

**Tourist Development Council
Pinellas County
March 29, 2023 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 9:05 AM in the Palm Room at the Pinellas County Communications Building, 333 Chestnut Street, Clearwater, Florida.

Present

Janet C. Long, Chair, Board of County Commissioners (BCC) Chair
Russ Kimball, Vice-Chair, Sheraton Sand Key Resort
Brian Aungst, Sr., Interim City of Clearwater Mayor
Julie Ward Bujalski, City of Dunedin Mayor
Copley Gerdes, City of St. Petersburg Councilmember
Phil Henderson, Jr., Starlite Cruises
Doreen Moore, Travel Resort Services, Inc.
Charles Prather, The Birchwood Inn
Clyde Smith, Bilmar Beach Resort
Michael Williams, Innisbrook Golf Resort

Not Present

Melinda Pletcher, City of St. Pete Beach Commissioner
Trisha Rodriguez, Clearwater Ferry

Others Present

Steve Hayes, Visit St. Pete/Clearwater (VSPC) President and CEO
Eddie Kirsch, Digital Producer, VSPC
Elizabeth Giaquinto, Chief Tourist Development Tax Auditor, Tax Collector's Office
Catherine Perkins, Emergency Management Director
Michael A. Zas, Managing Assistant County Attorney
Katie Poviones, Board Reporter, Deputy Clerk
Other interested individuals

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Long called the meeting to order at 9:05 AM.

CHAIR COMMENTS

Chair Long welcomed Interim Mayor Aungst and remarked on his experience with the TDC.

APPROVAL OF TDC MINUTES

Ms. Moore made a motion, which was seconded by Mr. Williams and carried unanimously, that the minutes of the February 15, 2023, meeting be approved.

PUBLIC COMMENTS – NONE

OUTSIDE PRESENTATIONS

Hurricane Preparedness

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation titled *Hurricane Preparedness*, Ms. Perkins introduced this year's messaging for hurricane season, which focuses on the actions of 'Ready, Set, Protect', and emphasized the importance of using time wisely, communicating risk in anticipation of a hurricane as part of early preparations, and the dangers of storm surge. She provided information regarding how local businesses can assist with response and recovery efforts, steps tourism-oriented businesses can take to prepare for a storm, how visitors can remain informed using the Ready Pinellas mobile application, and resources for post-disaster updates.

Ms. Perkins shared information regarding a Lodging Partner Survey and related that the Department would like to better understand the information needs and capabilities of local hotels and vacation rental companies; whereupon, Mr. Henderson commented on the uncertainty associated with storm forecast cones and Mr. Hayes discussed VSPC's role during hurricane season and future improvements to storm-related communications.

Tourist Development Tax Collections

Mr. Hayes indicated that he asked Ms. Giaquinto to attend the meeting today to address questions posed at previous TDC meetings regarding the miscellaneous/other category utilized when separating Tourist Development Tax (TDT) collections by municipality in the tourist development reports available on the Tax Collector's website; whereupon, Ms. Giaquinto provided information regarding the reports, indicating that the miscellaneous/other category exists because tax collected from properties owned by individuals with rentals in different cities is grouped together due to confidentiality

concerns; and that collections for the category have grown recently due to the rising popularity of companies like Vrbo and Airbnb.

In response to queries by the members, Ms. Giaquinto explained that Florida Statute 213.053 establishes the confidentiality measures which prevent any account information or rental income from being shared; that the Tax Collector's Office cannot audit, ask for additional information, or require online vacation rental platforms to register with the Office for tax-paying purposes due to outdated statutes on the matter; and that the Tax Collector's Office is hopeful that proposed legislation will pass which would require online platforms to register and pay the appropriate taxes.

Responding to queries by the members, Ms. Giaquinto indicated that the Tax Collector's Office investigates and issues penalties to property owners who evade paying their taxes; that investigations are conducted both proactively via the internet and responsively based on tips from the public; and that the Office examines bank statements, as well as reports, and contacts Airbnb, Vrbo, and other online platforms during investigations.

During discussion, Ms. Moore related that she is not aware of an interface that would allow vacation rental agencies to break down TDT collections by city, and Chair Long displayed a map of all of the Vrbo and Airbnb listings throughout Pinellas County as provided by Key Data; whereupon, Ms. Giaquinto noted that the Tax Collector's Office expects property management companies to provide an updated list of their properties each month; and that the Office will soon have a supplemental filing where property owners can report rental income by property, which would assist with investigations and enforcement.

DEPARTMENT UPDATES

Capital Funding Grant Program

Mr. Hayes explained that the members have a copy of the changes to the program guidelines, which have been previously discussed; and that upon approval by the TDC, the guidelines would be presented to the BCC for approval. Thereupon, a motion was made by Mayor Bujalski to approve the finalized program guidelines. The motion was seconded by Mr. Prather and carried unanimously.

In response to a query by Mayor Bujalski, Mr. Hayes clarified that pending the BCC's approval of the guidelines, the program application process could tentatively begin on July 1.

Digital/Web Update

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation titled *Visit St. Pete/Clearwater TDC Update March 29, 2023*, Mr. Kirsch introduced Scott Bacon from Miles Partnership and spoke of its importance to VSPC's marketing efforts; whereupon, he provided information regarding a recent campaign with Adara and highlighted that the company tracked over \$127 million in in-market credit expenditures, more than 424,000 travelers, and 1.8 million transactions in the destination from April through October of 2022; that each traveler spent approximately \$300 while visiting the area; that visitors spent most of their money on local restaurants and food stores; and that visitors from Chicago, New York, and Cincinnati spent the most per household among other top markets.

Mr. Kirsch discussed some of VSPC's current digital marketing campaigns and changing trends in data and content, emphasizing that marketing has been relying more on first-party data input through data consortiums and less on Google Analytics and pixel-tracking due to data privacy concerns; and that within the past year, VSPC has invested in content production, search engine optimization, and meaningful engagement, resulting in a \$56 return on investment per visitor to VSPC's website. Responding to queries by the members, Mr. Kirsch provided clarifying comments regarding visitors' average daily spend in the destination and a digital marketing campaign with Hopper.

Department Reports

The item was not addressed.

VSPC PRESIDENT & CEO REPORT

Tourism Day Recap

Mr. Hayes referred to a PowerPoint presentation titled *Pinellas County Tourist Development Council Meeting* and indicated that he and some of the members recently attended Tourism Day in Tallahassee; and that while they were there, the Florida legislature released their proposed budgets for VISIT FLORIDA, with the Senate suggesting \$80 million and the House suggesting \$0, respectively. Mr. Williams remarked on his experience at the event and related that a bipartisan bill, which would strip all state funding from VISIT FLORIDA, passed a few days after the event; and that the legislation would also eliminate VISIT FLORIDA's funding by rental car agencies, which have historically been a significant contributor.

Thereupon, discussion ensued regarding the negative impacts of the bill, the significance of marketing to driving tourism to Florida, and next steps with regard to the bill. During

discussion, Mr. Hayes indicated that the bill would require the County to contribute 5% of its total TDT collections, or approximately \$5 million annually, for three years to fund VISIT FLORIDA, after which the County could decide if it wanted to continue to pay; and that VISIT FLORIDA would be required to ensure that 75% of all of its expenditures go towards directly assisting state parks and forests, as well as rural counties.

In response to a query by Mr. Williams, Mr. Hayes explained that the proposed legislation would expand the counties' permissible uses of TDT to include infrastructure improvements; that the requirement mandating that at least 40% of TDT collections go towards marketing would be removed; and that all TDT levied would have to be reauthorized by referendum every six years, exempting TDT collected to cover County bond obligations. Later in the meeting, he provided resources for the members to receive updates regarding the proposed legislation.

General Tourism Update

Chair Long provided information regarding a recent visit to the White House, where she and a small delegation discussed beach renourishment and met with delegation member Representative Anna Paulina Luna. She noted that the County has been in contact with the White House and the Army Corps of Engineers; and that there will hopefully be some good news regarding the matter soon. Responding to a query by Mr. Prather, Chair Long remarked on the need for beach renourishment on Redington Beach.

Attorney Zas indicated that he recently spoke to the Manatee County Attorney's Office to gain insight into a matter referenced by Mayor Bujalski at a previous meeting; that he was informed that Manatee County is not currently using TDT for waterborne transportation, although they will likely do so at some point as they have been considering it for several years; that Manatee County would be justifying the use of the funds through a portion of the relevant statute which is not available to Pinellas due to population constraints; and that he will continue to research whether or not the County can use TDT collections to fund waterborne transportation.

Later in the meeting, Mr. Hayes discussed VSPC's efforts to provide accurate updates to the media regarding issues like the seaweed blob and red tide.

Destination Metrics

Referring to the above-referenced PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Hayes reviewed the January 2023 statistical data regarding TDT collections, including hotel and vacation rental occupancy and average daily rates (ADR). He related that TDT collections increased by 11% from the same time in 2022; whereupon, he discussed a recent webinar VSPC hosted with Key Data, noting that 11 companies participated; and that Key Data is

collaborating with Smith Travel Research (STR) to develop a new report, which would forecast occupancy and ADR for a given time period and allow VSPC to adjust marketing, if needed, to maximize occupancy and revenue.

May Meeting

Later in the meeting, Mr. Hayes explained that the TDC's May meeting will include the budget presentation and an opportunity for the Board to review staff's funding recommendations for Elite Event applications.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS/DISCUSSIONS

Mr. Hayes discussed employment vacancies at VSPC, which are in various stages of being filled, and introduced the current Film Commission Manager Liza Dozois as the new Film Commissioner. Responding to a query by Mr. Williams, Mr. Hayes provided clarifying comments regarding specific positions.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 11:19 AM.