

**Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting**

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, April 23, 2026

9:00 a.m.

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

Mr. Christopher Fernandez 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, Doug Cone, Commissioner Ron Livsey, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Commissioner Michelle Stone, Bobby Walker, Christopher Fernandez.

Staff:

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

Guests:

Isiah Lewis, Downs and St. Germain Research; Meagan Gumpert, Avera Visuals; Tammy McCann, Marion County Tax Collectors Office; Paresh Chhotu, Hilton Garden Inn; Jaye Baillie, Marion Cultural Alliance; Manish Chaudhai, Holiday Inn Express & Suites

**Notice of Publication**

Notice was published on the County Website on January 5, 2026, including Teams information.

***Approval of Minutes***

**A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Doug Cone, to adopt the minutes from the March 26, 2026 Tourist Development Council Meeting. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).**

### ***Acknowledgement of Financials – March 2026***

**A motion was made by Commissioner Michelle Stone, seconded by Rus Adams, to review and approve the March 2026 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0)**

### **Report from Chair**

#### ***Presentation: Tourist Development Tax Collection Update, Marion County Deputy Tax Collector, Tammy McCann***

Mr. Christopher Fernandez welcomed Ms. Tammy McCann, Marion County Deputy Tax Collector, to provide an update on Tourist Development Tax Collections.

Ms. McCann reported that there have been positive trends in collections with an increase in short-term rentals. Comparing the January-March 2025 quarter to the same period in 2026 collections from short term rentals had increased by \$148,000. She explained that this increase coincided with the utilization of Deckard Technologies which was implemented in February of 2025. Ms. McCann further reported that from January to March 2026, the number of short-term rental accounts had increased by 92 with less than 10 accounts becoming inactive during that period. She explained that accounts may become inactive due to seasonal rental patterns and many of those accounts are expected to resume activity during the winter season. She added that traditional lodging including hotels and motels remained the largest contributor to Tourist Development Tax collections, accounting for approximately 80% of total collections.

Ms. McCann then provided an update on a recent event conducted by the Tax Collector's Office in collaboration with the Tourist Development Department. She stated that a "meet and greet/meet and teach" event was held the day prior to the meeting, with approximately 17 attendees. While attendance was much smaller than expected she noted that they received positive feedback about the event. Attendees noted that they appreciated the length of the session and presentations were well received, particularly the fire prevention presentation which provided valuable information for property owners on how to protect their investment. Attendees also appreciated being able to learn more about the Tourist Development Department and its role in supporting tourism and visitor services within the County. She noted that the event provided valuable networking opportunities for short-term rental operators, allowing them to share ideas. She added that staff is considering hosting additional sessions in the future, including alternative times such as afternoon or evening meetings, to better accommodate participants with standard work schedules. Ms. McCann concluded her presentation and opened the floor for questions.

Commissioner Michelle Stone inquired about a slight year over year decrease in collections from RV parks and campgrounds, noting the seemed unusual. She asked whether the Tax Collectors Office keeps track of specific accounts that are lost.

Ms. McCann explained that some of the decreases are attributable to properties transitioning to long-term rentals. She stated that if more than 50% of an RV park or mobile home park is occupied by long-term residents, those properties are no longer required to remit Tourist Development Tax, resulting in a reduction in reported collections within that category.

Commissioner Stone thanked Ms. McCann for the clarification.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer commended Ms. McCann on the previous day's event noting that it was very informative.

Mr. Fernandez thanked Ms. McCann for her presentation and invited Ms. Sky Wheeler to proceed with the next presentation.

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

Ms. Sky Wheeler explained that following the previous Tourist Development Council meeting the agenda was adjusted to present the TDT Collection, Smith Travel Research and Key Data reporting after Ms. McCann's presentation as these metrics are closely related. She noted that, with the transition to new chairmanship, it was an appropriate time to restructure the reporting format. Moving forward, she stated that after the Tax Collector's presentation, staff would provide an overview of TDT collections along with occupancy, average daily rate, and revenue per available room trends. Ms. Wheeler advised that Council members had been provided with a handout summarizing trend data, noting that Visit Florida's statewide data was released after agenda publication therefore a hard copy of the data had been distributed at each seat.

She reported that for the March reporting period which reflected February revenues, TDT collections totaled \$701,573.80. This represents a year over year increase of \$52,404.43 or 8.07%. Ms. Wheeler also noted that corrections made by the Tax Collector's Office to prior data are now reflected in the reporting, and future comparisons will be based on these updated figures.

Ms. Wheeler then reviewed the Smith Travel Research data for Marion County for the month of March. She noted that the County's data is represented by the blue line, statewide data by Visit Florida is represented by the orange line, and short-term rental data (Key Data) is represented by the gray line. Ms. Wheeler stated the blue line on the graph represented occupancy for the month of March which was at 68.1%, a decrease of 3.8% year over year. Average daily rate was \$143.21, a decrease of 5.6%, and revenue per available room was \$97.56, a decrease of 9.2% year over year. For the running twelve months occupancy decreased by 8.5%, average daily rate decreased by 5.3% and RevPAR decreased by 14.2%. Ms. Wheeler emphasized that the decreases should be considered in context, noting that lodging supply increased by 7.9% while demand still grew by 3.2%. She explained that these factors must be evaluated together, as increases in supply can impact occupancy and rate metrics even when overall demand is rising. She then reviewed the statewide data represented by the orange line on the graph, noting that

this data is Smith Travel Research data obtained by Visit Florida. Occupancy was 78.3%, an increase of 1.1% year over year. Average daily rate was \$252.19, an increase of 5.4%, and RevPAR was \$197.47, an increase of 6.5% year over year.

Ms. Wheeler next reviewed Key Data metrics for short-term rentals, clarifying that this data is used solely for tracking market trends and is not directly connected to the Tax Collector's compliance system though they do use similar technologies. For March, short-term rental occupancy was 55.7%, an increase of 7% year over year. Average daily rate was \$248, which remained flat, and RevPAR was \$113, an increase of \$10. Nights available totaled 5,621, representing a 2% decrease from the prior year. For the running twelve months, short-term rental occupancy decreased by 8%, ADR decreased by 2% and RevPAR decreased by 5%. Ms. Wheeler noted that for the third consecutive month nights available decreased by 2% indicating a normalization in the short-term rental space from the previous trend of continuous growth in available inventory. She explained that this may be attributed to increased compliance efforts by the Tax Collector's Office, as well as market factors such as property owners exiting the short-term rental market, selling their properties or converting properties for other uses, including long-term housing. Ms. Wheeler concluded her presentation and asked if there were any questions related to the data.

Mr. Doug Cone asked that Ms. Wheeler revisit the Tax Collection data requesting clarification on the rolling twelve month Tourist Development Tax figures and asked whether the approximately \$700,000 monthly figure represents a steady trend or if an average is calculated over time. Ms. Wheeler further explained that while the Council's report reflects aggregated data, the Tax Collector's Office produces a more detailed report included in the agenda packet. She noted that this report provides a more granular breakdown, including total rental receipts, exempted receipts, taxable amounts, and any adjustments, and may better address specific questions related to collections.

Mr. Cone asked whether an annual total is included in the report.

Ms. McCann confirmed that an annual total is calculated at the end of the year.

Ms. Wheeler added that staff could modify the report to include a rolling twelve-month total moving forward. She noted that the report would include clarification indicating that the total reflects a rolling calendar-year figure rather than a fiscal-year total. Ms. Wheeler confirmed that the updated format would be presented at a future meeting and asked if there were any additional questions.

No further discussion or questions were brought forth.

### **Funding Requests**

#### **Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament (June 2026 – Date Change)**

Mr. Christopher Fernandez presented a date change request for the Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament and read into the record “the funding request date change met all of the criteria for consent consideration under Resolution 25-R-219 which governs the four funding programs”.

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Commissioner Ron Livsey, to approve the date change for the Cal Ripken T-Ball/Rookie B State Tournament for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners.**

Mr. Fernandez then invited Ms. Loretta Shaffer to present the staff updates.

### **Staff Updates**

#### **Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2026-2027**

Ms. Loretta Shaffer introduced the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2026–2027, noting that this is the time of year when staff begins presenting budget recommendations to administration and the Tourist Development Council in preparation for submission to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners in July. She advised that Ms. Wheeler would present the proposed budget, as she does annually, and emphasized that the budget remains in a preliminary stage. Ms. Shaffer noted that there is still flexibility for adjustments, with additional opportunities for review and modification in May and June. She encouraged Council members to provide feedback and recommendations.

Ms. Wheeler directed the Council’s attention to the agenda item cover page on page 74 of the published agenda. She advised the draft budget being presented was generated by the County’s Budget Department on March 27, 2026. Staff then met with County Administration on April 13, 2026 to review the budget. Ms. Wheeler provided an overview of the County’s budget development process, noting that it is a multi-step, collaborative effort that begins at the start of the calendar year and involves ongoing coordination between departmental staff, the Budget Office, and County Administration. She stated that the Budget Office handles reconciling accounts and reviewing revenues and projections while staff develops the proposed budget based on the department’s anticipated expenditures, upcoming projects as well as alignment with both departmental and countywide strategic initiatives. She advised that following development of the draft budget, staff meets with County Administration to ensure there are no further edits or clarifications needed. Ms. Wheeler noted that following the initial submission, two updates were identified that are not reflected in the printed budget documents included in the agenda packet but have been noted on the agenda cover page. She went on to state that funds were added to the contract services line item bringing the total budgeted amount to \$182,613. This was done to support the structural maintenance of the South Gateway and County line markers. She further stated that a vendor, Oasis, which is a Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) contractor has submitted a price proposal for the work which would include conducting monthly inspections of the bridge to ensure the features are safe and conducting power washing on both fixtures bi-annually. She noted that a

significant portion of the associated cost is related to traffic control requirements necessary to safely perform the work. Ms. Wheeler stated for the record that the total value for that contract was \$110,410. The second update was made to line item 552106 which is the computer software line item, bringing the total budgeted amount to \$217,654. This was done to account for additional expenses associated with Tyler which is the County's enterprise resource planning system used to manage financial and budgetary records. Ms. Wheeler likened Tyler to QuickBooks typically used by small businesses. She advised the system is undergoing a transition to a cloud-based platform, resulting in a necessary cost increase.

Ms. Wheeler then transitioned to review the budget document directing the Council's attention to several items for consideration. She explained that the budget development process involves multiple entities, including County Administration, which oversees departmental operations under the direction of the Board of County Commissioners, as well as the Clerk of Court's Office, which manages both the Budget Office and the Finance Office under the purview of Clerk Gregory Harrell, Marion County Clerk and Comptroller. Ms. Wheeler clarified that the Budget Office is responsible for planning and projecting expenditures, while the Finance Office focuses on tracking actual spending, coding expenditures, and ensuring proper allocation of funds. Ms. Wheeler noted that differences can occur between projected budgets and actual expenditures, as spending may be reallocated throughout the fiscal year based on operational needs. To further explain this, she likened the reallocation process to transferring funds between personal accounts to fund different items. She stated that staff worked closely with a staff accountant in the Finance Office to review detailed expenditures from the previous fiscal year. This allowed staff to improve accuracy by moving funds to the appropriate budget categories. She explained that this proactive approach helps reduce the need for future budget amendments, which would otherwise require formal action by the Board of County Commissioners. While such adjustments are sometimes necessary, Ms. Wheeler noted that recurring corrections indicate an opportunity to improve the accuracy of initial budget planning.

Mr. Doug Cone asked if the changes being presented primarily involved reallocating expenses to the appropriate line items.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that the adjustments did not change the overall funded amounts but instead ensured budgeted expenditures were categorized within the correct line items. Ms. Wheeler then provided further clarification using examples from specific budget line items. She highlighted line item 531109, professional services, which had a significant decrease from the previous years amended budget of \$1.9 million and was now \$502,500. She explained that media buying services are managed through a contracted vendor, Miles Partnership, where the department pays only a percentage of the total value of the media plan directly to the vendor for professional services with the remaining media placement costs paid as a service fee directly to the to the entity where the placement is being done for example Meta or Google. The service fees paid directly to the placement platform is considered a promotional activity. This distinction created a large increase in the promotional activities line item as a result of

direct placements being paid from this budget category. Ms. Wheeler advised that for the remainder of the presentation she would not review each individual line item but would cover those items that had significant changes. She noted, however, that she could answer any questions that were raised regarding any items on the proposed budget. Ms. Wheeler went on to review an increase in the contract services line item which was partially attributable to the structural maintenance of the gateway as previously discussed as well as landscape maintenance, which was a separate contract with Grandview Landscape. She explained that this separate contract with a vendor provides ongoing landscaping services for the gateway feature and surrounding areas, which had not been included in the prior year's budget. Ms. Wheeler then reviewed promotional activities, noting that this remains the department's largest line item, consistent with its role as a destination marketing organization. She reported that promotional activities increased by approximately \$756,000 compared to the prior year's adopted budget. She explained that this increase is largely due to the reallocation of direct media placement costs into this category.

Ms. Wheeler further clarified the differences between adopted, amended and requested budget figures. She explained that the adopted budget reflects the amount approved by the Board of County Commissioners during annual public hearings in September, while the amended budget reflects any adjustments made throughout the fiscal year. She stated that requested budget represents the proposed funding for the upcoming fiscal year, noting that the budget being presented to the Council was at the 'requested stage'. Ms. Wheeler stated that the department had budgeted \$2.7 million for promotional activities that had been adopted for the current fiscal year. She reiterated that there had been a significant change of just over \$750,000 for direct media placement costs. She added that the total media plan value exceeds the increase reflected in this line item noting that the media plan was valued at a total of \$1.75 million. Ms. Wheeler mentioned that these changes reflect how the department has streamlined its budget to more accurately align with requirements from the Finance Department.

Ms. Wheeler went on to explain that the department operates as a special revenue fund and is not supported by the County's general fund. She explained that this structure allows the department to have some additional budget flexibility that other departments do not have, particularly in the ability to approve funding commitments that extend beyond the current fiscal year. She noted that when sales opportunities are presented by staff, the Council may approve contracts for future years, and those funds are then reappropriated accordingly. This ensures that current funding decisions do not negatively impact future budgets. Ms. Wheeler highlighted the importance of the allocation report provided monthly by the sales team, which tracks funds that have already been committed and ensures transparency in available funding. Ms. Wheeler further stated that the proposed budget maintains consistent funding for the department's established programs, including \$500,000 for bid fee funding, \$300,000 for room night generating funding, \$30,000 for meeting rewards funding, \$100,000 for arts and cultural destination enhancement funding, and \$75,000 for marketing assistance funding. She explained

that reappropriations are a routine part of the budget process and reflect previously approved commitments that extend into future fiscal years. As an example, Ms. Wheeler noted that in the current fiscal year, approximately \$653,000 was reappropriated for bid fee funding and \$91,000 for room night generating funding to support obligations already approved by the Council. Ms. Wheeler added that staff has evaluated alternative approaches to structuring these funds; however, due to audit and accounting requirements, the current method remains the most appropriate. Ms. Wheeler asked if there were any questions regarding promotional activities, noting she was happy to provide additional detail while being mindful not to overwhelm the Council. No questions were raised and Ms. Wheeler went on to address the increase in line item 552106, computer software. She stated the change in this line item may initially raise questions; however, the changes are primarily the result of reallocating existing expenses rather than an increase in new or existing expenses. She provided examples, including social media management platforms such as Sprout Social and other digital tools to include the department's online store, which, while supporting promotional efforts, are fundamentally software-based services and therefore more appropriately categorized under this line item. Ms. Wheeler also noted the inclusion of new initiatives within this category, including the launch of an online store platform and the implementation of a tourism booking platform, Tourism Exchange which is designed to enhance Marion County's accessibility to both domestic and international travelers. She explained that this initiative aligns with broader efforts made in partnership with Visit Florida to support tour operator engagement and improve the destination's bookability. Additionally, Ms. Wheeler explained that Smith Travel Research where the Council receives its monthly STR data report, was previously considered a contract service but has been reclassified as software due to their transition to web-based dashboard systems. She also referenced digital tools to include immersive website content platforms such as Threshold 360, noting that while these support marketing efforts, they are maintained as software systems and are therefore categorized accordingly. Ms. Wheeler went on to highlight a new line item, 552107, clothing and apparel. She stated that this category had not been included in prior budgets. She explained that this line item accounts for branded apparel worn by staff, such as polos and jackets used at trade shows and official events. Ms. Wheeler clarified that while branded clothing supports promotional efforts, items worn by staff are classified as uniforms for accounting purposes. In contrast, branded items distributed externally for marketing purposes remain categorized under promotional activities.

Ms. Wheeler then directed the Council to the capital section of the budget, noting that no capital projects were anticipated for fiscal year 2027. She clarified, however, that this does not preclude future capital items from being brought before the Council and the Board of County Commissioners, particularly in relation to the North Gateway project. Ms. Wheeler reminded the Council that an initial escrow payment of just over \$3.35 million was previously made to support the North Gateway project, as required by FDOT to initiate the bidding process. She noted that approximately \$2.2 million remains reserved and earmarked toward the project's future costs. She added that final construction costs are still being determined and that

updated figures will be presented to the Council once they are available. Ms. Wheeler then reviewed the reserve for tourism initiatives, explaining that, as a special revenue fund, the department does not operate under a “use it or lose it” structure that exists with the general fund. Instead, unspent funds are restricted and placed into reserves to be used for future tourism-related initiatives. She emphasized that these funds cannot be expended without specific action by the Tourist Development Council and approval by the Board of County Commissioners. She explained that reserve funds may be allocated through budget amendments to support capital projects or other initiatives as needed. Ms. Wheeler noted that the balance in this reserve has decreased over time, reflecting the Council’s use of funds to support projects such as the South Gateway and improvements at the Rotary Sportsplex, including the installation of turf fields to enhance tournament capacity. Ms. Wheeler also referenced the reserve for contingencies and reserve for cash to be carried forward, noting that these accounts provide flexibility to address unexpected needs or support strategic investments. She provided an example in which \$500,000 was transferred from reserves to the general fund to support the Rotary Sportsplex improvements. She concluded by noting that the budget is structured to balance revenues and expenditures, with reserve allocations reflected as expenditures for accounting purposes; however, those funds are not utilized without formal approval from the Council and the Board of County Commissioners. Ms. Wheeler concluded her presentation and asked if there were any questions.

Commissioner Michelle Stone asked whether any investment earnings generated and held by the Clerk’s Office were returned to the department fund.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that investment earnings are included on the revenue side of the budget and are tracked and reconciled by the Budget and Finance Office. She explained that any residual funds generated flow back into the reserve accounts. Ms. Wheeler noted that specific Council action would be required to allocate those funds for expenditure. She advised she could quickly research what the projected return would be.

Commissioner Stone provided additional context regarding the investment of funds, noting that such investments are governed by state statute and are managed conservatively. She explained that the Clerk of the Court serves as the custodian of the funds and that the Board of County Commissioners does not have direct access to those funds without coordination through the Clerk’s Office. She added that the funds are individually managed on behalf of the Tourist Development Council and that the County utilizes an external investment group to manage these accounts.

Ms. Wheeler responded that while investment earnings are tracked within the system, she did not have the finalized figures readily available at the time of the meeting and would need to confirm the details with the appropriate staff. She noted that the budget is currently in the review phase with County Administration and will return to the Budget Department for finalization before being presented back to the Council.

Commissioner Stone emphasized the complexity of the budget process, noting that there are many moving facets and timelines for this and other departments.

Ms. Wheeler agreed and further explained that during the odd months of the year the budget was being reviewed and revised at the department level while during the even months it would be reviewed by the Budget department. She stated that the staff works closely with the Budget and Finance teams and emphasized the value of their support. Ms. Wheeler expressed appreciation for the Finance Department's efforts in reviewing detailed expenditures and assisting with properly aligning budget line items during the preparation process. She noted that this collaboration improves efficiency, enhances accuracy, and reduces the need for future budget amendments.

Commissioner Stone asked Ms. Wheeler for clarification on whether the Finance Department referenced was part of the Clerk of the Court's Office.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that the Finance Department referenced was a part of the Clerk's Office under the leadership of Clerk Harrell with Jennifer Cole being the Finance Department Director and included a number of staff accountants who review expenditures and ensure budget alignment. She then opened the floor for additional questions.

No questions were raised.

Mr. Christopher Fernandez thanked Ms. Wheeler for the presentation and commended the collaboration between departments.

**A motion was made by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, seconded by Bobby Walker, to approve the fiscal year 2026-2027 budget for recommendation to the Marion County Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).**

Mr. Fernandez invited Ms. Shaffer to continue with additional staff updates.

Ms. Shaffer introduced Ms. Jessica Heller to present the Marketing and Communications Updates. She stated that Ms. Heller had recently returned from a media mission and has been diligently working on the America 250 initiative.

### **Marketing and Communications Updates**

Ms. Heller provided an overview of the Marketing and Communications Updates, noting that the presentation would cover current running media to include print, billboards and digital media advertising. She stated that the statistics presented included performance metrics such as impressions and clicks for the month of March. Ms. Heller reviewed the industry and advocacy communications section, which outlines departmental involvement in community engagement efforts, including events attended, presentations conducted, and ribbon cuttings supported. She noted that these activities reflect ongoing efforts to promote and advocate for tourism within Marion County. She also highlighted the public relations section of the report, which included recent press activity and hosted media visits. Ms. Heller reported that a press

trip from Mexico was conducted in partnership with Visit Florida in March, followed by a Canadian press trip hosted within the destination. She acknowledged staff including Ms. Heidi Villagomez who contributed significantly to the coordination of the press trip and community partners for their support in coordinating and hosting these initiatives. Ms. Heller announced that National Travel and Tourism Week will take place May 3–9. This week would highlight the impact tourism has both nationwide and locally, with a proclamation scheduled to be presented at the next Board of County Commissioners meeting. She noted that Council members would receive additional details and an invitation to attend. As part of National Travel and Tourism Week, Ms. Heller also announced the department’s second annual postcard contest. She reported that submissions are currently being accepted, with a deadline of the following day, and noted that seventeen submissions had already been received which was an increase from the previous year’s approximately seven submissions. She explained that the contest will include a public voting period, after which the selected design will be featured on an official postcard available for free in the department’s office. Ms. Heller concluded her presentation and invited the Council to ask questions. No questions were raised and she then invited Ms. Loretta Shaffer to add any additional context regarding National Travel and Tourism Week.

Ms. Shaffer provided additional remarks, noting that the Council had previously approved the America 250 plan and staff has been actively working to implement it. She stated that efforts are underway to secure advertising placements and finalize related initiatives, including the upcoming launch of the department’s online store. She added that there would be a number of events occurring in association with this initiative including multiple fireworks displays and encourage Councilmembers to direct people to the department’s landing page for information regarding upcoming events. Ms. Shaffer thanked Ms. Heller for her update.

Ms. Heller then asked if there were any additional questions.

No questions were raised.

### **Sales Update**

Mr. Corry Locke provided the department’s sales update. Under new business, he reported on the Shocker Park Meltdown scheduled for August 29-30, 2026 to be held at Shocker Park. The event was estimated to have 75 room nights. He noted that staff is working with the event organizer to assist with event expenses through the Meeting Rewards funding program. Mr. Locke then reported on the ProAM Senior Softball September Showdown, scheduled for September 11-12, 2026 and is anticipated to generate approximately 260 room nights. He then highlighted a larger event opportunity, the Elite Club National League girl’s soccer tournament scheduled for December 3-6, 2026. This event is expected to bring approximately 150 teams and generate an estimated 4,500 room nights. Mr. Locke reviewed active leads, including the American Association of Equine Practitioners Colic Symposium, a national-level event under consideration for March 8–12, 2027, with an estimated 400 room nights. He noted that this

opportunity builds on the destination's long-standing relationship with the Florida Association of Equine Practitioners and would be a 3-year bid. He also discussed the National Folk Festival, a large-scale cultural event currently hosted in Jackson, Mississippi through 2027. Mr. Locke explained that Marion County has been invited to explore a future hosting opportunity and that staff will participate in an upcoming informational webinar to evaluate the feasibility of submitting a three-year bid. Transitioning into ongoing leads, Mr. Locke announced that the American Early Learning Coalition has confirmed its event for a three-year period, spanning 2027 through 2029. He noted that this represents a significant opportunity and that staff had been working extensively with the event planner who is a Helms Briscoe agent to bring the event to the destination. He noted that a funding request will be presented to the Council at a future meeting. Mr. Locke also provided an update on upcoming conferences and tradeshow, stating that he will attend a meeting planner event in Washington, D.C., hosted by Visit Florida. He explained that the event is designed to foster relationships with meeting planners through an interactive pickleball format and noted that Marion County was selected as one of a limited number of participating destinations. Mr. Locke concluded his update and invited any questions from the Council.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer thanked Mr. Locke for the update and the work done by the sales team.

#### **TDC Events Calendar**

Ms. Shaffer then directed the Council to the TDC Events Calendar and emphasized that it is provided to keep Councilmembers abreast of upcoming events. She encouraged members to participate in any events of interest. Ms. Shaffer concluded the staff updates.

#### **Old Business**

Mr. Fernandez called for any old business.

None was brought forth.

#### **New Business**

Mr. Fernandez called for any new business.

Mr. Doug Cone shared an update regarding a recent opportunity he had been involved with. He noted that he had connected with Mr. Phillip Levine, former two-term Mayor of Miami Beach and Carnival Cruise Lines affiliate who had recently purchased property in Marion County and plans to relocate his family to the area. Mr. Cone stated that he has developed a strong relationship with Mr. Levine and learned that Mr. Levine has developed a substantial interest in Marion County. He reported having several discussions with Mr. Levine that have led to his participation in a virtual meeting with the CEO of Breeze Airlines to explore the potential for future commercial air service in Marion County. He indicated that the airline will participate in a site visit in late May or early June. Mr. Cone advised he attended a Chamber & Economic Partnership (CEP) meeting earlier in the day where County and City representatives were also

present. He advised that he had asked Breeze Airlines to provide metrics being used when making decisions regarding the opening of new destination hubs. Mr. Cone stated he was advised to reach out to two specialized aviation consultants who have both worked for Breeze Airlines previously and he plans to have in-depth conversations with both consultants regarding pricing for their services. Mr. Cone stated that preliminary conversations have taken place regarding potential shared funding among multiple entities to include the City of Ocala, Marion County, the CEP and four members of the Airport Mobility Committee to support this analysis. He added that additional information, including cost estimates, will be brought back to the Council for further consideration.

Mr. Fernandez asked if there were state entities that could be involved to provide further assistance.

Mr. Cone responded that additional outreach may include coordination with state-level partners such as Enterprise Florida. He provided context on Breeze Airline's current operations, highlighting its service to several Florida markets, including Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Vero Beach, and Fort Lauderdale. Mr. Cone stated that discussions have emphasized the region's strengths, including its equine industry and broader tourism assets. He added that he has a scheduled meeting with representatives from The Villages to gather data on resident travel patterns, including points of origin, to further support the market analysis. He added that there was a high degree of interest from The Villages to participate in these initiatives. He explained that preliminary discussions with the airline indicate that a key consideration is ensuring sufficient passenger demand, particularly during the initial phases of service. Mr. Cone noted that airlines often seek financial guarantees to offset the risk of unoccupied seats when entering a new market. Based on comparable agreements in other Florida destinations, he stated that such commitments could range from approximately \$5 million to \$10 million to support service stabilization during the startup period.

Mr. Fernandez emphasized the importance of state-level participation to increase support for the initiative.

Mr. Cone advised they would be seeking any potential funding sources.

Mr. Fernandez expressed support for the previous discussion and shared additional new business. He reported he had recently met with Ken Odom with the Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) to receive updates regarding pathway connectivity projects for trails in Marion County. He advised within a few months TPO would be proceeding with a trail connection linking the trailhead at 80<sup>th</sup> Street on Santos Trails to the Baseline Trail System. He noted that this project will utilize existing infrastructure, including an underpass, and will create a more seamless connection between major trail networks. He further reported that an additional project involving a trail along U.S. Highway 441, connecting the City of Belleview to the Santos Trailhead, is anticipated to go out for bid later in the year. Mr. Fernandez emphasized the importance of expanding trail connectivity, noting that these improvements

enhance access to the County's outdoor recreation assets and support tourism. He highlighted that increasing pedestrian connectivity between key locations strengthens the overall visitor experience and aligns with ongoing efforts to promote Marion County as an outdoor destination.

Ms. Shaffer added to the discussion, commending Mr. Fernandez's leadership. She noted that following the previous Council meeting he initiated discussions with Visit Florida regarding opportunities to further promote cycling and trail-related tourism. She stated that, as a result of those conversations, Visit Florida expressed interest in supporting related initiatives and exploring potential opportunities within the current fiscal year. Ms. Shaffer commended Mr. Fernandez for effectively communicating Marion County's assets at a broader, statewide level.

Mr. Fernandez expressed enthusiasm regarding the collaboration, noting that discussions with Visit Florida leadership were productive and that there is strong interest in advancing outdoor recreation initiatives. He emphasized the County's ability to compete with leading destinations that promote outdoor experiences, highlighting opportunities to enhance accessibility for a variety of activities, including cycling, hiking, walking, and nature-based recreation.

Ms. Shaffer noted that these initiatives bring forth a more affluent customer and highlight the existing culture of outdoor recreation in Marion County. She expressed appreciation for Mr. Cone's airport discussion and mentioned that Visit Florida had discussed revitalizing a previously existing partnership between airlines. She stated that she intended to bring forth the conversation at the next Visit Florida board meeting to strengthen support from Visit Florida that could be used as leverage in future conversations with Enterprise Florida.

Mr. Cone asked that Ms. Shaffer provide updates following conversations with Visit Florida.

Ms. Shaffer affirmed.

#### **Public Comment**

Mr. Fernandez called for any public comment

None was brought forth

Mr. Fernandez advised that the next meeting for the Tourist Development Council would take place on May 21, 2026

Mr. Locke noted that the next meeting would be held on the third Thursday of the month instead of the typical fourth Thursday.

Mr. Fernandez adjourned the meeting at 9:57am.