troubleshooting and illustration. Before coming to the County, he was previously a test proctor, registration clerk and media specialist for adult education centers in Miami-Dade County. He is also bi-lingual, which is a great asset for the department, and he has a leadership role in mentoring adults seeking to learn English. He animated Rubbish the Raccoon which is a part of the No Horsin' Around with Marion anti-litter campaign and the horse in front of the Board of County Commissioners office with the Olympic design is also Mr. Medina's work. Ms. Shaffer expressed her excitement to have him join the team.

Ms. Shaffer then introduced Mr. Isiah Lewis with Downs and St. Germain who would be presenting the quarterly report, not only on Marion County, but on a state and national level to close out the fiscal year.

Mr. Lewis advised the presentation style has been changed to be more insight driven. Instead of pictures and talking about top sources they are focusing more on insights they see within the data, how it compares quarter over quarter in the fiscal year and how it compares year over year. The July to September 2025 report looked at study objectives through a visitor journey that showed how a visitor spent their time in Marion County starting with their Pre-Visit planning cycle, sources for planning, and reasons for visiting. The report then would move into Travel Party Profile that would include number in party, length of stay, number of visits they had to the area and demographics as well. Then he planned to move on to Trip Experience which would include how visitors got around the county, what they did while visiting, how long they stayed and how much they spent. The next portion of the report titled the Post Trip Evaluation would show visitors' satisfaction, likelihood of return and overall evaluation of their emotional appeal of Ocala. Finally, the report is to cover Economic Impact, which will be a larger overview on the number of visitors, expenditures, rooms nights generated and occupancy, ADR and RevPAR produced with STR reports and data. The methodology showed data collected from July through September advising 705 visitors were interviewed in person at multiple locations throughout the county including downtown hotels, state parks, special events, different attractions and online. The economic impact included figures based on all visitor types, such as visitors who stayed at paid accommodations, visitors who stayed in unpaid accommodations with friends or family, and day-trippers which were defined as people who just came in for a day and then left. The Key Performance Indicators showed 279,000 total visitors with room nights estimate just under 248,000 and a direct spending just short of \$135,000,000.00 which led to an economic impact of \$203,000,000.00. The year-to-year dipped nearly 20% in total visitors, 6% in room nights, down 12% in direct spending which led to decrease in economic impact of that same percentage. Although the numbers seem disagreeable when looking at July to September nationally September was hard for a lot of people and destinations. On a larger trend there was a hurricane last September which brought in visitors on recovery efforts and had an event planning schedule change into October. Largely July was solid and was up year over year in terms of traditional paid accommodations with a bit of flattening in August with the big dip coming in September which was seen in multiple destinations. The destinations they work with nationally saw a tough September and October which is due to an economization of the lower income visitors. Ocala Marion County does have several luxury visitors as compared to areas that have less luxury visitors which are experiencing a greater loss. Mr. Lewis advised that Ms. Shaffer will be covering the fiscal year next month and you will see

the downward trend in entertainment and shopping spending as people are spending less in those categories. The national trend is that people are still traveling but they are spending their money on necessities of accommodations and restaurants and less on entertainment as they have previously. Mr. Lewis explained that the Tourism Development Tax (TDT) shows a sizeable increase of 52% yet occupancy, RevPAR, ADR are down advising that the reasoning is the county's tax collection platform switch which caused a lag. Hence the comparison point should discredit looking quarter over quarter.

Mr. Gaekwad verified that the occupancy was down by 13%, ADR down 2.8%, and RevPAR down 15% but asked if we collected more money.

Mr. Lewis explained when looking at the split between hotels and vacation rentals that the ADR for vacation rentals increased significantly because in April to May of this year the Key Data dashboards changed how they collect ADR which now includes cleaning fees and other associated fees. ADR is down on the hotel side 4.8% and occupancy also down potentially due to increase in units year to year.

Mr. Gaekwad asked Mr. Locke if he felt there is an oversupply of rooms as it was 12% down. Mr. Locke advised he did not believe so and that this was a nationwide situation. Mr. Lewis advised that statewide and nationwide occupancy, ADR and RevPAR have been down. Ms. Wheeler clarified that she will be presenting the STR data later and akin to Mr. Lewis's presentation that Hurricane Helene was in September with displacement of people into our market along with Hurricane Milton in October with far more recovery efforts skewing comparison data. Ms. Wheeler added that due to hurricane path switch to Tampa Bay the people, recovery workers and evacuees, staged there relocated to Marion County. Ms. Wheeler further explained that the tourist development tax collections had a large backlog that was added in this quarter as well. Ms. Wheeler advised that when Ms. Shaffer gives the annual report in December it will be clearer yet still showing a downward trend. Ms. Wheeler planned to give the 12 month overview to provide clarity. Ms. Wheeler added people from out of the area aren't planning vacations for September and October due to hurricane possibilities and this year's forecast showed a potentially active season.

Mr. Lewis continued with the visitor profile summary which reflected a median age of 49, first time visitors were at a strong 35% which is up year over year. 45% which is close to half of the visitors are traveling with children. The median household income is \$96,700.00 which is up about \$14,000.00 year over year reflective of the luxury visitor mentioned earlier. Travel party size is 2.8 compared to 2.9 last year. There was an increase in stay length from 3.7 to 4 nights. Mr. Lewis then covered the insight of the trip planning cycle which reflected a planning window of 54 days in advance. This was consistent with the previous year and the shortest cycle quarter throughout the year although national trends have seen a shorter trip

planning cycle as compared to previous year. The data should help marketing plan best advertising windows. Mr. Lewis then covered the top reason for visitors to come to Ocala Marion County which showed one in four visitors come to visit friends/family followed by horse-related event and to visit area springs. These are the familiar top 3 reasons and the drivers for repeat visitors.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if we are spending equal amounts on horse-related events as area springs. Ms. Wheeler advised that advertising spending is reviewed annually and programmatic targeting sub-sections of target visitors with dynamic ads. The split shifts as the engagement occurs as more people from the demographic type, psychographic to income, region, they will target more like people. There is a lot of spend outside our office in the horse-related market. Our advertising targets a type of visitor more inclined to do what our market offers as they come further down the funnel the ads before more specifically tailored depending on their family size, education, income, a myriad of factors. Mr. Gaekwad rephased his question to how much are we funding horse-related events versus area springs. Ms. Wheeler advised that horse-related events are often funded but springs are more of a leisure traveler so that's where the marketing campaign targets. Mr. Gaekwad advised we should put more funds into springs advertising. Ms. Wheeler informed that this year's approved marketing plan is \$1.625 million for all marketing and media with a heavy lean on leisure travel, less on sports and meeting marketing advising she can bring percentages to January meeting. Individual funding comes before the board as it relates to events statutorily whereas the media plan is presented yearly. There is not \$1.625 million spent on funding events. Mr. Gaekwad pointed out to staff that the area springs have a longer season than horse related events or events at FAST and wanted to bring attention to the great numbers. Ms. Wheeler advised that Mr. Bryan Day has been working to try to bring a water polo event to the springs. Ms. Shaffer added that Mr. Gaekwad is correct that the springs are a crown jewel of the community and prominent in our visual displays, billboards on highways, bringing visitors into the marketing funnel leading to equestrian, arts, culture, history, heritage, shopping, dining and all the amazing things the county offers. Ms. Shaffer advised that we are competing with oceans, the gulf and Disney World so the springs are a top performing driver for our destination. Mr. Gaekwad pointed out that with addition of Mr. Medina videoing and highlighting the springs would be worthwhile. Ms. Shaffer pointed out that what Commissioner Zalak has done with the Marion Insider's Guide to help visitors understand and explain whether on the trails or in the springs, how to tube down the Rainbow River, visit the Ocala National Forest and the waterways and just completed a shoot with Mr. Fernandez on the Cross Florida.

Mr. Lewis echoed the sentiment and also agreed adding that specific times of hotter seasons, July through September, visitors will want to go to springs more and be outdoors.

Beach destinations they work with the summer season is popular as visitors want to be near the water.

Mr. Lewis continued his presentation covering recall of advertising. The advertising recall in July to September 2025 saw a sizable increase of 9% year after year. An action item to take is continuing support for multichannel strategies to maintain destination awareness like television and streaming services, online advertisements and social media as they were the top ad recall sources.

Mr. Lewis covered visitor origins advising that a sizeable portion of visitors, 56%, came from Florida. International visitors accounted for 4% which was about the same year over year which is good as many other destinations are seeing a dip in international travelers. The top origin markets are Orlando-Daytona and Melbourne at 17% followed by Tampa at 10% then Jacksonville at 7% which showed the trend of Florida drive destinations. Fly-in destinations included New York at 4%, Philadelphia at 2% and Atlanta at 3%.

Mr. Gaekwad asked which countries consisted of the international visitors. Mr. Lewis advised he could get the breakout for him and knows the UK is one. Mr. Gaekwad advised that they are remodeling a resort in Crystal River Citrus County and they have 15% international visitors. Ms. Wheeler advised it is due to the manatees which we also have.

Mr. Lewis continued on to travel party size which shows that 45% of visitors traveled with children. That was the highest percentage quarter in fiscal year 2025 pointing out marketing efforts for family travel should be geared toward that July to September timeframe.

Mr. Lewis then spoke on satisfaction statistics which showed a slight dip in “Did Not Meet” expectations category but a strong hold on “Exceeded” and “Met” categories. Presentation showed a “strong likelihood to return” and “probably will return” categories with 88% “likely to recommend”. He advised in a year where we have seen a dip in national trends it good to continue marketing efforts for the repeat visitors.

In closing Mr. Lewis presented visitor profile insights which included July though September as the lowest trip planning window so advertising windows can be closer than other time frames. Horse-related events and local springs are the top trip drivers and he recommended to market towards those. Ad recall keeps increasing year over year so it is suggested to continue to support multichannel efforts. Traveling with children is increasing in the July to September so it is encouraged to market towards families a bit more for that quarter. Half of the visitors trip experience exceeded expectations so it's recommended to keep the opportunities that elevate the visitor experience. Lastly, half of the visitors would be likely to return so it was recommended to encourage repeat visitation through targeted campaigns. Mr. Lewis presented some top visitor quotes as “Ocala is quiet and more in touch with nature

than the coast. The springs are a must-see”, “We love the country vibes and cute gift shops downtown”, “Beautiful little town with rural vibes”, “Pretty, quiet, not much traffic, friendly people”, and “Great equestrian community in rural central Florida”.

Mr. Lewis ended his presentation and advised due to the new format if anyone wanted specific information to let him know. He planned to change the insights quote of the quarter to be the top items he is seeing from the data as there are so many years of history. He will be able to identify different trends and how they affect Marion County and place new insights each quarter. He advised the annual which Loretta will be presenting next month will be repetitive of what the board has seen in terms of overall numbers and will have a full breakout of visitors.

Mr. Gaekwad commented that the presentation was excellent and more in depth.

Mr. Fernandez verified with Mr. Lewis as to the statistic regarding the length of stay increase and wondered if he agrees that the work the group does factors into the increase. Mr. Lewis agreed advising that when you look at increasing exceeding expectations, people returning the destination and a 17% pull in off season horse related events which are drawing longer lengths of stay is definitively due to the efforts and work from the team. Mr. Fernandez remarked that the more a visitor knows what Marion County has to offer the longer they may stay. Mr. Gaekwad expressed that he feels we need more billboards in the County other than just the highways although the highways are great exposure of 100,000 people a day. Mr. Gaekwad felt we should showcase the springs, bicycling and the forest to cross market in county visitors that are unaware. Mr. Lewis agreed that the more the residents know the more they will encourage visits from our top category of visiting friends and family. Mr. Gaekwad commented that HITS and WEC have gained the county and world's attention and we need to take that momentum with their visitors and advertise with billboards during those event months. Ms. Jessica Heller remarked that we just hosted a Columbian content creator who was also here in 2022 that wanted to return as he had another 400,000 followers in Instagram, which is a whole new group of people, and he went to Crystal River directly after trip. She continued with the fact that we work to create a story as tourist don't know there are county lines so ensuring that if visitors are in one destination they are aware of other locals. Mr. Lewis added that the percentage of first-time visitors at 35% so 65% were return visitors so many come in for an event and are coming back for something different. Mr. Gaekwad requested from Mr. Lewis a more detailed report as to those repeat visitor figures. Ms. Wheeler clarified that quarterly Mr. Lewis brings reports to the board but staff also brings Miles Partnership, our marketing team and Arrivalist, who helps measure our media performance, together so we can take these insights and apply them. Ms. Wheeler advised Jessica Heller and her team work with Miles to ensure that the insights are applied to the

media plan as received because we do so much digital programmatic display and social media. Ms. Wheeler added Mr. Lewis had provided insights anecdotally to the team previously and formalize them to bring to the board's attention, as we are all interested in promoting tourism. Ms. Wheeler finalized with the information that the reports are accessible to all with that same insight and applicable to their business model as well. Ms. Shaffer added to Mr. Fenandez's point reiterating that if it wasn't for the tourism industry helping us to disseminate that message about other things to do, we would be at a disadvantage. She explained that the visitor's guide also has an app QR code so some of the hoteliers, restaurants, shopping are using it for an online conciergerie. Ms. Shaffer added that we are creating beautiful collateral, but it takes the industry to get it out to the locals. Ms. Shaffer advised they have reviewed with Ms. Dana Olesky in-market marketing, but it becomes a challenge with the state statutes, therefore we need to be work carefully with PR and community relations, adding that advocacy is a key word for the annual meeting.

Ms. Dana Olesky advised that the motions are now being done all in one motion for funding and previously we did the funding requests separately so we could pause and review for conflicts. There has been a funding request that was approved that one of our board members needed to recuse themselves.

**A motion to reconsider was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker to reconsider items 6.2 through 6.8 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker to approve funding items 6.2 through 6.8 without 6.6 or 6.8 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker to approve funding items 6.6 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0) with Mr. Fernandez abstaining from the vote. (Editor's Note: Mr. Fernandez filed Form 8B)**

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker to approve funding items 6.8 as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0) with Mr. Gaekwad abstaining from the vote. (Editor's Note: Mr. Gaekwad filed Form 8B).**

She will review the funding requests ahead of time for upcoming meetings to avoid potential voting conflicts.

Ms. Shaffer introduced and asked Ms. Jessica Heller to share her UK Fl Huddle experience with the TDC as it relates to international travel.

Ms. Heller presented the PR report for July through September which started on page 172 of the packet. From a press release perspective there is full list on page 174 which was released to Visit Florida for them to disseminate in their content along with items we sent individually through our partnerships through PR as well. Ms. Heidi Villagomez has been

integral with helping getting these messages out with any opportunity we receive. Visit Florida sends editorial leads and opportunities to respond to that they then send out to domestic and international markets and they specific it for those markets are interested in based on their data. Pages 175 and 176 showed the Meltwater reporting of trending topics and heat map both domestic and international.

Ms. Heller then transitioned into covering her travel in September to the first Visit Florida UK and Ireland Huddle which was akin to the event we had in Ocala in February. She had dozens of meetings and met with tour operators for two days in London. The night activities consisted of presenting at an event with 100 agents and another meeting consisting of approximately over 500 attendees of different market industries that were met with. An impact was made with our beautiful spring picture as our backdrop.

Ms. Heller referred to page 177 in the packet regarding a satellite media tour co-op with Visit Florida which was also done last year. We partnered with a travel expert and another county to highlight National Thrive Outside Day highlighting family things to do with ecotourism. The expert, who was given talking points and had a script would interview and answer questions. The expert had a whole list of media interviews, at least 28, with an 18 million audience views and a current media value of over \$628,000.00. The travel expert did approximately 5 minutes clips on radio, tv and podcasts. We provided high quality B roll. Ms. Heller then went into the 3 press trips for this quarter listed on page 179 of the packet.

Commissioner Ron Livsey left the meeting at 10:08 A.M.

There was an international press trip, in partnership with Visit Florida, in which we had the great opportunity to host a Brazilian content creator for low cost of \$818.00. The creator has 1.5 million followers and the media exposure valued at over \$608,000.00. Ms. Heller advised we leverage our PR the best we can and we have fantastic partners that help host. Ms. Heller briefly reviewed the other press trips of 904 Happy Hour out of Jacksonville and Golf Central Magazine whom did a couple golf course visits and stayed at a local hotel. Mr. Heller thanked Mr. Fernandez for hosting and mentioned the Canyons as well as the partners which help balance the cost out as the more we save the more we can host. Ms. Heller then described an additional earned media opportunity with 2 articles published this quarter in Southern Living. The first article, "The Gorgeous, Adventure-Filled Florida Town You've Never Heard Of", which was re-published in MSN Travel and additional media outlets, has a reach of over 150 million with a media value of over 1.3 million. The costs were zero and we just provided some photos and content about Ocala/Marion County. The other article, on page 196 of the packet, "The Most Underrated Fall Escapes in Florida", in which we had a mention had a reach of over 60 million with a media value of \$556 million. Page 198 of the packet listed all the media earned from the quarter which totaled \$3,655,932.28 with a total reach of 282,695,664.

Ms. Heller continued onto the social media portion of her presentation and advised there were over 3.3 million impressions over the social media channels, over 78,000 engagements and over 39,000 post link clicks.

Commissioner Ron Livsey returned to the meeting at 10:12 A.M.

Ms. Heller advised on Instagram the most popular post was an Insider's Guide reel promoting ATV riding in Ocala National Forest and Facebook's top post was promoting an escape to the destination that lead back to our website. Information on the app started on page 225 of the packet and all were asked to download if they haven't yet. The downloads from July to September were 728 and the total number of pageviews were 2,141. The map graphic showed downloads including the international reach. The total number of downloads for the app is currently at 7,164 with over 27,000 pages views since the app was launched. Ms. Heller moved on to the Marion Insider's Guide featured on page 227 which was launched in June 2024 to reach visitors and potential visitors to bring life experiences to Ocala/Marion County that may not be easily experienced via written word or imagery. The project is a video based program that exists in both short form for social media and long form complementing our website content and promote the app as well. The social media impressions for the quarter were 304,936, engagements 10,580 and post link clicks were 1,768. The YouTube impressions were over 50,000, the views over 726,000 with watch times over 35,000 hours. The pages where the Insider's Guide is posted had pageviews of 24,287. Ms. Heller then moved on to the website data, packet page 228, advising the website visits during the quarter was 250,000. The largest percentage of the audience is still organic, not paid traffic, and that is at 201,000.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to how many first-time visitors and Ms. Heller responded 245,000.

Ms. Heller continued advising with the total number of page views which were 792,000. People coming onto the website are going to more than one page. The user engagement was over 295,000. The blogs, page 230 of the packet, are updated to stay relevant with new additions like Best Place to Eat Healthy, Best Donuts and Seafood Restaurants as food blogs are very popular for visitors to see where they want to eat. The SEO is available for people to search the website for unique content. Page 231 of the packet showed the top visited pages as our general events page, outdoor things to do, equestrian and food and drink. These often are ranked as top pages along with the seasonal blogs. On page 232 our partner pages directory show over 171,000 visits with over 50,000 clicks on links going directly to partner's websites. The last two pages of the portion of the packet are summary data showing visitation and performance by month. There were 178 newsletter signups and 962 visit guide requests. With regards to the monthly email newsletters we had over 10,000 total opens for those emails.

Ms. Shaffer expressed her appreciation to the board for listening to the presentation as it the particulars of what we do as a team. She reminded members that the annual meeting is December 11<sup>th</sup> and advised World Equestrian Center is being gracious with their hospitality, along with the exciting things planned there will be exceptional speakers, Bryan Griffin, with Visit Florida previously with the Governor's office is extremely forward thinking with communication across the state reiterating messaging and Lauren Pace with Destinations International. Ms. Shaffer thanked Mr. Joe Reichel and Ms. Jess Schultz with the CEP for their cooperation as well as Matt McCormick, whom has started in his role and will be at the

annual meeting. Ms. Shaffer asked that board members inform and invite their team. Ms. Shaffer then invited Ms. Wheeler to present the STR and Key Data.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he was at a CEP event and met the new CEO and inquired about the CEP representatives present at the meeting and their positions within the organization.

Ms. Jess Schultz responded that she is partner engagement for the chamber's side.

Mr. Joe Reichel advised he was the director of the Belleview CEP.

Mr. Gaekwad suggested that tourist development team work closely with the CEP.

Ms. Wheeler advised that normally Tammy McCann would be in attendance to present the tax collector's efforts as it relates to Deckard Technologies and compliance, but she is currently out of the office, and she will return for the January meeting. Ms. Wheeler continued onto the collection figures for the new fiscal year, October's figures which were September's stay totaled \$299,752.00 which was down \$79,566.00 or 20.89% year over year.

Mr. Gaekwad interjected that it was due to the hurricane in which Ms. Wheeler agreed that Hurricane Helene was cause.

Ms. Wheeler continued advising that additionally the short-term rental payments appears as some have caught up as some are paying quarterly, and some paying monthly. Tammy will speak more to that in January, she did a fiscal year report but we are getting close to annual year report to give us better insight. Similar to Mr. Lewis' messaging, Ms. Wheeler planned to give data and then explain the meaning. The STR and Key Data for both Marion County and the State of Florida figures were not available at the time of publishing so the Council was presented with a printed copy at their seat and figures also were displayed on the screen. Last month the STR data trend was covered and this month is generally the same. One thing to note is that in October occupancy was 55.2% in Marion County which is down 22% year over year as we just covered September's collections and am now advising October's occupancy. Hurricane Helene did drive a lot to the market in September of last year however Hurricane Milton was far more catastrophic to the State of Florida resulting in people staying much longer than with Helene. People vacated preemptively for Hurricane Helene which hit the Big Bend section of Florida, then Blue Ridge areas, Asheville, flooding the Biltmore, but in October Milton damaged the Gulf Coast area in the state of Florida explaining why we are seeing the decline in numbers for October. The average daily rate \$113.19 which is down 11.7% from last year along with RevPAR down 31.1% at \$62.48. In October of last year we were at 98% occupancy in certain parts of that month due to the recovery efforts in the State of Florida. For the running 12 months occupancy was down 1.6%, average daily rate was up 3.2% and RevPAR was up 1.6%. Also within the last year our supply increased by about 7% which factors in as it takes more to fill that. That will continue to grow as several hotel properties that have and are going to come online. Ms. Wheeler then moved on to Visit Florida's nuanced figures as it covers the whole state. Occupancy statewide was at 63.9% which was down 6.5%, average daily rate was \$174.96 that was up 2.5% last year and RevPAR was \$111.82 which is down 4.1% year over year. Ms. Wheeler advised that we can't really compare Marion County to the State of Florida as we are part of it but we look comparatively at some of our markets in the State as it relates in our region and there are a lot of similar trends

because the outlying counties similar to Marion's experience the same whenever there is a storm. Citrus and Pasco Counties have a different perspective as they have coastal communities but as you get further inland there are a lot of similarities in what we see. Marion County has the benefit of being right off of I-75 which has good ingress and egress for people to escape from a storm. The Key Data is the short term rental and not related to compliance factor that Tammy McCann presents as it relates to Deckard Technologies, this is simply the reporting information as far as the occupancy, ADR and RevPAR. The occupancy in October was at 23.7% which was down 18% from last year, the average daily rate was at \$154 which was a decrease \$13.00 from last year and RevPAR was at \$23.00 which was a decrease of \$5.00 from last year. Short term rentals don't really operate the same way during storm situations as traditional hotels do and a lot of that is because it is on the private person and what they need to do in the time of the storm. They may not be in the position to be hosting someone, they may be using the short term rental themselves or opening it for family or friends and that is why those numbers aren't comparable. Nights available in October were 6,055 which was a 1% decrease from last year and for the running 12 month occupancy was down 4%, average daily rate was down 1% and RevPAR was down 6% with nights available decreasing by 2%. There appears to be a normalization of how many short term rentals there are on the market likely due to the compliance factor that Tammy and her team have instituted. Previously they were coming online rapidly now that the rules are very clear they are leveling out. Ms. Wheeler invited any questions and offered if anyone needed further explanation to contact her.

Mr. Locke transitioned into the sales update skipping the first business as it was discussed in the funding portion earlier and moved onto the Convocation of Seminole War Historians. The event would take place at Fort King on April 24-26, 2026. He advised they have met with them and they are eligible to be in the meeting rewards program. The next program is the South Florida Soul Rodeo (SFSR) which would be June 26-27, 2026 at the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion, they estimated about 200 room night and we have had conversations regarding funding and they may attend a future meeting to discuss that. SFSR started in 2024 as a brand-new organization out of South Florida and they are branching into the state and other states. The next items are the Babe Ruth 12U, 14U, 13-16U and 16-18U Southeast Regionals which are 4 tournaments happening at the same time on July 15-18, 2026 at the Rotary Sportsplex in which they estimate about 750 room nights and we have had funding conversations. Mr. Locke then moved onto leads stating an RFP has been completed for a Florida Lions Club Statewide Convention to be held May 6-9, 2027, with estimated 525 room nights. Sales is working with them to try to bring that event here. Mr. Locke advised the next lead is the USDAA, which stands for United States Dog Agility Association, they have the dog agility world games to be held November 3-7, 2027 at the World Equestrian Center for an estimated 500 room nights. Mr. Bryan Day took the president and vice-president, whom were in from Texas and North Carolina, out to breakfast the previous day and had some great conversation. Nothing is official but an announcement is to be made soon. The next lead is The Great Race which is an organization that does a classic car race covering multiple states with checkpoints along the way. We hosted them previously in 2014. Mr. Day met with the organization at the Teams Conference last month and they are very interested in returning to Ocala for 2027. The event is a week-long and we have some great classic cars opportunities between Don Garlitts and NPD Museum. Mr. Locke continued to the next event which was the

USA Fencing Junior Olympic Championships, another organization that Mr. Day met with at Teams, they are looking to bring their Junior Olympics to the World Equestrian Center which is the only venue that is capable of hosting it as it's a large event taking up a lot of space. The event would be February 18-21, 2027 with an estimated 525 room nights. The last lead is the FSAE, The Florida Society of Association Executives, Annual Conference in July of 2028. Mr. Day was at the Power Luncheon for FSAE two weeks ago and met with their CEO. They just released their RFP last week and we are reviewing that and putting some information together to submit a bid. They estimated about 1,200 room nights. The ongoing leads were mentioned last month and there are no updates on them. Mr. Locke closed with asking if anyone had questions.

Ms. Shaffer advised Mr. Locke is doing a great job and the Florida Sports Foundation awarded FAST Venue of the Year in which Mr. Locke presented to the Board of County Commissioners, with thanks to Mr. Colen and On Top of The World. Mr. Locke advised a press release would be coming out later in the week.

Ms. Shaffer advised that representatives from the Florida Sport Foundation, FRLA and Visit Florida would be at the annual meeting and asked that members make it a priority to attend. The next three agenda items start on page 245 of the packet. We will be at the Capitol for the Florida Sports Day on January 19-21<sup>st</sup> and Florida Tourism Day on January 20-21<sup>st</sup> and then on February 11th there is Marion County Day at the Capitol which is done near the main courtyard. We have the blow-up Gateway arch as you come into the Capitol which is quite dynamic. Last month we presented some of the bills that are being filed regarding tourism as it relates to the expansion of the tourist development tax and housing is going to come up and this is something we are continuing to monitor. A topic that was mentioned last month regarding the state statute of exemptions especially as it relates to the RV situation that if half of the total units available are occupied by tenants who have continual use at those opportunities in excess of three months they are tax exempt. We are working with Destination Florida and Visit Florida's, Bryan Griffin, who has taken a leadership position with making sure DMOs are communicating their transparency and the importance of the quality of life we demonstrate. Ms. Shaffer lastly thanked her team for their hard work advising the large share of the work comes from them, the council for their work with the myriad of things they are asked them to do and Ms. Olesky for her and the legal department's help. Ms. Shaffer wished everyone a happy Thanksgiving and she expressed she is grateful to all of them.

Mr. Fernandez advised it's a strong team and he is proud to be apart of the program with everyone in the room.

Ms. Shaffer thanked Ms. Jess Schultz from Ocala CEP and Mr. Joe Reichel from Belleview CEP for their attendance and appreciated their cooperation and support.

### **Old Business**

Mr. Fernandez called for old business and none was brought forth.

### **New Business**

Mr. Fernandez called for new business and none was brought forth

**Public Comment**

Mr. Fernandez called for public comment and none was brought forth.

Mr. Fernandez stated that the next TDC meeting will be on Thursday, January 15, 2026 at 9 am.

The meeting adjourned at 10:36 am.

DRAFT