

**Tourist Development Council
Pinellas County
February 18, 2026 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 9:01 AM in the Palm Room at the Pinellas County Communications Building, 333 Chestnut Street, Clearwater, Florida.

Present

Dave Eggers, Chair, County Commissioner
Russ Kimball, Vice-Chair, Sheraton Sand Key Resort
Dave Gattis, City of Belleair Beach Mayor
Phil M. Henderson, Jr., StarLite Cruises
Dylan Hubbard, Hubbard's Marina
Chris Latvala, County Commissioner (non-voting)
Doreen Moore, Travel Resort Services, Inc.
Chuck Prather, The Birchwood Inn
Bruce Rector, City of Clearwater Mayor
Trisha Rodriguez, Clearwater Ferry
Clyde Smith, Bilmar Beach Resort

Not Present

Katie Gannon, City of Oldsmar Mayor
Copley Gerdes, City of St. Petersburg Councilmember

Others Present

Amanda Coffey, Managing Assistant County Attorney
Brian Lowack, Visit St. Pete-Clearwater (VSPC) President and CEO
Craig Campbell, Director of Community and Brand Engagement, VSPC
Kylie Diaz, Vice President of Community Engagement, VSPC
Eddie Kirsch, Director of Digital and Data, VSPC
Ashley Pabilonia, Board Reporter, Deputy Clerk
Other interested individuals

All documents provided to the Clerk's Office have been filed and made a part of the record.

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Chair Eggers called the meeting to order at 9:01 AM; whereupon, he requested that Mayor Gattis lead the Pledge of Allegiance; and that those in attendance introduce themselves.

CHAIR COMMENTS

Chair Eggers briefly discussed a recent media event he attended which highlighted the destination's readiness for visitors; whereupon, he expressed appreciation to the members for their service as Board members and emphasized his excitement for the upcoming year as Chair of the TDC.

APPROVAL OF TDC MINUTES – JANUARY 21, 2025

Mayor Gattis made a motion to approve, which was seconded by Mr. Hubbard and carried unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

No one responded to the Chair's call for public comment.

PRESENTATIONS

Legislative Update

Following an introduction by Chair Eggers, Pinellas County Intergovernmental Liaison Tristan Sommer provided a status update regarding the current Florida legislative session, including details related to subcommittee and committee meetings and subsequent consideration of potential legislation by the full House of Representatives and Senate; whereupon, he indicated that budget proposals from the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Governor include \$80 million in funding for Visit Florida; and that budget negotiations have not yet commenced since tax packages have not been released.

Mr. Henderson arrived at 9:07 AM.

Referring to a document titled *TDT Bill Summaries*, Mr. Sommer also provided an overview of bills pertaining to Tourist Development Tax (TDT) which were proposed in the Florida House of Representatives and Senate, noting that none of the bills appear to be advancing through the legislative process at this time; whereupon, he briefly

discussed the possibility that TDT-related policy may be included in forthcoming tax packages.

Responding to queries by Chair Eggers and Mr. Prather, Mr. Sommer indicated that he believes that policy discussions surrounding TDT have involved expanding uses of TDT revenue; and that while there is no clear indication regarding whether the legislature's handling of TDT-related bills will change next year under new leadership, he believes that the Senate will retain its position with regard to TDT-related legislation under the new incoming President, who represents Manatee County.

In response to an additional query by Mr. Prather, Mr. Sommer discussed potential legislation associated with reforming, reducing, or removing property taxes. Brief discussion ensued regarding the utilization of property tax revenues and potential impacts of decreased revenues; whereupon, responding to queries by Mr. Kimball and Chair Eggers, Mr. Sommer also provided information regarding other proposed legislation which may impact Pinellas County and the possibility that the legislative session may be extended.

Destination Metrics

Mr. Kirsch referred to a PowerPoint presentation and reviewed metrics for December 2025, including statistical data and year-over-year comparisons of TDT collections, vacation rental and hotel performance, and trip patterns; whereupon, he also provided details related to the pace of hotel bookings and top origin markets for hotel bookings.

Responding to queries by Messrs. Henderson and Prather, Mr. Kirsch briefly discussed seasonal travel patterns and provided clarifying details regarding the sample size of the data utilized in Destination Metrics presentations and the top origin markets for hotel bookings; whereupon, in response to a query by Ms. Moore, he indicated that, prior to the next TDC meeting, he can provide a report with updated statistics pertaining to vacation rentals.

Data Update

Ms. Diaz indicated that the purpose of today's presentation is to share information regarding enhancements to Elite Event data. She related that, for nearly a year, staff has been working to transition away from relying on self-reported attendance figures provided by event organizers and to begin independently estimating economic impact and measuring Elite Event attendance; and that VSPC has partnered with a local firm, Street Level One, to implement a multi-layered data strategy, including mobile traffic analytics through Placer.AI, on-site data capture, drone attendance verification, and detailed event footprint mapping; whereupon, she noted that VSPC now has the ability

to convert verified attendance into measurable economic impact, which will allow staff to more confidently evaluate event performance.

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Kirsch provided details regarding the methodology associated with estimating event attendance through mobile traffic analytics; whereupon, he compared event attendance data reported by event organizers to the attendance figures measured by Street Level One and Placer.AI. Mr. Kirsch also discussed the utilization of the Destinations International Event Impact Calculator as a tool to measure the impacts of Elite Events on various economic metrics, including direct sales, total economic impact, and estimated room demand; whereupon, he provided the following preliminary estimated impacts associated with 24 Elite Events from Fiscal Year (FY) 2025:

- Event Attendees: 596,100
- Direct Impact: \$83 million
- Total Economic Impact: \$148 million
- Total Local Taxes Generated: \$4.2 million
- Bed Tax Generated: \$2.16 million
- Overnight Attendees: 154,904
- Room Nights: 145,707

Mr. Lowack noted that the above-listed estimates do not reflect the full impact of the events funded through the 2025 cycle of the Elite Events Funding Program since the calculations were based on data from only 24 of the more than 40 events funded; whereupon, in response to comments by Chair Eggers, Mr. Lowack indicated that, last year, Elite Event organizers were informed that staff was searching for new technology with which to conduct economic impact studies; that staff has been able to obtain data which is more inexpensive and more accurate; and that staff continues to learn and modify the process.

Responding to a query by Mr. Hubbard, Mr. Kirsch provided information regarding the utilization of visitor profile survey responses to calculate specific economic metrics. In response to comments and queries by Mr. Henderson, Mr. Lowack, with input from Mr. Kirsch, indicated that this attendance tracking technology is also being implemented to measure visitation to partner Chambers of Commerce; whereupon, brief discussion ensued regarding the City of Clearwater's utilization of Placer.AI, staff's data layering strategy for verifying the accuracy of Placer.AI, and the value of these enhancements to Elite Event data.

Elite Event Funding

Mr. Campbell indicated that the purpose of this presentation is to provide an overview of the ways in which data is being leveraged to improve the Elite Event Funding Program; whereupon, referring to a PowerPoint presentation and documents included in the agenda packet, he reviewed the following program priorities:

- Drive visitation, awareness, and economic impact
- Data-informed decision-making
- Transparency
- Eliminate subjectivity
- Incentivize events to increase promotional spending

Mr. Campbell also discussed the following proposed changes to the Elite Event Funding Program:

- Revise funding categories and eligibility
- Attendee and visitor figures based on data gathered by VSPC
- Clarify allowable marketing expenses and broadcast viewership/assets
- One year only – events may not reduce more than 50%

Thereupon, Mr. Campbell explained that VSPC is proposing a one-year transition provision under which events funded through the Elite Event Funding Program would receive no less than 50% of their current funding if they no longer qualify under the proposed guidelines; and that while VSPC has provided event organizers with advance notice of upcoming changes, this phased approach is intended to ease the transition and allow organizers time to strengthen their performance metrics.

Mr. Campbell indicated that, based on conversations at a previous TDC meeting, staff has defined use of funding more clearly. He related that, for Category 1 Elite Events, 100% of funds will be allocated toward marketing and/or sponsorship, at VSPC's discretion; and that, for Elite Events under Categories 2 through 5, funds will be evenly split between marketing and/or sponsorship, at VSPC's discretion, and hosting fees, with no restriction; whereupon, Mr. Campbell reviewed the proposed criteria for each category based on the total number of attendees, percentage of tourist attendees, and broadcast views and assets of value to VSPC.

Mr. Campbell compared the current and proposed Elite Event funding criteria and presented the potential impacts of applying the proposed criteria to events which were funded last year. He also highlighted provisions in the proposed program guidelines regarding the use of third-party attendance data, procedures for applicants to dispute

the third-party data, consideration of weather or other extraordinary circumstances affecting a prior event, and evaluation criteria for first-time or newly funded events.

Thereupon, Mr. Campbell briefly summarized next steps, including that recommendations from the TDC will be presented to the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) on March 24; that, with approval from the BCC, Elite Event funding applications would be accepted beginning around April 1; that staff's recommendations for funding will be presented at the July TDC meeting; and that the TDC's final recommendations for funding will be presented to the BCC in August.

In response to queries by Chair Eggers, Mr. Campbell, with input from Mr. Lowack, clarified that Elite Events for FY 2026 were approved last year; that applications submitted in April will be for FY 2027 and would be subject to the changes within the proposed criteria; and that while events failing to meet eligibility requirements in FY 2027 would receive 50% of their FY 2026 funding during the transition year, funding would cease thereafter; whereupon, in response to comments and queries by the members, Messrs. Campbell, with input by Attorney Coffey, provided clarifying details regarding various topics, including the following:

- Allowable uses of Elite Event funding for marketing expenditures
- Requirement that applicants must submit proposed media plans for review
- Documentation and reimbursement process for approved marketing expenses
- Attendance thresholds for different funding categories
- Transition considerations for event organizers adjusting to revised funding criteria
- Potential impacts of proposed changes on existing and long-standing events

Mr. Henderson indicated that he would like to recommend replacing the criterion requiring that 40% of attendees be tourists with a fixed number equivalent to 40% of the total attendance required for each category; whereupon, responding to comments and queries by Messrs. Hubbard and Henderson, Attorney Coffey explained that, if Elite Events funding is awarded for operational purposes, statutory requirements necessitate that event organizers must demonstrate their intent to utilize the funds to attract tourists to their events; and that implementation of Mr. Henderson's recommendation may necessitate case-by-case evaluation of events to ensure compliance with statutory requirements.

Thereupon, Mr. Henderson made a motion to replace the 40% criterion for tourists with the actual number equivalent to 40% of total attendees required for each category. He clarified that this would result in the following tourist attendance requirements for each category:

- Category 1: 16,000

- Category 2: 16,000
- Category 3: 6,000
- Category 4: 3,000
- Category 5: 2,000

Following brief discussion, Mr. Prather seconded the motion. Mr. Lowack cautioned that, since the budgetary impact of Mr. Henderson's amendment is uncertain, staff may need to return to the Board to request additional funding or determine that some events do not qualify due to budgetary constraints; whereupon, Mr. Henderson amended his motion to incorporate the proposed change, subject to staff confirming that it does not create any issues. In response to a query by Chair Eggers, Mr. Prather confirmed that he would second the motion, as amended. Upon Chair Eggers' call for the vote, the motion carried unanimously.

Brief discussion ensued regarding event organizers' use of Elite Event funding and whether to modify the proposed one-year transition provision. Responding to a query by Mayor Gattis, Attorney Coffey indicated that, while her understanding of the previous motion was to approve the entire package with an amendment, clarification may be helpful. Chair Eggers concurred and requested a second motion to approve the package recommended by staff with the amendment proposed by Mr. Henderson; whereupon, Mayor Gattis indicated that he would make that motion, as amended. The motion was seconded by Mr. Smith and carried unanimously.

VSPC PRESIDENT AND CEO UPDATE

Mr. Lowack recognized the following staff members for their years of service to VSPC:

- Eddie Kirsch, Director of Digital and Data – 5 years
- Katie Bridges, Director of Advertising and Promotions – 15 years
- Gail Yeager, Leisure Travel Senior Sales Manager – 20 years
- Hortensia Simmons, Meetings and Conferences Senior Sales Manager – 20 years

Mr. Lowack also indicated that TripAdvisor announced the winners of its Travelers' Choice Best of the Best awards, which included recognition of the following local destinations and experiences:

Clearwater Beach

- No. 2 beach in the United States
- Top beach in Florida
- Among the top beaches in the world

Get Up and Go Kayaking at Shell Key Preserve

- No. 1 in the United States for nature and outdoors experiences
- No. 2 in the world for nature and outdoors experiences
- No. 8 in the United States for top experiences

Little Toot Dolphin Adventure at Clearwater Beach

- No. 4 in the United States for sailing and day cruises

OCC Road House and Museum

- No. 3 pet-friendly restaurant in the United States

Caretta on the Gulf

- No. 11 fine dining restaurant in the United States
- Only Florida restaurant in the rankings

Thereupon, Mr. Lowack provided brief comments regarding recent and upcoming sports events taking place in the destination.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS/DISCUSSIONS

No one responded to the Chair's call for Board member comments.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 10:54 AM.