

Tourist Development Council
Pinellas County
March 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 9:02 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
Copley Gerdes, City of St. Petersburg Councilmember
Phil M. Henderson, Jr., StarLite Cruises
Dylan Hubbard, Hubbard's Marina
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
Chris Latvala, County Commissioner (non-voting)

Others Present

Amanda Coffey, Managing Assistant County Attorney
Brian Lowack, Visit St. Pete-Clearwater (VSPC) President and CEO
Stephanie Alexander-Priakos, Director of Meetings and Conferences, VSPC
Kylie Diaz, Vice President of Community Engagement, VSPC
Steve Grimes, Chief Marketing Officer, VSPC
Eddie Kirsch, Director of Digital and Data, VSPC
Caleb Peterson, Sports Commission Director, 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 9:02 AM; whereupon, he requested that Ms. Moore lead the Pledge of Allegiance. Later in the meeting, he requested that those in attendance introduce themselves.

CHAIR COMMENTS

Chair Eggers encouraged the members to continue their work to the best of their ability and to pray for those affected by current events.

APPROVAL OF TDC MINUTES – FEBRUARY 18, 2026

Upon the Chair's call for a motion to approve the minutes, Mr. Hubbard made a motion to approve, which was seconded by Ms. Moore and carried unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

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

PRESENTATIONS

Intern Presentation

Mr. Lowack related that, upon conclusion of their internship, VSPC interns summarize their experience in a presentation to staff; and that it was decided that, this year, an intern would also make a presentation to the TDC; whereupon, he introduced Adrianna Vargas and provided information regarding her background and experience.

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Ms. Vargas discussed her responsibilities as an intern and reviewed her work in the following areas:

- Community and brand engagement
- Film Commission
- Sports Commission
- Public relations
- Highlights and takeaways

Messrs. Smith and Gerdes arrived at 9:08 AM and 9:13 AM, respectively.

Resident Sentiment Survey Results

Mr. Lowack introduced the item, relating that VSPC has not conducted a resident sentiment survey in a couple of years; whereupon, Ms. Diaz added that the purpose of the resident sentiment survey is to understand residents' thoughts and feelings regarding tourism; and that VSPC utilized surveys and interviews to identify areas of success, opportunities for improvement, and topics of most importance for residents.

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Kirsch reported that approximately 1,200 residents were surveyed; and that respondents were categorized into six regions across the county for the purpose of conducting the survey; whereupon, he described the age demographics, number of years residing in Pinellas County, and homeownership status of the respondents. He also described the attributes and characteristics that respondents associated with Pinellas County and related that they generally agreed that the tourism industry benefits their lives and drives the county's economy and local businesses.

Mr. Kirsch noted that while a majority of respondents believe that the County's tourism industry provides job opportunities to residents, only half of them feel that employment in the industry is easily obtainable, and even fewer perceive that these jobs pay well; whereupon, he discussed regional disparities in responses and related that the findings may assist VSPC in tailoring outreach and messaging efforts.

Mr. Kirsch also discussed sentiments related to engagement with tourism and indicated that respondents generally agreed that visitor spending generates funding for community services; that they enjoy interacting with visitors; that the county has a healthy balance of tourist and resident activity; and that they support responsible tourism growth. He also reported that respondents expressed concerns regarding congestion and traffic driven by tourism, the level of respect visitors hold for the local community, and the negative impacts of tourism upon community culture and natural resources; whereupon, Mr. Kirsch noted that responses again varied by region.

Thereupon, Mr. Kirsch indicated that some respondents were unaware of tourism investments such as beach renourishment and renovations to parks and preserves. He also reviewed results regarding respondents' generally positive familiarity and satisfaction with VSPC.

In response to comments and queries by Mr. Hubbard and Ms. Moore, Mr. Kirsch indicated that research firm Future Partners conducted the survey, which was offered online; that messaging regarding the survey was dispersed through various methods, including via email and social media; and that, as part of the online survey, respondents were offered the option to elect to an in-person interview.

Responding to comments and queries by Mr. Prather, Mr. Lowack discussed VSPC's ongoing efforts to communicate the value and benefits of tourism to residents through the *From Visitors with Love* campaign and other outreach initiatives; whereupon, discussion ensued regarding various topics related to tourism, including the following:

- Tax savings and government revenue generated through tourism
- Potential outreach and messaging during spring break related to benefits of tourism
- Resident awareness of tourism-related jobs and economic impacts
- Opportunities to coordinate messaging efforts with local businesses and Chambers of Commerce

Meetings and Conferences Update

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Ms. Alexander-Priakos reviewed year-to-date Meetings and Conferences statistics from October 1, 2025, through early March 2026, including the following:

- Leads: 738
- Room Nights: 61,216
- Economic Impact: \$42,120,776.00

Ms. Alexander-Priakos indicated that the number of leads received this fiscal year has improved when compared to the same time period in the previous fiscal year; whereupon, she provided information regarding top client industries, projected room nights associated with bookings for 2025 through 2030, and the typical booking window for meetings and conferences.

Ms. Alexander-Priakos indicated that, based on data received from hotel partners, VSPC launched an enhanced incentive program in January; and that the program increased the amount of incentive funding available to hotel partners who secure meetings and conferences in the destination, which has resulted in the payment of \$70,000.00 of additional incentives awarded to hotel partners, 32 more meetings, and 16,000 additional room nights; whereupon, she noted that, due to the program's success, its duration was extended through April and may continue further, depending on budget availability.

Thereupon, Ms. Alexander-Priakos discussed different activities that the Meetings and Conferences team engage in, such as trade shows, sales missions, familiarization trips, and site visits, and provided statistics regarding room nights and economic impact generated through those efforts.

Responding to a query by Ms. Rodriguez, Ms. Alexander-Priakos indicated that a group must book a total of 100 room nights to qualify for VSPC's incentive program.

Sports Commission Update

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Peterson provided an overview of various events hosted in the destination for the following sports:

- Softball
- Sailing
- Baseball
- Lacrosse
- Swimming
- Volleyball
- Basketball
- Golf
- Bowling
- Hockey
- Running
- Tennis
- Hurling

Mr. Peterson then indicated that the Sprowls Horizon Sports Park complex recently opened in Pinellas Park; and that, with the demand for additional sports fields, the complex is of great benefit to the destination; whereupon, he provided details regarding Triple Crown Sports' soft opening of the complex, its partnership with the United States Specialty Sports Association, and ongoing discussions with VSPC related to tournament growth and national exposure. He also reported that a potential developer for the Toytown site requested that additional subsurface investigation be conducted on the site to determine development feasibility and design options; whereupon, he noted that staff anticipates receiving a report in early April, followed by a revised development proposal and a future recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners.

Thereupon, Mr. Peterson presented statistics for the fiscal year-to-date statistics regarding the total number of events, room nights, direct spending, and market segment breakdown and related that softball and baseball contribute the most sporting events due to the availability of diamond fields in the destination; and that events for sports played on rectangle fields are less represented due to limited supply, a demand for which Toytown is proposed to fulfill.

In response to comments by Mr. Kimball, Mr. Peterson described conversations between VSPC and local economic development organizations regarding ways to leverage exposure at sporting events to attract corporate relocation opportunities to the destination.

Responding to comments and queries by the members, Mr. Peterson provided information various topics, including the following:

- Investment in sports facilities to attract sporting events and tourism
- The destination's appeal to sports travelers and event organizers
- Preferred field quantities for hosting tournaments
- Challenges related to the development of local sports facilities

Destination Metrics

Mr. Kirsch referred to a PowerPoint presentation and reviewed metrics for January and February 2026, including statistical data and year-over-year comparisons of Tourist Development Tax (TDT) collections, mobile visitor estimates, and hotel and vacation rental performance; whereupon, he provided details regarding the pace of hotel and vacation rental bookings for March through June.

Marketing Update

Referring to a PowerPoint presentation, Mr. Grimes indicated that, since hiring a new advertising agency at the end of last year, VSPC has shifted more toward trackable digital advertising approaches; that advertising impressions, ad clicks, and engagement with VSPC's website have increased; and that more individuals are requesting copies of the destination guide magazine. He also described marketing efforts targeted towards travelers reconsidering a planned trip to Mexico and residents of northern regions experiencing severe winter weather to encourage visitation to the destination.

Thereupon, Mr. Grimes discussed marketing efforts and viewership data related to the Firestone Grand Prix of St. Petersburg and the Valspar Championship golf tournament, noting that both Elite Events generated significant national television and social media exposure for the destination. He also described promotional initiatives associated with the events, including strategic signage placement, influencer marketing, and social media marketing efforts.

Mr. Grimes then indicated that VSPC is considering a new advertising campaign while continuing to emphasize features that distinguish the destination from other Florida locations; that while the *Ampersand* campaign has been successful, its format presented creative challenges and limited potential for emotional storytelling; and that the new campaign, *Beach. Culture.*, will provide more targeted messaging focused on either the beach or cultural aspects of the destination; whereupon, he reviewed conceptual advertising examples for the *Beach. Culture.* campaign and noted that a modernized VSPC logo will debut with the campaign launch.

Additionally, Mr. Grimes provided background information regarding the Ocean Race, an international sailing competition, and displayed a video announcing St. Petersburg as the only stop location in the United States for the race. He also noted that an Ocean Live Park will be constructed to accommodate yacht docking and related public activities; whereupon, he discussed the race's expected attendance and economic impact and its potential to showcase the destination to a worldwide audience.

In response to comments and queries by Mr. Henderson, Mr. Grimes clarified that while VSPC is spending more for digital advertising, costs associated with generating additional traffic and more precisely targeting advertisements to specific users have not increased; whereupon, in response to comments and queries by the members, Mr. Grimes, with input from Mr. Lowack, provided information regarding various topics related to the Ocean Race, including the following:

- Entities involved in organizing the event
- Anticipated Elite Event funding and marketing expenditures
- Race route, timing, and stopover duration
- Engagement opportunities with the community, tourists, and educational institutions

VSPC PRESIDENT AND CEO UPDATE

Mr. Lowack provided information regarding the following updates:

- The Dali Museum was ranked a top five museum by USA Today's 10Best Reader's Choice Awards and also announced an expansion project.
- *Southern Living* released this year's The South's Best awards, which ranked St. Petersburg as a top ten best city in the South and the No. 1 best city in Florida. The Don CeSar was also ranked as the No. 6 best classic hotel in the South.
- VSPC received two awards from The Golden City Gate at the ITB Berlin trade show, including a Gold Star for the Palate and Palette activation and campaign and a Silver Star for a brand video.
- Announcement of the MICHELIN Guide 2026 edition is anticipated for April 14.
- StarLite Cruises and Hubbard's Marina have again been nominated by *USA Today* for best dinner cruise and best charter boat, respectively.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS/DISCUSSIONS

In response to comments and queries by Mr. Prather, Chair Eggers provided an update regarding Pinellas County's partnership with the United States Army Corps of Engineers, including efforts to facilitate progress by Commissioners Kathleen Peters, Brian Scott, and Chris Scherer, Public Works Director Kelli Hammer Levy, and Congresswoman Anna Paulina Luna; whereupon, Chair Eggers related that he believes discussions regarding a long-term funding partnership have progressed positively and may be nearing finalization.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 11:03 AM.