

**Tourist Development Council Regular Meeting**

Ocala/Marion County Visitor & Convention Bureau

109 W Silver Springs Blvd.

Ocala, FL 34475

Thursday, February 27, 2025

9:00 a.m.

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

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

**Roll Call**

Present:

Rus Adams, Victoria Billig, Danny Gaekwad, Commissioner Ron Livsey, Councilmember Barry Mansfield, Jason Reynolds, Commissioner Carl Zalak and Jeff Bailey

Staff:

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

Guests:

Dana Olesky, Chief Assistant County Attorney; Richard Busche, Principle Engineer, Senior Vice President – Kimley Horn; Kevin Milak, Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training (FAST), Isiah Lewis, Downs & St. Germain Research; Michael Osbourne, ARK Hospitality; Derrick Kimbaugh, Marion County Parks & Recreation Dept.; Eric Boyle, Marion County Parks & Recreation Dept.; Mary Hutchcraft, Hilton Ocala; Chis Hoover, Major League Fishing; Breanna Dacks, Visit Florida; Lea Brayton, World Equestrian Center; Rodney Guitierrez, World Equestrian Center; Sarah Thacker, World Equestrian Center; Maven Photo + Film

### **Notice of Publication**

Notice was published on the County Website on December 27, 2024 and subsequently updated to include Teams information on February 20, 2025.

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

**A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Councilmember Barry Mansfield, to adopt the minutes from the November 21, 2024 Tourist Development Council Meeting as presented. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (7-0).**

Commissioner Carl Zalak in at 9:03am

### ***Acknowledgement of Financials – January 2025***

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

Mr. Bailey advised the council would review and discuss Funding Requests prior to discussing new Program Guidelines.

### ***Funding Requests***

#### **Fiscal Year 2025 Event Funding Allocations**

Mr. Cory Locke, Group Sales Supervisor, discussed Fiscal Year 2025 Event Funding Allocations. He explained that the last four (4) items on the spreadsheet were current proposed Bid Fee requests. If those items were approved, the available funding amount would be reduced to \$75,000 for the remainder of the year.

Mr. Rus Adams requested the line entitled “Available to Fund Bid Fee Events” be updated to explain that if the current funding requests were approved, the amount noted would be the remaining balance to fund future events through the end of the fiscal year, September 2025.

#### ***USA Swimming Speedo Sectionals – June 2025 (date change)***

Mr. Locke then discussed a date change request for a previously approved event entitled the USA Swimming Speedo Sectionals. Mr. Locke advised this event was approved in 2024 for event dates of May 22-25, 2025 with a request of \$25,000. The event organizer has since moved the date to June 26-29, 2025 but all other details remained the same.

**A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Victoria Billig, to approve the recommendation to move the event date for the USA Swimming Speedo Sectionals**

**from May 2025 to June 26-29, 2025 to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

***USA Swimming Futures Meet - \$25,000 (Bid Fee)***

Mr. Locke then addressed a Bid Fee funding request in the amount of \$25,000 for the USA Swimming Futures Meet Championships to be held at the World Equestrian Center from July 23-26, 2025. He advised the economic impact would exceed \$2.1 million with an ROI of 121% based on the \$25,000 Bid Fee.

Mr. Gaekwad requested to know the number of anticipated room nights the event would generate.

Mr. Locke advised the estimated room nights were noted as 2,500. He further advised this was a huge event for USA Swimming as it would be a competitive meet. Mr. Locke indicated the event would host approximately nine-hundred aspiring Olympians, coaches and spectators and provide them an opportunity to experience Ocala/Marion County.

Mr. Kevin Milak, General Manager of Florida Aquatic, Swimming and Training advised there would be approximately 800-1000 athletes in attendance for 30 of 42 days between the last week of June and the first week of August.

Mr. Bailey clarified the funding allocations discussed earlier. He reiterated that \$500,000 was approved and budgeted for the year, the funding requests the council would vote on during this meeting would total \$155,000 which, in turn, meant the council had approved approximately \$275,000 in funding within the first four (4) months of the year. Mr. Bailey then advised, if the current funding was approved, it would leave \$75,000 in available funds for the remaining seven (7) months of the year.

Ms. Loretta Shaffer, Tourism Development Director, clarified the aforementioned and stated the Tourism Development's fiscal year budget started on October 1.

Commissioner Carl Zalak posed a question to Mr. Bailey and requested to know if the council was comfortable spending funds in the beginning of the year for upcoming events. He further requested to know if events booked their dates in advance and then requested to know if the staff wanted to have the funds expended ahead of the actual event date.

Mr. Bailey advised there had been previous discussion regarding the accounting of Bid Fees. He then reiterated that if an event was approved as a Bid Fee but was scheduled to occur two (2) years from now, the money would be encumbered in this year's budget.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the council should consider being more critical of the ROI (return on investment) when the Bid Fee request was in the range of \$50,000 or more and if they should be more cognizant of seasonality.

Mr. Bailey advised the Tourist Development Council may have voted differently, as it related to funding approvals, if they were presented with the Funding Allocation

spreadsheet during the October 2024 meeting.

Ms. Shaffer advised once the new funding guidelines were presented, some of the questions the council had may no longer be an issue. She further advised after the guidelines were reviewed by the council, they would be presented to the Board of County Commissioners for approval. Ms. Shaffer stated if an extraordinary funding opportunity presented itself, the Visitors and Convention Bureau had funds in reserve which could fund the event.

Mr. Gaekwad advised the new funding guideline requiring an event organizer to apply for funding 120 days prior to the event date was the best addition to the program.

Ms. Shaffer stated the Visitor and Convention Bureau staff had never exceeded the budgeted funding allotment. She further advised that numerous funding opportunities were presented to Marion County so it was imperative that parameters were set so the council could be strategic moving forward.

**A motion was made by Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to approve the recommendation for the requested Bid Fee funding amount of \$25,000 for the USA Swimming Futures Meet to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

Commissioner Zalak advised the opportunities that Ocala/Marion County has had to host potential Olympians at the Florida Aquatics Swimming & Training Center (FAST) or World Equestrian Center (WEC) should not be overlooked. He further stated that Marion County should highlight these athletes as they journey to the Olympics and showcase their training at FAST or WEC. This would showcase Ocala's "hometown" feel and the elaborate training facilities available to athletes.

Mr. Locke advised that FAST created a press-release last year which showcased all of the Olympians who have trained at that facility over the past two-years.

***Cal Ripken Rookie World Series - \$5,000 (Bid Fee)***

Mr. Locke then discussed a funding request for the Cal Ripken 8U Rookie World Series to be held at the Rotary Sportsplex from August 1-9, 2025. He advised 2025 would be the 5<sup>th</sup> year Marion County had hosted the World Series. The event organizer requested a Bid Fee in the amount of \$5,000 with an estimated economic impact of \$898,265 and total ROI of 334%. Mr. Locke stated the anticipated room night total was 800 rooms with an anticipated total attendance of 300 people. He further advised that a number of International teams had committed to attend the World Series, such as, Colombia and Bonaire (by Aruba).

**A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Jason Reynolds, to approve the recommendation for the requested Bid Fee funding amount of \$5,000 for Cal Ripken Rookie World Series to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

***Babe Ruth 16-18 World Series - \$50,000 (Bid Fee)***

Mr. Locke then advised of a Bid Fee funding request presented by Babe Ruth 16-18 World Series in the amount of \$50,000. This event would be held at the Rotary Sportsplex from August 1-9, 2025. Mr. Locke further advised this would be the first-year the Babe Ruth World Series was held in Marion County. He also noted the Bid Fee amount was higher than that of the Cal Ripken World Series but that twice as many teams would be participating. Mr. Locke stated the estimated economic impact for this event would total \$1,814,844 with an ROI of -14%. The estimated room night total was noted as 1,400 rooms and 500 people were expected to attend. Mr. Locke advised the event organizer guaranteed 16 teams to attend, thus far, and they would be traveling from Canada, China, Australia, Mexico, United Kingdom, Philippines and Nigeria. This event would bring an elite level of baseball to Marion County.

Mr. Bailey advised a Bid Fee should not solely be based on anticipated room nights but the marketing aspect of the event should also be considered.

Mr. Locke interjected and advised that all of the games would be live-streamed.

Mr. Bailey advised these teams were flying in from other countries and if a team were eliminated from the series, the participants would not travel home immediately. The players and their families would stay in Marion County for the duration of their trip due to pre-scheduled flights.

Mr. Locke advised the Babe Ruth game model involved three-days of pool play and then two-days of elimination. This would create the need for each team to be in Marion County for at least four-days. The series would also host championship games and an Awards Ceremony on the final day of the event.

Commissioner Zalak directed a question to the hoteliers on the council and requested to know if the potential of securing room nights in August would outweigh the negative ROI.

Mr. Bailey responded and advised securing room nights in August was important for hoteliers.

Mr. Rus Adams advised this was the first time the council was presented with a negative ROI in a long time and requested clarification as to what it represented.

Mr. Locked explained the negative ROI was based on information obtained from the Economic Impact Report which compiled all local taxes, including any new approved taxes. To calculate the ROI, the program subtracted the investment (\$50,000 Bid Fee) from the profit (\$43,134 in taxes) which totaled -\$6,866 or -14% (\$6,866/\$50,000).

Mr. Adams then stated the -14% ROI was relatively minimal which indicated the county was reimbursed its investment via taxes.

Commissioner Zalak noted when the two events were reviewed together, since they would run concurrently, the ROI from Cal Ripken World Series of 334% would make a big

impact on the negative ROI of the Babe Ruth World Series.

Mr. Adams stated the combination of both events would zero out the negative ROI.

Mr. Locke stated the total investment for both events would be \$55,000 (\$5,000 for Cal Ripken World Series & \$50,000 for Babe Ruth World Series) and would generate over 2000 room nights.

Mr. Locke indicated the staff made the decision to treat each series as a stand-alone event to alleviate losing one of them to another destination. This decision enabled Marion County to secure both events.

**A motion was made by Jason Reynolds, seconded by Rus Adams, to approve the recommendation for the requested Bid Fee funding amount of \$50,000 for Babe Ruth 16-18 World Series to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

***MLF Heavy Hitters - \$75,000 (Bid Fee)***

Mr. Locke then discussed a request from Major League Fishing, LLC for MLF Heavy Hitters presented by Bass Pro Shops. Mr. Locke advised this event would showcase “The Best of The Best” anglers from all over the country. This event would take place at Heagy-Burry Boat Ramp in Orange Lake. The event dates were not secured but it would be either May 16-22, 2026 (preferred) or May 9-15, 2026 or May 2-8, 2026. The event organizers requested a Bid Fee of \$75,000 which would include extensive media coverage. Mr. Locke stated that everything connected to the event would be live-streamed on their website (Majorleaguefishing.com), including but not limited to, every cast and every fish caught. The event would also be showcased in a tape-delayed broadcast on Discovery Channel and the Outdoor Channel. The event planner guaranteed Marion County (the destination and fishery) would be mentioned at least five (5) times each during the broadcast. Mr. Locke advised this would be a six (6) day event, Saturday – Friday, with the top thirty (30) anglers competing. The broadcast would include 42-hours of coverage on Majorleaguefishing.com, Discovery Channel and the Outdoor Channel. He further advised the event was held at Lake Kissimmee Florida last year and the live-stream secured 842,000 total views which calculated to 25.1 average minutes watched per view or 21.1 million total minutes watched. The event also secured 9.7 million social media impressions and media value equivalency (based on articles produced) of \$1.2 million. Mr. Locke reiterated that the organization requested a \$75,000 Bid Fee and advised the total economic impact for the event would be \$564,610 with a ROI of -80%. The organization anticipated 560 room nights which included rooms for the anglers, officials, staff and camera crew.

Commissioner Zalak out at 9:28 am

Commissioner Zalak in at 9:28 am

Mr. Jason Reynolds requested someone clarify whether the \$1.2 million was strictly related to social media.

Mr. Locke advised the \$1.2 million included any/all media coverage. He further advised there were 133 million total impressions from last year's coverage. There were more than one-hundred articles written about the event in publications such as Sports Illustrated.

Mr. Danny Gaekwad requested to know who would profit from the event.

Mr. Bailey requested that question be directed to Chris Hoover with Major League Fishing who appeared via the online TEAMS meeting.

Mr. Hoover introduced himself and then advised the event was the organization's All-Star event. He further discussed the payouts awarded to the winning anglers.

Mr. Gaekwad re-iterated and provided clarification to his previous question. He requested to know more about the organization, whether a profit would be made from the event and if so, the gross revenue.

Mr. Hoover advised the organization would produce an original broadcast which would air during the third-quarter and re-air during the fourth-quarter on the Discovery Channel. It would also be re-broadcasted on the Outdoor Channel. He further advised the organization was an LLC (Limited Liability Company) and a for-profit company.

Mr. Gaekwad then requested to know who owned the company.

Mr. Hoover advised the parent-company was Outdoor Sportsman Group which also owned the Outdoor Channel and their parent-company was Kroenke Sports and Entertainment which owned the Los Angeles Rams and Denver Nuggets.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he was not comfortable approving a \$75,000 Bid Fee.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if there was a way to elevate the presence of Marion County during the event by showcasing the Marion County logo on boats or hats.

Mr. Hoover advised the destination would be mentioned at least five (5) times daily during the broadcast on livestream and the television broadcast. As they discuss the destination and highlight Orange Lake, there would be a map which showcased the host logo. Mr. Hoover stated during one-day of the livestream, there would also be a one-minute feature on the host community. He advised that Orange Lake was a world-class fishery, but it was not large enough to host major events. He stated this event would be a media buy for Marion County, as much as it would be a way to secure room nights. He stated Orange Lake was a fishery that was unknown by most anglers but this event would provide exposure for the location and showcase it as a world-class fishery which would provide future dividends to Marion County.

Mr. Locke advised that Marion County invested a significant amount of money to revitalize Orange Lake as it was voted the 8<sup>th</sup> best place to fish in the US.

Commissioner Zalak advised Orange Lake was a great fishery which would provide the anglers with an enjoyable experience.

Mr. Gaekwad reiterated that 15% of the budget was not producing room nights and the goal of the TDC was to secure room nights for the county not media coverage. He further advised the contract should be re-negotiated to provide more value for Marion County.

Sarah Thacker with World Equestrian Center affirmed.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he was in favor of the event occurring in Marion County but felt the terms needed to be re-negotiated to provide more exposure to the county.

Ms. Shaffer requested that Mr. Locke discuss the potential of placing the Marion County logo on the side of the boats since the county was considered a Platinum Sponsor.

Mr. Hoover advised the placement of logos on the boats was reserved for Corporate Sponsors who pay a significant amount of money, such as Toyota, Bass Pro Shops and Yeti. He further stated their organization would produce a six-day event with over 24-hours of Discovery Channel time that their organization would pay for. The Discovery Channel footage would showcase Ocala/Marion County and Orange Lake as a location for recreation and vacation. He advised he could pose the question to the organization but he was not confident they would agree because the amount of money Bass Pro Shop paid to brand the boats significantly exceeded the \$75,000 Bid Fee. He then reiterated the \$1.2 million in media value the county would benefit from when Orange Lake and Marion County were showcased.

Mr. Adams requested to know the amount of money Toyota or Bass Pro Shops invested to have their brand on the boats.

Mr. Hoover declined and advised that was confidential and proprietary information.

Mr. Bailey advised he was excited that Major League Fishing was interested in hosting their event in Marion County and then reiterated to the council that approval of this Bid Fee request would leave \$75,000 in the budget for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Mr. Gaekwad stated he had voiced, on several occasions, that other entities who would benefit from these events should also contribute to the Bid Fee. He further stated this was a great event for Marion County but the fact that it would not produce room nights made it difficult to justify the investment.

Mr. Bailey reiterated the council must consider the media value the event would bring to Marion County as that was also a goal of the Bid Fee.

Ms. Jessica Heller, Communications and Marketing Supervisor, advised she researched all of last year's data for this event via Meltwater, a system designed to track media value, and found hundreds of articles pertaining to the event. She then advised the \$1.2 million in media value only included published articles and Discovery.com coverage but did not include the additional value produced via social media coverage.

Ms. Victoria Billig then requested to know if the county's investment of \$75,000 would be enough money to purchase \$1.2 million in media coverage.



Ms. Heller advised it would not.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know how the ROI would be affected if the \$1.2 million in media coverage was included in the calculation.

Mr. Locke advised the ROI calculated by the county only considered taxes (profit) vs Bid Fee (investment).

Commissioner Zalak indicated he understood but that he wanted to know how the value of the event would change if \$1.2 million in media value was considered.

Mr. Gaekwad requested to know what the event organizer could include with their Bid Fee request to increase the value of hosting the event in Marion County.

Commissioner Zalak then requested to know how likely it would be for Marion County to receive an opportunity to host an event such as MLF Heavy Hitters in future years.

Mr. Locke advised that approximately twelve different National Touring Fishing Companies existed and they all worked via the bid process. There were instances when a tour would return to an area, if the fishing and market was favorable.

Commissioner Zalak then requested to know how likely it was for this event to return to Marion County within the next five (5) years.

Mr. Locke advised highly likely.

Commissioner Zalak then requested to know what other locations hosted the event.

Mr. Hoover advised Major League Fishing, LLC had other events which were too large to host at Orange Lake but they had taken MLF Heavy Hitters to Monroe, Louisiana and Smith Mountain, Virginia as well as Kissimmee, Florida. He then advised the Heavy Hitters event created over nine-million social media impressions, in addition to, the \$1.2 million in media value.

Mr. Locke circled back to Commissioner Zalak's question regarding whether there would be a change in the negative ROI when \$1.2 million in media value was included. He then advised if the county invested \$75,000 and received \$1.2 million in media value, it would increase the ROI to 1500%.

Danny Gaekwad out at 9:50am

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Ms. Sky Wheeler, Tourist Development Manager, advised she did not include the traditional ROI calculation, she only included media value.

Danny Gaekwad out at 9:51am

Danny Gaekwad in at 9:51 am

Mr. Locke advised that the cost of showcasing Marion County on The Discovery Channel

would be significantly more than the \$75,000 Bid Fee requested. He also advised the exposure that Marion County would receive on the Discovery Channel could encourage anglers and possibly their families to travel to Marion County to experience Orange Lake.

Mr. Reynolds advised the council must consider the potential long-term benefit Marion County could gain by tapping into the fishing industry. He further stated he was not in favor of the ROI unless the media value was included but he believed this would be a huge opportunity for Marion County to bring something different and unique to the area.

Mr. Adams reiterated that the county may not receive another opportunity to host the event for another five or seven years, unless the event organizers really love the area. He further advised the only way to know whether the event organizers love the experience of Marion County would be to host the event and make the investment. Mr. Adams then added that room nights for this event would generate more than \$75,000 in revenue for the county so the council should not be discouraged by the amount of taxes received but focus on the overall benefit to the county.

Mr. Gaekwad then advised he would like to proceed with an approval but still wanted the event organizers to offer something that would increase the value of hosting the event to Marion County.

Commissioner Zalak agreed.

Mr. Locke advised he was in negotiations with the event organizers regarding 2026 and they could discuss including something in the contract to make sure Marion County was highlighted more.

Mr. Adams requested to know if any media coverage would occur prior to the event or whether the \$1.2 million in media value only considered of media exposure during the event.

Mr. Hoover advised their website would include a daily news release which would start approximately two-weeks prior to the event. He then acknowledged the request to add additional opportunities for Marion County to be showcased. Mr. Hoover subsequently offered 100,000 banner ad impressions starting a month and a half prior to the event to provide more brand exposure for Marion County. He advised Orange Lake was a world-class fishery that was unknown to the angler community and the media exposure from the Heavy Hitters event would spotlight Marion County as a "must-see" experience and a recommended detour when these anglers travel to larger, well-known fisheries. Mr. Hoover stated, once an angler had the opportunity to experience Orange Lake they would definitely return.

Mr. Gaekwad requested an explanation of what banner ads were.

Ms. Heller explained that banner ads were either animated or static advertisements which showed up vertically or horizontally on webpages.

Mr. Gaekwad then requested clarification on the timeframe in which the banner ads would be displayed and advertisement would occur before the event.

Mr. Hoover advised the banner ads could be displayed approximately 2-3 weeks prior to the event and continue 2-3 weeks after the event. He stated the links would be clickable and showcase "Visit Ocala or Visit Marion County". The link would then lead the viewer to the OcalaMarion.com website.

Mr. Gaekwad out at 9:57am

Mr. Gaekwad in at 9:58 am

Ms. Shaffer requested to know if the event organizers could double the number of times Ocala/Marion County was mentioned from 5 to 10 or allow the logo to be placed on the hats of the fisherman and/or cameramen.

Mr. Hoover advised that Ocala/Marion County would most likely be mentioned more often than five (5) times. The number provided was a minimum guarantee. He advised what was allowed on the hats was exclusive to their Corporate Sponsors.

Mr. Reynolds stated he believed the potential was worth the risk and he was ready to extend a motion to approve.

**A motion was made by Jason Reynolds, seconded by Rus Adams, to approve the recommendation for the requested Bid Fee funding amount of \$75,000 for MLF Heavy Hitters, including 100,000 website banner ad impressions to provide additional brand exposure for Marion County, to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (8-0).**

Victoria Billig out at 10:01 am

Barry Mansfield out at 10:01 am

Commissioner Zalak then directed Mr. Locke to include a statement advising that the TDC requested the ROI be re-calculated to include media value when the recommendation was presented to the Board of County Commissioners.

Mr. Locke agreed.

Commissioner Zalak out at 10:02 am

Rus Adams out at 10:03 am

### ***Report from Chair***

#### ***Meeting Rewards Program Guidelines***

Mr. Corry Locke then discussed the Meeting Rewards Program Guidelines, a new program which derived from a pre-COVID program. This program would offer up to \$2,500 for smaller events which may not generate significant reach but would benefit from funding assistance. To qualify for funding through the Meeting Rewards Program,

the event planner must submit a hotel RFP through the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau, the meeting must be held in Marion County and a minimum of fifty (50) room nights must be anticipated. A funding scale was provided which specified the amount of funding available based on the room nights secured. The scale also included specific funding amounts available for repeat events which was noted as less than that offered to new events. Mr. Locke further advised this program would only be offered during the April-December.

Rus Adams in at 10:04 am

Commissioner Ron Livsey requested to know if any events that would qualify for this program had already been in existence for three consecutive years. *(this question was posed based on the definition of a new meeting which was provided on the handout and stated: "To qualify as a new meeting, the specific meeting must not have been held in Ocala/Marion County over the previous three consecutive years.")*

Mr. Locke advised he was not aware of any events/meetings that would be excluded from funding based on that guideline.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if an event/meeting would qualify for funding if it had been held in Marion County for the past three years, consecutively, but the VCB staff was unaware of it.

Mr. Locke advised an event would not be defined as "new" just because they submitted their first funding application but had hosted the event in Marion County for the past three years. If the event was hosted in Marion County the year prior, it would then be defined as a "repeat event".

Commissioner Livsey requested to know if the program needed to include dates specifying the calendar year of eligibility.

Mr. Locke advised eligibility would be based on funds available. The staff would budget \$30,000 per fiscal year for this program. All programs would be re-evaluated annually.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Ron Livsey, seconded by Commissioner Carl Zalak, to approve the recommendation for the Meeting Rewards Program Guidelines to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

#### ***Room Night Generating Event Funding Program Guidelines***

Mr. Locke discussed the Room Night Generating Event Funding Program Guidelines and advised the feedback that was provided in the workshop was included in the revised guidelines. One of the main decisions made at the previous meeting was to break the funding up based on specific times of year. The following was determined:

Quarter 1 (Q1): January – March *\$5.00 rebate per verified room night with a maximum funding amount of \$10,000*

Quarter 2 (Q2): April - June *\$10.00 rebate per verified room night with a maximum funding amount of \$25,000*

Quarter 3 (Q3): July – September *\$15.00 rebate per verified room night with a maximum funding amount of \$25,000*

Quarter 4 (Q4) October – December *\$10.00 rebate per verified room night with a maximum funding amount of \$25,000*

Mr. Locke further advised to be eligible to apply for funding, an event must anticipate producing a minimum of 250 room nights and submit their funding application at least 120 days prior to the event. He then advised there was no change to the eligible or ineligible expenses. Lastly, he stated a marketing plan would be required for an event to receive funding.

Mr. Reynolds requested to know if this funding program was restricted to new events.

Mr. Locke advised it was not. He further stated any event that met the criteria was eligible to apply.

Mr. Bailey requested to know how the staff would determine which funding quarter an event fell in if the event dates spanned over multiple quarters.

Ms. Wheeler advised the quarter in which the majority of the event dates occurred would determine the funding quarter and eligible reimbursement. She further clarified that it would defer to the lower rebate if there was an even split.

**A motion was made by Danny Gaekwad, seconded by Commissioner Carl Zalak, to approve the recommendation for the Room Night Generating Event Funding Program Guidelines to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

#### ***Bid Fee Funding Program Guidelines***

Lastly, Mr. Locke discussed the revised Bid Fee Funding Program Guidelines. He thanked the legal department and Internal Auditor for their assistance with reviewing the guidelines. The bid process would include an RFP (Request for Proposal) packet that would be presented to several destinations. The body of the packet would then outline the dates of the event, the requirements to host the event as well as any other pertinent information. Mr. Locke advised the event must have an economic impact that would be favorable to the county. He further advised the media value would also be taken into consideration when reviewing a Bid Fee submission. The event must provide the potential for substantial media exposure and marketing opportunities for Marion County which may result in the county considering the value of media exposure in lieu of ROI. Mr. Locke stated the staff wanted to encourage events to host in Marion County during the shoulder season and Bid Fee funding provided the opportunity to secure events during that time of year. He then went on to discuss the Legacy Impact that Bid Fee funding provided by inspiring repeat visitation to Marion County. The revised guidelines

indicated there may be an inclination to support a bid fee for events that had the potential to return on an annual basis. Mr. Locke advised another change to the Bid Fee guidelines included the requirement for an organization to submit either a Letter of Intent or a complete RFP (Request for Proposal) packet. Lastly, he advised that Bid Fee funding would not be provided to events not previously funded via Bid Fee.

Mr. Bailey requested clarification and requested to know if an event which was previously approved for and received funding through the Room Night Generating Funding Program could move over to the Bid Fee Funding Program in an effort to request more money.

Mr. Locke advised they could not. The events could not bounce from one funding program to the other. They must stick with the funding program with which they originated.

Mr. Adams requested to know if exceptions would be made for organizations which have a change to the format of their event.

Ms. Wheeler advised the event would have to be established with Bid Fee as a part of their process. She further advised a local event which would have occurred without assistance from the Tourist Development Department, would not qualify as a Bid Fee eligible event. Ms. Wheeler stated if an RFP was placed on a national register and Marion County decided to bid on it, it would mean there was a competitive bid process.

Commissioner Zalak advised that Rock the County (which was now funded via the Room Night Generating program) would be a great example of an event which could grow in future years and benefit from a Bid Fee process. He further stated if Marion County does not have an exception which would allow a Room-Night Generating event to transition to a Bid Fee Funding event, we may lose them.

Mr. Adams requested to know if an event such as Rock the County would fall into a "special exception" category.

Commissioner Zalak stated a "special exception" category wasn't necessary but that he wanted to be informed if Rock the Country requested to transition from Room Night Generating Event Funding to a Bid Fee.

Mr. Gaekwad stated the VCB staff created guidelines which set parameters for funding but the TDC had the authority to amend the guidelines as they deem necessary.

Mr. Bailey advised the staff along with the TDC must find events that generate additional revenue for Marion County through increased visitation so additional funds would be available to invest in future events.

Mr. Gaekwad advised the staff needed firm guidelines that specify which months funding would be available. He advised the guidelines should indicate the months which qualified as peak season and which months qualified as shoulder season based on information from the Tax Collectors Office.

Ms. Wheeler advised Bid Fees provided the VCB staff the framework in which to operate to seek business that fulfilled the goals of the department. It is not a passive application process like the Room Night Generating Funding Program. She further advised the staff would review an organization's Bid Fee package to determine if it mirrored the goals of the destination and Strategic Plan.

Mr. Reynolds pointed out that if the revised guidelines were implemented, the council would not have had the opportunity to review and approve the last two events presented (Babe Ruth 16-18 World Series and MLF Heavy Hitters). Mr. Reynolds then requested to know how the media value of an event would be determined.

Mr. Locke advised the Bid packet presented by an event organizer would include the anticipated media value. He further stated that a requirement could be added to the guidelines that required a positive ROI for any event to be funded but that he believed media value should be considered in the calculation of the return on investment. Mr. Locke then advised the direct ROI does not include media value at this time.

Mr. Bailey advised he does not want media value to be included in the calculation of ROI because it would become too convoluted. He stated the goal of the staff was to increase visitation, increase revenue via taxes and in turn, increase the ROI for the county. If the ROI was revised to include taxes plus media value, the staff would need to determine the type and amount of marketing included, as well as, whether it provided value to the destination.

Mr. Locke stated the current economy along with Marion County hotel rates should also be considered when reviewing the Bid Fee amount vs the ROI. He advised if an event was hosted in Orlando or Miami (which have higher hotel rates) but the same Bid Fee amount was requested, the ROI may have resulted in a positive percentage for those destinations.

Mr. Gaekwad advised he does not believe the staff should use Orlando as a comparison because their annual budget was significantly greater than Marion County.

Mr. Bailey stated he agreed with some aspects of the aforementioned and disagreed with others. He further stated Marion County was blessed to have some private investors who brought two World-Class facilities to the destination, FAST and World Equestrian Center. Therefore, although Marion County was a smaller destination than others, it was imperative for the council to think on a larger scale as it related to the acquisition of events.

Mr. Gaekwad advised that when private investors build venues they do so to make a profit not to support Marion County and its government agencies.

Mr. Bailey agreed but also advised that some investors build passion projects which were not based on ROI. He then requested a motion be presented.

Mr. Adams extended a motion to approve as presented.

Mr. Gaekwad interjected and requested to know if Mr. Reynolds wanted the language regarding ROI and marketing amended.

Mr. Reynolds declined.

Mr. Adams advised the council had a year to review the program as there was only \$75,000 left in the budget for funding through the end of the fiscal year.

Ms. Wheeler clarified that the guidelines would only be reviewed annually. The staff and council would not revisit the guidelines at the end of the fiscal year.

Mr. Bailey again requested a motion be presented.

Mr. Adams reiterated a motion to approve.

Mr. Bailey requested a second motion be presented.

Mr. Gaekwad interjected and advised he would like to discuss the matter further. He then circled back to Mr. Reynolds comment and stated the VCB staff should have clear instructions which stated not to base their acquisition of events on an ROI inclusive of media value. Mr. Gaekwad stated a conversation should commence among the council to determine how to proceed if an event such as the MLF Heavy Hitters was presented for funding. He then requested to know if the motion should be amended.

Mr. Bailey advised the motion was presented to approve the guidelines, as written, by Rus Adams and seconded by Commissioner Livsey.

Mr. Gaekwad then requested the staff consider amending the guidelines as stated above.

Mr. Bailey advised his request could be presented when Mr. Gaekwad voted. He further advised that Mr. Gaekwad's comments were noted on the record.

**A motion was made by Rus Adams, seconded by Commissioner Ron Livsey, to approve the recommendation for the Bid Fee Funding Guidelines, as presented, to the Board of County Commissioners. The motion was unanimously approved by the council (6-0).**

### ***Staff Updates***

#### ***Introduction of Coleen Robinson***

Ms. Loretta Shaffer introduced the newest employee to the Ocala/Marion County Visitors and Convention Bureau, Coleen Robinson, and welcomed her to the team. Ms. Robinson replaced Candace Shelton as Visitor Relations Representative.

#### ***Gateway Signage***

Mr. Richard Busche, Principle Engineer, Senior Vice President - Kimley Horn, presented an update on the South Gateway Project. Mr. Busche advised the last update was presented in November 2024. He further advised the pillars were built at the county-lines and the North Gateway was forthcoming. Mr. Busche presented a rendering of the



flyover construction (42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Osceola Avenue bypass roadway) from 2012 which was designed to relieve traffic on State Road 200. The next slide showed the flyover in 2020. Mr. Busche then presented several South Gateway concept designs from 2012-2017. Many concepts were reviewed by the TDC and none were sufficient until the design was remastered in 2018. The design was refined by the TDC and recommended to the Board of County Commissioners who approved the concept. The design was redefined to include the appropriate letter size for O.C.A.L.A. Next, colors were selected and approved which then allowed for construction drawings. The final rendering was prepared from the construction drawings and approved in February 2024. The next slide showed photos of the South Gateway, over a thirteen-month period, as it was constructed. Mr. Busche then showed photos of the South Gateway as the letters for O.C.A.L.A. were installed. Lastly, a slide was shown which depicted the South Gateway at substantial completion. He advised construction was not at final completion as landscaping, removal of construction equipment and removal of Interstate signage was needed. Mr. Busche advised the team made sure the integrity of the original concept was not lost as the Gateway was constructed.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the color of the Gateway would remain grey.

Mr. Busche affirmed and stated the colors were a shade of brown and grey, creating a silhouette, which were from the original concept.

Commissioner Zalak voiced concerns about the Gateway.

Mr. Bailey advised there were many discussions and renderings of how the Gateway would look as someone drove northbound (coming from the south end) but never considered how it would look as someone drove southbound (coming from the north end) but felt the Gateway looked good from both views.

Mr. Busche advised a picture had not been presented which truly conveyed the size or scope of the Gateway as someone drove under it. He further advised there was 275 feet between the two towers.

Mr. Bailey stated the photo presented showed a tree to the right of the pillar which blocked the view of the pillar.

Mr. Busche then moved to the next slide and stated there were several items the construction team needed to address such as the blue logo sign (pending relocation), green city limits sign (pending relocation) and the Date Palm Trees (pending removal).

Ms. Shaffer requested that Mr. Busche discuss the glare caused by vehicles traveling on the highway.

Mr. Busche requested to know if Ms. Shaffer was referring to the panels being powder-coated and the fact that a number of the panels were replaced because they did not meet specifications.

Ms. Shaffer then requested to know if the color of the Gateway was of concern.

Commissioner Zalak affirmed and advised he was not in favor of the color grey on the Gateway.

Mr. Busche advised the panels show as different colors during different times of the day. He stated when it was sunny, the panels were lighter in color and if it was a cloudy or later in the day, the panels looked darker. He further advised the panels looked darker in-person when traveling under the Gateway than in the pictures. Mr. Busche stated the design concept was created so the panels would appear to show silhouettes of trees and horses.

Mr. Bailey asked Commissioner Zalak what color he thought the panels were going to be.

Commissioner Zalak requested that Mr. Busche go back a few slides to show the design concept previously presented. *(the slides were reversed and paused at the Final Rendering)*. Commissioner Zalak advised he only saw one consistent dark grey color across the entire Gateway.

Mr. Bailey requested to know if Commissioner Zalak thought the Gateway color would be monochrome.

Commissioner Zalak affirmed and advised the light grey panels resembled unfinished, primed panels when viewed next to the darker grey panels.

Mr. Gaekwad requested to know why the color was changed.

Mr. Busche requested the slides be reversed.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the internal beams would be painted.

Mr. Busche advised the panels were always two-toned but the rendering did not adequately show variation in color.

Commissioner Zalak advised the plans did show the color variation but stated the renderings the TDC was shown over the past couple years did not show the lighter grey color.

Mr. Adams stated he had a video of the Gateway and the color variation was not as prevalent at car level. He further advised he was "Wowed" when he drove under the Gateway.

Mr. Reynolds agreed and advised he did not notice the color variation.

Commissioner Zalak referred to the graphic used for the tentative Ribbon Cutting and stated the lighter grey was not visible in that artwork.

Mr. Gaekwad agreed with Commissioner Zalak.

Commissioner Zalak advised the Gateway looked unfinished and residents had requested to know when painting of the Gateway would be finalized.

Mr. Bailey advised the council had a couple of years to re-evaluate the Southbound Gateway.

Commissioner Zalak requested that the two-toned color variation not be included in the North Gateway design.

Mr. Gaekwad requested that any renderings presented be actual representations of the Gateway design to include actual color samples.

Mr. Busche advised the council had time to revise the Southbound Gateway renderings, if they chose.

Commissioner Zalak stated he would like them revised.

Mr. Gaekwad agreed.

Mr. Busche advised some people indicated they could not see the O.C.A.L.A lettering at night. He further noted the Gateway lighting was completely functional but was only utilized during construction. He advised the lights could be permanently activated when the council was ready.

*Some members of the council requested the lights be activated immediately and others requested to wait until the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony.*

Mr. Adams presented the option of a soft-opening.

Mr. Bailey advised the lights should be activated after the meeting, at sunset.

Mr. Busche advised the lights were functional and ready to be activated but the contractor had a "punch list" which denoted some items that needed completing. Therefore, construction spotlights may still be utilized in the evenings.

Mr. Gaekwad requested clarification as to whether the lights would be activated or not.

Ms. Shaffer provided the option to wait until substantial completion was finalized and work with Florida Department of Transportation to facilitate an evening lane closure to allow the Board of County Commissioners and Tourist Development Council the opportunity to activate the lighting.

Commissioner Zalak advised an event involving the community should be organized.

Ms. Shaffer requested that Mr. Busche assist in the coordination of an event to activate the lights, once substantial completion was achieved.

Ms. Wheeler advised some corrections were needed before the staff would be comfortable permanently activating the lighting.

Mr. Busche advised the contractor still had a final inspection pending.

Mr. Adams stated he worked with Mr. Busche over the past twelve years in an effort to bring the Gateway project to fruition. He further stated that he would like Mr. Busche

to bring back costs related to making the South Gateway monochrome.

Mr. Gaekwad advised it would be costly.

Mr. Adams confirmed that may be the case, but advised there were a number of members who were not in favor of the Gateway's current appearance therefore, he felt it would be in the best interest of the council to know the potential cost to make changes. This would allow the TDC to decide whether they should invest in the changes.

Commissioner Zalak advised the Gateway looked amazing but he was uncomfortable with the color variation. He further advised he would also like to know how much the changes would cost.

Mr. Busche advised the cost to change the color variation to monochrome could be obtained. He further advised the Interstate 75 signage would be moved prior to the Grand Opening event.

Commissioner Zalak requested to view renderings of the street-level view of the Gateway, as one travels over the bridge, so he would be well informed on what to expect regarding color, finish, etc. He further advised anyone traveling on the bridge, behind the panels, would have an up-close view of the construction materials.

Mr. Busche advised he did not have those renderings available. He further advised the structure required to hold the Gateway together was significant to insure the safety of those traveling on Interstate 75. Mr. Busche stated panels were placed on both sides of the bridge which created the southbound view of the Gateway. He then stated when the structure was viewed from the side, the supporting structures were visible. Mr. Busche then advised the support structures were nearly impossible to conceal but construction was still underway. A black fence was being erected which should help shield the supports. Mr. Busche stated some of the metal would become dull over time and would not be as noticeable in the future.

Commissioner Zalak requested to know if the metal would be painted.

Mr. Busche advised it would not be painted.

Commissioner Zalak then requested to know if the supports would be contained or boxed in.

Mr. Busche advised they would not be boxed in.

Ms. Shaffer advised a quote to enclose the supports could be obtained.

Mr. Adams advised painting the aluminum was not recommended as it would present a recurring maintenance expense.

Mr. Busche advised the only time the metal was visible was when viewed from the side in the eastbound direction of the flyover. He further advised the metal supports could not be hidden from someone walking over the flyover.

Commissioner Zalak requested that the changes discussed be taken into consideration for the next Gateway project so people traveling over the bridge headed to Buc-ee's would be greeted with something that showcased Ocala/Marion County.

Mr. Busche advised the North Gateway project was out for procurement with FDOT and the staff hoped to have a contractor secured to negotiate contracts in June 2025. He further advised if adjustments were needed for the North Gateway, the council had time to request them. Mr. Busche advised the design for the North Gateway was very similar to the South Gateway but the bridge would be longer and would not be curved.

Commissioner Zalak requested to see the actual plans for the North Gateway to alleviate any future issues.

Mr. Busche again advised if the color variation needed to be adjusted for the next project, the council had time to implement the changes.

***Due to extensive discussion regarding Funding and the Gateway Signage project, all other agenda items were tabled until the March 28, 2025 meeting.***

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

Presentation postponed until March 28, 2025 meeting

***Quarterly Public Relations and Analytics Reports – October – December Data***

Presentation postponed until March 28, 2025 meeting

***Florida Huddle and Encounter Recap***

Presentation postponed until March 28, 2025 meeting

***Sales Update***

Presentation postponed until March 28, 2025 meeting

***Marion County Board of County Commissioners and City of Ocala Joint Workshop – March 13, 2025 at 9am***

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

Presentation postponed until March 28, 2025 meeting

***TDC Events Calendar***

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

***Notation for Record***

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

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

***Old Business***

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

***New Business***

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

***Public Comment***

***Upcoming Meeting***

Mr. Bailey stated, that the next TDC meeting will be on Friday, March 28, 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 11:01 a.m.

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Jeff Bailey, Chairman

DRAFT