

Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting
Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, April 24, 2025

9:00 a.m.

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

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

Roll Call

Present:

Rus Adams, Victoria Billig, Christopher Fernandez, Danny Gaekwad, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Commissioner Carl Zalak, Jeff Bailey

Staff:

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

Guests:

Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Paresh Chou, Hilton Garden Inn; Evelyn Morales, Hampton Inn & Suites; Susan Perkins, Hampton Inn & Suites; Lizbeth Gennard, Hilton Ocala; Mohamed Mohsen, College of Central Florida

Notice of Publication

Notice was published on the County Website on December 27, 2024 and subsequently updated to include Teams information on March 13, 2025.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Barry Mansfield, seconded by Jeff Bailey, to adopt the minutes from the March 28, 2025 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).

Acknowledgment of Financials – March 2025

A motion was made by Jeff Bailey, seconded by Barry Mansfield, to review and approve March 2025 Financials. Mr. Rus Adams interjected and inquired as to whether there was any discussion to be had regarding the March 2025 Financials.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad inquired to Ms. Loretta Shaffer, Tourism Director, as to if there were any items in the financial statement which was unusual, he stated he would like to point out any such instance and if there was nothing unusual, he would proceed.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer advised there was nothing unusual and remarked that Mr. Gaekwad posed a great question because the staff would be taking the council through the full budget for next year that would be proposed to the BCC in July. **A motion was made by Jeff Bailey, seconded by Barry Mansfield, to review and approve March 2025 Financials. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0)**

Report from Chair

Gateway Signage Update

Mr. Adams read an email from Mr. Richard Busche providing an update on the south and north gateway signage projects. Mr. Adams noted that the updates provided by Mr. Busche were much better than he had expected to have received in 30 days. The email read as follows:

“The south gateway contractor is making great progress on the panel recoating, all seven panels are down and are in the powder coating shop now being stripped and recoated with the darker color, we expect to see the panels go back up on the gateway between May 4th and May 9th”

Mr. Adams advised this was outstanding news and that the council would not be able to coordinate a ribbon cutting as quickly as the work would be completed. He advised the council had projected doing so 45 to 90 days later when they had previously discussed the matter last month. Mr. Adams continued reading the email as follows:

“On the north gateway from last TDC meeting there had been considerable coordination between the county and FDOT regarding the directional signage on the bridge in the middle of the gateway, on a call this week FDOT confirmed that they are able to relocate the sign to the outside of the gateway features and east of the decorative tower. As we get more design information from FDOT I will provide further updates”

Mr. Adams directed the council to direct any questions to Ms. Shaffer and advised the meeting would then proceed after questions.

Ms. Shaffer affirmed that the updates were positive news and advised Ms. Tracy Straub did a great job working with Mr. Busche the day prior with FDOT. She further affirmed it was phenomenal that they were able to achieve that.

Mr. Gaekwad posed a question as to whether the department had to pay extra or if the work was done as a courtesy.

Mr. Adams advised they had to pay extra.

Mr. Gaekwad requested to know how much was paid.

Mr. Adams posed a question to Ms. Shaffer as to whether she knew the exact amount that was paid.

Ms. Shaffer inquired to Ms. Wheeler to confirm whether the amount was \$153,000.00

Mr. Bailey advised the cost was above \$153,000.00

Mr. Adams stated he recalled the amount being between \$150,000.00 and \$163,000.00

Ms. Wheeler noted the work was done on contingency

Mr. Adams noted the cost for the work should be noted in the March 28, 2025 TDC meeting minutes.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that the fees for the work were being paid to the contractor and the subcontractors would actually do the work. She further clarified that no fees were paid to Kimley Horn.

Ms. Shaffer noted there was enough money in contingency to conduct the work.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he had no further questions and clarified that his initial question was due to the fact that there were plans to build another sign

Mr. Adams referred back to the March 28, 2025 TDC meeting minutes to answer Mr. Gaekwad's question and provide accurate information stating "additional changes would cost approximately \$150,000.00 to \$160,000.00 and would take approximately two months to complete". He stated that is what the council was told in the previous month.

Mr. Adams requested that Ms. Shaffer move on to the staff updates.

Staff Updates

Ms. Shaffer acknowledged Mr. Gaekwad's remarks regarding the budget. She affirmed the team was working to ensure all aspects of the budget were thoroughly completed. She commended Ms. Wheeler for consistently doing an excellent job with preparing the budget and advised Ms. Wheeler would present the proposed budget.

Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Proposed Budget

Ms. Wheeler responded to a previous inquiry regarding the cost for the additional work being done on the gateway project and confirmed the amount was \$154,084.10. She advised the majority of the cost was related to maintenance and traffic, as the work required closing two lanes of I-75 to access interior panels.

Ms. Wheeler transitioned to her presentation and directed the council to the printed copies of the budget provided, noting that if individuals were listening to the meeting online or viewing the digital version of the meeting packet that the budget documents were also available on pages 60-61 of the TDC agenda packet.

Ms. Wheeler made the council aware that the Tourist Development staff met with County Administration on April 3rd to review the budget being presented. She echoed what Ms. Shaffer previously stated asking the council to keep in mind that the budget goes through multiple layers of review. She advised this included conducting internal budget preparation, meeting with County Administration, presenting to the Tourist Development Council to ensure they were comfortable with the budget and able to make recommendations and finally presenting the budget to the Board of County Commissioners during the workshops Ms. Shaffer mentioned would occur in July. She advised the budget would be adopted following a series of two public hearings. Ms. Wheeler acknowledged that while the budget process may be familiar to some, it was helpful to provide a refresher for those who were not involved in the budget process on a day-to-day basis.

Ms. Wheeler advised the council that the Tourist Development's operations were conducted in alignment with the Long-Range Tourism Plan, the departmental operational plan, strategic conversations that occur during the Tourist Development Council meetings and the Empowering Marion for Success Plan which was the countywide strategic plan. She noted that all of these would be taken into consideration when building the budget.

Ms. Wheeler advised the council that her presentation would emphasize where there were key changes in the budget year over year and invited the council to ask any specific questions or request further detail as needed.

Ms. Wheeler began with the personnel section of the budget and noted that in recent years prior to the current year, new positions had been proposed which have since been filled. For the upcoming fiscal year, no new positions or changes to personnel were being proposed. She clarified that the roles were not fully staffed for the majority of the current fiscal year therefore the increase seen in the personnel line item reflected a full 12 month staffing level for the positions approved and filled in the previous year. Ms. Wheeler further explained that subject to discussions with the County Commission, County Administration would include allocations for merit increases and cost of living adjustments in the proposed budget that may or may not be approved. She emphasized that at the department level, no increases in wages or new positions were being requested.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad referred to the personnel section of the budget and noted that although Ms. Wheeler stated there were no increases, the line item for regular salaries and wages had

changed over time. He cited that in fiscal year 2024, the amount was \$575,000, followed by \$684,000, then amended to \$720,000. He noted that the current requested amount was \$749,000, reflecting a significant increase of several hundred thousand dollars. He requested that Ms. Wheeler provide an explanation for the changes.

Mr. Gaekwad clarified that he was referring to the 2025 figure of \$684,000.00

Ms. Wheeler explained there was an adopted budget which was presented in fiscal year 2024 which may be amended through an established process should cost of living and merit increases be approved. She further noted there was a threshold for hiring staff with a baseline minimum amount however, if the team was unable to hire staff at the minimum amount there may be an increase in salary within what was approved within the budget parameters.

Mr. Gaekwad requested to know how many staff members were on salary including Ms. Shaffer.

Ms. Shaffer advised 11 staff members were on salary.

Ms. Wheeler responded there were 11 staff members, all of whom were currently employed, and clarified no new staff members were proposed in the budget. She explained that the increase reflected having 12 months associated with each of those staff members. Ms. Wheeler provided an instance of having a position vacant that was not filled until February another that was filled on December 31st, effective January, resulting only partial expenditures from the current fiscal year to account for those salary expenses. She explained that full-year expenses needed to be accounted for in the projected fiscal year 2026 budget. She further explained that there were additional costs such as health insurance fees, life insurance and retirement contributions. Ms. Wheeler advised salaries increased, while healthcare costs remained the same and other associated benefits increased incrementally. She further explained that if an employee achieves a banner year and received a higher merit, workers compensation and retirement contributions also became more expensive as these were calculated as a percentage of their salary. She concluded by asking if that explanation answered the question.

Mr. Gaekwad affirmed that Ms. Wheeler's explanation answered his questions.

Commissioner Zalak asked for clarification on why the budget would change if there were no new positions approved mid-year.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that a new position had not been approved mid-year but rather an existing position had been filled during the year.

Commissioner Zalak followed up by asking for further clarification.

Mr. Angel Roussel offered clarification for the record. He explained that the report shown on the screen reflected accurate actuals for 2024, further clarifying that those figures were audited and were based on actual expenses. Mr. Roussel explained that the '2025 Amended' column reflected the adopted budget. He stated the column labelled '2025 Adopted' was

inaccurate and the '2025 Amended' reflected the adopted budget noting that the documents were draft reports.

Commissioner Zalak asked for confirmation that the '2025 Amended' column reflected what had been approved.

Mr. Roussel confirmed that what was in the approved line-item budget was reflected in the third column labeled amended.

Mr. Bailey inquired about how the \$684,000 figure was determined

Mr. Roussel reiterated that the report was a draft budget and had not yet been finalized by the Clerk of the Court. Mr. Roussel advised that the Clerk of the Court would prepare and finalize the reports prior to them being presented to the Board of County Commissioners in July. He requested the council focus on the first column of the report which reflected 2024 actuals and the 2025 amended column which reflected the adopted budget.

Mr. Bailey requested additional clarification on the \$749,000 and \$720,000 figures.

Mr. Roussel explained that when reviewing the actuals, , a figure such as \$720,000 for the current year, was unlikely o to be spent and more likely that approximately \$650,000 would be spent which would then be reflected in the actuals for 2025 once the department completed the auditing process.

Mr. Bailey indicated an understanding but emphasized that \$575,000 was spent in 2024 although \$720,000 was budgeted

Mr. Roussel advised that they would not know the final auditing numbers and there were times when vacancies which occurred throughout the year caused variances in the numbers being reviewed.

Commissioner Zalak stated that if all positions were filled the department would spend \$720,000. He explained that there needed to be enough money budgeted to do so and any unspent funds would be carried into the next year.

Mr. Roussel affirmed the statement made by Commissioner Zalak and noted that larger departments were spending around 90% of their budget while smaller departments spent closer to 100%. He further advised that budgets must be prepared to fund positions for the entirety of the year.

Commissioner Zalak indicated when the Clerk of the Court created the budget, it tended to be almost 10% higher.

Mr. Angel Roussel offered to provide printed copies of meeting materials to anyone who preferred them and noted that while some people may not want printed material it remained an option. Mr. Gaekwad requested that a printed copy be prepared for him at each meeting.

Ms. Shaffer and Ms. Wheeler affirmed the request.

Ms. Wheeler thanked Mr. Roussel for providing clarification and addressed a request made by Mr. Gaekwad to adjust the formatting of the budget report. She advised that the department does not control the formatting of the budget documents and that this was done by the Budget department. Ms. Wheeler further advised that the department was only able to submit the figures that were included in the budget report but does not submit the figures used in the personnel section. She explained that the Budget department reviewed the actuals for salary, proposed merit, proposed cost of living adjustments and drafts the personnel section considering those figures. Ms. Wheeler clarified that the department controls pay grade assignments through Human Resources when positions are hired.

Mr. Gaekwad requested again that the formatting on the document be adjusted to improve clarity.

Commissioner Zalak pointed out that Mr. Bailey had a question regarding how many people were on staff in 2024 versus 2025 and requested that Ms. Wheeler provide an answer.

Ms. Wheeler advised that in the previous fiscal year two new staff members were hired therefore the current fiscal year included two new positions that were not previously included in fiscal year 2024. She indicated that the department also experienced some staff turnover.

Mr. Bailey inquired as to whether the new positions were for the department's sales team.

Ms. Sky Wheeler responded in the negative advising that a new sales team position was added in fiscal year 2024. She clarified that in the current fiscal year, the Multimedia and Digital Coordinator, Keleab Spencer, was hired and Candace Shelton was promoted to the Industry and Community Relations Specialist position. Ms. Wheeler advised the department experienced staff turnover in the Branding Content Coordinator position and Heidi Villagomez was hired to fill the vacancy but clarified this position already existed.

Mr. Bailey requested confirmation on whether anticipated revenues would be included in the report.

Ms. Wheeler advised that the council would discuss revenue however the revenue that was projected was typically considerably lower than the actual revenue being made by the department. She clarified that the budget was balanced against the lower projection not the higher actuals.

Mr. Bailey acknowledged that salaries had increased and noted he would be interested to know the percentage of salaries relative to revenue. He noted that given the increase in revenue the percentage would likely be smaller despite the dollar amount having increased. He expressed interest in receiving the relevant data.

Ms. Wheeler affirmed she would be able to provide the requested information. She further clarified that as a special revenue fund – not part of the general fund – the balance of any

unspent money would be returned to the department. She explained that the department was unique in that fashion in that any funds that were overbudgeted but underutilized were returned to the department's fund. Ms. Wheeler advised this typically occurred to cost saving efforts by staff to reduce expenditures. She provided an example of Ms. Jessica Heller, Marketing and Communications Supervisor, leveraging public relations for familiarization tours to decrease costs noting the unspent funds would be returned to the department. Ms. Wheeler clarified that the unspent funds would not be returned to the department prior to presenting the budget to the council, however, in order to align with the budget timeline, the budget discussion with the council must occur in April. Ms. Wheeler noted that April was the timeframe in which the County Administrator assumed authority over the budget and was able to make edits based on recommendations made by the council.

Christopher Fernandez out 9:20am

She continued to explain, that late May was typically when the audited overage, that would be additional revenue, was balanced against the expenditures and money was returned to the fund. She clarified that the Budget and Finance departments were separate therefore the amounts projected by Budget would not reflect actual revenues. Ms. Wheeler committed to providing the numbers as requested, but clarified that they would not be based on actual figures but on budgeted revenue due to the nature of the budgeting exercise.

Mr. Bailey expressed understanding and stated that budgeted expenses were typically reviewed against budgeted revenues while actual expenses were reviewed against actual revenues.

Christopher Fernandez in 9:21am

Ms. Wheeler agreed and reiterated that the financials were reviewed monthly to compare actual revenues and expenditures.

Commissioner Zalak requested that if it pleased the Chair, the council should discuss the budget again in August. He advised that once the actual figures were made known, it would be beneficial for the council to discuss noting that a follow-up would help bring closure to the discussion.

Ms. Wheeler concurred and expressed that she would be happy to bring the item back for further discussion. She clarified that the budget presentation to the council was to ensure a level of comfortability regarding what would later be presented to the Board of County Commissioners on behalf of the Tourist Development Council and the Visitors and Convention Bureau staff for fiscal year 2026.

Mr. Bailey indicated that he had no further questions regarding the personnel section of the budget but anticipated questions regarding the operating section due to significant changes in that area.

Ms. Shaffer indicated that there would be significant changes in the promotional item budget.

Ms. Wheeler directed the council's attention to the operating portion of the budget, beginning with line item 531109 for professional services. She explained that this line item was used for professional services including services related to the department's media agency encompassing the entire media budget. She noted an increase of approximately \$352,000 from the current fiscal year explaining that funds were included for strategic planning during the 2026 fiscal year which was also the last year of the department's Long-Range Tourism Plan.

Mr. Bailey inquired about the approximate cost of that activity.

Ms. Wheeler advised that \$68,000.00 had been budgeted which aligned with what was previously spent plus a 10% increase. She further advised there were funds earmarked for the department to participate in research conducted in the fiscal year of \$100,000 along with \$30,000 earmarked for additional research to support the next steps related to the Tourism Placemaking Study. She noted that once the scope related to the Tourism Placemaking Study was finalized, the department would likely receive feedback seeking alternative forms of funding similar to how it was done in previous Hunden exercises. There was \$30,000 budgeted to partner with a firm that explores tourism improvement districts such as Civitas. She emphasized that these funds were set aside pending direction from the TDC and Board of County Commissioners.

Commissioner Zalak asked if there would be another workshop on the topic.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that another workshop would be conducted and was being scheduled in coordination with the City's 2050 plan.

Commissioner Zalak advised once that meeting took place, more information would be provided to the TDC.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad directed attention to the next line item, contract services, indicating there had been significant changes.

Ms. Wheeler stated that contract services had a significant decrease of about \$50,000. She explained that the shuttle RFP project which had been discussed with the council in the past was removed from the contract services line item. The shuttle RFP project was done to contract an on-call shuttle service when the destination hosted larger conferences and tradeshows. However, the department conducted the exercise and determined it was not successful, finding that there was not a standard cadence of events utilizing the service to justify an on-call contract. The funds previously budgeted for this project in contract services was reallocated to the promotional line item to be utilized when courting larger events to assist in acquiring appropriate services that meet their individual needs. Ms.

Wheeler noted this approach was successfully completed during Florida Huddle and Encounter and would be the approach used moving forward as opposed to having a contracted service retained and on-call at all times.

Councilmember Mansfield asked whether the City of Ocala was consulted regarding the shuttle service.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed conversations with the City of Ocala were had in the past regarding shuttle service but clarified that the intent was not to transport individuals around Marion County but to transport individuals from airports into Marion County at specific intervals in an effort to move business travelers, specifically, who have flown into a major airport to the host location/facility within Marion County.

Councilmember Mansfield advised the City of Ocala had vehicles and requested to know if this option had been explored with them. He further advised the City of Ocala discussed obtaining trolleys and requested to know if transferring those to the airport would be an option.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed the team had spoken with the City of Ocala in the past and emphasized that a contract for this service was not an appropriate option. The City's trolleys might be appropriate to utilize for some events. She further advised that contracting with a shuttle service may be appropriate in other situations and did not want to limit the department to one contractor which allowed them to leverage multiple relationships such as the one maintained with the City of Ocala.

Commissioner Zalak requested additional details on how transportation was arranged for Visit Florida.

Ms. Wheeler explained that it could function in a myriad of different ways, offering this as further reasoning for why having a fixed contract could not work as intended. The department learned that different meeting planners had different needs depending on their scale and size. She advised Visit Florida contracted their own bus lines for airport transfer however, once in destination, any event that was not a part of their official schedule of events, as well as, add-on events (similar to the Green Gaits event hosted by the VCB) would not be able to utilize Visit Florida's contracted bus lines. She explained that staff member Samantha Solomon, Sales Service Specialist, worked with local contractors to request quotes for services, she advised this task was done easily and the department contracted with Lamers bus line for under \$1000 as opposed to paying a fee to maintain a retainer with a contracted shuttle service provider. Ms. Wheeler explained that in market they would need a variety of fleet and that there were not enough leads for a business to support those initiatives. She reiterated that an ad-hoc approach would be better suited. Ms. Wheeler noted that the revisions to the department's funding programs would ensure planners provided the team with all of their needs to secure appropriate services.

Commissioner Zalak stated that when large groups travel to Ocala, they utilize a multitude of airports including Sanford, Orlando, Tampa, St. Petersburg, Jacksonville and Gainesville.

He advised it would be challenging to coordinate services to transport individuals from across the state into Marion County.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that not only would this be challenging but it would also be a bad idea.

Ms. Wheeler affirmed Commissioner Zalak's sentiment and noted that it would not only be a challenge for the VCB but that service providers were not interested in providing the service as the destination does not have a high demand for the service. She also noted that the majority of sports events were not interested in the service. Facilities such as FAST (Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training) host large events, however, athletes were not interested in utilizing a shuttle service but preferred individualized itineraries and schedules. The shuttle service would cater to business-related conferences, tradeshow and exhibitions which typically booked enough time in advance for the department to secure a shuttle service without limiting the department to a single contract that may not be utilized for 18-24 months.

Commissioner Zalak noted that transportation should be considered for the leisure traveler as well. He shared a story about several couples he met at last year's Food and Wine Festival who attended the event for two to three years.

Mr. Bailey noted the transportation challenge was further complicated by travelers utilizing up to five different airports.

Mr. Gaekwad stated car rental prices in Florida were lower than in other states. He shared his experience working with Hertz Rent- A - Car when their headquarters relocated and noted there were 35,000 cars staged at Orlando Airport, if needed. He explained airline packages often included car rental options with prices as low as \$30 per day. Mr. Gaekwad noted that most travelers had a plan for their visit and it was not the responsibility of the council to coordinate transportation for every tourist. He further stated The Villages and Ocala both had excellent shuttle services, and he personally knew international travelers who utilized those services. Mr. Gaekwad reiterated that it was not the responsibility of the council to provide transportation to tourists and that this was an opportunity for the private sector that would be naturally responded to if the demand exists.

Mr. Bailey affirmed Mr. Gaekwad's remarks adding that developing transportation solutions required significantly more effort and money than what was justified. He indicated there were more pressing matters for the council to focus on.

Mr. Adams indicated that the conversation needed to be refocused to the budget presentation.

Ms. Wheeler proceeded with the budget presentation, focusing on promotional line item, 548101. She noted a decrease in the line item and explained that the promotional line item was unique due to the department's ability to retain its funds. She explained the re-appropriation process occurs in July and is adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in August would become part of the budget once the budget was adopted. She clarified that

there were only a few areas where this could be done within the fund, such as multi-year contracts, capital improvement projects and specific expenditures within the promotional line item. Items which were typically re-appropriated included bid fee approved funding which was approved in a fiscal year with that year being when those funds become unavailable, the department would encumber those funds for the event even if the event was not scheduled to occur until future years. She highlighted Mr. Corry Locke's efforts in securing multiyear agreements for bid fees. Additionally, events may occur later in the fiscal year, such as August and were allowed 60 days to provide the required documentation which resulted in a need for funds to be re-appropriated into the next fiscal year. Ms. Wheeler shared that the current fiscal year approved bid fee and room night generating funded events resulted in over \$800,000 to be re-appropriated from fiscal year 24 into fiscal year 25 to support items recommended to and agreed upon by the Board of County Commissioners. Ms. Wheeler noted that the budget may appear to show a significant amount of money that was not spent, and that the department does not intend to spend. She emphasized revisiting the budget in August when the re-appropriations have been completed would be beneficial to the council.

Mr. Bailey asked if bid fees were included in promotional activity.

Ms. Wheeler replied in the affirmative.

Mr. Bailey asked for clarification as to whether the reduction was due to having items approved which were not subsequently contracted thus eliminating the need for the \$800,000.

Ms. Wheeler responded in the negative and explained that the reduction was due to items that had been previously approved and re-appropriated into the current fiscal year. This meant the funds were available and accounted for so there was no need to budget for the funds. Ms. Wheeler clarified that there was no new money budgeted in this line item.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know how much was being carried into that line-item year over year.

Ms. Sky Wheeler responded that the amount had increased slightly with the implementation of the bid fee program and the capacity to host larger events following the Covid-19 pandemic. She advised the department typically carried forward about \$700,000 related to event funding because event funding was the most consistent category requiring re-appropriations. Ms. Wheeler outlined other scenarios that may require re-appropriation such as a project that was intended to start in one fiscal year but experienced delays such as difficulties securing a contract or sending out an RFP. Ms. Wheeler clarified that re-appropriations were not a routine activity for every item in the budget but was standard for event funding. Ms. Wheeler advised that the department explored alternative approaches such as creating a special project for event funding outside of the promotional budget, however no other conclusion was reached with the Finance and Budget departments.

regarding how those funds could be managed. She stated that as the program continued to grow, additional discussions regarding the matter may occur.

Commissioner Zalak inquired if the actuals would reflect a figure in the range of \$2.6 million to \$2.8 million

Ms. Sky Wheeler confirmed that was likely, assuming there were no cancellations of contracts for events. She expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to revisit the conversation when the actuals became available, noting that it was challenging to discuss historical, current, and future budgets simultaneously.

Councilmember Mansfield inquired of Commissioner Zalak as to who was responsible to collect the money.

Ms. Wheeler advised the Tax Collector's Office collects the money.

Councilmember Mansfield followed up by inquiring whether the money was first routed to the County.

Commissioner Zalak advised the money goes to the Clerk.

Commissioner Zalak advised that all moneys were routed through the comptroller, clarifying that the comptroller was the Clerk of the Court.

Councilmember Mansfield asked if fees collected within the City of Ocala go to the comptroller as well.

Commissioner Zalak advised those fees go to the Tax Collector as he was the collection agency.

Councilmember Mansfield inquired if the Tax Collector was also the collection agency for this fund.

Commissioner Zalak advised the Tax Collector was the collection agency for this fund, property taxes and similar collections. He clarified that the County does not have a checkbook per say and the Clerk of the Court acts as the County's checkbook.

Ms. Wheeler provided further clarification advising the tax collector reconciles collections, deducts their commission and remits the remaining funds via ACH to the Clerk of the Court in the month following collection to be added into the Tourist Development fund.

Ms. Wheeler then transitioned to describe the department's planned uses for the promotional line item in fiscal year 2026. Ms. Wheeler advised that the promotional line item for the department was a larger line item because the department was responsible for marketing Marion County. She stated that typically a promotional section was not included in other funds related to County government as promoting was not their primary objective. She advised the promotional line item accounted for all of the department's funding programs. These included the Marketing Assistance Grant Program which was budgeted at

\$75,000, the Bid Fee Funding Program at \$500,000, the Room Night Generating Event Funding Program at \$300,000, Arts and Culture Destination Enhancement Funding at \$100,000 and the Meeting Rewards Program at \$30,000. Ms. Wheeler noted that the separation of funds for the Room Night Generating and Meeting Rewards programs is anticipated to result in cost savings by potentially reducing unused encumbrances, as events better suited for the meeting rewards program can apply for smaller-scale funding. Ms. Wheeler advised the new Arts and Culture Destination Enhancement program was developed with the arts community and will be evaluated annually. A larger expense included in the promotional line item was the department's annual meeting budgeted at \$50,000. She clarified that the event has never cost the full budgeted amount.

Mr. Jeff Bailey asked for clarification on which annual meeting Ms. Wheeler was referencing

Ms. Wheeler advised she was referring to the tourism annual meeting which occurs in December and reiterated that \$50,000 had never been spent on orchestrating the event. She further advised that as the meeting grows, the department wanted to ensure there was flexibility in the budget to be able to host the meeting. The budgeted funds for the department's website agency would also be paid from the promotional line item at \$87,600, Threshold 360 – a program that allows the department to capture and host 360 videos of tourism destinations within Marion County – was also included in the promotional line item at \$60,000.

Mr. Bailey pointed out that budgeting \$50,000 for the annual meeting when the costs may actually be \$15,000 could create the impression there were significant cost savings when in fact the initial budgeted amount may have been excessive.

Mr. Gaekwad stated that Ms. Shaffer should work with hotels who receive bid fees and other promotional fees to have them host the annual breakfast free of charge. He proposed that instead of paying for the event, the department could request hotels host the breakfast or lunch meeting as a courtesy, given the benefits they receive.

Mr. Adams supported the proposal and added that some negotiation occurs during the planning of the event to remain under budget.

Ms. Wheeler responded to clarify that the budget did not only include the venue rental and food but the department's objective was to create a marquee event which individuals prioritize attending. She advised that the department was not partnership based and there was no mechanism in place to recoup funds spent during the event, but those mechanisms could be explored in future. Ms. Wheeler added that food and service costs were fixed expenses that reflect fair compensation for hospitality staff, consistent with the department's goal of promoting tourism. Additionally, she explained that the department aspires to bring in nationally recognized speakers to elevate the educational value of the event for industry professionals and community members. These speakers often come with associated costs, which must be accounted for in the event budget. She noted that while the cost to host the event at Silver Springs was just around \$23,000 and the budget was more

than double that amount, as the event grows there would be more money needed to host more people.

Mr. Adams asked how many people attended the event in the year prior

Ms. Wheeler advised she would obtain the number.

Commissioner Zalak advised he believed it would be better to keep the attendance numbers between 300-500 people to create a sense of exclusivity. He commended the staff for their efforts with previous events.

Mr. Adams emphasized the importance of hosting the meetings annually it provides an education opportunity for those who do not understand the purpose of the TDC and CVB.

Commissioner Zalak indicated there were a number of methods, including advertising, that could improve the event.

Mr. Gaekwad reiterated that hotels were benefiting from the department therefore they should be asked to host the event on a complimentary basis.

Commissioner Zalak suggested that Mr. Gaekwad, a hotelier who benefits from room nights, could extend that offer.

Mr. Gaekwad noted for the record that he does not get any benefits and has never gotten any benefits within the past ten years, nor has he ever instructed his manager to pursue benefits offered by the department. He further clarified that while he does get room nights, all other hotels benefit from this as well and that he does not receive anything additional.

Ms. Wheeler noted that a reduction could be made to the budgeted amount for the annual meeting if the council desired. She advised there were 269 people in attendance at the annual meeting the year prior.

Continuing the presentation, she further advised that the promotional line item also included budgeted amounts for ensuring rights to purchase music and voice over talent for the production of videos and commercials.

Commissioner Zalak advised collections were trending upwards and as the department collects more money the increased collections should be added back to the fund as collections continue to outpace the budget.

Ms. Wheeler transitioned to the capital portion of the budget and advised no new money was budgeted towards capital expenditures as the South Gateway project had been fully funded and the North Gateway project has sufficient funds to begin construction. She advised that in fiscal year 2027 there may be some amendments needed as FDOT begins the project and develops the diverging diamond interchange. Ms. Wheeler then discussed the reserve line items which is cash to be carried forward for contingencies. She advised the department does not budget for debt services and this portion of the budget was handled by

the Budget and Finance departments. She explained that debt services reflect obligations related to countywide systems, such as budgeting software and purchase order processing, which departments were required to use. As such, the department contributes its share of those costs but does not have discretion over them.

Referring to Reserve for Contingencies, Ms. Wheeler explained that this reserve covers unexpected expenses. In fiscal year 2025 it was amended to \$446,865 and used along with the remainder of the re-appropriations balance bringing the amount to \$500,000 to fund the department's portion of the turf upgrades at Rotary. She explained that the reserve for cash to carry forward was to safeguard the department in the event of a situation where there was no revenue coming to the department, but the department still had expenditures it was obligated to pay. She noted this was a scenario the department had never encountered.

Ms. Wheeler addressed the Reserve for Tourism Initiatives, which was not shown in the current budget document but would appear once prior year expenditures were finalized and reallocated. She explained that this reserve was used for strategic tourism projects approved by the Board of County Commissioners. Past uses included supplemental funding for the gateway projects and fiber installation at Rotary Sportsplex. She emphasized that while these funds were not pre-planned for specific uses, they remained available to support critical tourism development opportunities as they arose. She concluded by stating that as the South Gateway was now completed and the North Gateway costs were better understood, the department would be able to consider new initiatives, particularly as insights emerge from the 2050 Plan and the Hunden proposal.

Commissioner Zalak noted that there would be some opportunity with the North Gateway for capital projects that align with the horse theme of the new interchange. He suggested purchasing pieces from the County's Horse Fever initiative to be placed along the trail. He noted with the Gateway going towards the World Equestrian Center it would be a good opportunity to include Horse Fever pieces.

Mr. Adams agreed that the department could sponsor or purchase pieces from the initiative.

Commissioner Zalak followed by stating the department could buy half a dozen of the pieces to be placed strategically.

Mr. Bailey redirected Ms. Wheeler's attention to line item 549185 pointing out a significant increase.

Ms. Sky Wheeler explained the cost allocation process and advised that in the past each department was assigned an individual position to fill various roles such as HR, IT, Procurement and Purchasing, however, the county removed those specialists from each department and created centralized departments for those services which all departments utilize. Using Maximus, the workload of those departments was audited to determine how much of the workload was received from other departments and costs were assigned to the departments. She noted that she was unsure of the exact reason for the increase in this line

item but suggested the increase may be from the department's high utilization of legal counsel to negotiate funding contracts and services as well as from information technology as the department increased its footprint in the digital space. She advised the account object operates two years in arrears and the last time the department experienced such an increase it was related to work done by Facilities to renovate the building.

Mr. Roussel noted that paying for these services separately would come at a much higher cost to the department and that the central services portion of the budget allows for cost savings.

Commissioner Zalak and Mr. Adams both expressed agreement with Mr. Roussel's sentiment.

Mr. Bailey requested the percentage of the personnel budget relative to total revenue. He clarified that he was only interested in the salaries and wages portion, excluding taxes and benefits.

Ms. Sky Wheeler stated that salaries and wages account for 12.25% of the budgeted revenue, which is \$6,120,000 for the current fiscal year.

Mr. Bailey asked if the same percentage was available for the previous year.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that it was.

Mr. Bailey inquired whether budget models typically display those percentages.

Ms. Wheeler explained that while the data was available, the current report format was designed for clarity and aesthetics and does not include that data. She clarified that she could generate such a report but it was not the standard format distributed for review, as doing so, could lead to confusion. She stated the document presented to the Council reflected the official format used in Marion County's published budget.

Commissioner Zalak reiterated that Ms. Wheeler could provide the requested data to Mr. Bailey to which Ms. Wheeler affirmed.

Mr. Bailey noted that while dollar variances were important to revenue, the context also mattered. He explained that if expenses increased by 4% but revenue decreased, that 4% increase would become problematic but if revenue increased by 10%, an increase in expenses may be reasonable.

Commissioner Zalak remarked that a follow-up report in August would be helpful, particularly once the budget was rebalanced and actuals for promotional items were clearer.

Mr. Bailey agreed and emphasized the importance of becoming more productive and efficient. He stated that while it was acceptable for costs to rise, they should do so at a slower pace than revenue growth, allowing more resources to be allocated elsewhere.

Mr. Roussel inquired if there would be interest from the council for a 5-year trend.

Commissioner Zalak and Mr. Bailey affirmed. Commissioner Zalak added that reviewing this data post-finalization in August would allow the Council to revisit budget allocations and make strategic adjustments. He emphasized that the budget process spanned nearly a full year—from initial development in January to final adoption in September—making real-time responsiveness challenging. However, August offered an ideal time to assess actuals and make informed decisions about reallocating funds to areas demonstrating need or opportunity.

Mr. Bailey stated that if the five-year data was readily available, that would be helpful; otherwise, he was comfortable waiting until August to review it.

Commissioner Carl Zalak out at 10:09am

Ms. Wheeler responded with the readily available percentage of the personnel line item from the most recent amended budget which was 13.14%. Ms. Wheeler explained that some staff members who left the department were earning higher salaries than their replacements which contributed to the decreased percentage. Ms. Wheeler inquired as to whether there were additional questions from the council and stated that, if not, she had concluded her presentation and would like guidance from the council on how to proceed as it related to a motion to recommend to the Board of County Commissioners. She further inquired whether there were any adjustments the council would like to make to the budget.

Commissioner Carl Zalak in at 10:10am

A motion was made by Mr. Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Ms. Victoria Billig, to approve the fiscal year 2025-2026 proposed budget for recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).

Mr. Danny Gaekwad out at 10:10am

Staff Updates

Funding Program Updates

Ms. Shaffer provided a brief update on funding programs, advising that staff was still working with legal counsel to develop a resolution that would encompass all five of the funding programs previously discussed. The resolution would be subdivided in two sections

separating marketing related programs from sales related programs. This would allow for flexibility in the event of economic instability such as what was seen during Covid-19 to allow for the continuation of the most economically prosperous funding programs.

House Bill 1221 and House Bill 7033

Ms. Shaffer also provided the council an update on House Bill 1221 and House Bill 7033 which have rapidly advanced in Tallahassee. Those bills have posed a significant threat to the tourism industry. If passed, they would require public referendum every eight years in order to maintain funding and could allow tourist development taxes to be used to offset property taxes across the state.

Mr. Bailey asked for clarification on whose property taxes would be impacted.

Ms. Shaffer advised the intent would be to offset the property taxes of residents within the state of Florida by eliminating funding for some of the marketing and promotion done by the department. She advised if the bills passed, they would dissolve all tourist bureaus across the state of Florida.

Mr. Gaekwad in at 10:13am

Ms. Shaffer noted that larger bureaus such as those in Orlando, Tampa and Miami were seen as appealing targets for offsetting property taxes due to their large funds. She emphasized that this would disproportionately impact smaller bureaus operating transparently and equitably. She expressed concern over the speed at which the bills were advancing and referenced having positive support during Tourism Day in Tallahassee.

Mr. Adams added that in his research of the topic, the bills not only propose a reduction in property tax but also a reduction in sales taxes, noting that a referendum would be difficult.

Mr. Gaekwad requested that Ms. Shaffer explain the potential impact of the bills being passed.

Ms. Shaffer responded by drawing a comparison to Colorado where the state removed tourism funding resulting in loss of revenue across the state. She noted there could be ripple effects as a result of the bills passing. The tourism industry directly impacts hotels and accommodators as well as indirectly impacts spending in the community and induced sectors, such as, contractors and builders. She stated that even though tourism was Florida's number one industry, political nuances may result in the industry being used as a bargaining chip.

Mr. Bailey noted that Marion County fortunately allocated tourism dollars strictly for tourism, while other markets treated the funds as slush funds.

Mr. Gaekwad cited Asheville as an example of where tourism dollars were redirected to support homeless individuals, rather than hotels and promotional activities. He applauded Marion County leadership for being fiscally responsible and tourism focused.

Commissioner Zalak recounted discussions at the Florida Associations of Counties where Mayor Deming's of Orlando expressed an interest from his tourism board to build workforce or vagrant housing. He noted that should tourism funds be opened up for general fund use, it could lead to significant issues statewide. He emphasized that pressure from the Speaker of the House was driving this legislation. Commissioner Zalak further noted that based on previous data, Marion County taxpayers saved approximately \$438 annually whereas if funds were re-directed, they would save approximately \$33.

Mr. Bailey shared his experience on similar boards across the country and noted that they had used a portion of tourism funds to contribute to firefighter pensions. He noted that tourism was one of the few industries that provided a return on its activities without being a burden on the general fund.

Ms. Shaffer added that Florida's lack of a state income tax was sustained by tourism revenue.

Mr. Gaekwad shared the history of Florida's tourism funding, recounting how a former governor increased the state's tourism budget from \$15 million to \$100 million following a study which showed a \$4.34 return on every \$1 invested in tourism initiatives. This increase in funding allowed for an increase from 75 million tourists yearly to 100 million tourists with last year having an increase of nearly 140 million tourists.

Commissioner Zalak added that many coastal counties were lobbying to use TDC funds for first responders, lifeguards, and other non-tourism purposes due to general fund shortages. He emphasized the risk of opening the door to general fund expenditures.

Mr. Gaekwad agreed stating that Florida had become the world's top tourist destination and that dismantling its infrastructure would be a significant error. He emphasized the importance of industry education through activities such as the annual meeting and quarterly meetings. He urged collective industry advocacy to educate legislators, many of whom may be unaware of the consequences.

Mr. Bailey inquired about the stance of FRLA.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed that FRLA was in opposition to the bills but acknowledged the political complexity of challenging legislation supported by house and senate representatives. She advised that local support has been attained however there are nuances at higher levels which may be difficult to navigate.

Mr. Gaekwad advised there were no nuances at a higher level and that it was ultimately the speaker of the house and a few other representatives impacting the decision. He noted that political super majorities have led to chaotic situations. He urged local County and City officials to advocate for the preservation of tourism funding.

Commissioner Zalak confirmed that advocacy and outreach efforts were underway.

Councilmember Mansfield shared that his office was in opposition of the bills, characterizing the proposed changes as a form of extortion designed to remove power at the local level. Councilmember Mansfield reiterated that this was a consistent point of frustration for local officials, as they were told how to manage local funds, priorities, and policies.

Mr. Gaekwad emphasized that the root of the issue lies in the presence of a supermajority in the state legislature.

Commissioner Zalak compared the situation to recent legislative interference in Key West cruise operations, where broad, aggressive policy changes were enacted to address isolated issues, likening it to using a sledgehammer instead of a sniper rifle.

Mr. Bailey redirected the conversation to a practical, community-level impact. He explained that while individual sports teams can book hotel rooms independently, tournaments required coordination. Without support structures like Corry's role in coordinating facilities and accommodations, hosting tournaments becomes significantly more difficult—particularly for smaller hotels that lack the capacity or visibility to manage group logistics on their own. He noted that eliminating these support functions would present major barriers for the local sports tourism economy.

Commissioner Zalak stated that while calls from elected officials were important, advocacy from the private sector was equally, if not more, impactful. He encouraged those present—including members of the gallery—to reach out directly to their legislative representatives. He noted that receiving calls and texts from both public and private stakeholders influenced legislative outcomes.

Mr. Fernandez posed a question regarding advocacy efforts, noting that while he intended to call, that his call may carry little influence and asked for guidance on how to make an effective call. He also inquired who calls should be directed to and requested the numbers for those individuals.

Mr. Adams requested that a sample script be prepared to support advocacy efforts.

Ms. Shaffer referred the council to an email she previously sent that included recommended language for advocacy efforts.

Mr. Gaekwad advised calling both the State Representatives and the State Senators.

Mr. Adams encouraged outreach through affiliated associations as well noting the impact of receiving multiple calls from a unified group.

Commissioner Zalak emphasized that input from constituents can influence a legislator's final decision, even if leadership directed a vote in a certain direction. He stated that the

goal was to insert doubt or pause into the decision-making process, giving legislators a reason to reconsider. He added that input aids in the decision-making process.

Mr. Jeff Bailey out 10:31am

Mr. Fernandez pointed out that the way the bill was written would create a state mandate for every TDC to pivot rather than making it optional.

Commissioner Zalak explained that the governor proposed taking \$500 million in order to give Florida residents \$1000 in a property tax rebate however the Florida House proposed alternative funding mechanisms. There was another \$100,000 homestead but such measures would exclude renters and others from receiving the benefits. He noted that those opposed to the tourism industry may have initiated the dissolution of funds.

Mr. Jeff Bailey in 10:33am

Mr. Gaekwad noted attempts were made to cut tourism funding for the past 15 to 20 years.

Mr. Adams asked whether any other states have conducted similar actions

Commissioner Zalak and Ms. Wheeler cited Colorado as an example. Ms. Wheeler explained that Colorado defunded tourism at the state level by terminating authorized funding mechanisms. She noted that this became a national case study in the advocacy of tourism.

Commissioner Zalak requested a summary report or case study on Colorado's tourism defunding to share with those involved in passing the proposed bills.

Ms. Wheeler confirmed that such a report existed and would be circulated to the Council.

Commissioner Zalak reiterated that not all state representatives fully understand the role of tourism, especially since many of them were serving on committees for the first time. He explained that new legislators may not be familiar with the scope of tourism's impact on local economies, particularly since marketing efforts were typically directed outward.

Mr. Adams requested that all local legislators be invited to the next annual meeting.

Commissioner Zalak recalled that Representative Chamberlin attended in the past, but Representative Gentry had not.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that Representative Chamberlin had extensive experience in lobbying and was well respected in the legislature.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed that she was tracking all the items tasked. She thanked the council for allowing her to bring forth this discussion and invited Ms. Jessica Heller to present.

Quarterly Public Relations and Analytics Report – January – March Data

Ms. Jessica Heller, Marketing and Communications Supervisor directed those following the meeting online to the Public Relations and Analytics report which began on page 64 of the

meeting packet and covers the time period of January through March. She noted improvements in report timing and relevance. Ms. Heller reported that a high volume of press releases was distributed during the quarter. Some were routed through Visit Florida which shared them with industry contacts while others were sent directly from the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau through its own channels.

Ms. Heller explained that Visit Florida circulates editorial lead opportunities to the industry however, the VCB only responds to relevant leads based on the topic of the editorial. She advised that the leads that were responded to were typically included in their press releases and offered useful information for the VCB to use and re-publish. The VCB also collaborated with the PR team or used the Meltwater system to distribute press releases that targeted PR professionals across the country, primarily in the Southeast, Eastern and Northeastern regions.

Ms. Heller explained that Meltwater was also used to track earned media value and exposure. There was a significant spike in mentions of Ocala/Marion County VCB, largely due to Huddle and Encounter coverage. Geographically, the United States remained the primary source of mentions, with notable regional activity in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Texas, California, New York, and Pennsylvania. Globally, coverage came from Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. A substantial portion of international data was categorized under "unknown region" due to user privacy settings.

Regarding familiarization tours, Ms. Heller noted the VCB hosted a large familiarization tour of 19 media representative during Florida Huddle and Encounter. There were a number of published articles that resulted from that familiarization tour and the geographical breakdown was presented. The VCB also hosted a German press trip and two Canadian press trips in that quarter. The German press trip was a luxury style, mainly online publication.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad out 10:41am

An editor and photographer couple visited and would be publishing up to 10 articles from their visit, while some would be focusing on Florida as a whole, others would be more specific to activities they participated in including one that had already been published covering their experience at the canyons. Ms. Heller highlighted that their online publication has a monthly reach of almost 400,000 and their website has 394,000 unique monthly visitors. In addition, David Cox from Canada World Travel was hosted by the VCB and published both a print and digital article. The printed publications reached 150,000 unique monthly visitors and their digital publications have reached 275,000 unique monthly visitors. Earned media value totaled \$9,000 for print and \$16,500 for digital.

Ms. Heller then presented the media coverage generated from hosting Florida Huddle and Encounter in Marion County for the first time. She advised some of the media published up to two articles a day during the event and in the weeks following. The total reach for the

quarter was 70 million and the earned media value was \$658,271.98. For social media which began on page 90 of the meeting packet the number of impressions for the quarter was over 9.1 million across the social media channels, over 144 thousand engagements and over 62 thousand post link clicks. The top performing Instagram post was a video of Juniper Springs which had 747 total engagements and 456 likes. The top performing post for Facebook was a link to the website regarding events occurring at the time which had a total of 26,000 engagements, 414 reactions and 22,000 post link clicks.

Ms. Heller then moved to the app section of the presentation which began on page 117 of the packet. Global downloads for the quarter totaled 573 and the number of page views was 2838. The number of downloads for the lifetime of the app was 5642.

Ms. Heller introduced a new recurring section: the Marion Insider's Guide. This video-based platform launched in June 2024, features both short- and long-form content, and was designed to enhance the destination's digital storytelling. The series includes reels, blog content, and long-form videos, all hosted by Commissioner Zalak. The data provided for Marion Insider's Guide represented the data from October 1st to March 31st, 2025. The social media performance numbers were based on any posts on social media that were done related to Marion Insider's Guide. Impressions totaled over 287,000, over 16,000 engagement and over 6000 post link clicks. On YouTube there were 483,633 views and 25,800 watch time hours.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad in 10:48am

Ms. Heller noted that the Marion Insider's Guide episodes were only 5 minutes long.

Mr. Gaekwad added that current attention spans average less than three minutes.

Commissioner Zalak commended the team for creating an effective media plan which strategically produced reels of 30 seconds to one minute to promote the videos. He also praised their efforts in applying advertisement funding to the YouTube videos for accelerated engagement.

Ms. Heller noted that the Marion Insider's Guide series was embedded on the VCB website and has its own dedicated page featuring callout cards for each episode. She reported 10,904 total page views to this section, which she confirmed was an excellent performance metric.

Mr. Gaekwad asked whether that number represented unique visitors, and Ms. Heller responded that she would confirm and follow up.

Ms. Heller then directed attention to the website performance section on page 120 of the packet. For the quarter there were 278,000 active visitors, 190,000 of those arrived via organic search. A large dip shown on one graph was clarified as a result of April data being excluded from the quarterly reporting window.

Mr. Gaekwad praised Ms. Heller's reporting and reassured her the anomaly was not concerning.

Ms. Heller continued her presentation with noting the total number of page views as 846,000. First time visits totaled 274,000 and user engagement was over 348,000. There were a number of new blogs posted to the website to include coffee shops, unique date nights, Silver Springs Insider's Guide, St. Patrick's Day, and Easter. Refreshed content included Valentine's Day events and glass-bottom boat ride updates to maintain SEO relevance.

Mr. Gaekwad asked if the team could create a "Top Ten" list blog post, noting the popularity of such content.

Ms. Heller confirmed that listicles were already being posted on the website including blogs for, Top 10 Instagram Spots, Top 40 Things to Do and Top Fishing Spots. She explained these formats performed well and were favored by search engine algorithms and AI. The top visited pages were the general events page, the homepage, the outdoor activities page, equestrian activities page and food and drink directory. As for partner pages there were a total of 148,345 visits to partner directory pages and there was a total of 50,251 clicks to partner websites.

Ms. Heller also summarized data on visitation and performance by month. There was a total of 230 newsletter sign ups and 1966 visitor guide requests for the quarter. For the monthly newsletter, there were a total of 8,666 opens of those emails.

Staff Updates

Rock the Country

Ms. Shaffer advised that Mr. Locke was attempting to finalize obtaining tickets for the Rock the Country event.

Mr. Gaekwad inquired as to how much funding was being provided to Rock the Country and what the County would receive in return.

Ms. Shaffer responded that the funding amount was \$50,000.

Commissioner Zalak advised that the County would receive 3000 hotel room nights in return for the funding.

Mr. Gaekwad asked whether tickets would be provided.

Mr. Locke advised there were 50 general admission plus tickets as well as 50 Marion County tent tickets being offered by Rock the Country.

Ms. Shaffer advised some tickets would be used for marketing, some would be given to the Tourist Development Council members and some would be given to County Commissioners and Administration.

Commissioner Zalak advised that the event organizers did not expect to have as high of an attendance rate as the first year the event occurred in Marion County as there were different artists performing but anticipated the show to still perform well.

Mr. Gaekwad noted the department could consider funding another concert in the next year.

Ms. Shaffer noted that this event was the only one taking place in Florida. She stated that Rock the Country was hosted by in other states but not in other destinations in Florida making this a significant achievement for Ocala. Ms. Shaffer then invited Mr. Locke to provide a sales update.

Sales Update

Mr. Locke began his presentation by providing an update on recent leads. The Florida Wine and Grape Growers Association Annual Conference was considering Marion County as a host for their two-day event, typically held in January. The conference was previously hosted in DeLand and was seeking a new location. While it is a smaller event, it offered a strong agritourism opportunity.

Commissioner Carl Zalak out 11:00am

Mr. Locke then moved to the Florida Society Children of the American Revolution which was planning a state conference for February 13–14, 2026. The event was projected to generate approximately 80 room nights. A major potential event was the Big East Swimming and Diving Conference Championships, which may come to FAST in 2026 or 2027. Mr. Locke noted that discussions with the conference have been ongoing for a few years. While no agreement has been finalized, they were leaning toward selecting FAST.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that February was the busiest month.

Mr. Bailey asked which school would serve as the anchor institution for the event.

Mr. Locke responded that the conference would organize the event directly, and a host school had not yet been confirmed. He cited Auburn as an example of a past host for a separate collegiate event but emphasized that further details were pending. He then provided an updated on the lead for the USA Gymnastics Men's State Championships which was looking to relocate from Gainesville to Ocala in February 27 – March 1, 2026, which would generate approximately 330 room nights. Mr. Locke noted he attempted to negotiate the timing, but the event was bound by USA Gymnastics' national calendar, allowing little flexibility. The Florida Sports Foundation Sports Summit had also been pursued for several years and was now being pursued for June of 2026. The summit includes members from across the state—32 total sports commissions—and offers exposure to 20 sports event planners, generating a projected 210 room nights. Mr. Locke reported no changes to ongoing leads but highlighted one notable loss being the FSAE Annual Conference. He had pursued this event for some time, and they considered Ocala for 2026 but ultimately chose Orlando. The event represented about 400 room nights and would have taken place in July,

which Mr. Locke noted would have been ideal for Ocala's summer calendar. He added that Ocala east now being considered for 2028, as 2027 was already booked. Mr. Corry Locke also noted a positive trend for the upcoming summer. Based on the Tourist Development Council's calendar of events, eight events were scheduled over seven weeks, between June 26 and August 8. He attributed this success to the combined efforts of FAST, baseball, and softball event programming, noting that this kind of activity in the shoulder season was rare when he began in his role.

Mr. Bailey remarked that while the broader economy may be unstable, the strong summer event calendar would likely surprise and benefit hotel operators.

Commissioner Carl Zalak in 11:04am

Mr. Gaekwad agreed, noting that Q1 of 2025 was relatively soft across Florida, but Q2 bookings were unusually strong, which was a reversal of typical trends.

Mr. Bailey added that there was an increase in the diversity of events—ranging from darts and fishing to gymnastics and rodeo.

Mr. Gaekwad asked for clarification on the FSAE conference loss.

Mr. Locke reiterated that while the event was not huge by room night standards, its July timing made it particularly desirable. He confirmed that FSAE expressed interest in Ocala for 2028, even though they chose Orlando for 2026 and that the reason for choosing Orlando was not disclosed. He also noted the event would attract state association executives, each of whom managed their own conferences. He reiterated that staff would continue to pursue the 2028 opportunity.

TDT Collections/ STR and Key Data Update

Ms. Wheeler presented the TDT Collections/ STR and Key Data Update. She noted that the secondary report typically provided by the Tax Collector's Office was unavailable this month due to changes in their internal software and reporting systems. Ms. Tammy McCann, who oversees the VCB account at the Tax Collector's Office, indicated that the secondary report—which includes late taxes, penalties, and interest—would resume next month. Despite the missing report, all necessary primary data was provided, and for the March reporting period, reflecting February revenues, collections totaled \$649,169.37, representing an increase of \$20,459.10, or 3.25% year-over-year. Ms. Wheeler stated that figures including penalties, late taxes and interest were unavailable and would be presented at the next meeting. She also announced that Mr. Albright and Ms. McCann would attend a future meeting in early summer to provide an update on the new reporting system. Moving on to STR data, Ms. Wheeler shared that updated reports were provided in hard copy due to a delay in March STR data availability at the time of packet publication, which was impacted by the Good Friday holiday. For the month of March in Marion County, occupancy was at 70.8%, up 8.8% year over year, average daily rate was \$151.73, up 2.7% from last year and RevPAR was \$107.46, up 11.7% from last year. For the running 12-month period,

occupancy was up 3.9%, ADR was up 5.6% and RevPAR was up 9.7%. Statewide data from Visit Florida showed that occupancy statewide was 77.4%, down 1.1%, the average daily rate was \$239.58 which was up 0.6% from last year and RevPAR for the state of Florida was \$185.48 which was down slightly at 0.6% from last year. Ms. Wheeler then presented key data pertaining to short term rentals indicating occupancy was 63.2%, down 9% from last year, average daily rate was \$206 which was a \$12 decrease from last year, RevPAR was \$110 which was a \$26 decrease from last year and nights available was 5855 which was a 2% increase from last year. For the running 12 months, as it relates to short term rentals, occupancy decreased by 4.2%, average daily rate decreased by 5.8% and nights available increased by 13.3%.

Mr. Gaekwad noted that the short-term rental figures were negatively impacting traditional hotel models.

Ms. Shaffer advised that Mr. Albright would join the TDC meeting in June to discuss the compliance tool implemented which she believed would assist in offsetting potential issues with short term rentals.

Ms. Wheeler provided clarification for the record regarding the budget documents previously discussed. She explained that the column labelled fiscal year 2025 which stated 'adopted' reflected what the budget projection was. She further explained that budget projections were developed using a variety of factors such as historical data and trend data. She reiterated the information for transparency, in case future readers of the minutes referred to those documents. Ms. Wheeler inquired as to whether there were any questions on Tourist Development Tax Collection, STR or anything else.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that the Council should preserve surplus funds during high-revenue periods and invest in increased marketing during downturns, referencing a similar strategy supported by Governor Rick Scott during a past economic recession.

Ms. Shaffer confirmed the completion of the staff update.

TDC Events Calendar

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

Old Business

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

New Business

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

Notation for Record

Mr. Rus Adams reiterated that everyone should reach out to their state senators regarding the proposed legislative changes affecting tourism funding. He encouraged all members to

forward the information to their employees, urging them to call and voice their concerns. He also advised members to contact any associations, clubs, or organizations they belong to, noting the issue would impact everyone in some way. Mr. Adams stated he would request the information be distributed to approximately 650 employees.

Public Comment

Upcoming Meeting

Mr. Rus Adams called for any public comment and none was brought forth.

Mr. Adams stated that the next TDC meeting will be on Wednesday, May 21 at 9am.

The meeting adjourned at 11:13a.m.

Rus Adams, Chairman