

TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (TDC)

The Indian River County (IRC) Tourist Development Council (TDC) met at **2:00 p.m. on Wednesday, February 18, 2026**, 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; **Vice-Chair Karen Mechling**, Interested in Tourist Development, Not an Owner/Operator; **Keith Kite**, Owner/Operator Tourist Accommodations Representative; **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.

Others Present were: **Kristin Daniels**, Office of Management & Budget Director; **Marie Ramkissoon**, Budget & Grant Analyst; **Michael Zito**, Deputy County Administrator; **Ben Earman**, Director of Tourism & Marketing at Visit Indian River; **Krista Hoyt**, Visit Indian River; **Nicholas Sanzone**, Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce; **Jody Van Order**, Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce Operations & Tourism Assistant; **Kendra Bergman**, Coastal Connections; **Rick Hatcher**, Play Treasure Coast; **Kevin Greene**, Play Treasure Coast; **Aaron Vos**, City of Vero Beach; **Jeff Devlin**, Vero Beach Air Show; **Todd Howder**, Vero Beach Air Show; and **Ashley Brown**, Recording Secretary.

Call to Order and Welcome

Chairman Flescher called the meeting to order at 2:03 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 or revisions.

ON MOTION BY Ms. Moore seconded by Mr. Kite, the Council unanimously (7-0) approved the Agenda.

Approval of the Minutes of November 19, 2025

Ms. Mechling had previously reached out to the recording secretary to update the spelling of the name to "Britney".

ON MOTION BY Ms. Moore seconded by Mr. Kite, the Council unanimously (7-0) approved the November 19, 2025 minutes, with one revision.

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

Director

Revenue Report Through December 2025

Kristin Daniels, Budget Director, presented the Tourist Development Tax revenue report through December 2025.

Ms. Daniels reminded the Council that as of January 2025 the County began levying the full five-cent Tourist Development Tax. She explained the allocation as follows:

- Two cents are designated for tourism development agencies, with funding decisions to be made at the May 20 meeting.
- Two and three-quarter cents are allocated to beach restoration.
- One quarter cent is allocated toward the County's obligations related to the Jackie Robinson Training Facility.

Ms. Daniels reported that year-to-date collections are up **\$144,728 (13%)** and are **\$142,051 (12.7%) above budget projections**.

She noted that current year comparisons are somewhat uneven because prior fiscal years only included four cents of tax for part of the period, while Fiscal Year 2025-2026 includes the full five cents for the entire year. Beginning with February comparisons, reports will reflect a true five-cent-to-five-cent comparison.

Ms. Daniels presented revenue trends by fiscal year, noting that while total collections appear higher due to the additional cent, comparisons on a four-cent basis indicate a slight downward trend. She explained that the increase is less than the expected 20% associated with adding the fifth cent, meaning that without the additional cent, revenues would be below prior years.

Mr. Kite stated that he had requested the inclusion of the five-cent comparison and indicated that the graph presented supported the point he had intended to illustrate regarding tourism trends following the unusually strong performance during and immediately after the COVID period. He commented that while collections appear higher overall, the underlying trend shows the market stabilizing rather than growing significantly. He noted that, relative to other areas in Florida and beyond, the County's performance remains stable and comparatively strong.

Ms. Daniels confirmed that, when compared to the adopted budget, revenues remain strong. Monthly collections have ranged from **9.6% to 20% above budget**, with an overall increase of **12.7% year-to-date**.

She added that the previous fiscal year (2024-2025) ended at approximately **\$5.6 million**, partially reflecting the addition of the fifth cent, while Fiscal Year 2022-2023 remains the strongest pre-five-cent year.

Grant Application Process Timeline

Ms. Daniels next reviewed the upcoming grant application schedule for tourism agencies.

- **March 2:** Application portal opens and link distributed
- **May 1:** Application deadline (per policy, late submissions cannot be accepted)
- **May 8:** Application packets distributed to Council members
- **May 20:** Agency presentations and Council rankings due

She explained that Marie, the County's in-house grants coordinator, will oversee application coordination and reimbursement processing this year.

Ms. Daniels reviewed the ranking criteria used by the Council:

- Packet completeness – 10 points
- Presentation – 10 points
- Impact on tourism – 50 points
- Effective use of tourism dollars – 30 points

She noted that funding allocations are ultimately based on Council rankings and recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners, with the current expectation that those recommendations will be presented at the **June 2 Board meeting** for inclusion in the FY 2026-2027 budget.

Ms. Daniels stated that revenue projections are still being developed. While revenues remain strong and no decreases are anticipated, it is too early to determine whether additional funds will be available for distribution.

Additional Discussion

Council discussion included clarification regarding the County's financial obligations associated with the Jackie Robinson Training Facility. Staff explained that prior debt obligations were restructured so that state funding of approximately **\$500,000 annually** now covers the debt service. The remaining quarter-cent allocation supports lease-related maintenance and capital obligations under the long-term agreement. Current debt obligations are anticipated to mature around **2031**.

In closing, Chairman Flescher shared that Council members were invited to attend the June 2nd Board of County Commissioners meeting if they wished to provide input when funding recommendations are presented.

Vice-Chairman Election

Chairman Flescher nominated Vice Chairman Karen Mechling for re-election.

ON A MOTION BY Mr. Kite, seconded by Chairman Flescher, the Council unanimously (6-0) reelected Karen Mechling as Vice-Chair of the Tourist Development Council.

Request for Funding Consideration: Vero Beach Air Show, Inc. – Tourism Partnership Opportunities

The Council considered a request for funding consideration from **Vero Beach Air Show, Inc.** for Tourism Partnership Opportunities.

Jeff Devlin, Executive Director of the Vero Beach Air Show and liaison to the Blue Angels, provided an overview of the upcoming event and the organization's objectives. **Todd Howder**, Vice President of Vero Beach Air Show, Inc., was also in attendance. Mr. Devlin noted the Blue Angels are scheduled to arrive on **Wednesday, May 13**, and explained the event activity spans multiple days, including media and community engagement components. He stated the organization's goal for the 2026 air show is to build on prior successes and maintain an event standard that supports the Blue Angels' interest in returning in future years.

Mr. Devlin outlined two general areas of need: **marketing** and **air show planning efforts**, including the International Council of Air Shows conference (ICAST). Staff clarified the County's outside agency funding policy does not allow reimbursement for travel-related expenses, and Council discussion focused on eligible tourism promotion activities, particularly those intended to increase "heads in beds" through overnight stays.

Council discussion included questions regarding the geographic reach of current and future marketing, emphasizing the importance of targeting out-of-county and out-of-state markets that are more likely to generate overnight lodging. Mr. Devlin explained the organization currently contracts with **Evergreen Media** for a range of marketing services (radio, print, digital, television/cable, video production, and press releases), and indicated the organization is pursuing expanded outreach beyond local markets.

Following discussion, Mr. Devlin stated the organization's request would be **\$50,000**, consisting of the current Evergreen Media marketing budget and additional funding to expand marketing into broader markets outside the County.

Kristin Daniels, Budget Director, confirmed that the Council's **Reserve for Contingencies** is intended for requests that arise outside the grant application cycle and reported the current reserve balance is **\$286,832**.

Additional Council discussion emphasized the importance of documenting performance measures and return on investment for the requested marketing funds. Council members requested that the organization provide post-event metrics where available (e.g., marketing reach, impressions, engagement, and other reporting provided by Evergreen Media), and encouraged coordination with the Tourism Bureau/Chamber partners to support targeted outreach.

ON MOTION BY Mr. Kite, seconded by Chairman Flescher, the Council unanimously voted (6-0) to allocate \$50,000 to Vero Beach Air Show, Inc. for Tourism Partnership Opportunities.

Indian River County Chamber of Commerce – Fiscal Year Update Presentation

Mr. Earman reported on the continued implementation and expansion of the **“Why IRC” branding campaign**, which launched in May 2025 during National Travel and Tourism Week. He explained the campaign is designed to highlight the County’s tourism assets through interchangeable photo and video content used across digital advertising, social media, and print placements. He noted that advertisements are linked directly to relevant content pages rather than the website homepage in order to improve user engagement and reduce click steps.

Mr. Earman advised that the campaign has been expanded into high-end print publications with accompanying digital placements and editorial features. Messaging is tailored to specific markets, including targeted promotion tied to new direct air service to Vero Beach.

Mr. Earman also provided an update on the Chamber’s **new event support initiative**, funded within the existing budget to assist unique festivals and events in Indian River County with marketing efforts. He explained that promotional videos are produced in a format that allows them to be reused in future years. Events supported this fiscal year include the Vero Beach Air Show, the Craft Brew and Wing Fest, the Frog Leg Festival, the Under the Oaks Art Festival, and the Film Festival.

Performance data for recent campaigns was reviewed, showing click-through rates above established benchmarks across multiple events and platforms. Mr. Earman noted that event marketing includes social media, statewide radio advertising, and geographically targeted outreach intended to attract visitors traveling at least fifty miles or more, increasing the likelihood of overnight stays.

Mr. Earman next reported on **ongoing paid media performance** for the Visit Indian River brand, including Google search marketing, video campaigns, Meta platforms, and other digital advertising tools. He noted that carousel-style ads and original content continue to outperform static formats.

Additional updates included:

- Expansion of branded merchandise used for promotions, familiarization tours, and inaugural airline flights
- Enhancements to the Visitor Center, including a new mural installation
- Continued collaboration with regional Treasure Coast tourism partners
- Increased exposure associated with new JetBlue and American Airlines service to Vero Beach
- Growth in social media engagement, including Instagram reaching approximately 14,900 followers
- Continued production of the regional tourism podcast (now in Season Four)
- Ongoing distribution of the destination guide

Mr. Earman also introduced the development of **digital tourism trail passports**, which will replace printed versions of the KidsQuest program. He explained the digital platform will allow visitors to check in at participating attractions using their phones and will allow the Chamber to add or modify partners more efficiently. Planned trails include a KidsQuest passport, an arts and cultural trail, a crate label trail in partnership with the Heritage Center, and an expanded pet-friendly locations trail.

Mr. Earman concluded by noting that additional initiatives are underway for the remainder of the fiscal year and will be reported at the Council's August meeting.

The Council thanked Mr. Earman for the presentation. No formal action was taken.

Other Matters

Play Treasure Coast Sports

The Council received a fiscal year update from **Rick Hatcher**, Executive Director of Play Treasure Coast Sports. **Kevin Green** was also present.

Mr. Hatcher reported on sports tourism activity during the first quarter (October through December), as well as early January performance. During that period, the Sports Commission hosted **10 events**, including **two new events**, which generated approximately **3,100 participants** and **3,300 spectators**. These events produced more than **2,700 room nights**, approximately **\$2.1 million in direct spending**, and an estimated **\$3.7 million in total economic impact**.

Mr. Hatcher highlighted several key events hosted during the quarter, including:

- **Quail Valley Collegiate Golf Championships**, which brought 16 colleges to the County for a four-day tournament.
- **USA Softball High Performance Selection Camp**, held in December at the Jackie Robinson Training Complex, which drew approximately 450 athletes from 38 states along with family members. Mr. Hatcher noted the facility's designation as a training center supports its role in upcoming Olympic preparation and international competition activity.
- **Major League Umpiring Training Academy**, the only designated East Coast training academy for minor league umpire development, which hosted 89 candidates for a 30-day session in January.
- **Vero Beach International Tennis Open**, held at Grand Harbor, which featured approximately 100 female players representing 30 countries, including internationally ranked competitors.

Mr. Hatcher stated that the Sports Commission invested approximately **\$27,000 in grant funding** to support events during this period, generating an estimated return of roughly **\$133 in economic impact for every \$1 invested**.

Looking ahead, Mr. Hatcher provided an overview of upcoming events, including:

- The **Andre Dawson Classic** at Jackie Robinson Training Complex, featuring historically black colleges and universities, with one game scheduled for national broadcast on MLB Network.

- **High School Spring Training**, expected to bring approximately 130 schools to the area through mid-April, utilizing both the training complex and local hotel properties.
- The **International Senior Softball Tournament** scheduled for March, anticipated to bring approximately 30 teams to the County.
- Continued partnership with the **American Junior Golf Association** and the **Florida State Golf Association** for youth tournaments at Sandridge Golf Club.

Mr. Hatcher also announced that **Lee Hunter of the Kimpton Vero Beach Hotel & Spa** has been selected as the new Chairman of the Sports Commission.

Mr. Hatcher further reported on a prospective new event, the **Pan American Surf Fishing Championship**, proposed for **November 6–9**, to be held at Sebastian Inlet State Park. The event is expected to include teams from approximately nine to ten countries, with coordination underway with local tourism partners and lodging providers.

Kevin Green provided brief additional updates, noting recent activity at the Jackie Robinson Training Complex, including the **President’s Day Challenge Youth Baseball Tournament**, which hosted 84 teams and utilized multiple venues across the region. He also highlighted continued growth in rowing activity along the C-54 Canal in Sebastian, with participation from several major universities.

Council members noted the continued synergy between sports tourism and overall visitor growth, including repeat visitation from athletes and families who return to Indian River County for leisure travel after participating in sporting events.

The Council thanked Mr. Hatcher and Mr. Green for the update. No formal action was taken.

Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce

The Council received a tourism update from **Nicholas Sanzone**, representing the **Sebastian River Area Chamber of Commerce (SRACC)**.

Mr. Sanzone reported that the Chamber has experienced approximately **5.5% annual growth over the past two years** across its digital platforms, including Facebook, other social media channels, and YouTube. He stated the Chamber continues to expand its marketing presence through multiple advertising efforts, including billboard placements and magazine advertising tied to major markets.

Mr. Sanzone noted recent promotional placements included advertising partnerships connected to the **Tampa Bay Lightning** and **New York Knicks** publications, helping increase exposure in key visitor markets. He also reported that the Chamber is working with media partners such as **Cumulus Media** and **WFLX** to run targeted television and digital advertising campaigns, including short-form promotional spots.

Mr. Sanzone advised that the Chamber is producing a new familiarization tour video scheduled for release during **National Travel and Tourism Week**, highlighting local assets and tourism opportunities. He stated the Chamber continues to utilize live social media broadcasts, newsletters, and event promotions to maintain audience engagement. He reported that the Chamber’s **Concerts in the Park** series continues to serve as a strong

local and regional draw, attracting visitors to the Sebastian area.

Mr. Sanzone also shared that the Chamber is coordinating with partners to provide visitor itineraries for participants in the upcoming **surf fishing competition**, with the goal of enhancing visitor experiences while in the area.

Additionally, he noted the Chamber is working with a local partner to organize a **surf contest in June** benefiting the Alzheimer's Association. The event will be promoted as a tourism opportunity, with assistance from regional partners, including **Visit Space Coast**, to help track attendance and visitor data due to the event's proximity to the county line.

The Council thanked Mr. Sanzone for the update.

Coastal Connections

Kendra Bergman, representing **Coastal Connections**, announced that the organization has relocated its offices to downtown Vero Beach on **14th Avenue**. She advised that Coastal Connections is now occupying the former Veterans Council building, which provides additional space to accommodate meetings and events.

Ms. Bergman noted that the organization plans to host a public housewarming event in the coming months and that additional details and invitations will be shared once finalized.

Lastly, **Councilmember Kite** noted recent national recognitions highlighting the County's quality of life and tourism appeal. He reported that **Vero Beach** was ranked **No. 2 among the 15 best U.S. beach towns to live in year-round**, according to a recent *Travel + Leisure* magazine. He also shared that Vero Beach was recently identified as the **safest city in Florida**, and that the **City of Sebastian** was ranked among the most livable places to retire in the United States in the same publication.

Mr. Kite encouraged tourism partners to utilize these recognitions in marketing and promotional efforts.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at approximately 4:02 p.m.

Next Meeting Date

The next Tourist Development Council meeting will be held on **Wednesday, May 27, 2026**, at 2:00 p.m. in the Commission Chambers of the County Administration Building A.

