

Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting
Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau
109 W Silver Springs Blvd.
Ocala, FL 34475
Friday, March 28, 2025
9:00 a.m.

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

Mr. Jeff Bailey read into the record, members of the public are advised that this meeting/hearing is a public proceeding, and the clerk to the board is making an audio recording of the proceedings, and all statements made during the proceedings, which recording will be a public record, subject to disclosure under the public records law of Florida. Be aware, however, that the audio recording may not satisfy the requirement for a verbatim transcript of the proceedings, described in the notice of this meeting, in the event you desire to appeal any decision adopted in this proceeding.

Roll Call

Present:

Rus Adams, Commissioner Ron Livsey, Jason Reynolds, Commissioner Carl Zalak, Jeff Bailey, Christopher Fernandez (arrived at 9:09am)

Staff:

Loretta Shaffer, Sky Wheeler, DeeDee Busbee, Bryan Day, Jessica Heller, Corry Locke, Heidi Villagomez, Candace Shelton, Keleab Spencer, Coleen Robinson

Guests:

Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Richard Busche, Principle Engineer, Senior Vice President – Kimley Horn; Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Michael Osbourne, ARK Hospitality; Mary Hutchcraft, Hilton Ocala; Lea Brayton, World Equestrian Center; Maven Photo + Film; Sonya Rutschow, Courtyard Residence Inn, Paresh Chhatu, Hilton Garden Inn; Jessica Gilbert, Chamber and Economic Partnership; Evelyn Morales, Hilton

Notice of Publication

Notice was published on the County Website on December 27, 2024 and subsequently updated to include Teams information on March 3, 2025.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to adopt the minutes from the January 16, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

A motion was made by Jason Reynolds, seconded by Commissioner Carl Zalak, to adopt the minutes from the February 27, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

Acknowledgement of Financials – February 2025

A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to review and approve February 2025 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (5-0).

Report from Chair

TDC Chairman/Vice-Chairman Vote

Ballots were distributed to members of the council and collected by staff to be tallied.

Mr. Jeff Bailey advised he was not available to chair the Tourist Development Council (TDC) for the upcoming term.

Mr. Jason Reynolds advised he was not available as vice-chair for the upcoming term.

Mr. Rus Adams advised he was available sit as chair or vice-chair for the upcoming term.

Mr. Bailey advised that Ms. Victoria Billig (not in attendance) was available to sit as vice-chair for the upcoming term. He then stated the council would proceed to the next agenda item to allow members to cast their vote and the results would be presented once tallied.

Christopher Fernandez in at 9:09am

Gateway Signage Update, Kimley-Horn

Mr. Richard Busche with Kimley Horn presented updates to the North and South Gateway projects. He first discussed the South Gateway and indicated the contractor was working through final punch list items. He then advised FDOT relocated the signs which were previously on the east side of the roadway as well as removed the palm trees.

A number of photos were presented showcasing the view of the South Gateway during

different times of day, angles and distances.

Mr. Busche then addressed the question presented at the last meeting requesting to know how the Gateway would look if all panels were dark grey and presented a rendering of the gateway as such.

A picture was presented showcasing the Gateway with the multi-colored panels during night-time conditions. Mr. Busche advised that converting the panels to one color would not make a difference at night since the front panels indirectly lit.

Mr. Bailey advised at night, the panels give the illusion of shadows which was not apparent during the day.

Mr. Busche advised the dark color panels were slightly extended forward and the lighter panels were tucked behind them. Therefore, to change the panels, they would need to be pulled down, stripped of the powder coating, re-coated and placed back on the gateway. The two outside panels would be less cumbersome to update since they were located on the shoulders, outside of the travel lanes and could be worked on during the day. The inside panels would require closure of the interstate and night-time work so the traffic lanes could be re-opened during the day. Mr. Busche then advised it was unlikely that the new dark panels would be exactly the same color and shade as the dark panels which currently exist. The color for the Gateway was customized and powder-coated (involved baking and sealing) which might cause the color to be a semi-tone darker or lighter than the others. The other panels have also been exposed to the weather for at least a three-month period. He advised that dirt and weathering over time might be more prevalent on the darker panels than the lighter panels.

Ms. Shaffer requested to know the cost of the changes and length of time to complete.

Mr. Busche advised the additional changes would cost approximately \$150,000 - \$160,000 and would take approximately two months to complete.

Mr. Adams requested to know if the council was concerned with the South Gateway and North Gateway matching. He advised that the South Gateway should definitely be updated to a continual darker grey color across all panels as well as use black anodized metal, instead of silver, on the interior to allow for better appearance. He advised the North Gateway could be dealt with as a separate issue.

Mr. Busche advised any adjustments the council would like to the North Gateway could be made.

Mr. Bailey advised he felt the two gateways should match and that it would be odd to see one gateway with two-toned coloring and another gateway monotoned.

Commissioner Zalak agreed that both gateways should match, but that the interior of the North Gateway could be upgraded. He further advised that he would like the council to review the gateway images, moving forward, in real-time and from different angles instead of only reviewing renderings. Commissioner Zalak then advised he brainstormed

some ideas with Florida Department of Transportation as it related to the North Gateway and a significant amount of traffic would exit the interstate to go to the future Buc-ee's. He then stated it would be nice to see something on the back of the Gateway design such as artistry or the QR code for the Mobile App. He then stated that off-directional signage might work better for this concept.

Mr. Busche then discussed the North Gateway project. A rendering was shown with the North Gateway panels one-color. He advised there were a couple minor differences between the North Gateway and South Gateway such as the North Gateway would be longer and wider requiring more artwork.

Mr. Adams requested to know if the Oak Tree panels could be larger.

Mr. Busche advised due to structural wind-load issues that would arise if the Oak Trees were higher, they could not be enlarged.

Mr. Busche enlarged the rendering to show a Florida Department of Transportation sign with a green informational plate affixed to it.

Mr. Busche advised the pole must remain. He further advised the pole relies on the center for structure and provides directions to drivers.

Commissioner Zalak and Mr. Adams requested to know if anything could be done to make the pole an artistic feature of the Gateway.

Mr. Busche advised that a request could be made to Florida Department of Transportation to paint the pole. The sign would be completely perpendicular to southbound traffic so drivers would not see the signage.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if a tree could be placed in front of the pole.

Mr. Busche advised the plans were out for bid based on the previously adopted concepts. He further stated issues arose with placing oak trees and art panels in that area due to the vertical and horizontal elements which does not allow placement of any additional items. Mr. Busche then went on to discuss the towers and indicated they would look slightly different than those at the South Gateway because they would be cast in place instead of pre-cast. He then discussed the landscaping design for the North Gateway indicating that Jim Couillard, Marion County Parks and Recreation Director, reviewed the design as well as Florida Department of Transportation. Once the interchange was constructed, Florida Department of Transportation would come through later to work on a corridor beautification project. Mr. Busche advised there was opportunity for the county to include some additions to the project to highlight the backside of the Gateway artwork which would be visible to people as they traveled across the flyover. He advised the county could not say "Welcome to Ocala" on the interstate sign but the welcome verbiage could be used off the interstate. He encouraged the county to brainstorm ideas regarding what form of signage they preferred and whether a FDOT permit or county permit was required. He also advised the on-ramp and off-ramp pattern of the divergent diamond interchange should be reviewed because it would be different than all other

exit ramps in Ocala. This would allow the council to determine where the best placement of signage would be based on travel patterns.

Commissioner Zalak suggested signage which read "Horse Capital of the World" or something similar.

Mr. Busche encouraged the council to start with the existing landscape plans and then tie in some aesthetic elements.

Commissioner Zalak requested the landscape plans be brought before the council during a future meeting for review.

Mr. Adams requested to know if the road would be a State Road or County Road once completed.

Mr. Busche advised a portion of the North Gateway would be State Road and would continue to be State maintained until the limited access right-of-way stopped (end of the ramps). He advised the council needed to determine if they wanted signage before the limited access right-of-way because there would be two permits to acquire.

Mr. Adams advised it would be good to have a Wayfinding Package completed for the entire interchange inclusive of lodging, restaurants and fuel so it would be cohesive and not Florida Department of Transportation signage.

Mr. Busche advised Florida Department of Transportation was in the process of accepting bids for the project and expected to secure a contract by June 2025.

Commissioner Zalak requested the council readdress the pole in the middle of the North Gateway and the options available to conceal it.

Mr. Busche advise an option was to paint the pole.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know what color was suggested.

Mr. Bailey requested to know why placement of a tree in front of the pole was not a viable option.

Mr. Busche advised based on the placement of the current structure, two structural teams were unable to design an option which placed a tree in front of the pole. He advised the letters O.C.A.L.A would have to be extended further out which would cause additional issues. He stated that if the council requested that Kimley-Horn re-evaluate the option, they could.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the pole was strong enough to have a tree panel bolted to it.

Mr. Bailey reiterated that the discussion on the floor was in regard to the paint color on the South Gateway.

Mr. Busche advised he needed to know if the council wanted to execute a change order

to extend the contract which had expired a few days prior. The contract was extended past the meeting to allow for consensus from the council.

Mr. Bailey advised a motion should be extended regarding change of the panel color on the South Gateway and the council should revisit the North Gateway (regarding the pole) at a later date.

Commissioner Zalak recommended a motion be presented regarding change of the paint color for the North Gateway as well.

Mr. Adams requested to know if the lights could be turned on since it would take a few months for the changes to be completed. He suggested the lights come on now and then be turned off when construction started.

Commissioner Zalak advised Mr. Angel Roussel, Assistant County Administrator, could ask Chairman Kathy Bryant how she would like to proceed with lighting the feature.

A motion was made by Commissioner Zalak, seconded by Rus Adams, to change the paint color on the South Gateway panels to one color and to change the panel color on the North Gateway to one color so all panels on both Gateways would be identical. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Ms. Sky Wheeler advised that Mr. Christopher Fernandez joined the meeting after the Chairman/Vice-Chairman discussion and requested that Mr. Bailey explain the availability or lack thereof of current members so he could cast his vote.

Mr. Bailey explained the aforementioned.

Mr. Adams suggested the council re-address the discussion regarding concealment of the pole on the North Gateway and what options existed.

Mr. Busche advised the project was out to bid therefore the discussion with Florida Department of Transportation should occur quickly and needed to consist of an option which did not add weight to the bridge but looked aesthetically pleasing. He advised the discussion needed to occur immediately so the project would not be delayed.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if next month would be too late.

Mr. Busche advised for simple changes, next month would not be too late. He further advised that if the changes required design and additional engineering then the county along with Florida Department of Transportation would need to determine if they agreed to proceed.

Mr. Busche recommended the council not wait a month to advise of changes, they needed to move quickly. He further advised that Marion County Administration needed to have a discussion with Florida Department of Transportation's Project Management to inform them of this discussion and brainstorm options to soften the aesthetic without affecting the design.

Mr. Roussel advised he understood.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if Mr. Roussel could have that discussion with Florida Department of Transportation within the next couple of weeks.

Mr. Roussel advised he would share the information as there were individuals employed with the county who were coordinating with Florida Department of Transportation. He would share the information and the Board of County Commissioners sentiments to see what could be achieved.

Mr. Adams requested to know if Kimley-Horn could create and provide some concepts which might be options for consideration.

Mr. Busche advised he did not want to bring any concepts before the council that did not include Florida Department of Transportation feedback.

TDC Chairman/Vice-Chairman Vote continued

Ms. Shelton advised the votes were tallied and Mr. Rus Adams received the majority vote for Chairman and Ms. Victoria Billig received the majority vote for Vice-Chairman.

A motion was made by Commissioner Zalak, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to appoint Mr. Rus Adams as Chairman for the upcoming term and Ms. Victoria Billig as Vice-Chairman for the upcoming term. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Mr. Bailey reminded the council and staff that Marion County Day would occur on March 29, 2025 at the McPherson Complex and Marion County Day at the Capitol would occur on April 10, 2025 in Tallahassee.

Mr. Adams requested the staff research how to get a banner created to hang over State Road 40 to highlight the Gateway Project when we get closer to the grand opening.

Funding Requests

Update on Funding Programs

Ms. Shaffer advised the funding programs were reviewed by Administration, legal and the Clerk of Court and would be prepared for review at a future meeting once the Board policy was established.

Fiscal Year 2025 Event Allocations

Mr. Locke addressed the updated funding allocations for fiscal year 2024-2025 and showed the remaining budget for Bid Fee Funding and then moved on to the remaining budget for Room Night Generating Funding Events. He advised that if the funding requests presented were approved, the remaining budget for Room Night Generating Funding would be \$5,203.00 for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament - \$10,500 (Room Night Generating Events

Funding)

Mr. Locke then addressed a Room Night Generating Events Funding request for Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament which was previously held in Marion County. The event coordinator requested funding in the amount of \$10,500 based on the \$14.00 per room guideline. The requested funding amount mirrored the staff recommendation. The event organizer anticipated securing 750 room nights and generating an estimated economic impact of \$1,078,606 with a total ROI of 158%. Mr. Locke advised the funds would be used for facility rental fees, tournament sanctioning fee, umpires, marketing materials and baseballs. The organizers anticipated approximately 45-55 teams to participate with each team hosting a separate tournament to award the state champion.

Mr. Adams indicated the Room Night Generating Funding Event allocation sheet balance assumed that all events received their requested funding amount. Mr. Bailey reminded the council that all events may not submit the necessary documentation or succeed in securing the required room nights and therefore, would not receive their requested funding in full. He advised that more money would then be available in the budget.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know how much of the yearly funding budget was expended.

Mr. Locke advised he was unsure of the percentage but the expended amount never exceeded the budgeted amount of \$330,000.

Commissioner Zalak then requested to know if the expended amount was always lower than the budgeted amount.

Ms. Wheeler advised not considerably. She further advised that event coordinators have sixty-days to submit their documentation for reimbursement and sometimes they would bridge the fiscal year causing funds to be carried over to support the vendor. Ms. Wheeler advised the staff had access to reports which confirmed same but did not have them available at the meeting.

Mr. Locke advised the staff evaluated the need to increase the budgeted amount of \$330,000 and determined the need did not exist since it had never been exceeded in the past.

Commissioner Zalak stated he was aware that \$5,203 was the remaining budget for Room Night Generating Funding Events through October 1, 2025 but requested the staff bring any events submitted to the council up until that time so they could determine if another program line item should be reduced in an effort to fund the event.

Mr. Locke affirmed and advised he was not concerned with the remaining budget as funds could always be transferred from another line item if necessary.

A motion was made by Christopher Fernandez, seconded by Rus Adams, to approve the recommendation for the requested Room Night Generating Event funding amount of \$10,500 for the Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Dixie Softball State Tournament - \$12,012 (Room Night Generating Events Funding)

Mr. Locke then discussed a funding request for the Dixie Softball State Tournament which was previously hosted in Marion County in 2021. The event would occur June 25-29, 2025 at Belleview Sportsplex. The event organizer requested funding in the amount of \$12,012 based on the \$14.00 per room guideline which mirrored the staff recommendation. The anticipated economic impact would be \$1,697,760 with an estimated ROI of 268%. The organizer's intended use of funds would include facility rental fee, tournament sanctioning fee, umpires, marketing materials, softballs, security and advertising. They anticipate 25-30 teams to be in attendance and estimate securing 858 room nights.

A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to approve the recommendation for the requested Room Night Generating Event funding amount of \$12,012 for Dixie Softball State Tournament to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).

Staff Updates

Quarterly Economic Impact/Visitor Tracking Report – October – December Data

Jason Reynolds out at 9:59am

Mr. Isiah Lewis with Downs & St. Germain Research presented research representing the October-December 2024 quarter. Mr. Lewis reviewed the Tourism Snapshot and stated that Marion County was experiencing the effects of hurricanes Helene and Milton which caused a really strong impact to the quarter results. He further advised there were many recovery workers and displaced people which caused an increase in accommodations across the board. The visitor profile showed an increase in longer trip planning cycles which was historically 48 days. In 2024 the trip planning cycle averaged 57 days of advanced planning. He advised there was a decrease in the average travel party size from 3.0 in 2023 to 2.7 people in 2024 but an increase in the length of stay from 3.5 nights in 2023 to 3.8 nights in 2024. Mr. Lewis further advised there was an increase in first time visitation as well. He further advised the Visitor and Lodging Metrics showed an increase of nearly 5% in visitors, from 344,400 in 2023 to 360,800 in 2024. The results also indicated an increase in direct expenditures of 17.2% from \$141,948,600 in 2023 to \$166,433,800 in 2024 resulting in a total economic impact of \$250,792,600 in 2024. The occupancy rates increased to 66.3% in 2024 from 55.1% in 2023 which was a direct result of the hurricanes which brought more people to the area. Mr. Lewis stated there was also an increase in room rates, RevPar and room nights resulting in an increase in TDT (Tourism Development Tax) from \$1,114,494 to \$1,400,448. He then stated there was a 11.2% increase in hotel units from 4,547 in 2023 to 5,056 in 2024.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the survey results showed any trends in vacation rentals.

Mr. Lewis advised the results showed a slight decrease in vacation rentals which was a result of the variability of these units being online and offline. He then discussed the survey results of the Trip Planning Cycle from October-December 2024 compared to October-December 2023. Mr. Lewis stated over half of the visitors to Marion County planned their trips a month or less in advance which was a decrease of 10% year over year and an increase in the number of days visitors planned their trips in advance of their visit.

Mr. Bailey advised he thought the numbers would have increased due to the hurricanes.

Mr. Lewis advised he would look into the numbers further to try to determine the reason for the increase to see if he could pinpoint the cause. He then discussed the Top Trip Planning Sources from October-December 2024 which continued to be talking to friends and family at 47%, an increase of 11% year over year, followed by search sites at 45% (no change year over year), destination social media, hotel/resort websites or apps, personal social media, trip planning websites or apps and lastly, online advertisement. Mr. Lewis discussed the Top Reasons for Visiting from October-December 2024 which continued to show an increase in those who visited to attend equestrian events, spent time with friends and family, visit the area springs, attend a business-related event or conference, as well as, attend sporting tournaments/events. There was a slight decrease in those who visited to relax and unwind. He advised that 1 in 4 visitors recalled advertising about the Ocala/Marion County area which was an increase of 4% year over year and over 2 in 3 visitors who recalled the advertising were influenced by the information to visit the area which accounted for 18% of all visitors, an increase of 1% year over year. Mr. Lewis informed the council that 26% of Marion County visitors who recalled advertising indicated the lead source was via social media followed by online advertisements, billboards, print advertisement and magazine or newspaper articles. He then talked about the Travel Party Profile, specifically Regions of Origin, from October-December 2024. Mr. Lewis advised there was a 5% increase in Florida visitation year over year and there was no change in international visitation at 4% year over year. He stated there was a slight decrease in the other regions of the United States. Mr. Lewis stated the Top States of Origin from October-December 2024 remained Florida (+5% year over year), Georgia (+1% year over year), New York (no change year over year), Ohio (no change year over year), North Carolina (no change year over year) and Pennsylvania (no change year over year). He then discussed Top Markets of Origin and noted that survey results confirmed that people from Florida destinations were the primary first-time visitors to Marion County. Mr. Lewis stated that the typical travel party size from October-December 2024 was 2.7 people which was a decrease from 3.0 in 2023. The median age for the typical traveler to Ocala/Marion County was 51 years old which mirrored the 2023 data and the annual household income increased from \$77,800 in 2023 to \$95,000 from October-December 2024. Mr. Lewis advised that over 1 in 3 visitors to Ocala/Marion County were first-time visitors which was an increase by 5%

year over year and nearly 2 in 10 visitors were loyalists which was a decrease of 4% year over year, having visited over 10 times. He further advised that 79% of visitors drove to Marion County which was a decrease of 3% year over year (he advised he would double check the data as the online sources differed slightly). Mr. Lewis then stated 13% of Marion County visitors arrived via the Orlando International Airport which was an increase of 1% year over year.

Mr. Christopher Fernandez requested to know how Downs & St. Germain was able to determine the percentage of travelers driving from Orlando to Marion County.

Mr. Lewis advised the results were gathered through survey responses which requested the traveler's mode of transportation and airport usage. He further advised the typical visitor spent 3.8 nights in the destination in 2024 compared to 3.5 nights in 2023 and there was a 7% increase in visitors who indicated the only destination they were visiting was Ocala/Marion County. The top accommodations were noted as hotels/motels and resorts with a 9% increase and a decrease noted in day trippers, no change in friends or relatives' homes and a slight decrease in vacation rentals. The top activities from October-December 2024 included dining out with an increase of 19%, visiting friends and family increased by 11%, visiting Downtown Ocala increased by 7%, attending equestrian events increased by 1% followed by shopping which had no change, visiting area springs which decreased by 2% and to relax and unwind decreased by 7%.

Commissioner Zalak out at 10:12am

Commissioner Zalak in at 10:12am

Mr. Lewis then advised the biggest drivers for travelers to Marion County were horse related events and visiting friends/family. The trip enhancers followed and were noted as visiting the area springs, business/conferences, sporting tournaments/events and to relax and unwind. Lastly, although not the main drivers, these were things travelers liked to do while in the area such as canoeing/kayaking/tubing, other horse-related events, special occasion/special events, nature/birdwatching, going to restaurants, visiting Downtown Ocala and shopping/antiquing. Mr. Lewis stated those things which were done often and exceeded expectations included horse related events, visiting the area springs, visiting friends and family, visiting Downtown Ocala and experiencing nature/the environment. He further discussed those things which were done infrequently but exceeded expectations such as other horse related events, sporting tournaments/events, canoeing/kayaking/tubing and fishing/hunting. Mr. Lewis advised the typical travel party spent approximately \$320.00 per day from October-December 2024 and spent approximately \$1,214 during their trip. He discussed visitor satisfaction and stated that 99% of visitors to Marion County said their visit met or exceeded their expectations with 39% of those visitors stating the trip exceeded their expectations. He then stated that 94% of Marion County visitors would recommend the trip to a friend while 95% would return to the county and 50% stating they would definitely return. Mr. Lewis proceeded to discuss 2025 Travel Trends and stated that 70% of global travelers often sought out authentic, local experiences when traveling with children. He further

advised that per Skift's Megatrends, event travel would not slow down in 2025 and Americans had a growing interest in exploring untouched landscapes.

Mr. Fernandez advised that at least three major bike adventure races came through Santos Trails annually. He further advised that publicizing these events would be paramount since exploring nature was a trend.

Mr. Adams requested to know if the council had funded any of these events.

Mr. Fernandez advised they normally start outside of Marion County but would come through the county during the race.

Mr. Adams requested that Mr. Fernandez share those contacts with the Sales Team so they could plan some outreach to the event coordinators.

Ms. Wheeler advised the Visitors and Convention Bureau would not have to fund the event but could assist in marketing the event.

Mr. Fernandez advised these events would not produce room nights but these events embodied the energy the county wanted to generate to highlight the natural resources in Marion County.

Mr. Lewis advised that 63% of travelers advised they were likely to visit a destination which was off-the-beaten-path and 80% of travelers planned to skip the mainstream vacation hubs within the next year.

Commissioner Zalak stated that visiting friends and family was consistently a major contributor to visitors in the area and requested to know if other destinations were doing anything that would make an impact with that segment of the community.

Mr. Lewis advised resident opinion was important and making sure the community was aware of the purpose of the Visitors and Convention Bureau was important as well. He advised that the Marion County community were representatives of the county and would be speaking to the potential visitors. The more informed the residents were regarding the Visitors and Convention Bureau, the more the visitors would know about it.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know how other destinations were reaching their residents.

Mr. Lewis advised Downs and St. Germain offered a Resident Opinion Study which could help develop community marketing efforts. Many other counties work closely with their Economic Development Councils to start building a better bridge between the two offices. He advised that people who visited the destination become residents of the destination.

Quarterly Public Relations and Analytics Reports – October – December Data

Ms. Jessica Heller, Marketing and Communications Supervisor, discussed the Public

Relations and Analytics Report covering October-December 2024. She began by discussing the press releases and editorial leads. She then discussed the Meltwater Report which highlighted what was being discussed around the world about Marion County. Ms. Heller advised the media was showcasing Marion County in a number of areas such as the southeast, Idaho, New York and Virginia. Globally, she advised the United States was the top media producer as it related to outdoor adventure followed by The United Kingdom, New Zealand and India. Ms. Heller then discussed two FAMs which were hosted in-market. She further discussed an article written by Maria Sonnenberg which was published on Florida Today and then republished on MSN Travel. This article alone generated an earned media value of \$1,189,646.01. During the October-November quarter, the Ocala National Forest was named one of the best places to visit in 2025. Ms. Heller showed a snapshot of the National Geographic article which generated earned media value of \$63,752.12 and reach of 6,892,121. She also showcased additional earned media which had a total reach of 50,052,724 and an earned media value of \$462,987.69. Ms. Heller then announced that Ocala/Marion County had a record-breaking quarter for earned media value generating over \$9.2 million and a total reach of over one billion. She then discussed page 203 of the packet which compared October 1-December 31, 2024 to the previous quarter (July 1-September 30, 2024), highlighting all social media platforms which generated over 4.3 million impressions, approximately 180,000 engagements and over 56,000 post link clicks. As it related to Instagram, the top post had 4,920 engagements which promoted the Ocala National Forest. As it related to Facebook, the top post shared the Visitors and Convention Bureau blog regarding things to do during Christmas time. Ms. Heller then discussed the mobile App which showcased the number of downloads for the quarter which totaled 526 with a total number of page views of 2,526. She further advised the total downloads since the inception of the App totaled 5,417. Ms. Heller stated there were 246,000 visitors to the OcalaMarion.com website with the majority of the views generated from organic search which was an increase of 14.7% year over year. She then highlighted the updated blogs, discussed the top visited pages, the number of visits to partner pages and the number of visitations to the website by month. Lastly, she discussed the monthly email newsletters distributed to potential guests.

Rus out at 10:42am

Florida Huddle and Encounter Recap

Mr. Locke discussed the Florida Huddle and Encounter event held at the World Equestrian Center in partnership with Visit Florida. The event was held in Ocala for the first time and was previously held in Miami, FL.

Rus Adams in at 10:44 am

Mr. Locke highlighted the local partners who attended Florida Huddle and Encounter such as Cape Leisure (Silver Springs), Hilton Ocala, LBA Hospitality and World Equestrian Center. The Encounter event hosted 42 appointments and the Huddle event hosted 34 events with a total of 550 attendees and 7,000 total appointments between all of the

destinations. Mr. Locke advised the Visitors and Convention Bureau in partnership with the World Equestrian Center hosted a Derby themed Opening Reception. He then discussed the anatomy of a sales meeting, the tour operator's impression of the World Equestrian Center, networking opportunities provided to all attendees and the equine panel.

Ron Livsey out at 10:44 am

Ms. Heller discussed the media portion of the conference and highlighted Ms. Shaffer and Dana Young who hosted a Question & Answer session. Ms. Heller also hosted a media FAM to showcase restaurants and experiences in Marion County. She then advised that media coverage was produced from all over the world (i.e. The United Kingdom, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Germany and Latin America). Ms. Heller stated that the total reach for all media associated with Florida Huddle and Encounter totaled more than 7.9 million.

Marketing and Communications Update

Ron Livsey in at 10:47 am

Ms. Heller then presented the Marketing and Communications update which highlighted current running media, industry/advocacy communications and public relations communications.

Sales Update

Mr. Locke discussed the Sales Update and the International Miniature Bull Riding Association World Finals which was a lead gained during the Florida Huddle and Encounter conference. He then went on to discuss additional leads, including but not limited to, Double K Rodeo Productions, CDC National Workshop and American Advertising Federation District 4 Fall Conference. Mr. Locke highlighted the Ongoing Leads which included American Darter's Association National Championship, Lady Bass Anglers Pro Bass Tour and World Fishing Tour. He then advised the Lady Bass Anglers Pro Bass Tour and World Fishing Tour had the same parent company so the staff was in discussions with the organization to suggest hosting the events during consecutive weeks.

TDT Collections/STR and Key Data Update

Ms. Wheeler then presented the STR and Key Data update for December 2024 in Marion County was at 65.2% which was a 19.4% increase year over year, ADR was at \$126.56 which was an increase of 15.6% from last year and RevPar was at \$82.53 which was an increase of 38.1% from last year. She then advised for the running twelve (12) months, occupancy was down 1.1%, ADR increased 2.9% and RevPar increased 1.7%. Ms. Wheeler then presented Visit Florida's December STR Data which indicated that occupancy, statewide, was at 69.8% which was an increase of 6.7% from last year, ADR was \$200.47 which was an increase of 1.1% from last year and RevPar was \$139.90 which was an increase of 7.8%. Ms. Wheeler advised the December Key Data (short-term rental

data) indicated that occupancy was at 46.2% which was an increase of 8% from last year, ADR was at \$144.00 which was a decrease of \$8.00 from last year, RevPar was at \$50.00 which was an increase of \$4.00 from last year and nights available were noted as 5,934 which was an increase of 13% from last year (5,274). For the running twelve (12) months, as it related to the December data, occupancy was down 2%, ADR was down 7%, RevPar was down 8% and nights available increased by 18%. Ms. Wheeler then went on to discuss the January 2025 Smith Travel Research (STR) data for Marion County stating that occupancy was at 64.1% which was an increase of 5.5% year over year, ADR was at \$135.01 which was an increase of 12.1% from last year and RevPar was at \$86.60 which was an increase of 18.2% from last year. For the running twelve (12) months, occupancy increased 0.6%, ADR increased 3.7% and RevPar increased 4.3%. She then discussed the Visit Florida STR Data for January and advised that occupancy, statewide, was at 71.2% which was an increase of 3.9%, ADR was \$204.34 which was an increase of 3.4% from last year and RevPar was \$145.57 which was an increase of 7.4%. Ms. Wheeler advised the short-term rental data for Marion County in January 2025 indicated that occupancy was at 56.6% which was a decrease of 4% from last year, ADR was at \$180.00 which was a decrease of \$12.00 from last year, RevPar was at \$78.00 which was a decrease of \$10.00 from last year and nights available was noted at 5,701 which was an increase of 16% from last year (4,931). For the running twelve (12) months, occupancy decreased 2%, ADR decreased 8%, RevPar decreased 8% and nights available increased 17%. Ms. Wheeler proceeded to discuss the February 2025 STR Data for Marion County results and advised that occupancy was at 68.0% which was an increase of 3.4% year over year, ADR was at \$143.22 which was an increase of 9.2% from last year and RevPar was at \$97.38 which was an increase of 12.9% from last year. For the running twelve (12) months, occupancy increased 3%, ADR increased 6.7% and RevPar increased 9.9%. She advised the Visit Florida STR Data indicated that occupancy, statewide, was at 78.8% which was an increase of 2.4%, ADR was \$236.60 which was an increase of 3.4% from last year and RevPar was \$186.34 which was an increase of 5.9%. The February Key Data results indicated that occupancy was at 68.9% which was a decrease of 4% from last year, ADR was at \$232.00 which was an increase of \$3.00 from last year and RevPar was at \$138.00 which was a decrease of \$9.00 from last year. As it related to nights available, February Key Data indicated there were 5,174 available rooms which was an increase of 5% from last year. For the running twelve (12) months, occupancy decreased 2%, ADR decreased 6%, RevPar decreased 7% and nights available increased 14%. Ms. Wheeler then discussed the TDT Collections for the reporting period of January which covered the December revenues and stated collections totaled \$537,175.62 which was an increase of \$137,833.94 with only 1.55% from late taxes and penalties. For the reporting period of February which covered January revenues, collections totaled \$626,799.77 which was an increase of \$101,287.37 or 19.27% year over year with 6.14% from late taxes and penalties (\$38,471.48). Ms. Wheeler advised she was unsure when the Dekard reporting started and could not validate any correlation between the increased percentage of late taxes and penalties with the onboarding of the Tax Collector's new system.

TDC Events Calendar

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

Notation for Record

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

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

Old Business

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

New Business

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

Public Comment

Upcoming Meeting

Mr. Bailey stated, that the next TDC meeting will be on Thursday, April 24, 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 11:18 a.m.

Jeff Bailey, Chairman