

**Official Minutes of  
MARION COUNTY  
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

November 20, 2024

**CALL TO ORDER:**

The Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) met in a workshop session at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, November 20, 2024 at the Marion County Governmental Complex located in Ocala, Florida.

**INTRODUCTION OF WORKSHOP BY CHAIRMAN KATHY BRYANT**

Chairman Zalak advised that the joint workshop is scheduled this afternoon with the Tourist Development Council (TDC).

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

The meeting opened with invocation by Chairman Zalak and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of our Country.

**ROLL CALL**

Upon roll call the following members were present: Vice-Chairman Carl Zalak, III, District 4; Commissioner Craig Curry, District 1; Commissioner Matthew McClain, District 3; and Commissioner Michelle Stone, District 5. Chairman Kathy Bryant, District 2 arrived after the meeting commenced. Also present were County Attorney Matthew G. Minter; County Administrator Mounir Bouyounes; Assistant County Administrator (ACA) Angel Roussel; ACA Tracy Straub; and ACA Amanda Tart.

The following members of the TDC were present: Chairman Jeff Bailey; Rus Adams; Victoria Billig; Chris Fernandez; and Danny Gaekwad who appeared telephonically. Council members Jason Reynolds, Barry Mansfield, and Ron Livsey were absent due to prior commitments.

The Deputy Clerk was in receipt of a 225 page Agenda packet and a 27 page handout to follow along with the PowerPoint presentations.

**WORKSHOP PRESENTATION**

1. Ocala/Marion County Tourism Placemaking Plan and Feasibility Analysis Presentation

Tourist Development Director Loretta Shaffer advised that the 422 page report was presented to the BCC relating to the Ocala/Marion County Placemaking Plan in August 2024 and subsequent one-on-one meetings were done with both leadership Boards to discuss the potential areas of concentration in order to further increase tourism and overall economic impact for Marion County.

President & Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Robin Hunden, Hunden Partners, provided a brief overview of the Hunden Partners and his work history.

Executive Vice President of Consulting Division Bethanie DeRose, Hunden Partners, advised that she has been doing this type of work for approximately 12 years.

Mr. Hunden addressed the Placemaking Action Plan steps and the Summary Matrix. He stated the matrix is divided in to the following categories: Hospitality; Sports & Outdoor

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Recreation; Shopping, Dining & Entertainment; Conference & Meetings; and Major Attractions & Events. Mr. Hunden advised that three out of the four items listed in the red boxes became a deeper study, which will be addressed later in the meeting.

Mr. Hunden stated the market analysis resulted in the following preliminary recommendations for Ocala/Marion County: 1.) Multipurpose Facility; 2.) Conference Hotel; and 3.) Mixed-Use Walkable District. He advised that the major takeaways from the one-on-ones with the BCC and TDC was for Hunden to conduct a deeper dive analysis to prove the viability for success of the following: 1.) Multi-Use Facility & Conference Hotel; 2.) Large Entertainment Multi-Use District; and 3.) Water Park or Major Family Entertainment Attraction.

David Greusel, Convergence Design, commented on the site comparison matrix and advised that as part of the comprehensive tourism overview 11 possible sites were reviewed for some of the facilities being discussed, including 2 downtown sites. He stated the highest rated site is the one located immediately to the southeast of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Flyover.

Mr. Greusel referred to the renderings on the overhead screens showing possible concept plans for 3 different multipurpose facilities, conference hotel, and flexible entertainment venue. He provided a brief overview of potential future phase mixed-use district concept site plan for the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Flyover, downtown destination development – north, and downtown destination development - south locations.

Commissioner Stone questioned if the future hotel that will be located near the TDC building was taken into consideration in any of the diagrams presented. Mr. Greusel advised that it was not, but that location would reinforce the south downtown scenario.

Mr. Hunden addressed the financial and impact projects for the different facilities.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Mr. Hunden advised that the projections included are local taxes and does not include State tax funds.

Mr. Hunden commented on the strong support the tourism industry in Marion County has received from its leadership. He stated there are a variety of funding opportunities available, noting buy-in from local leadership is a key component to move forward.

Mr. Hunden advised that there are additional opportunities based on current gaps in the market such as: cycling and events centered around existing bike trails; quality of life amenities for residents; and event programming to increase awareness of existing assets within arts, culture, history, and heritage. He commented on the importance of connectivity within the County. Mr. Hunden stated possible sports and outdoor recreation opportunities could be authentic commercial developments near natural assets; gun/shooting range; enhancements in County parks to increase assets for future growth; and additional youth sports facilities for traditional outdoor sports. He advised that multi-use districts with shopping, dining, and entertainment facilities can boost the quality of life for residents and make the County more attractive to visitors.

Commissioner Bryant arrived at 2:00 p.m.

Chairman Zalak passed the gavel to Commissioner Bryant, who assumed the Chair.

Ms. DeRose directed both the Boards to utilize their phones or iPad to scan the Quick Response (QR) Code and advised that this part of the meeting will be interactive. She stated the Boards can respond to the questions and their answers will show on the screens.

Ms. DeRose questioned how the Boards would define long-term success for tourism in Ocala/Marion County. She advised that the following responses were submitted through the QR code: maximizing room occupancy; convention center/meeting space; unity

between City and County with strong private investment; high visitation that is not to the detriment of residents; year-round group destination; sustainable and multi-generational; all price points; and quality place for family and fun.

Danny Gaekwad, TDC, expressed support for a County owned outdoor facility with reasonable pricing for use.

In response to Mr. Gaekwad, Ms. DeRose opined that it would be great to see demand generators that are publicly owned and operated, as well as at a price point that would add variety and depth to what is currently offered in the County.

Mr. Hunden advised that many Counties have utilized the Tourist Development Tax to induce demand in multipurpose event facilities that can benefit multiple hotels. He stated typically they are publicly funded event venues that benefit privately owned hotels. Mr. Hunden commented on the benefits the World Equestrian Center (WEC) facilities provides to the County, but the price point may not be achievable for a lot of different kinds of groups. He opined that having a facility with a middle or low price point will be a benefit to the community.

Commissioner Curry expressed support for the mixed use district.

Ms. DeRose requested the Boards rank what they perceive as the top priority for detailed analysis and programming.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Ms. DeRose advised that today provides an opportunity to determine how everyone would like to proceed, as well as a better understanding of the feasibility of any one of the options.

Commissioner Zalak stated if the County was to build a lively hub in the community all 3 factors would need to be included, noting it would be an injustice not to analyze all 3.

Ms. DeRose advised that what is needed today is to determine how to phase the study. General discussion ensued.

Mr. Gaekwad opined that the County should not be in the business of building hotels, noting the County's focus should be on promoting events and attracting people to the area.

Mr. Hunden advised that it is up to the Boards to determine if they want to prioritize a multi-use event facility as an item that lifts all businesses

In response to Mr. Bailey, Mr. Hunden commented on possible public/private partnerships and incentives the County could provide to make the building of a facility feasible for a private entity.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that there are enough hotel rooms in the County already, noting there is not a need to build a 300 room hotel/convention center.

Ms. DeRose stated the goal today is to prioritize how to move forward and validate what the phasing and timing should be.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Mr. Hunden advised that tax recapture districts are being seen more, which is similar to a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA). He stated the facility built by the County may not pay for itself, noting the benefits it will generate are not captured between the 4 walls of the building. Mr. Hunden advised that the surrounding development's value is higher due to the existence of the facility. He commented on a similar situation in Clarksville, Tennessee, where a 6,000 seat event center was just completed and the private sector has begun to invest around it without a district being created.

Mr. Gaekwad expressed support for creating the multi-use district.

It was noted for the record the results of the poll are as follows: 1.) water park or major family entertainment attraction; 2.) large entertainment multi-use district; and 3.) multi-use

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facility & Conference hotel.

Ms. DeRose advised that there are 12 other potential opportunities (shown on the overhead screen) and requested the Boards rank them based on which ones address the current needs/unaccommodated demand in the County. She stated these were already opportunities that surfaced in the planning process.

Commissioner Zalak out at 2:31 p.m.

Mr. Gaekwad questioned if they could have more time to consider these options. Ms. DeRose advised that a tentative meeting is scheduled for November 21, 2024 where this can be addressed or it can be brought back at a later date.

Mr. Gaekwad commented on the cost of the study and requested more time.

Mr. Hunden advised that the scope of work is not being determined today, instead it would be indicating directionally and momentarily that the Boards are eager to pursue ideas, but they do not have to pick the ideas today. He stated Hunden Partners can work with staff after formal or informal direction is given and craft a scope of work that can be approved.

Commissioner Zalak returned at 2:32 p.m.

Ms. Shaffer advised that a decision does not need to be made today, noting there are a lot of things going on in the private sector and it would be prudent to allow the market to mature.

Chairman Bryant opined that it would be extremely difficult to dial in on one item at this point until it is known what will come to fruition from the private sector.

Commissioner Zalak commented on the length of time it takes to plan possible options for a multi-use district.

General discussion ensued.

Chairman Bryant opined that the City of Ocala should be included in these conversations prior to agreeing to move forward with anything.

Mr. Hunden advised that a lot of the things being discussed today will need public sector investment, which could include the City and the County. He stated certain venues will fall into the realm of public sector and then there will be facilities that could be public/private, as well as just private sector. Mr. Hunden stated what has to be determined today is whether or not the Boards want to keep momentum going or sit and wait to see what everyone else does.

Chairman Bryant opined that prior to moving forward a conversation should take place with the City of Ocala.

Commissioner Curry stated it is his understanding that today was just to further gel their ideas and for discussion to take place to give the private sector more of an analysis of the County's and TDC's thought process.

Mr. Hunden advised that an incentive the public sector can offer besides helping with a project is to do a lot of the leg work that helps the private sector understand the vision and direction of the County.

Commissioner Curry opined that a pause would allow time to see what projects will be coming forward from the private sector and allow the Board time to partner with the City of Ocala and analyze how to move forward.

Mr. Adams stated the County and the TDC need to take the lead and put out a direction and deliver that to the City. He opined that there will be positive input from the City of Ocala.

Chairman Bryant advised that she is not willing to move forward prior to having conversations with the City of Ocala.

Ms. DeRose advised that going through this process gives the Board something to be proactive on and not just reactive to what is brought forward.

Chairman Bryant stated the County and TDC can let it be known to the private sector that they are looking to move forward with something and maybe in 3 months another workshop can take place with the City in attendance. She recommended inviting the private sector to the workshop to ensure they hear the conversations taking place.

Ms. DeRose stated in the past Hunden Partners has facilitated meetings with the express purpose of trying to garner interest from the private sector.

General discussion ensued.

Mr. Bailey commented on the importance of the City and the County working together to ensure proper development.

Ms. DeRose stated based on discussion today it has been established that the County and TDC do want to move forward, noting determining the best way to do that is priority number 1.

Chairman Bryant passed the gavel to Commissioner Zalak who assumed the Chair.

Commissioner Bryant out at 2:51 p.m.

Ms. DeRose questioned how the Ocala/Marion County's Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB) will be involved to continue to move forward with the highest ranked initiatives. She advised that the results of the questions are on the overhead screens as the following: 1.) get financials to find out what is viable; 2.) determine location priority; 3.) help determine best facilities for our demand; 4.) bring those parties together that have expressed keen interest in the survey results; 5.) plan, guide the conversations towards that goal; 6.) City/County conversations; 7.) facilitate conversation with the city and private partners on possibilities.

### **BOARD/COUNCIL DISCUSSION AND CLOSING COMMENTS**

Chairman Zalak directed staff to set up one-on-ones with the City to brief them on the elements prior to the workshop.

Mr. Bouyounes advised that the County is due to have a workshop with the City of Ocala and staff have been working on the topics that will be discussed, noting this will be added to the Agenda.

Commissioner Bryant returned at 2:52 p.m.

Chairman Zalak returned the gavel to Commissioner Bryant, who resumed the Chair.

In response to Commissioner Curry, Ms. Billig advised that she is in agreeance with what has been said today, noting the importance of having conversations between the City and the County. Mr. Fernandez concurred.

Commissioner McClain expressed concern with continuing to have meetings but not having any action. He opined that having plans in place will help guide those conversations with the City and the private sector.

Mr. Bouyounes advised that staff can work with the consultant to develop a scope relating to the top 3 priorities to be addressed at the workshop with the City of Ocala. It was the consensus of the Boards to concur.

Commissioner Stone opined that the County laying the groundwork will allow for the private sector to come in and develop.

Commissioner McClain expressed support for exploring incentives to the private sector to move the vision forward.

Ms. Shaffer thanked the Board for their input and direction.

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There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting thereupon adjourned at 2:57 p.m.

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Kathy Bryant, Chairman

Attest:

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Gregory C. Harrell, Clerk

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