



TDC Meeting Minutes

March 12, 2020

Commissioner Brian Hamman, chair, called the Lee County Tourist Development Council (TDC) meeting to order at 2:04 p.m.

Council Members in Attendance

Commissioner Brian Hamman, Anita Cereceda, Pamela Cronin, Colleen DePasquale, Tony Lapi, John McLain (via telephone), Fran Myers and Robert Wells. Brian Kramer and Bill Waichulis were excused.

CGSP Recognition

Dr. Nicole King-Smith, VCB tourism & hospitality training manager, recognized 60 newly certified guest service professionals (CGSP), bringing the total to 974 CGSP graduates in Lee County.

COVID-19 Update

Commissioner Hamman addressed the council on the current COVID-19 situation. Updates included the cancellation of the remainder of all Major League Baseball spring training games as well as postponing the regular season, Gov. Ron DeSantis' recommendation that all public and private events with more than 1,000 attendees be canceled and Congress announcing it will no longer allow the public into its facilities. Hamman added that there is a third case of COVID-19 in Lee County and he has been in contact with the state Department of Health regarding the evolving situation.

Roger Dejarlais, Lee County manager, stated that the county has been in touch with partner agencies at the EOC to discuss COVID-19. He added that at this time, no recommendations have been made to the BoCC to cancel county meetings or events as of yet. The plan is to work with municipalities and other agencies to ensure a unified message. Dejarlais said an announcement will be made Monday that no additional public event permits for groups of more than 1,000 people will be issued until further notice.

Hamman said, so far, the primary elections have not been affected other than polling places being moved out of assisted living facilities. Cereceda noted she is getting many questions about whether Fort Myers Beach's Shrimp Fest, St. Patty's Day parade and local election will be cancelled. She hopes the message to the public will be to exercise personal responsibility and said the Town of Fort Myers Beach will follow the county's lead on COVID-19 response. Hamman said that this virus is not unique to Lee County and will be felt nationwide. Hamman then asked the acting airport director, to give report to the TDC.

Ben Siegel, Lee County Port Authority acting executive director, reported that so far Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) has been business as usual, just seeing less people on the aircrafts. Airlines are doing their usual air service cuts that typically happen after Easter, just earlier. He also said Eurowings (only direct flight to Germany) has canceled its air service effective Saturday, March 14. Siegal noted that RSW had a great season and is confident it will weather the storm. Cereceda then asked about flight cancellation fees. Siegal said some airlines are waiving cancellation fees, others do not have them at all and bookings are down. Lapi asked about what visitors are inquiring about at RSW in regard to COVID-19. Siegal said that the most asked question is what precautions the airport is taking to which, RSW has implemented routine cleaning of high-touch areas, regular cleaning of the airport shuttles and having hand sanitizers readily available in vehicles and facilities.

Cereceda made a motion to approve Feb. 13, 2020 TDC meeting minutes. Myers seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Public to be Heard

Allison Gormly, WINK News reporter, asked about the impact on Lee County due to the cancellation of spring training. Hamman said that it's too early to tell the impact, but in 2018 the county conducted research showing that spring training brings in \$70 million a year to Lee County and the cancellation will affect markets all over Florida and Arizona.

Municipalities to be Heard

Michelle Dean, City of Cape Coral parks and recreation marketing coordinator, reported that the general obligation (GO) bond projects are coming along. Pelican Baseball Complex, Koza/Saladino Park were completed on Feb. 29 and Northwest Softball Complex is under construction. Many other parks are getting shade structures as well. Sun Splash is now open for 2020 season and, as of now, Sun Splash is scheduled to be open every day. According to the CDC, there is no evidence that COVID-19 can spread to humans through use of pools and hot tubs. Upcoming events hosted by the City of Cape Coral include Sounds of Jazz and Blues on March 28 and Brews on the River on April 18, both of which still taking place as of now, but the city is staying informed on COVID-19 developments.

Report of the Executive Director

The preliminary resort tax collected for January 2020 was \$5,675,357 a 26.2% increase over January 2019 preliminary collections of \$4,498,603. Fiscal year-to-date preliminary tourist tax collections are \$14,896,875, an increase of 18.7% year-over-year.

Pigott also reported that the average occupancy rate in January 2020 was 78.4%, which is up 3.5% from January 2019 (75.8%). The average daily rate for January 2020 was \$174.03, up 9.2% from January 2019 (\$159.30) and RevPAR for January 2020 was \$136.50, up 13% from January 2019 (\$120.77).

During January 2020, 1,132,103 passengers traveled through RSW, an increase of 7.8% compared to January 2019.

Commissioner Hamman noted that we have had a great start to the year to help offset COVID-19 impacts.

Marketing Update

Brian Ososky, VCB director of marketing, provided an update on steps the VCB is taking to adjust its summer marketing campaign amid the current COVID-19 concerns. A greater emphasis is being placed on reaching in-state drive markets, plus Atlanta. An overview of integrated media buys, broadcast TV and radio, digital, out-of-home and streaming platforms was provided for the council's review. Ososky said the VCB is monitoring the situation and will adjust marketing strategies as needed. As of now, the VCB is not pausing its marketing, but looking at potential plans in case a need to shift marketing presents itself.

Hamman asked how the VCB is monitoring the COVID-19 situation. Pigott said the VCB is in close contact with U.S. Travel and VISIT FLORIDA. She noted that the council and industry partners are the VCB's "boots on the ground" so the bureau is staying tuned to industry partners. She assured the council that the VCB has a very seasoned team that has handled many crises and is prepared to take on the evolving COVID-19 situation.

Wells asked if the VCB has used any emergency funding and with business going away so quickly, has the VCB put any funds toward immediately marketing to drive markets to capture their business in the short term. Ososky noted that no reserve funds have been activated or discussed at this point as they are usually used when the crisis has passed. Hamman stated that being that this is a public health crisis, the VCB needs to be careful about spending funds on encouraging people to gather and travel. Pigott said that posting deals may be an option to draw some business amidst the onset of the crisis. Lapi added that it's important to be careful with large discounts because people will get on planes to travel and those that paid full prices will not appreciate paying a full rate when others did not. Lapi reported that business at Sanibel and Captiva Beach Resorts was up 12% but is now down 5% with some new bookings coming from canceled cruises. Cereceda said that her three stores were trending up 5-12% over her best year in 2015 before the onset of the crisis.

DePasquale wanted clarification on whether the VCB would ever stop marketing the destination. Glenn Salyer, assistant Lee County manager, added that decision of the nature would depend on how the situation develops as public health is the main concern. Pigott added some ads are already in place and paid for, so they can't be stopped.

For Council Information

Pigott noted the full 2019 visitor profile report from Downs and St. Germain is now available.

TDC Member Items

- Cereceda thanked council as her term is ending. Commissioner Hamman thanked Cereceda for her service to the TDC.
- Pigott, added that Pamela Johnson, VCB deputy director, is staying with the VCB after being offered a position with Visit Pensacola.
- Commissioner Hamman let the council and industry know that he is there for support if anyone needs anything.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 2:54 p.m.

Next TDC Meeting

The next scheduled TDC meeting at 9 a.m. Thursday, April 9, 2020 **is canceled**. To view a complete tax collections report, go to LeeVCB.com. Contact: Tamara Pigott, TPigott@leegov.com, Lee County VCB, 239-338-3500.