

**Tourist Development Council  
Pinellas County  
April 20, 2022 Meeting Minutes**

The Pinellas County Tourist Development Council (TDC), as created under Pinellas County Ordinance 78-20 pursuant to Section 125.0104, Florida Statutes, met in regular session on this date at 8:49 AM in the Palm Room at the Pinellas County Communications Building, 333 Chestnut Street, Clearwater, Florida.

Present

Charlie Justice, Chairman, Board of County Commissioners (BCC) Chairman  
Russ Kimball, Vice-Chairman, Sheraton Sand Key Resort  
Julie Ward Bujalski, City of Dunedin Mayor  
Phil Henderson, Jr., Starlite Cruises  
Frank Hibbard, City of Clearwater Mayor  
Doreen Moore, Travel Resort Services, Inc.  
Charles Prather, The Birchwood Inn  
Trisha Rodriguez, Clearwater Ferry  
Clyde Smith, Bilmar Beach Resort  
Kenneth T. Welch, City of St. Petersburg Mayor  
Michael Williams, Innisbrook Golf Resort

Not Present

Melinda Pletcher, City of St. Pete Beach Commissioner

Others Present

Steve Hayes, Visit St. Pete/Clearwater (VSPC) President and CEO  
Michael A. Zas, Managing Assistant County Attorney  
Tony Armer, Film Commissioner  
Katie Bridges, Senior Advertising Manager  
Craig Campbell, Sports and Events Interim Director, Community and Brand Engagement Director  
Andrea Gabel, Senior Sales Manager, Latin America  
Suzanne Hackman, Vice President of Business Development  
Eddie Kirsch, Digital Producer  
Liz McCann, VSPC Executive Administrative Assistant  
Rosemarie Payne, Leisure Travel Director  
Katie Poviones, Board Reporter, Deputy Clerk  
Other interested individuals

## **CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL**

Chairman Justice called the meeting to order at 8:49 AM; whereupon, at his request, the members introduced themselves.

## **CHAIR COMMENTS – NONE**

## **MINUTES OF THE MARCH 16, 2022 REGULAR MEETING**

Ms. Moore made a motion, which was seconded by Mayor Welch and carried unanimously, that the minutes of the March 16 meeting be approved.

## **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Upon invitation by Chairman Justice, CEO and founder of One Blue Ocean, Henthorne, appeared and related that his company is a non-profit global ocean organization based in St. Petersburg, where it will be building its main headquarters; and that he would like to present more information on the company in the future; whereupon, Chairman Justice explained how he could do so.

## **FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2023 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

### FY 23 Revenue Projections

Budget and Financial Management Analyst Jim Abernathy referred to a document titled *Tourist Development Council FY 2023 Budget Workshop* and presented the proposed budget, indicating that the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) revenue for FY 2022 has surpassed the projected amount of \$67.1 million and is on pace to reach approximately \$86 million; and that based on collecting more revenue than anticipated, additional funding will be provided for beach renourishment in the FY 2023 and FY 2024 budgets.

In response to queries by the members, Mr. Abernathy clarified that the beginning fund balance and revenue provide the total available resources for the upcoming year; that \$67.3 million in revenue will be added to the total reserves in FY 2023; and that the overall budget will not be drastically impacted by the rising interest rates.

### Capital Project Funding Program Update

Mr. Abernathy explained that the only capital projects currently committed for funding are the Florida Holocaust Museum and the continuing local match for beach renourishment; that while funding for the Museum was approved a few years ago, construction delays

have prevented the project's conclusion; and that the funding commitment to the Museum is being rolled over into FY 2023 for the project completion.

During discussion, Mayor Welch provided updates on the Dali Museum and the Tampa Bay Rays projects, noting that the museum will maintain the existing funding request with some adjustments for inflation; that a new design concept for the museum would partially address short-term parking for the Firestone Grand Prix event; that the Rays have officially reincorporated the consideration of the City of St. Petersburg into their decision on where to reside; and that if a potential agreement with the Rays is reached, it likely would not take place for several years, but the ask is there to reserve a commitment from the TDC and the County to help fund a new stadium.

Chairman Justice remarked that no formal funding request has been received from the Rays or the City, and Mayor Welch indicated that it would be coming in the near future.

Mr. Henderson stressed the importance of beach preservation and proposed increasing beach nourishment funding so that out of the total 6% TDT, a full percent should be allocated for beach nourishment instead of the current half of one percent, and the members opined on the matter. Mayor Welch expressed support for increasing the funding but noted that it should be done strategically; whereupon, he proposed also increasing the arts funding to a third of a TDT percent for the next five years.

Mayor Bujalski expressed support for more beach nourishment funding, but remarked that the Council needs factual information about specific funding needs prior to making the changes, and Mayor Hibbard added that he would like to hear from the experts regarding optimal ways to spend the funds to avoid the never-ending renourishment cycle.

Attorney Zas clarified that the half of a TDT percent is dedicated by an ordinance and allocated by budgetary function; and that beach nourishment funding can be increased by either recommending a higher annual budget amount to the BCC and preserving the half-percent dedicated through the ordinance, which would be the most flexible option, or by recommending an amendment to the ordinance for the full percent.

Mr. Kimball noted that a matter of investing in sports facilities should also be considered, and discussion continued. Mr. Hayes indicated that the TDC's May meeting will include a presentation on the strategic plan and suggested that staff could invite experts in the areas of beach renourishment and the arts to a future meeting for further discussion. Mayor Welch emphasized that he supports exploring options for more funding for the beaches, pending additional data, as well as obtaining data regarding the funding needs for the arts and sports facilities.

In response to queries by the members, Mr. Abernathy related that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is a moving target, and the projected 2.8-percent CPI increase is based on one year from now; and that the cruise industry forecast was taken into consideration when formulating revenue projections.

Mr. Henderson made a motion that the FY 2023 budget reflect a full TDT percent going towards beach renourishment instead of the half of a percent. The motion was seconded by Mr. Williams and failed by a vote of 4 to 7, with Chairman Justice, Mayors Bujalski, Hibbard, and Welch, Mr. Kimball, and Mses. Rodriguez and Moore casting the dissenting votes.

### Department Budget Overview

#### VSPC SUMMARY

Mr. Hayes referred to a PowerPoint presentation titled *Tourist Development Council FY 2023 Budget Workshop* and discussed VSPC's budget for FY 2023 as it relates to areas of focus, budget assumptions, expenses by department, and increases over the FY 2022 budget. He noted that travel is returning to normal, including international travel, as well as meeting and business travel; that the strategic plan will affect work plans and priorities; that 97% of the FY 2022 budget is projected to be expended by the end of the fiscal year; and that the current budget request is approximately \$40.5 million, as compared to the last year's budget of approximately \$36.7 million.

Responding to queries by Ms. Moore, Mr. Hayes clarified that the next phase in the strategic plan process is for presentations to the TDC and VSPC staff to take place to discuss findings; that the plan may refocus the programming without requiring a budget increase; that it was not designed to match the timeline of the budget process; and that some of the items will not be executed until the year following the next.

In response to queries by the members, Mr. Abernathy explained that beach renourishment costs are subtracted from the TDT fund and transferred into the Capital Fund, and Mr. Hayes noted that the budget for personnel includes salaries for vacant positions; and that VSPC will evaluate the position classifications and salaries to ensure they are competitive with the market; whereupon, discussion ensued regarding budget adjustments, importance of building the reserves, and other matters.

## ADVERTISING AND PROMOTIONS

Ms. Bridges referred to pages 10 through 22 of the Budget document and to the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Responding to queries by Mayor Welch, Ms. Bridges indicated that VSPC partnered with Caulin Donaldson, noting that he is a major influencer on TikTok, as part of the Unwind & Be Kind campaign, featured on the front page of the Tampa Bay Times newspaper; and that VSPC uses a variety of social media channels to reach different audiences, and Mr. Hayes provided input.

## DIGITAL AND COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Hayes introduced Mr. Kirsch and recognized him and PR Lead Mackenzie Comerer for their great work; whereupon, Mr. Kirsch referred to pages 22 through 30 of the Budget document and to the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

In response to queries by the members, Mr. Kirsch related that he does not think a growing digital advertising budget would necessarily take away from the traditional advertising budget; and that VSPC has a contract with Miles Partnership for digital media and website services; whereupon, Mr. Hayes provided information concerning cybersecurity measures and training for the VSPC.

## MEETINGS AND CONVENTIONS

Deviating from the agenda, Mr. Hayes noted that the Meetings and Conventions Department staff would present at this time; whereupon, Ms. Hackman referred to pages 49 through 66 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following topics:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Discussion ensued regarding the lack of meeting space in the County and the need for a new convention center, with Ms. Hackman remarking that the County lacks the hotel and meeting space to host a group of 350 to 750 people; that many hotel developers are constructing hotels targeted at the leisure market due to it being the bulk of the

destination's business; that the membership-based association market is trending to return; and that while VSPC does offer transportation in its incentive packages, there is not one hotel that could house an entire meeting in the case of a citywide convention.

In response to a query by Chairman Justice referencing a potential County partnership with a hotel developer to pay for meeting space using TDT revenue, Attorney Zas expressed that the construction of a convention center does not seem to be a statutorily allowable use of the TDT funds; and that he would have to examine project specifics to determine whether there would be a way of accomplishing it.

## FILM COMMISSION

Mr. Armer referred to pages 30 through 48 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Responding to queries by the members, Mr. Armer stated that the State of Florida does not offer a film incentive due to political lobbying; that County film incentives go strictly towards narrative content; that the impact of film projects on the local economy is calculated using software that requires individuals in the County who possess a film permit to submit spending data; and that a significant number of locals have inquired about beginning a career in the film industry.

In response to queries by the members, Mr. Armer indicated that the Department will participate in the Cannes Film Festival as part of the USA pavilion to promote the United States as a filming venue; that the Film Commission has previously garnered business from the festival; and that the local film incentives program offers a valuable advantage in attracting projects, noting that Pinellas is one of the few counties in Florida to offer it.

*The meeting was recessed at 11:45 AM and reconvened at 12:09 PM.*

## SPORTS AND EVENTS

Mr. Campbell referred to pages 67 through 82 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following topics:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Discussion ensued on market segments, the economic impact of major league sports, collaborations with venue partners, tennis tournaments, and the potential for media days during sports events, and Messrs. Campbell and Hayes provided input.

Mr. Campbell noted that funding amounts for events are based on calculations by the Customer Relationship Management and additional software that evaluate events based on certain data inputs; that the destination lacks rectangular-shaped fields for certain sports; and that there are ongoing efforts to create a cheer/dance market segment.

## COMMUNITY AND BRAND ENGAGEMENT

Mr. Campbell referred to pages 83 through 95 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Responding to queries by Mayor Bujalski, Mr. Campbell clarified that funding for the Chambers of Commerce was grandfathered in; that it was increased a few years ago and has remained the same since then; that feedback from the Chambers regarding their funding has been positive; and that there is a funding allocation for visitor centers; whereupon, Mr. Hayes conveyed that several variables affect the funding given to visitor centers, including location and operating hours.

## LEISURE TRAVEL

Ms. Payne referred to pages 110 through 127 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following topics:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

Mr. Hayes related that the Leisure Travel department has been utilizing a new tool to target specific markets. In response to queries by Mr. Henderson, Ms. Payne indicated that department personnel has decreased by one person, which has not prevented the department from attending trade shows; that digitally partnering with travel agents and the travel advisor community has been an effective technique to build relationships in certain markets; and that while the tourism landscape in Canada has changed significantly, VSPC has several opportunities to reach that market through partnerships with VISIT FLORIDA and Canadian jet lines.

*Mayor Hibbard left the meeting at 1:05 PM.*

## LATIN AMERICA

Ms. Gabel referred to pages 96 through 109 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following:

- Fiscal Year 2022: Sales Plan Recap
- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary, Budget Request, and Sales Plan

## EXECUTIVE SALES

Mr. Hayes referred to pages 128 through 130 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and presented information regarding the following topics:

- Fiscal Year 2023: Budget Summary and Budget Request

Mr. Hayes noted that “executive sales” refers to any travel for VSPC staff or TDC members to attend industry-related trade shows.

## INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

Mr. Hayes referred to pages 131 through 136 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and reviewed the budget information. Responding to a query by Chairman Justice, he related that the European firms handle both sales and marketing for VSPC in Europe; and that while there is one point of contact at each firm, there is a team of individuals involved in the work.

## DECISION PACKAGES

Mr. Hayes referred to pages 137 through 140 of the Budget document and the PowerPoint and introduced the first decision package, noting that it would add two intern positions per semester at VSPC; that the positions would be shared with various departments based on need and desired experience by the interns; and that the cost includes hourly pay with no benefits.

In response to queries by Mayor Bujalski, Mr. Hayes explained that there are currently nine open positions at VSPC; that one position is in the process of being filled; that four positions have become available in the past year; and that the positions will be filled going into the next fiscal year.

*Mr. Prather left the meeting at 1:33 PM.*

Mr. Hayes introduced the remaining five decision packages requested by Creative Pinellas, conveying that two packages would be funded through the Tourist Development Fund; and that the other three would be funded through the General Fund and

Transportation Fund; whereupon, discussion ensued regarding having a plan and a dedicated funding source for Creative Pinellas and for the local arts in general.

Responding to queries by the members, Mr. Hayes noted that potential interns would likely come from the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg College, and other universities; and that he understands that the members would prefer a more in-depth conversation regarding the decision packages, indicating that he supports certain Creative Pinellas programming being funded by the TDT due to the importance of the arts to the tourism business.

In response to a query by Ms. Moore, Chairman Justice invited the members to share their thoughts with Mr. Hayes or the other Commissioners regarding any budget components or goals that they feel strongly about, noting that their feedback will be important as the BCC begins to deliberate budgets and decision packages.

Attorney Zas clarified that historically, the practice has usually been for the TDC to vote on a recommended budget, and Chairman Justice remarked that the TDC will meet again in May, at which time the members will have another opportunity to discuss the budget; whereupon, the members requested additional information for discussion at the next TDC meeting regarding beach renourishment and funding for the arts and for amateur sports facilities.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 1:45 PM.