

TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (TDC)

The Indian River County (IRC) Tourist Development Council (TDC) met at **2:00 p.m. on Wednesday, August 20, 2025**, in the County Administration Building, Building A, Commission Chambers, 1801 27th Street, Vero Beach, Florida. You may hear an audio of the meeting, review the agenda or Minutes on the IRC Website.

Present were: **Chairman Joseph Flescher**, Indian River County Commissioner, District 2; **Linda Moore**, City of Vero Beach; **Nichole Johanson**, Interested in Tourist Accommodations (not Operator) Representative; **Amanda Owens**, Interested in Tourist Accommodations (not Operator) Representative; and **Jennifer Bates**, Owner/Operator Tourist Accommodations Representative.

Absent was: **Christopher Nunn**, City of Sebastian; **Keith Kite**, Owner/Operator Tourist Accommodations Representative; **Vice-Chair Karen Mechling**, Interested in Tourist Development, Not an Owner/Operator; and **Will Collins**, Owner/Operator Tourist Accommodations.

Others Present were: **Kristin Daniels**, Office of Management & Budget Director, **Rhonda Zirkle**, Budget Support Specialist; **Ben Earman**, Director of Tourism & Marketing at Visit Indian River; **Krista Hoyt**, **Nicholas Sanzone**, Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce; **Jody Van Order**, Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce Operations & Tourism Assistant; **Kevin Greene**, Play Treasure Coast; **Rick Hatcher**, Play Treasure Coast; and **Ashley Brown**, Recording Secretary.

Call to Order and Welcome

Chairman Flescher called the meeting to order at 2:01 p.m. at which time it was determined there was a quorum present. He then led the pledge of allegiance and welcomed all those in attendance.

Additions/Deletions to the Agenda

The Agenda was approved with no edits revisions.

ON MOTION BY Ms. Moore seconded by Ms. Bates, the Council unanimously (5-0) approved the Agenda.

Approval of the Minutes of February 19, 2025

No edits or revisions were made.

ON MOTION BY Ms. Moore seconded by Ms. Johanson, the Council unanimously (5-0) approved the May 21, 2025 Minutes as submitted.

Tourist Tax Revenue Update – Kristin Daniels, Office of Management & Budget Director

Budget Director Kristin Daniels provided an update on tourist tax revenue collections through **June 30, 2025**.

Since **January 2025**, the County has collected the full **5-cent Tourist Development Tax** allocation, distributed as follows:

- **2 cents** – Tourism agencies
- **2.75 cents** – Beach restoration projects
- **0.25 cents** – Lease obligations/debt service for the fishing training complex

Revenue Performance:

- **June 2025 collections:** up **\$37,342** or **12.1%** compared to June 2024.
- **Year-to-date collections:** up **18.7%** compared to the same period last year.
- Compared to budget: **June:** up **\$17,784** or **5.4%** & **year-to-date:** up **12.6%** over budget

Comparative Analysis:

- Monthly collections in FY 2024-25 (shown in gold on the revenue chart) have consistently outperformed the prior fiscal year (gray, FY 2023-24).
- Actual revenues (orange) have exceeded budgeted projections (green) each month this fiscal year.

Annual Trends:

- Total revenue collected through **June 30, 2025:** **\$4,555,396**.
- FY 2023-24 total was **\$4.7 million**, collected through September.
- With three months remaining in the current fiscal year, revenues are expected to **surpass FY 2023-24 totals** and may potentially exceed the **record levels of FY 2022-23**.

Discussion:

- Council members inquired about the reporting period, and Ms. Daniels clarified that the data presented included collections through **June 30, 2025**.
- Members noted the strong performance and the potential for a record-setting year.
- It was also highlighted that preliminary figures were recently shared at a Chamber of Commerce meeting prior to June's finalized numbers being available.

Conclusion:

Tourist tax revenues are performing strongly, exceeding both budgeted expectations and prior year collections, with the potential to set a new record by the end of the fiscal year.

Indian River County Chamber of Commerce 2025-2026 Budget Presentation

Mr. Ben Earman presented the **2025–2026 Tourism Budget and Marketing Program**, providing an overview of performance data, visitor trends, and promotional initiatives.

Tourism Office & Mission

- Indian River County Tourism has operated as a dedicated destination marketing office within the Chamber since 1986, with two staff positions: Vice President of Tourism and a Tourism Communications Manager.
- The office functions independently from Chamber membership activities, maintaining separate branding, finances, and marketing operations.
- Its mission is to promote Indian River County as a visitor destination beyond a 50-mile radius, with targeted outreach by season and market. Key drive markets include Orlando, Tampa, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville, and West Palm Beach. Out-of-state markets include New York, New England, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Canada.

Visitor Data & Lodging Trends

- From October 2024 through July 2025, **47% of visitors were ages 25–54**, and over half of households reported incomes above \$100,000.
- Average hotel stay: 2.2 nights with a \$435 spend; average daily rate: \$195 (down 1% year over year). Short-term rentals averaged one week at \$208 per night (up 8%).
- County lodging inventory totals 2,217 rooms. Hotel occupancy is up 3% year-to-date, while short-term rental demand dipped slightly due to higher rates.
- Top origin markets included New York, Miami, and Orlando, with these visitors also showing the highest per capita spend.

Digital Presence & Marketing Campaigns

- The tourism website recorded a **6.5% increase in users**, with paid advertising accounting for half of all sessions. Top-performing content included pet-friendly travel, dining guides, and event listings.
- From October to July, paid digital campaigns across Google, Meta platforms, Amazon Display, and specialty partnerships generated over **6 million impressions** and **143,000 clicks**, all above industry benchmarks.
- Pet-friendly campaigns in particular outperformed, with Meta ads achieving **249% higher click-through rates** than average.
- The new “**Why Indian River County**” campaign builds on last year’s theme and emphasizes unique experiences, natural beauty, and an alternative to Florida’s busier destinations.

Media & Creative Outreach

- Digital channels dominate strategy, complemented by selective print in high-quality travel publications. Streaming audio, connected TV, and digital billboards generated millions of impressions, with video content proving the most effective format.
- Tourism social media accounts have grown to **14,596 followers** (up from 13,481), with the office now Meta Verified. Monthly email campaigns reach over 40,000 subscribers with open and click rates exceeding industry standards.
- Public Relations and Familiarization Tours (FAMs) continue to be a cornerstone, with nine tours hosted this year producing nearly **775 million consumer impressions** through national publications and influencers.

New Initiatives & Recognition

- Visitor Center enhancements include a new interactive map highlighting traveler origins, with strong representation from the Northeast, UK, and Germany.

- Three new destination maps for Vero Beach Mainland, Beachside, and Sebastian/Fellsmere integrate QR codes for digital access.
- Merchandise expansion under the “Why IRC” brand includes stickers and planned apparel.
- At the 2024 Visit Florida Governor’s Conference, the Chamber received first place in website design and the **Best of Show Award**, marking the first time Indian River County tourism earned the state’s top honor. The Visitor Guide also won for Best Communications Marketing Material.
- Future initiatives include expanded festival marketing, digital experience passes (arts, murals, nature, pet-friendly), augmented reality features for murals and historic sites, and destination activations at out-of-area festivals.

Discussion

- Council members inquired about data sources, and Mr. Earman explained the use of the Zartico Destination Operating System, filtered for Indian River County.
- The group discussed seasonality and booking windows, noting differences between hotels and vacation rentals.
- Members praised the Chamber’s creative campaigns and recognized the importance of coordinated marketing through a Destination Marketing Organization. Without such coordination, as seen in Colorado’s past tourism decline, destinations risk losing market share.
- Questions regarding airline service confirmed that **JetBlue will begin daily service to Boston and JFK in December**, strengthening tourism access.

Conclusion

The Chamber’s presentation demonstrated strong visitor arrivals, spending, and engagement supported by data-driven marketing and expanded air service. Members commended the Chamber’s achievements, acknowledged the statewide awards, and expressed appreciation for its leadership in positioning Indian River County as a premier Florida destination.

Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce 2025-2026 Budget Presentation

Nicholas Sanzone and Jody Van Order provided an update on current tourism initiatives, community programs, and promotional efforts designed to enhance visitation to the Sebastian River area and Indian River County.

Mission & Vision:

- The Chamber continues to support a healthy business environment, promote economic development, and encourage tourism to enhance quality of life.
- The Pelican Porch Visitor Center serves as a central hub, with over **22,000 visitors annually**.

Team & Operations:

- The Chamber team collaborates to manage trends, social media, and visitor engagement.
- Efforts extend beyond chamber membership to **promote all area tourism businesses**.

Visitor Guide & Publications:

- The Chamber’s Visitor Guide remains a cornerstone resource, distributed widely across five visitor centers and in collaboration with Visit Florida.
- **A newly redesigned guide**, “*Find it All in Sebastian*”, emphasizes ecotourism and a fresh visual approach.

Partnerships & Collaborations:

- Collaborations with regional Chambers of Commerce, Visit Space Coast, and Visit Florida continue to strengthen tourism efforts.
- Expanded inclusion now allows for non-chamber-member tourism businesses to be promoted.

Events & Community Engagement:

- Signature events include Grill Out Night, Light Up Night, and the annual Christmas Parade, which draw visitors from more than 50 miles away.
- Concerts in the Park series and partnerships with local festivals attract significant regional participation.

Marketing & Public Relations:

- Strategies include digital and print campaigns, social media, newsletters, and video spotlights.
- Data-driven approaches are increasing engagement, **with measurable growth in non-follower reach across platforms**.
- Sports partnerships (Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Major League Baseball) provided extensive exposure, reaching more than 29 million viewers across print and digital platforms.

Tourism Data & Trends:

- Visitor sign-ins indicated an increase in out-of-state visitors, particularly from New York, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.
- December remains the highest visitation month, driven largely by holiday events. September reflects the lowest visitation.

Creative Initiatives:

- The **Sebastian Mural Trail** continues to expand and attract visitors seeking cultural and authentic Florida experiences.
- Social media campaigns highlight “hidden gems,” such as local parks and trails, with **posts reaching over 44,000 views**.

Conclusion:

The Chamber reaffirmed its commitment to promoting Sebastian as a destination for authentic Florida experiences, with emphasis on ecotourism, cultural assets, and small-town events. The TDC thanked Mr. Sanzone and Ms. Von Order for their comprehensive update and continued efforts in advancing tourism in the Sebastian River Area.

Other Matters

Ms. Bates commended the continued growth in tourism numbers, attributing the success to the dedication and creativity of the County’s tourism partners. She noted that

the passion and commitment of the teams are evident in their work and marketing efforts, which consistently generate excitement and visitor engagement.

Ms. Bates highlighted positive feedback from visitors, many of whom return annually after their first experience, often drawn initially by sporting events. She also emphasized the County's advantageous central location, which makes it an appealing gathering point for families and groups.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at approximately 4:14 p.m.

Next Meeting Date

The next Tourist Development Council meeting will be held on **Wednesday, November 19th, 2025 at 2:00 p. m in the Commission Chambers of the County Administration Building "A".**