

**Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting**

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, January 15, 2026

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 that due to a technical issue, a portion of the meeting was not audio recorded. The written minutes serve as the official record for the portion of the meeting for which an audio recording is unavailable.

**Roll Call**

Present:

Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Bobby Walker, Christopher Fernandez, Commissioner Michelle Stone, Danny Gaekwad, Doug Cone, Rus Adams, Commissioner Ron Livsey

Staff:

Loretta Shaffer, Sky Wheeler, DeeDee Busbee, Bryan Day, Corry Locke, Heidi Villagomez, Candace Shelton,

Guests:

Tammy McCann; Marion County Tax Collectors Office, Matt Grow; Ocala International Airport, Alexis Medina; The Civic Theatre, Cynthia Wilson Graham; Friends of Silver Springs, Rob Balmes; Transportation Planning Organization, Barry Mansfield; City of Ocala, Melody Murphy; Teams; Ocala Civic Theatre, John Cowman; JLC Airshow Management, Tim Hite; JLC Airshow Management, Brenda Little; JLC Airshow Management, Bill Braack; JLC Airshow Management, Natalie McComb; Reilly Arts Center, Amy Agricola; HITS LLC, Paresh Chhotu; Hilton Garden Inn Ocala Downtown, Laurie Zink; Marion Cultural Alliance, Inc., Corian Yandel; Naventure, Danielle

Trees; Teams; HITS LLC, Austin C, Kyle Rose; Hilton Ocala, Matt Wardell; Teams; Ocala Symphony Orchestra, Sarah Thacker; Teams, Angie Lester; The Boyd Group

### **Notice of Publication**

Notice was published on the County Website on December 30, 2025 and subsequently updated to include Teams information on January 5, 2026.

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

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Commissioner Ron Livsey, to adopt the minutes from the November 20, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

### ***Acknowledgment of Financials – December 2025***

Mr. Danny Gaekwad inquired as to whether there was anything unusual about the Financials.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer and Ms. Sky Wheeler both confirmed that there was nothing out of the ordinary about the Financials.

Commissioner Michelle Stone inquired about which staff members within the department had County issued purchasing card (P-Card).

Ms. Shaffer responded that she has a P-Card but rarely uses it as staff typically pay for any department related expenses including Ms. Shaffer's department-related travel expenses.

Ms. Wheeler provided Commissioner Stone with a detailed breakdown of which staff members had P-Cards and what they were used for.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that he was familiar with the reasoning behind Commissioner Stone's inquiry and noted that Ms. Shaffer and her staff are very transparent about spending within the department.

Commissioner Stone added that she appreciated the detailed information presented regarding P-Card spending.

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker, to review and approve December 2025 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

### **Report from Chair**

#### ***Introduction of TDC Member, Commissioner Michelle Stone***

Mr. Rus Adams announced that Commissioner Michelle Stone would be joining the Council as a new member. He confirmed with Commissioner Stone that it was her first time serving on the Council.

Commissioner Stone confirmed that it was her first time serving on the Council however, she has had a long-term interest in tourism within Marion County.

***Introduction of TDC Member, Doug Cone***

Mr. Rus Adams announced that Mr. Doug Cone would be joining the Council as a new member.

Mr. Cone thanked Mr. Adams for introducing him and provided assurance that he would add value to the Council.

Ms. Shaffer welcomed both Commissioner Stone and Mr. Cone to the Council and expressed her appreciation for their willingness to serve.

***Presentation: Tourist Development Tax Collections, Marion County Deputy Tax Collector, Tammy McCann***

Ms. Tammy McCann presented data for short term rental registrations noting that there was an increase in the number of registrations since utilizing Deckard Technologies as a compliance tool. Ms. McCann stated that prior to February 26, 2025 there were 535 short term rental registrations, and as of December 31, 2025 there were 1336 short term rental registrations with 801 registrants coming from Deckard Technologies. Ms. McCann continued the presentation with revenue data noting an overall \$277,444.53 decrease in the first quarter of the 2025/2026 fiscal year when compared to the first quarter of the 2024/2025 fiscal year. She explained that the difference seen is likely because there was an influx in revenue during the 2024/2025 fiscal year as a result of hurricanes which occurred driving lodging within Marion County as individuals fled other locations to Marion County for safety. She continued the presentation by noting that hotels produce 85% of tax revenue for the County. She added that the first quarter of fiscal year 2025/2026 has seen an increase in revenue for short term rentals, property management and RV parks/campgrounds when compared to the first quarter of fiscal year 2024/2025.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad asked if the decrease in revenue could be definitively attributed to the hurricane occurrences as Visit Florida saw a decrease in revenue across the state.

Ms. McCann stated that the hurricanes were likely the cause adding that although hotel revenues had decreased that revenues in the remaining three lodging types has increased therefore the total revenue was approximately the same.

Ms. Shaffer inquired to the Council as to whether including Ms. Wheeler's TDT Collections/STR and Key Data Update after Ms. McCann's presentations would be helpful in providing clarity for future meetings.

The Council members affirmed that it would be.

## **Funding Requests**

***HITS Ocala Spring Premier I (Room Night Generating) (Requested Funding - \$5,000)***

***HITS Ocala Spring Classic II & Classic III (Room Night Generating) (Request Funding - \$12,500)***

Mr. Corry Locke introduced himself and explained that he would be presenting funding requests for HITS Ocala Spring Premier I and HITS Ocala Spring Classic II & Classic III.

Ms. Shaffer asked that Mr. Locke provide an overview of the funding programs for those attending the meeting who may not be familiar with the programs.

Mr. Locke stated that the department administers five funding programs: Meeting Rewards Program, Event Bid Fee Funding, Room Night Generating Events Funding Program, The Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program and The Marketing Assistance Funding Program. He explained that the Sales team which he supervises is primarily responsible for administering the Meeting Rewards Program, Event Bid Fee Funding and Room Night Generating Events Funding Program while the Marketing team administers the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program and The Marketing Assistance Funding Program. He went on to provide details regarding the structure of the funding programs administered by the Sales team noting that the funding requests being presented at the meeting were under the Room Night Generating Events Funding Program. Mr. Locke added that while he could not provide in depth explanations of the funding programs administered by the Marketing team that their staff would be able to provide further details and noted there would be presentations related to the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program to follow.

Mr. Locke continued with his presentation of the funding requests for HITS Ocala Spring Premier I and HITS Ocala Spring Classic II & Classic III. He stated that HITS Ocala Spring Premier I was scheduled to occur March 25-29, 2026 at HITS Post Time Farm. HITS, LLC has requested \$5,000 in funding and anticipates 1,000 room nights. The anticipated economic impact for the event is \$668,609 with a ROI of 282%. Funding would be used for judges, officials, equipment rentals, course designers and promotional expenses.

Mr. Rus Adams advised the Council that he would allow Mr. Locke to present the second funding request and they would make a motion on both requests if there were no conflicts of interest.

Mr. Locke presented the funding request for HITS Ocala Spring Classic II & Classic III scheduled to occur April 1-12, 2026 at HITS Post Time Farm. HITS, LLC has requested \$12,500 in funding and anticipates 1,250 room nights. The anticipated economic impact for the event is \$860,151 with a ROI of 94%. Funding would be used for judges, officials, equipment rentals, course designers and promotional expenses.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if the events presented were new or returning events.

Mr. Locke advised that the events were new events.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed his pleasure in seeing that HITS, LLC was adding to its event line-up as he was familiar with the organization, noting they have been active in the community for 33 years.

**A motion was made by Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to approve funding for HITS Ocala Spring Premier I and HITS Ocala Spring Classic II & Classic III for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

***Appleton Museum of Arts (Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program)  
(Requested Funding - \$10,000)***

***Marion Cultural Alliance (Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program)  
(Requested Funding - \$10,000)***

***Ocala Civic Theatre (Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program) (Requested Funding - \$7,500)***

***Reilly Arts Center (Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program) (Requested Funding - \$10,000)***

Mr. Adams deferred to Ms. Wheeler to present the funding request for the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program.

Ms. Wheeler explained that the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program was implemented in order to allow the department to provide financial aid in the programming and promotions of arts, cultural, history, heritage and nature experiences that, as one of their main purposes, attract tourists. She stated that there were four funding applicants for the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program all of whom were reviewed by the rank and review committee for the program. The committee included the community liaisons for Marion County Public Library, Marion County Parks and Recreation and Tourist Development departments. Ms. Wheeler noted that the committee also initially included Ms. Jaye Baillie however, she was unable to participate resulting in the County Administrator appointing Ms. Wheeler to sit on the committee in her place. All applicants scored the maximum points of 100 enabling them to qualify for the full amount of the funding request.

Ms. Wheeler went on to explain that for the meeting's presentations applicants would have the opportunity to present their requests to the Council and were required to ensure their presentations lasted no longer than three minutes noting that a timer was being used and would alert speakers when they had reached their time limit. She also explained that it would be at the discretion of the Chair in regard to how voting on the motions would take place. She

stated that the Chair could choose to either vote on each funding request individually or collectively.

Mr. Adams stated that the Council would move on the motions collectively. He also highlighted that based on the budgeted amount for the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program and the total amount of funding being requested that much of the funds allocated for the program would remain unused. He emphasized the need to utilize any unused funds to cover segments outside of arts.

Ms. Wheeler explained that any unused funds from the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program would likely be utilized towards the Room Night Generating Events and Bid Fee Funding programs. Before welcoming the funding applicants to make their presentations, Ms. Wheeler noted that one of the applicants representing Marion Cultural Alliance was running late for the meeting and thus while scheduled to be the second presenter, their presentation would be made later in the segment upon their arrival. She then introduced Ms. Victoria Billig to present on behalf of Appleton Museum of Arts.

Ms. Billig introduced herself and gave her presentation as follows:

As we all know, this year marks 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and cultural organizations all over the country – several of them in this room – are celebrating the semi-quincentennial in their own unique ways. The Appleton Museum of Art is no exception. Drawn from our permanent collection of more than 24,000 objects and works of art, we will present the special exhibition, “My Country Tis of Thee,” on view March 13-September 13 of this year. The exhibition will feature three centuries of American art and design through a variety of media, from painting, sculpture, photography, video, and more. We are especially excited to devote a section of the exhibition to Florida’s heritage, and more specifically, Marion County’s. This includes artwork made from celebrated artists locally and across the state, as well as historical photographs and documents that help tell the story of our community. The exhibition will be accompanied by special programming that includes an opening celebration, free admission during the month of July, a talk in partnership with Florida Humanities on Florida art and artists, and newly added the schedule, several summer art camps for ages 5-17 that focus on American art, and the exhibition. I am also pleased to update you that since submitting our application, the Appleton has received a special donation, the marble “Ambassador Molly” sculpture, which was created by award-winning artist Nilda Comas and commemorates Molly, a heroic mixed-breed boxer and the namesake of Molly’s Law. We are honored to be the recipients of this donation. We will be great caretakers of Molly, beginning with a debut in the “My Country Tis of Thee” exhibition. The Appleton requests \$10,000 from the county to help support efforts to attract out-of-county visitors. County funds will cover a portion of what we plan to spend on: an every-door-direct-mail campaign to targeted zip codes, print, digital and

radio ads and billboards with the remainder of the costs being covered through our annual budget allocation. We plan to track out-of-county visitation and engagement through zip code collection at the admissions desk and in event surveys, social media metrics, and ad impressions, and use this information with other qualitative data to report back to you all at the conclusion of the exhibition. We had a record-breaking year of attendance with almost 70,00 visitors in 2025 – the highest in my 12 years at the Appleton – and look forward to breaking that record again this year with the county’s help.

Mr. Gaekwad applauded Ms. Billig for a well done presentation and asked if staff and the County as a whole were aware of the activities and initiatives being done by the Appleton.

Ms. Shaffer affirmed that the County was aware. Commissioner Stone also noted that the information had been shared with the County’s Public Relations department.

Ms. Wheeler welcomed Ms. Alexis Medina to present on behalf of Ocala Civic Theatre.

Ms. Medina introduced herself and made her presentation as follows:

Ocala Civic Theatre has been serving Marion County since 1950. Each year, we produce a full season of live performing arts that includes three mainstage musicals, three plays, three youth productions, and more than fifty concerts, comedy shows, and special events—over two hundred and fifty performances annually. Last season, we welcomed 36,852 attendees from more than 225 ZIP codes. At least thirteen percent of those patrons traveled from outside Marion County, confirming that our programming already attracts visitors beyond the local market. What’s especially important for this application is how those visitors spend once they arrive. According to the Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 study, patrons who come from outside the county spend an average of forty-nine dollars and fifty cents per person beyond the cost of their theatre ticket. That spending flows directly into local restaurants, lodging, retail, and other visitor-serving businesses. With support from the Tourist Development Council, our goal is to intentionally grow that secondary spending by encouraging visitors to stay longer and experience more of Marion County—not just the theatre. We plan to do this by strengthening collaborations with local restaurants, lodging providers, and cultural and natural attractions, and by actively marketing The CiViC as part of a broader travel experience rather than a single-night activity. Our location makes this strategy especially effective. The CiViC is located on the Appleton Cultural Campus, adjacent to the Appleton Museum of Art, and just minutes from Silver Springs State Park and the Ocala National Forest. This allows us to promote a complete arts-and-nature itinerary—an evening at the theatre, dining downtown, a museum visit, and outdoor recreation—positioning Marion County as a destination for weekend retreats and multi-day cultural travel. This approach is fully aligned with Visit Florida’s emphasis on experience-driven, overnight tourism. We are requesting seven thousand five hundred dollars

to support a targeted out-of-county marketing campaign that includes geo-targeted Google Ads, digital and social media promotion, print and radio placements, and an out-of-area billboard. These efforts will be supported by an enhanced “Plan Your Trip” page on our website that highlights lodging partners, dining options, and nearby attractions to encourage overnight stays and expanded visitor spending. Success will be measured through ZIP-code ticketing data, digital analytics, and visitor surveys, with a goal of increasing out-of-county attendance from thirteen percent to twenty percent while strengthening Marion County’s reputation as a cultural tourism destination. With TDC support, Ocala Civic Theatre will continue to attract out-of-area visitors, encourage longer stays, and contribute to a stronger, more sustainable tourism economy for Marion County.

Ms. Medina thanked the Council for their time and welcomed any questions.

No questions were raised.

Ms. Wheeler invited Ms. Natalie McComb to present on behalf of Reilly Arts Center.

Ms. McComb introduced herself, thanked the Council for the opportunity to speak and noted that the funding request was being made on behalf of Reilly Arts Center to support their Disney’s Aladdin in Concert: Live to Film with the Ocala Symphony Orchestra project. Ms. McComb made her presentation as follows:

This is not just another concert. This is a first-of-its-kind cultural tourism event for North Central Florida: a full-length Disney film presented with a live, 60-plus-member professional orchestra. Nothing like this exists in surrounding communities—not in Gainesville, the Villages, Citrus County, or Volusia. That alone gives Marion County a powerful competitive advantage. Audiences will experience Disney’s classic film, Aladdin exactly as they remember it—original dialogue and sound effects—while every note of Alan Menken’s Academy Award-winning score is performed live in perfect synchronization by the Ocala Symphony under Maestro Matthew Wardell. Add Disney-themed lobby activities and character photo opportunities, and it becomes a complete family experience, not just a performance. This event is built to drive tourism. It is scheduled for November 7 and 8, during a non-peak tourism period, when our hotels and restaurants most need activity. With a Saturday night performance and Sunday matinee, it naturally encourages overnight stays and weekend visits. We expect up to 1,400 patrons, and at least 35% coming from outside Marion County—likely more for a Disney event. Every ticket captures a billing ZIP code, and every guest receives a post-event survey, so we will measure impact in overnight stays, dining, and visitor activity. This event speaks to everyone: grandparents who grew up with Disney, parents who shared it with their kids, and children seeing it for the first time. That multigenerational appeal is rare. It creates shared family memories and makes Marion County a place people associate with meaningful experiences. The

Disney brand is powerful, but what makes this truly special is the novelty. Most people have seen Aladdin. Almost no one has seen it with a full live symphony performing every note in real time. That combination makes this a must-see destination experience—something people will travel for. This strengthens Marion County’s image as a premier cultural destination. We have the experience to deliver. The Ocala Symphony is celebrating 50 years. The Reilly Arts Center welcomes over 50,000 patrons annually. Our past live-to-film events have sold well and earned glowing reviews. We know how to do this—and do it well. Financially, this is a smart investment. At 85% capacity, ticket sales cover about 85% of event costs. The \$10,000 requested is used only for out-of-county marketing—no salaries, no production—purely to bring visitors into Marion County. That investment is projected to generate more than \$130,000 in economic impact—an 8-to-1 return. But this is bigger than one weekend. This event launches a long-term live-to-film series with future classic Disney film titles like Star Wars, Hocus Pocus, and The Lion King—building a growing cultural tourism engine. Fully funding this proposal means investing in tourism during a slow season, in families and multigenerational audiences, in overnight stays and local business, and in Marion County’s identity as a cultural destination. Disney’s Aladdin in Concert delivers all of that—and with your support, it will create lasting value far beyond a single weekend.

Mr. Doug Cone asked when the show was being held.

Ms. McComb stated that the show was scheduled for November 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of 2026.

Mr. Adams asked for clarification on the frequency at which the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program is made available.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that the program is available once a year.

Mr. Adams noted that there needed to be stronger outreach to the art community for them to participate in the program.

Ms. Wheeler noted that the program also extends beyond the art community and is available to any organization that promotes culture, history, heritage and nature experiences.

Mr. Gaekwad commented that Fort King Heritage Foundation should have applied for funding via the Arts and Cultural Destination Enhancement Funding Program.

Mr. Cone noted that it may be beneficial to have conversations with Commissioner Craig Curry in regard to the program.

Ms. Wheeler added that many relevant industry partners were aware of the program but did not feel as though they were ready to apply for funding in the current year. She noted that she anticipates an increase in applications in the following year. Ms. Wheeler then invited Ms. Laurie Zink to present on behalf of Marion Cultural Alliance.

Ms. Zink introduced herself and made her presentation as follows:

Marion Cultural Alliance (MCA) is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and for this milestone year we are presenting a signature tourism initiative. I am here today as the chair of the 25th Anniversary events. Our request is for The Mane Tour: A Horse Fever Public Art Experience. The Mane Tour is a ten-month, countywide public art experience celebrating MCA's 25th anniversary and honoring the legacy of Horse Fever™, Ocala's first large-scale public art initiative. The project is designed specifically to attract visitors to Ocala/Marion County by encouraging them to tour Horse Fever public art installations located throughout the county. The Mane Tour invites visitors to explore multiple locations, extending their time in the community and encouraging overnight stays. Visitors are prompted to dine locally, shop, attend cultural venues, and experience other attractions while touring the installations. Because the tour spans ten months, it supports sustained tourism impact, not just a single event. Marketing will target out-of-county and regional digital advertising, promotion will take place through tourism platforms, visitor guides and distribution of Horse Fever maps. MCA plans to establish partnerships with hotels, local businesses, arts organizations, and attractions and conduct social media campaigns and earned media highlighting Ocala as a cultural destination. TDC funding will be used exclusively for eligible tourism-related expenses, primarily marketing and promotion aimed at visitors from outside Marion County. The Mane Tour reinforces Marion County's identity as a creative, arts-forward destination. It builds on a beloved public art legacy while encouraging repeat visitation and long-term cultural tourism. MCA will track participation, visitor engagement, marketing reach, and geographic data where available with all required reporting and documentation to be provided.

Ms. Zink thanked the Council for their consideration and welcomed questions.

Councilmember Mansfield asked about existing horse statues throughout the County that were on private property but were a part of the original herd.

Ms. Zink stated that it would be the property owner's decision on whether they would like to participate and include their horses in the project. She mentioned that there was a horse statue in front of Cone Distributing and inquired if Mr. Cone would allow it to be included in the project.

Mr. Cone advised he welcomed the opportunity for the painted horse in front of Cone Distributing to be included in the project.

Mr. Adams asked how many painted horses were available to view and easily accessible throughout the County.

Ms. Zink advised that there were approximately fifty-eight painted horses throughout the County that could be accessed.

Councilmember Mansfield and Mr. Cone began a discussion surrounding potentially utilizing City of Ocala buses to transport individuals for a tour of the horses once a week. They suggested that individuals could meet at a designated location to ride the City of Ocala buses for the tours.

Members of the public began to raise questions, Ms. Wheeler explained that the Council could not take questions at that time but extended the opportunity for the public to make comments during the Public Comment segment of the meeting.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Ron Livsey, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to approve funding for Appleton Museum of Arts, Marion Cultural Alliance, Ocala Civic Theatre and Reilly Arts Center for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

#### **Staff Update**

Mr. Adams deferred to Ms. Shaffer for the staff updates.

Ms. Shaffer again welcomed the new members of the Council, Mr. Cone and Commissioner Stone and expressed gratitude for their participation on the Council. Ms. Shaffer stated that the upcoming presentation would include a significant amount of research-based data as everything the department does is driven by research. She noted this included activities related to audits, marketing, sales, industry relations and advocacy. Ms. Shaffer explained that the department had been utilizing Downs & St. Germain as its research firm for several years as well as Destinations International to cover national data. She added that research data from Downs & St. Germain was used in developing the department's strategic plan in the year prior and the department intends to work collaboratively with them again. Ms. Shaffer further explained that the department's strategic plan updates aligned with the timing of the County's strategic plan updates which was an ideal situation as the department would be able to develop their strategic plan to align with the goals of the County. She then welcomed Mr. Isiah Lewis to present.

#### ***Annual Economic Impact/Visitor Tracking Report – Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Data***

Mr. Danny Gaekwad out 10:02 am

Mr. Doug Cone out 10:02 am

Mr. Isiah Lewis advised he would be presenting the Annual Economic Impact and Visitor Tracking Report for fiscal year 2025. He began by providing context for the reporting structure, noting that the analysis has transitioned from a calendar-year reporting model to a fiscal-year reporting model. As a result, the data being presented would not be directly comparable to previously reported full-year impact studies based on the calendar year. However, he explained

that he had recalculated data for Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024 to allow for appropriate fiscal-year comparisons moving forward. Mr. Lewis noted that while Council members may have seen a preview of some of the data during the December Annual Meeting, the current presentation would provide a more detailed review.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad in 10:03 am

Mr. Lewis explained that he would first provide a high-level overview of the Fiscal Year 2025 economic impact data, followed by a deeper analysis of the findings. He also noted that the presentation would include a summary of visitor tracking highlights for the fiscal year and conclude with a discussion of emerging trends for Fiscal Year 2026 and how they relate to Ocala/Marion County.

Ms. Shaffer added that while many attendees were present at the Annual Meeting where some of the figures were briefly highlighted, the current presentation would offer a more comprehensive review of the data.

Mr. Lewis confirmed that several of the figures being presented may be familiar to those who attended the Annual Meeting but reiterated that the information would be discussed in greater depth.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad commended staff on the presentation delivered at the Annual Meeting, noting it was a strong highlight of the event and encouraging the team to continue building upon that success in future.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged the feedback and expressed appreciation.

Mr. Lewis noted that before reviewing the primary figures, it was important to provide context regarding current travel trends. He explained that Ocala/Marion County, along with many destinations across Florida and the United States, experienced a slight decline in visitor statistics during Fiscal Year 2025. He described this as a normalization driven by broader economic factors, explaining that visitors are currently more price-conscious than in Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024 and are making different travel decisions due to overall economic conditions. Mr. Lewis stated that these trends had a modest impact on local tourism statistics and would be reflected in the data presented. Mr. Lewis reported that the total economic impact to Marion County for Fiscal Year 2025 was \$956,452,100, representing a decrease of 0.8% year over year. He noted that while some destinations have experienced more drastic declines, Ocala/Marion County's market composition helped mitigate the impact. He explained that the destination attracts a relatively high percentage of luxury visitors, and that lower-income travelers—who are more likely to reduce travel during economic downturns—have had less influence on the overall local tourism economy. Mr. Lewis further explained that changes to the IMPLAN economic impact model used for reporting also influenced the figures presented.

Mr. Doug Cone in 10:06 am

He stated that IMPLAN updates its methodology every five years based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Census, and other national datasets. As part of the most recent update, multiplier calculations were adjusted, resulting in more conservative estimates for economic impact, jobs, and wages. Mr. Lewis emphasized that these methodological changes should be considered when comparing current figures to prior years. Mr. Lewis added that Downs and St. Germain also updated their methodologies to align with the updates from IMPLAN.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad inquired whether the County had ever surpassed the \$1 billion mark in economic impact.

Mr. Lewis responded that under the updated methodology and fiscal-year reporting structure, Fiscal Year 2024 reflected an economic impact of \$964,284,300, which did not exceed \$1 billion.

Mr. Doug Cone out 10:07 am

However, he noted that under the previous reporting methodology and cycle, Fiscal Year 2023 reflected an economic impact exceeding \$1 billion. Mr. Lewis reiterated that direct comparisons between earlier reports and current figures should be avoided due to both methodological changes and the transition from calendar-year to fiscal-year reporting.

Ms. Shaffer added that the changes in the IMPLAN model contributed to the differences in reported figures and acknowledged that the transition could be confusing.

Mr. Gaekwad indicated his understanding and encouraged Mr. Lewis to continue with the presentation.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged that the question regarding economic impact trends was an important one and noted that similar discussions were occurring across destination marketing organizations throughout the state. She explained that while some reported economic impact metrics reflect decreases tourism tax collections continue to increase.

Mr. Gaekwad observed that increases in accommodations inventory, including additional hotel properties and short-term rental units—contribute to rising collections. He noted that as room supply and available accommodations continue to grow year over year, those increases must be considered when comparing performance across reporting periods.

Ms. Shaffer agreed.

Mr. Gaekwad added that there would be continued increases in hotels and short-term rental inventory.

Mr. Lewis continued by noting that direct visitor spending is not affected by the IMPLAN model changes and that only the economic impact multiplier which relates to economic impact, job and wages are affected by the IMPLAN methodological changes which are also reflected in Downs and St. Germain's metrics. He reported that direct spending for fiscal year 2025 totaled \$664,798,900, reflecting a slight decrease of 0.2% from fiscal year 2024 and remained relatively flat overall. Visitor volume for fiscal year 2025 totaled 1,329,800, representing a decrease of 7.3%. Mr. Lewis explained that while visitation declined, this trend is consistent with national patterns and reflects fewer visiting friends and relatives, unpaid accommodations, and day-trip visitors. He noted that the decrease in visitor numbers was offset by higher spending from luxury travelers, whose expenditures are greater than those of lower-income travelers who may be traveling less frequently. Mr. Lewis then reviewed room night data, reporting that room nights increased to just under 1.3 million, a 5.6% increase from fiscal year 2024. He explained that this increase occurred despite the decline in total visitors due to several factors and referenced the presentation footnotes to provide clarity.

Mr. Doug Cone in 10:10am

The footnotes read as follows: "room nights have increased while having fewer visitors due to a variety of factors including, an increase in the percentage of paid visitors compared to other visitor types, flat occupancy year over year, and a 5.8% (+298 units) increase in units compared to FY2024".

Mr. Rus Adams out 10:11am

Mr. Lewis added that while there were fewer day-trippers and visitors staying with friends and relatives, the share of visitors utilizing paid accommodations increased, resulting in higher room night totals. Slight increases in average daily rate also contributed to this trend. Mr. Lewis reported that Tourist Development Tax collections from paid accommodations and vacation rentals totaled \$6,789,255 for fiscal year 2025, representing an increase of just under 24% year over year. He explained that this growth was driven by increases in room nights, available lodging units, and average daily rate, as well as continued compliance and enforcement efforts by the Tax Collector's Office.

Mr. Gaekwad asked that the information be presented slowly for clarity.

Mr. Lewis stated that the growth in Tourist Development Tax collections reflects the combined impact of increased room nights, expanded lodging inventory, higher average daily rates, and improved compliance efforts.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that the nearly 24% increase was substantial and asked whether a breakdown was available comparing hotel collections to those from short-term rentals such as Airbnb, particularly in light of recent compliance efforts by the Tax Collector's Office.

Mr. Lewis stated that he did not have that specific information.

Mr. Gaekwad emphasized the importance of the Council having that information and breakdown.

Ms. Wheeler explained that Ms. Tammy McCann with the Tax Collector's Office had previously presented a fiscal year comparison detailing the impact of compliance and enforcement efforts related to short-term rentals, and that information was included in a previously published meeting packet. She added that staff could resend that information to Council members for reference.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that he believed this was beneficial information for Council members to have due to the significant increase in collections and the Council needing to understand why that occurred.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged the request and noted that staff would review how best to aggregate available data to provide additional context for the Council during the budgeting process. She asked Mr. Lewis to explore potential methods for compiling the requested information and to report back to staff.

Mr. Gaekwad reiterated that for several years the Council had discussed the importance of improving compliance among short-term rental operators.

Ms. Shaffer again inquired to Mr. Lewis as to how they could aggregate data to be able to fulfill Mr. Gaekwad's request.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed interest in evaluating whether compliance efforts have resulted in measurable gains. He further commented on the significant number of visitors utilizing short-term rentals during peak equestrian season, stating that overflow demand often results in thousands of visitors being accommodated in private homes rather than traditional lodging.

Mr. Rus Adams in 10:14 am.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed concern that inconsistent quality and oversight within short-term rental accommodations could negatively impact visitor experience and, ultimately, the destination's reputation. He emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant in monitoring this segment of the lodging market and noted that Visit Florida continues to closely observe short-term rental trends statewide.

Ms. Shaffer asked whether other destination marketing organizations across the state were tracking similar data related to short-term rental compliance and Tourist Development Tax collection. She inquired about potential tools or partnerships, including those with industry

firms such as Miles Partnership or Arrivalist, that could assist in aggregating and analyzing this information.

Mr. Lewis responded that detailed tracking of Tourist Development Tax collections and compliance is typically conducted by local Tax Collector offices.

Ms. Shaffer inquired whether the Tax Collector's Office would be able to provide data to the research team, noting that while certain details cannot be shared directly with the Council, they may be able to share information with the research team.

Ms. Wheeler responded that the Tax Collector already produces reports containing relevant data and clarified that the information is not proprietary, but rather had not previously been incorporated into Mr. Lewis's reporting. She stated that staff would ensure Mr. Lewis is included in the appropriate distribution moving forward so that the information can be integrated into future reports in a seamless manner.

Ms. Shaffer added that, if not already included, staff would begin aggregating the available data and cross-referencing it with other research metrics to provide more comprehensive insight. She noted that while this could not be developed all at once, staff would begin evaluating opportunities to build this into future reporting and long-range planning efforts, suggesting a phased approach to incorporating additional data points into the Council's research. Mr. Doug Cone referenced Mr. Gaekwad's earlier comments and noted the ongoing challenge faced by the Tax Collector's Office in tracking privately owned short-term rentals that operate intermittently, stating that these types of rentals frequently go in and out of operation and can be difficult to monitor consistently.

Ms. Shaffer agreed and acknowledged that this is an issue seen not only locally but also at the state level.

Mr. Gaekwad emphasized the importance of enforcement and continued collaboration not only with the state but also between the City and the County. He stated that increased compliance could generate additional tourism development tax revenue that could be reinvested into cultural initiatives and community programs, ultimately benefiting Ocala/Marion County as a whole. He noted that continued efforts by the Tax Collector's Office have contributed to recent increases in collections and encouraged ongoing vigilance.

Ms. Shaffer added that though this issue has been presented for over 13 years she has yet to see a relevant bill be introduced.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that County leadership may be able to aid in these efforts.

Mr. Cone provided a local example, noting that within a 12-block area of his historic district neighborhood there are 14 AirBnBs.

Mr. Gaekwad directed his comments towards Commissioner Michelle Stone and stated that there was a significant amount of money being lost due to non-compliance. He added that those funds if collected could be beneficial to the community. Mr. Gaekwad stated that he did not mind short-term rentals competing with traditional lodging accommodators however, expressed the importance of the Tax Collector ensuring these properties were compliant with collection requirements.

Mr. Cone relayed the concept of “pay to play,” emphasizing the importance of ensuring all operators comply with tax requirements.

Ms. Shaffer expressed agreement with the overall sentiment and stated that this was an area where collaboration with County Growth Services and other partners could continue to evolve.

Mr. Gaekwad encouraged staff and County leadership to continue exploring potential solutions and methods for improving compliance tracking.

Commissioner Stone responded that she was considering possible approaches but acknowledged the difficulty in collecting comprehensive data, noting that the Tax Collector’s Office had recently implemented a new system which has helped capture additional accounts.

Mr. Cone added that while progress has been made, not all rentals are currently captured within the system.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired whether a reporting mechanism, such as a hotline to the Tax Collector’s Office, could be established to allow residents to report suspected short-term rental activity that may be operating outside of compliance and creating issues within neighborhoods.

Ms. Shaffer provided additional context for Commissioner Stone and the Council, noting that short-term rental regulation and data transparency continue to be a significant challenge for the tourism industry statewide. She explained that financial data related to short-term rentals is often protected or limited by state regulations, creating an uneven landscape between traditional hotels and privately operated rentals.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that significant private investment continues to be made in hotel development and emphasized the importance of maintaining fair and equitable enforcement across all lodging types.

Commissioner Michelle Stone stated that many of the regulatory challenges stem from property rights associated with private ownership, indicating that broader legislative solutions at the state level will likely be necessary to fully address the issue.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged these limitations and reiterated that while state-level policy changes are needed for comprehensive reform, local efforts to improve compliance and coordination can continue in the meantime.

Mr. Gaekwad stated for the record his frustration with the lack of statewide action regarding short-term rental regulation and shared concerns regarding the growth of short-term rentals and the perceived impact on traditional lodging properties. He shared that he had sued the state previously and in that lawsuit obtained documentation indicating that there were discrepancies in the financial reporting by AirBnB. He added that meaningful enforcement will need to occur at the local level through cities and counties as they were the most invested in the issue.

Commissioner Stone inquired about potential enforcement mechanisms, including whether the Tax Collector's Office would be able to support inspection or compliance activities if a reporting system or hotline were established, and who would be responsible for conducting any necessary follow-up or enforcement actions.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that there was a need for thoughtful planning around enforcement and reporting mechanisms, noting that residents may be hesitant to report concerns.

Ms. Shaffer referenced examples from other destinations, including Miami, where local ordinances were revised to strengthen compliance requirements for short-term rentals.

Commissioner Stone asked whether funding could potentially be allocated by the Tourist Development Council, if permissible under state statute, to support a dedicated enforcement or compliance role similar to code enforcement.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed support for exploring possible funding solutions. He noted that private investors in traditional lodging operations were spending tens of millions of dollars while remaining compliant with tax collections while short-term rentals were essentially committing theft against those operators, investors and the County by not complying with tax collections. Mr. Gaekwad stated that he has been an advocate for this issue for several years and would continue to speak on this issue to bring awareness and make lasting changes. He further expressed his concerns with the dangers of short-term rentals to the families that exist within neighborhoods and the potential for visitors in those communities to commit harmful acts.

Commissioner Stone stated that she has read a substantial amount of information regarding the harmful impact of visitors staying in short-term rentals within existing neighborhoods and expressed a desire for the Council to explore funding sources to aid in compliance efforts.

Mr. Adams, Mr. Gaekwad and Ms. Shaffer all expressed support for continuing to explore options and collaborative solutions moving forward.

Mr. Gaekwad reiterated concerns regarding unregulated short-term rentals in residential areas, noting that some neighborhoods have experienced an increase in transient occupancy without clear oversight. He stated that residents would likely be willing to report suspected short-term rental activity if a reporting process were available.

Mr. Cone noted that in his neighborhood alone there were 14 short-term rental properties.

Commissioner Stone asked how the Tax Collector's Office verifies whether identified properties are properly registered and remitting applicable taxes.

Ms. Shaffer invited Ms. Tammy McCann to provide a brief overview of the compliance tracking system currently in use.

Ms. McCann explained that the Tax Collector's Office utilizes specialized software that scans thousands of online platforms to identify potential short-term rental listings. She noted that while the system reviews a large number of websites and platforms, it may not capture every listing, particularly those advertised on social media or less traditional channels. She added that listings can frequently change or be removed, making comprehensive tracking challenging.

Ms. Shaffer added that the intermittent activity of these rentals along with the existence of many platforms for advertising short-term rentals increased tracking difficulties.

Ms. McCann encouraged Council members and the public to report suspected short-term rental properties directly to her office. She explained that when an address is provided, staff can cross-reference the property within the system and, if necessary, initiate compliance outreach. She noted that although automated letters are generated through the system, some property owners may not receive them due to outdated contact information or other factors, and additional follow-up may be required. Ms. McCann provided her email address of [tmccann@mariontax.com](mailto:tmccann@mariontax.com) for reporting purposes and advised that addresses may also be submitted through the Tourist Development Tax section of the Marion County Tax Collector's website, which routes inquiries directly to her for review.

Mr. Cone asked what penalties would apply if a short-term rental operator had failed to remit Tourist Development Tax for several years.

Ms. Tammy McCann explained that the Tax Collector's Office has generally taken the approach of bringing operators into compliance and moving forward with current reporting; however, state statute allows the County to go back and assess unpaid taxes for prior periods of noncompliance. Ms. McCann stated that in most cases the office reviews up to three years of unpaid taxes. She noted that any unpaid amount would be subject to both penalties and interest. The penalty is calculated at ten percent of the unpaid tax or \$50, whichever is greater, and interest accrues at a rate of twelve percent per year.

Mr. Cone asked what actions could be taken if a property owner refused to pay.

Ms. McCann responded that state statute allows for a lien to be placed against the property for unpaid Tourist Development Taxes. She clarified that while this enforcement action has not been utilized to date, the authority exists and any decision to pursue liens would be made by the Tax Collector in coordination with the Board of County Commissioners.

Ms. Shaffer noted that the current approach has focused on education and voluntary compliance to avoid more severe enforcement measures whenever possible.

Ms. McCann added that if a lien were placed and the property were later sold, the outstanding taxes, penalties, and interest would be collected at that time.

Mr. Gaekwad discussed the potential use of stronger enforcement tools to encourage compliance and deter nonpayment,

Mr. Cone expressed his support for pursuing liens and increasing public awareness of the enforcement measures that could be taken.

Mr. Gaekwad added that these enforcement measures could be published in local newspapers to increase visibility.

Mr. Lewis confirmed that he would continue with the presentation, noting that he had approximately twenty additional slides to review.

Mr. Gaekwad encouraged him to proceed quickly.

Mr. Lewis continued with the presentation, noting that he would move quickly through the remaining slides. He reported that the combined occupancy rate for fiscal year 2025, including both hotels and vacation rentals, was 58.9%. He provided approximate breakout figures, stating that hotel occupancy was approximately 59.9% while vacation rental occupancy was approximately 45%. Mr. Lewis reported that the average daily rate (ADR) across accommodations was \$126.21, reflecting an increase of 3.2% from fiscal year 2024. Revenue per available room (RevPAR) also increased, with ADR growth contributing to a 4% increase overall. He noted that ADR for vacation rentals was approximately \$159 and explained that vacation rental metrics reflect a smaller sample size of total available units compared to traditional hotels, which accounts for differences between the two categories. Turning to employment and wage data, Mr. Lewis explained that these figures were affected by the updated IMPLAN methodology previously discussed. He reported that tourism in Marion County supported 867 jobs in fiscal year 2025, representing a slight decrease of 4% compared to fiscal year 2024. Tourism-supported wages totaled \$296,839,700, reflecting a decrease of approximately 1% year over year. He reiterated that these figures appear more conservative due to the updated modeling methodology.

Mr. Bobby Walker inquired as to whether those figures took into account that minimum wage had increased.

Mr. Lewis confirmed that wage increases were reflected in the data but clarified that, due to the IMPLAN model's reliance on nationwide data sets, fiscal year 2025 figures were calculated using 2024 dollar values. He explained that updated 2025 dollar values would not be incorporated until fiscal year 2026 reporting, at which time the fiscal year 2025 report would be updated to reflect those figures. As a result, the current wage and employment figures may appear slightly lower on a year-to-year basis until updated. Mr. Lewis reported that tourism supported one additional Marion County job for approximately every 153 visitors. He explained that this metric was calculated by dividing the total number of tourism-supported jobs by the total number of visitors.

He then reviewed the net tax benefit generated by visitors, stating that visitors produced a net tax benefit of \$5,915,200 to Marion County government in fiscal year 2025. He explained that this figure was derived by calculating total local taxes and user-fee revenues generated by visitors and subtracting the cost incurred by the County to provide services and infrastructure for those visitors. Visitors generated approximately \$28,378,000 in local tax revenue, while the cost to service those visitors totaled approximately \$22,463,000, resulting in the net benefit reported. Mr. Lewis further reported that tourism resulted in an estimated annual household savings of \$453 in state and local taxes for Marion County residents. He explained that this figure was calculated by dividing total local and state taxes supported by visitors by the number of households in the County.

He then reviewed the department's marketing spend and noted that every dollar spent by the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB) on marketing was associated with approximately \$49 in visitor spending within the County. He explained that this metric was derived by analyzing advertising recall, visitor influence, total visitor numbers, and the VCB marketing budget. He added that this figure is considered conservative but compares favorably with similar destinations across the state. Mr. Lewis then transitioned to a high-level overview of visitor profile data for fiscal year 2025. He reported an increase in visitors recalling advertising, with recall rising six percentage points over the prior year. He also noted that visitors traveling between April and June 2025 demonstrated longer trip-planning windows. He reported that the median visitor age remained approximately 50 years old, consistent with fiscal year 2024. Median household income for visitors increased to approximately \$96,000, compared to \$86,000 the previous year, reflecting a continued trend toward higher-income or luxury travelers. He explained that this trend aligned with a national pattern in which lower-income travelers reduced travel due to economic concerns. Mr. Lewis reported that average travel party size decreased slightly from 2.9 to 2.8 persons. First-time visitation increased by

approximately 7%, indicating a greater share of visitors experiencing Ocala/Marion County for the first time, while repeat visitation declined slightly as a result. Approximately 40% of visitors traveled with children, and average length of stay remained steady at approximately 4.1 nights. He reiterated that advertising recall increased to approximately 30% in fiscal year 2025, compared to 24% in fiscal year 2024. Of those who recalled advertising, approximately seven in ten indicated that advertising influenced their decision to visit, equating to approximately 21% of all visitors reporting that advertising influenced their travel decision. He noted that this represented a strong performance compared to other destinations and reflected a significant increase from approximately 14% the prior year. He further noted that the increase in advertising influence aligned with the increase in first-time visitation. Mr. Lewis reported that first-time visitors accounted for approximately 37% of visitors in fiscal year 2025, while loyalist visitors defined as those who had visited more than ten times declined slightly year over year. He reported that Florida residents comprised approximately 53% of visitors, up slightly from 51% the previous year. International visitation remained stable at approximately 4%, which he noted was a positive indicator given broader declines in international travel during the period, including continued visitation from Canada.

He reviewed top states of origin, noting that more than eight in ten visitors originated from the top thirteen states listed. Virginia and Maryland entered the top-origin list during the fiscal year, while other top states such as New York and Ohio showed slight increases.

Mr. Lewis then reviewed visitor motivations and activities. He noted that visiting friends and relatives and horse-related activities remained the two primary drivers of visitation to the destination. He explained that these categories consistently generated the greatest tourism impact, while mid-tier and lower-tier activities represented additional opportunities for growth and diversification within the destination's tourism offerings.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired whether food or restaurant experiences served as a primary driver for visitation.

Mr. Lewis reported that dining was identified as the main reason for visiting by approximately 6% of visitors; however, approximately 66% of visitors reported dining out during their stay. He explained that while restaurants are not a primary motivator for travel to Ocala/Marion County, dining remains a significant activity once visitors arrive.

Mr. Lewis then presented a quadrant analysis comparing visitor activities with visitor expectations. He explained that activities appearing in the upper-right quadrant represented the destination's strongest tourism drivers—those most frequently participated in and most positively rated by visitors. These included nature and birdwatching, horse-related activities, and visits to area springs. He noted that the upper-left quadrant represented activities

participated in less frequently but which exceeded visitor expectations. These included canoeing, kayaking, equine utility and sales activities, sporting tournaments, and attractions such as the Canyon Zipline. He clarified that activities performed less frequently were not performing poorly; rather, they exceeded expectations among those who participated in them. He further noted that only a small percentage of visitors reported that certain activities did not meet expectations, with the highest being approximately 4% related to area attractions and approximately 3% related to fishing and fishing-related activities. Overall, he stated that visitor satisfaction remained strong across all categories.

Mr. Lewis then reviewed quarterly trends, noting that visitors traveling between April and June planned their trips significantly further in advance than visitors in other quarters. He reported that April through June visitors planned their trips an average of 73 days in advance, compared to approximately 57, 62, and 54 days for the remaining quarters. He suggested this information could help inform marketing timing and strategy. He also reported that first-time visitation was highest during the January through March period, coinciding with peak equestrian season, with nearly two out of five visitors during that period visiting for the first time. He concluded by noting that visitor expectations exceeded satisfaction benchmarks across all visitor types and that advertising recall was highest among visitors traveling between April and June and July through September.

Ms. Shaffer invited feedback from Council members regarding the new reporting layout.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed his support for the revised format, noting that it was easier to understand and provided greater clarity.

Mr. Lewis added that the updated slide design offered a useful way to visualize key differences and trends.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged that the quadrant-style graphics could be somewhat confusing but appreciated the enhanced level of detail provided.

Mr. Lewis further highlighted statewide visitation trends for context, noting that Florida visitation during the April through June period was approximately 41%, compared to approximately 61% during the October through December period, illustrating seasonal variations in travel patterns across the state.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired whether visitor tracking data was available for the Florida Aquatics Swimming & Training (FAST) facility and asked how many people visit annually.

Mr. Lewis indicated that he did not have the figures immediately available.

Ms. Wheeler noted that FAST does track its visitation data internally and maintains a unique fiscal year beginning in April. She added that Mr. Kevin Milak and the FAST team closely monitor a wide range of performance and visitation metrics and that those figures could be obtained and shared with the Council.

Ms. Shaffer added that the World Equestrian Center similarly maintains comprehensive tracking and data analytics and works closely with Mr. Lewis and his team to quantify visitation and economic impact.

Mr. Lewis acknowledged the strong collaboration with FAST and indicated appreciation for their detailed data tracking.

Mr. Lewis then transitioned the presentation to an overview of national tourism trends and forward-looking projections for fiscal year 2026. He explained that the trends being presented were based on aggregated national and statewide data compiled into an annual trends report distributed to partner destinations. He noted that Ms. Shaffer had received a more comprehensive version of the full report and that he had identified the trends most relevant to Ocala/Marion County for discussion.

Ms. Shaffer added that the full list of trends would be shared with industry partners and that staff would be unveiling additional related initiatives in the near future.

Mr. Lewis continued his presentation with an overview of projected tourism trends for fiscal year 2026. He noted that many national trend reports indicate that travel decisions in 2026 are expected to be more intentional and purposeful. Travelers are increasingly seeking trips that feel personal and meaningful, and marketing efforts that connect to individual interests and experiences are expected to resonate more strongly. He explained that while overall travel may not necessarily decline, visitors are expected to be more selective, choosing destinations and experiences that align with specific motivations rather than routine or habitual travel patterns. Mr. Lewis highlighted several specific trends relevant to Ocala/Marion County. He noted an increased interest in rural and farm-related travel experiences, citing data indicating that 84% of travelers expressed interest in visiting farms or rural areas. He stated that Ocala's strong rural, agricultural, and equestrian identity positions the destination well to capitalize on this growing interest. Mr. Lewis also discussed the upcoming FIFA World Cup in 2026 as a significant travel driver, with anticipated increases in both domestic and international travel. He noted that Ocala/Marion County's location between host cities, Atlanta and Miami, presents an opportunity to capture pass-through visitors traveling between host cities. He suggested that the destination could market itself as a convenient and appealing stop for travelers driving between those locations.

Ms. Wheeler asked for clarification regarding the timing of the World Cup, noting that it would be a significant opportunity for the region.

Mr. Lewis confirmed that the event would take place during the summer months.

Mr. Gaekwad suggested that staff could place billboards along the driving route that welcomes Fifa World Cup visitors to Ocala/Marion County.

Ms. Shaffer noted that Visit Florida is already developing related cooperative marketing opportunities and that Marion County would be able to participate through co-op buy-in programs similar to those discussed for the America 250 campaign. She explained that Visit Florida has indicated it will match local marketing investments, allowing the County and private sector partners to leverage additional funding to support promotional efforts. Ms. Shaffer emphasized that increased participation and support from private sector partners would strengthen the County's ability to maximize available matching funds and enhance destination-wide marketing efforts tied to major initiatives, including America 250 celebrations and associated community events such as planned fireworks displays. She encouraged Council members to share potential sponsorship leads with staff so they could be connected with the appropriate team members for follow-up.

Mr. Cone asked whether staff had engaged directly with FIFA representatives in Miami regarding potential opportunities.

Ms. Shaffer responded that while staff had not engaged directly, Visit Florida has been working with FIFA representatives and is developing cooperative packages that partner destinations will be able to participate in.

Mr. Gaekwad provided additional background on prior Visit Florida funding efforts to support host destination bids and related tourism initiatives including Visit Florida offering ten million dollars to Miami for tourism efforts.

Mr. Cone noted that he has a connection with FIFA representative, Rodney Barreto who would be visiting the area in the near future and offered to facilitate an introduction.

Ms. Shaffer welcomed the opportunity and expressed appreciation for the potential connection.

Mr. Lewis continued his presentation by outlining two additional travel trends expected to influence visitation in Fiscal Year 2026. He explained that travelers are increasingly seeking offline and outdoor experiences, with growing demand for national and state parks and nature-based activities. He noted that the Ocala National Forest—one of only three national forests in Florida—positions Ocala/Marion County favorably within this trend due to its central location and limited direct competition from natural assets in surrounding areas. He stated that this interest in outdoor recreation is expected to continue growing and presents a strong

opportunity for the destination. Mr. Lewis further reported that travelers age 50 and older remain highly motivated to travel, often prioritizing bucket-list experiences, comfort, and planning certainty. He referenced research indicating that this demographic is particularly sensitive to booking friction and values clear service and support. He noted that the median age of visitors to Ocala/Marion County is approximately 50 years old, reinforcing the importance of maintaining accessibility and targeted marketing for this audience. While younger demographics remain a consideration, he emphasized that older travelers continue to represent a significant and financially capable visitor segment. Mr. Lewis then reviewed the study methodology. He explained that visitor interviews were conducted both in person and online, with in-person surveys administered via tablets at hotels, attractions, and events. A total of 2,891 visitor interviews were completed between October 1, 2024, and September 30, 2025, providing a strong sample size for analysis. He also reviewed partner participation in the study and encouraged additional hotels, attractions, and event partners to participate in future data collection efforts to further strengthen the dataset.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that Mr. Lewis needed to obtain additional data from downtown Ocala to aid in revitalization efforts.

Mr. Lewis responded that while downtown-specific partners were not listed in the presentation, a surveyor currently conducts visitor data collection in the downtown area each Saturday and Sunday to capture activity and trends.

Mr. Gaekwad commended the City's efforts in revitalizing downtown and noted that continued enhancements, particularly the addition of live music and entertainment, could further strengthen the area's appeal. He stated that with new developments including a parking garage and hotel, downtown is poised for continued growth and increased visitation.

Councilmember Mansfield asked Mr. Gaekwad about potential restaurant and retail development in his property downtown.

Mr. Gaekwad shared that he plans to open food-focused concepts and had no plans for retail development. He noted that downtown needed at least 30 restaurants.

Councilman Mansfield commented on the importance of both restaurants and retail in attracting visitors and creating a vibrant downtown environment.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that broader retail development would require participation from other stakeholders.

Ms. Shaffer noted that additional retail development is anticipated as part of the Shops on 80th project and other ongoing initiatives.

Mr. Gaekwad added that he intends to support ongoing downtown revitalization efforts and reiterated the need for additional evening time entertainment. Mr. Gaekwad suggested that traffic patterns could be adjusted to improve pedestrian experience and visibility of downtown activity.

Councilmember Mansfield shared that the City Council continues to explore strategies to increase downtown activity, support new development, and enhance accessibility, including excitement surrounding the new parking garage and hotel projects.

Mr. Lewis concluded his presentation and asked if there were any questions from the Council. He thanked the Council for their time and noted he would aim to be more concise at future meetings.

Ms. Shaffer thanked Mr. Lewis for the presentation, noting that the length of the discussion was largely due to TDC engagement and questions rather than the presentation itself. She stated the information provided was helpful and delivered at an appropriate high-level overview.

Mr. Gaekwad requested that healthy snack options be made available for Councilmembers during meetings, noting that members often arrive early and volunteer their time. He suggested including protein or healthier selections in addition to coffee.

Ms. Shaffer indicated the meeting was nearing conclusion and invited Mr. Locke to provide a brief update.

### ***Sales Update***

Mr. Locke provided the monthly sales update and noted he would keep his remarks brief. Under new business, he reported that three events had been confirmed for the summer season, all hosted by the same organization, ProAm Senior Softball.

Commissioner Ron Livsey out 10:58 am

The organization plans to host three separate tournaments in May, July, and September, each anticipated to bring approximately 20 to 30 teams and an estimated 250 room nights per event. Mr. Locke noted that preliminary funding discussions had taken place and that a funding request would likely be presented to the Council in the future. He added that the events occur during favorable periods for the destination and expressed enthusiasm about welcoming the organization, which had previously hosted events in Tampa and other markets and is now exploring Ocala/Marion County.

Mr. Doug Cone out at 10:59 am

Mr. Locke then moved to the leads section of the report, referencing page 174 of the agenda packet. He shared that the Florida Paddling Trails Association Paddle Fest, an event previously

hosted in Ocala/Marion County approximately five years ago, is planning a return. The event is tentatively scheduled for April 16–19 and is expected to generate approximately 300 room nights. Organizers are currently working with Camp Kiwanis as a potential host location. He next discussed the FDOT Scenic Highway Annual Meeting, which is working with Silver Springs as a potential host site for next month. While not yet confirmed, planning is trending in that direction. An RFP for host hotels was distributed, and Mr. Locke thanked local hoteliers who had responded, noting the team was awaiting final confirmation from the organization.

Commissioner Ron Livsey in at 11:00am

Mr. Locke also provided an update on the Official Strongman Games, which staff have been pursuing for several years. A site visit was conducted the previous week and was reported to have gone very well. He noted that the primary remaining step is finalizing financial details to ensure feasibility. The tentative dates are November 16–22, 2026, potentially the week prior to Thanksgiving. Mr. Locke expressed optimism and stated staff hoped to return the following month with an update, including a potential funding request for Council consideration.

Moving to ongoing leads, Mr. Locke highlighted several updates. The Fishers of Men District 12 Championship is progressing positively following a recent call with organizers. Proposed dates are October 13–17, with the event tentatively planned for the Orange Lake location at the Heagy-Burry Boat Ramp currently under construction. Staff continues to coordinate with the Parks Department and expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to host another fishing tournament. He also reported that the Florida Lions Club Statewide Meeting is expected to make its host site decision on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2026. Ocala/Marion County remains under consideration along with other Florida destinations, and staff will provide an update once a decision is made. Mr. Locke further noted that a site visit is scheduled for the FSAE Annual Conference, which staff have been pursuing for approximately two to three years. The visit will take place the following week at The Equestrian Manor, the only venue locally capable of accommodating the conference's size. Staff expressed excitement about the opportunity and will report back on the outcome.

Under lost business, Mr. Locke reported that the Florida Swimming Senior Spring Championships, previously approved for three years of funding beginning in January 2024 at \$20,000 per year, has elected to relocate to Orlando. The event was hosted locally during the first year of the agreement but moved to Orlando for the second and third years. As a result, the previously approved \$20,000 in funding for the current year will not be expended. Staff expressed hope the event may return in future years. Mr. Locke concluded his update by noting he would be attending Florida Tourism Day at the Capitol the following week to represent Ocala/Marion County and the Visitors and Convention Bureau.

Ms. Shaffer added that staff would be emailing Council members an invitation to attend Florida Tourism Day at the Capitol for those interested in participating.

Mr. Locke then asked if there were any questions regarding the sales update. None were raised.

Ms. Shaffer stated that Ms. Jessica Heller would provide the final update before Ms. Wheeler concluded the meeting.

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

Ms. Heller provided the Marketing and Communications update and noted that the report before the Council covered activities from October through December, including paid media performance, industry communications, and public relations efforts since the last presentation.

Commissioner Michelle Stone out at 11:02am

She highlighted a recent change to billboard placements, explaining that the billboard previously located in front of the Gateway to Ocala on the Ocala-facing side had been removed and was no longer in place. She advised that a replacement billboard had been secured slightly farther south within Marion County and would still provide visibility for travelers entering the area. Ms. Heller also shared that a new Marion Insider's Guide episode had been launched featuring Santos Trail.

Ms. Shaffer requested that the episode be included on the next meeting agenda for the Council's review

Ms. Heller agreed.

Ms. Shaffer further noted that a presentation from the Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) was also on the agenda but requested that the presentation be moved to the following month.

Mr. Adams approved.

Ms. Heller then asked if there were any questions regarding the marketing and communications update. None were raised.

Mr. Adams turned the floor over to Ms. Wheeler.

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

Ms. Wheeler provided the TDT Collections and STR/Key Data update. For the sake of time, she noted that the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) collection figures were included in the meeting packet and would not be reviewed in detail. She also advised that the packet contained a chart reflecting month-over-month changes related to Smith Travel Research (STR) and Key Data

metrics. Ms. Wheeler explained that recent fluctuations in the data were largely attributable to the impacts of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, which caused irregularities in visitation and lodging performance. She added that future reports would begin to reflect a normalization of the market as those storm-related impacts subside.

Ms. Shaffer noted that staff continues to provide one-on-one data reviews with partners and stakeholders as needed.

Ms. Wheeler further explained that while STR and Key Data information can be shared upon request, the department is contractually bound by its agreement with Smith Travel Research not to proactively publish the data, as it is proprietary. She confirmed that staff is available to discuss the information with any stakeholder who wishes to review it in more detail. Ms. Wheeler then reminded the Chair that there was an item under Old Business to be addressed and noted that several individuals were present for that discussion.

## **Old Business**

### ***Wings Over Ocala Airshow Update***

Mr. Adams invited Mr. John Cowman to the podium to provide an update regarding the Wings Over Ocala Airshow, previously discussed by the Council.

Mr. Cowman thanked the Chair and Council for the opportunity to provide an update on planning efforts for the upcoming airshow. He began by introducing members of his team present at the meeting, including Colonel Jim Haight, who serves as his deputy and partner in coordinating the show; Brenda Little, who will manage public relations and media outreach; James Stewart, who will oversee logistics including transportation, setup, and teardown of show equipment; and Bill Braack, a longtime collaborator and retired president of the Oregon International Airshow. Mr. Cohan noted that the team consists primarily of retired U.S. Air Force personnel with decades of combined experience in airshow production and operations across the country.

Mr. Gaekwad asked that members of the airshow team raise their hands as they are called so that the Council could identify them.

Mr. Cowman added that Mr. Braack serves as a close collaborator and fellow retired Air Force member noting that they have worked together in the airshow industry for approximately 20–25 years. He shared that Mr. Braack recently retired after serving for the past decade as president of the Oregon International Airshow and that they regularly support one another in planning and executing shows across the country. Mr. Cohan also highlighted that the upcoming show is expected to feature a rocket car demonstration capable of accelerating from zero to 400 miles per hour in approximately nine seconds, with Mr. Braack serving as the driver. He

described these types of performances as a passion project the team continues to pursue nationwide. Mr. Cowman stated that it had been approximately three years since his last appearance before the Council, explaining that scheduling delays were due to the two-year booking cycles of military jet demonstration teams. He reported that his team was notified in December that the U.S. Navy Blue Angels had officially confirmed their participation as the headlining demonstration team for the Wings Over Ocala Airshow, scheduled for May 1–2, 2027, and that additional performers and elements of the show package would be shared as planning progresses.

Mr. Gaekwad asked whether the Blue Angels scheduled to appear were the same team based in Pensacola.

Mr. Cowman confirmed that the Blue Angels scheduled to appear are the team based in Pensacola and stated that they are enthusiastic about coming to Ocala/Marion County. He noted that he works closely with both the Blue Angels and the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds. Mr. Cowman added that his team is currently preparing for another scheduled show in Rome, Georgia, in April, which was secured on short notice.

Mr. Gaekwad asked how many spectators were anticipated for the show in Rome, Georgia.

Mr. Cowman estimated that the Rome, Georgia airshow is expected to draw approximately 50,000 attendees.

Mr. Cowman estimated that attendance for the Ocala/Marion County airshow could exceed 50,000 and noted that planning efforts are already underway in coordination with Airport Director Matt Grow. He stated that he and his team recently met with airport leadership to review logistics and begin laying the groundwork for the event, adding that planning will intensify beginning in May as they work closely with VCB staff to fully develop the show. He expressed appreciation to Marion County and Ocala partners for their support and collaboration on what he described as a significant new venture for the community. Mr. Cowman explained that the event is planned as a three-day airshow, featuring a Friday evening program that will include an afternoon and twilight performance with a drone and fireworks show. He noted that a similar format was successfully implemented at a previous event in Rome, Georgia, and exceeded expectations. The Saturday and Sunday programs will be daytime shows held at the Ocala International Airport. He projected total attendance could exceed 60,000 over the three-day period and indicated that the event is expected to generate a substantial economic impact for the community. He emphasized that safety remains a top priority, noting his team's 15-year record of hosting shows without incident and their partnerships with FAA- and Department of Defense-approved performers and organizations. Mr. Cowman presented a general overview of the marketing strategy, noting that primary outreach will focus on audiences within a 100-mile

radius of Ocala while also attracting visitors from across the country. He described the Ocala International Airport as an ideal host site and reviewed preliminary layout considerations, including the designated aerobatic performance area required for FAA approval. He shared a preliminary performer lineup, noting that while most acts remain tentative, the Blue Angels are confirmed on the national schedule. Additional anticipated participants include military demonstration teams, civilian jet teams, parachute teams, and a variety of historic and military aircraft, including World War II-era warbirds.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired about the length of each show.

Mr. Cowman explained that each daily airshow performance will include approximately four hours of flight programming. He noted that several featured performers are expected to participate, including Michael Goulian, who is anticipated to perform during his final year before retirement, and additional specialty acts such as jet car demonstrations, sailplane performances, and full night airshows incorporating pyrotechnics and fireworks. He stated that the Great Lakes Drone Company is expected to provide a drone show featuring approximately 300 drones, with fireworks anticipated to be coordinated as part of the evening programming. Additional aircraft under consideration for participation include historic and military aircraft such as helicopters and vintage planes, depending on availability. Mr. Cowman clarified that the full performer lineup will be featured each day of the event. The Friday program is planned as an afternoon-to-evening show culminating in twilight performances with drone and fireworks displays, while Saturday and Sunday will be full daytime airshows. He also reviewed preliminary emergency management and operational planning efforts, noting that coordination with airport leadership and local partners is already underway to ensure all logistical and safety components are addressed. He concluded by outlining a tentative planning timeline, noting that the project is currently in the early planning stages with a formal public announcement anticipated later in the year, followed by intensified planning efforts leading up to the event. Mr. Cowman then opened the floor for questions from the Council.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired if JLC Airshow Management operated as a for profit or non-profit organization.

Mr. Cowman responded that the organization operated as both.

Mr. Gaekwad asked for further clarification on how the organization operated as both a for profit and non-profit organization.

Mr. Cowman responded that the organization makes charitable donations.

Mr. Gaekwad commented that the airshow is not a nonprofit or charity event but rather an event that generates revenue, similar to other large-scale events such as horse shows. He noted

there is nothing wrong with the event generating revenue given the level of planning and effort involved.

Mr. Cowman confirmed that the event is a revenue-generating production.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that he simply wanted clarification that the event is structured as a ticketed, revenue-producing show rather than a charitable event.

Ms. Shaffer inquired about the projected economic impact of the event using the established calculator.

Mr. Gaekwad responded that he was less concerned with the economic impact estimate and instead wanted clarification on whether the event would be ticketed and what the anticipated ticket cost would be.

Mr. Cowman confirmed that the airshow would be a ticketed event, noting that one-day general admission tickets at a comparable show in Rome, Georgia were approximately \$35.

Mr. Gaekwad asked what seating options would be available at the show.

Mr. Cowman explained that seating options typically include a range of experiences, such as VIP hospitality seating, bleacher seating, box seating, and general admission viewing areas.

Mr. Gaekwad asked for visual examples of the seating layout, stating that while the presentation showed the aircraft and performers, it did not clearly illustrate how spectators would view the show.

Ms. Wheeler explained that similar airshows, such as Wings Over North Georgia, utilize large-scale hospitality structures comparable to those seen at major sporting events like The Players Championship or The Masters. She noted these are high-quality hospitality tents and viewing areas rather than small temporary setups.

Mr. Gaekwad acknowledged the comparison to large racing and sporting event hospitality structures.

Mr. Cowman added that many of the event's viewing and hospitality elements are modeled after NASCAR-style event layouts, noting that because the airshow does not take place in a traditional stadium, these structures provide a comparable spectator experience.

Ms. Shaffer stated that the presentation served as an update, noting that the event organizers had been working on the project for approximately three years and were now able to provide a status report. She thanked the team for selecting Ocala/Marion County and expressed appreciation for their continued efforts.

Mr. Cowman thanked the Council and staff for their support.

Mr. Gaekwad encouraged the organizers to consider supporting local charitable initiatives as the event moves forward.

Mr. Adams noted the need to continue moving through the agenda and asked Ms. Shaffer if all items had been covered.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed that all items had been addressed and expressed appreciation to everyone who attended the recent Tourism Annual Meeting. She recognized the World Equestrian Center (WEC) as a sponsor of the Annual Meeting and noted that WEC provided approximately \$40,000 in in-kind support for the event. She also acknowledged Miles Partnership and Kenney Communications for their sponsorship and participation. Ms. Shaffer added that planning for next year's Annual Meeting is already underway, with the tentative date of December 10, and that additional details would be provided as they become available.

Mr. Adams commended staff on the success of the Annual Meeting and asked if there was any additional old business to be discussed.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed there was no further old business.

#### **New Business**

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

#### **Public Comment**

Mr. Adams called for any public comment.

Ms. Shaffer stated that there were individuals who had joined the meeting virtually who had public comments.

Mr. Adams welcomed those individuals to present their comments or questions.

Ms. Wheeler advised they would need to unmute themselves.

Ms. Sarah Thacker addressed the Council and expressed appreciation for the Council's support of the VCB Annual Meeting. She stated that the event was a great success and noted that, while there is always room for improvement, the overall outcome was very positive. Ms. Thacker shared that more than 300 individuals attended the event and that, through collaboration with the VCB, several attendees who had not previously participated in the Annual Meeting were able to attend. She also noted that Bryan Griffin and his wife were hosted for several days and were very impressed with their stay. Ms. Thacker thanked the Council and staff for their continued support and partnership in making the event successful.

Ms. Shaffer thanked Ms. Thacker and her team for their advocacy and support, noting their efforts exceeded expectations and were greatly appreciated. She added that planning is already underway for the next Annual Meeting scheduled for December 10.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad complimented Ms. Thacker and her team, noting that his visit to the convention center was impressive and expressing interest in potentially hosting a future Annual meeting at that location.

Mr. Adams commended Ms. Thacker and her team for their efforts, stating that they did an outstanding job and that he felt very welcomed during the event.

Ms. Shaffer also expressed appreciation to Ms. Thacker and her team, including Mr. Jeremy Gow, Mr. Mason Jordan, and Ms. Mary Roberts, for their collaborative efforts and support in making the Annual Meeting a success.

Ms. Thacker thanked the Council and staff and noted that more initiatives and opportunities were forthcoming.

Mr. Adams asked if there were any additional comments.

Ms. Thacker asked whether there would be an opportunity for individual lodging properties to build select service packages in connection with the Wings Over Ocala Airshow, such as hotel packages that include event tickets and can be booked and tracked through individual property links on the airshow website.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed that such opportunities could be explored and supported.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that staff recently held a planning meeting with Mr. Cowman and his team, noting that his organization regularly implements similar partnerships in other markets and has already begun considering package opportunities for Ocala/Marion County. She explained that the airshow team typically manages the package development directly with lodging partners and that discussions regarding packaging had already taken place. Ms. Wheeler added that Mr. Cowman's team is receptive to incorporating such partnerships and that details would be coordinated prior to a formal public announcement of the event.

Ms. Shaffer compared the concept to previous partnership models used for other events such as Rock The Country.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that while similar collaborative opportunities may exist, the event organizer's team would manage the packaging and booking components directly. She noted that Mr. Cowman's company has extensive experience implementing these types of partnerships in other markets and is well-versed in structuring hotel and ticket packages.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged the update and noted she had been out sick the previous day and therefore was unaware of the discussion that took place.

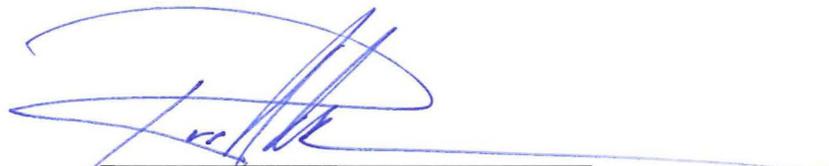
Mr. Gaekwad stated that he had already discussed with staff ensuring that appropriate ticketing and related benefits would be included due to the amount of funding (\$100,000) being offered for the airshow to take place.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that he was referring to funds previously committed through the funding process and noted that staff would be negotiating appropriate marketing deliverables as part of the agreement.

Mr. Adams asked if there were any additional public comments. Hearing none, he advised the Council that the date listed in the written agenda for the next Tourist Development Council meeting was incorrect. He announced that the next meeting would be held on February 26 at 9:00 a.m. in the same location.

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged the length of the meeting and noted that future meetings would be kept to a shorter duration, explaining that the extended length was due to multiple funding presentations.

The meeting adjourned at 11:26 am.



Rus Adams, Chairman