



DeSoto County

Tourism Development Council

Meeting Minutes - Draft

Tuesday, August 19, 2025

1:30 PM

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Anthney called the meeting to order at 1:31 p.m.

Present: Jerod Gross, Judy Wertz-Strickland, Trent Anthney, Pam Ames and Summer Lempenau

Absent: Sanjay Patel, Zac Varner and Meagan Joseph

MINUTES APPROVAL

Minutes for June 10, 2025

TDC members reviewed the minutes from the June 10, 2025 meeting. Mr. Gross made a motion to approve the minutes, Ms. Wertz-Strickland seconded. All approved.

REGULAR BUSINESS

Bed Tax Revenue Update

Ms. Guffey provided an update on bed tax revenue for May 2025, which were down by 32% compared to the previous year.

The group acknowledged the concerning drop in local bed tax revenue, which has not been mirrored in surrounding counties. Charlotte County experienced a slight dip due to hurricane repairs, but Collier County saw a 2% increase in April and 1% in May, while Lee County had a 2% decrease in April but a 7% increase in May.

TDC members agreed that ongoing road construction is a major factor deterring visitors. Construction has made navigation difficult, leading to negative reviews and reduced business for local establishments.

The construction is expected to continue for approximately two and a half more years, with the project originally planned for three years but extended by one year.

Businesses, including restaurants and shops, are struggling due to limited access and ongoing disruptions. The city has been unable to secure adequate signage to direct visitors, and requests to the Department of Transportation (DOT) have not been successful.

The FDOT project is a significant overhaul of Arcadia's downtown infrastructure, including new sidewalks, drainage, lighting, traffic lights, and signage.

The project's cost has increased from an initial estimate of \$1 million to over \$10 million, but the state is covering the expense, not local taxpayers.

Discussion of tourism advertising options, Visit Florida Guide

Ms. Guffey asked TDC members for suggestions on advertising DeSoto tourism. The group discussed the available budget, with \$30,000 remaining until the end of September for the current fiscal year.

There was consensus not to spend the entire amount, but to allocate a significant portion.

After considering various suggestions, a motion was approved to allocate up to \$10,000 for advertising.

The amount is set as a maximum, with flexibility to adjust based on results.

The effectiveness of the spend will be reviewed in a few months, with the next meeting scheduled for October.

The focus is on attracting visitors from outside the local area, particularly those three to four hours away or further. Examples include targeting day trippers, overnight visitors, tour groups, and antique enthusiasts.

The impact of the \$10,000 advertising allocation will not be clear until after the next meeting in October.

The group discussed potential advertising in the Visit Florida Vacation guide.

The Florida Visitor Guide is widely distributed, with tens of thousands shipped annually and available both in print and digital formats.

The guide is visually appealing and reaches a broad audience, mainly east of the Mississippi.

Digital versions provide links to listings, boosting SEO and increasing online traffic.

Advertising options and pricing:

Featured photo listing costs \$1,500 annually and provides a small highlighted section. A third-page ad is priced at \$7,000; a full-page ad costs \$17,000; a two-page spread is \$30,000.

The marketing budget is approximately \$80,000, making larger ads (full-page or two-page) less feasible.

Visit Florida's website receives 29 million sessions, and the guide generates 211,000 reader response leads.

Members agreed that staff should pursue boosting social media posts and the Visit Florida Featured Photo advertisement.

Mr. Gross made a motion that staff pursue spending advertising at a maximum of \$10,000 for now, as well as pursuing the Visit Florida Featured Photo Advertisement.

Ms. Wertz-Strickland seconded. All approved.

Discussion of Tourism Department funding additional downtown signage

Ms. Ames stated that additional signage would be complicated because construction workers tend to remove signage that is not theirs.

Road construction has significantly impacted downtown businesses, contributing to several closures, including Honey Bells and a local pool hall.

Community awareness of existing downtown businesses remains a challenge, as some residents are unaware of available offerings.

Ms. Guffey stated that Tourism staff is actively implementing a social media plan to

help bring awareness to downtown businesses.

Emphasis was placed on selecting hashtags with varying traffic volumes to maximize visibility. Recommended usage is two to three hashtags per post, with three to five posts suggested. Data tracking is a priority, with the intention to provide more insights in the future.

A marketing boot camp, co-hosted with the Small Business Development Center, Economic Development, and DeSoto Chamber of Commerce, is scheduled for the 20th and 21st from 11:30 to 1:30. The goal is to help business owners improve their marketing efforts.

Ms. Wertz-Strickland stated that the city is planning a Christmas give-back event, tentatively set for December 5th to coincide with the wine walk.

Plans include two 40-foot and two 20-foot Christmas trees, new and repurposed decorations, extensive park lighting, and free food booths.

A giveaway bag with a cookie and Christmas item is planned for attendees.

All city activities that night will be free to the public. Final date confirmation is pending a city vote, and a flyer will be distributed once approved.

Chair Anthney suggested pursuing more Google and social media advertisements with a budget of \$100 a month targeting birding, fossil hunting and other river-related activities.

Mr. Gross made a motion to approve the \$100 a month for advertising, Ms Wertz-Strickland seconded. All approved.

Holiday Inn Express GM Shannon Alves

Ms. Alves could not be reached so this item was tabled.

Arcadia Main Street Update

Ms. Ames provided an update on the Arcadia Main Street program and downtown projects.

Main Street celebrated its 40th anniversary, with consistent progress over the past 12 years. A \$25,000 grant from AARP was received to conduct a walk audit of the 18-block downtown area.

The audit aims to improve wayfinding and accessibility, with the grant funding these enhancements. FDOT involvement was sought to foster collaboration and mutual understanding, but no partnership has materialized yet.

A new mural project is underway on Magnolia Street, featuring local themes and historic buildings.

Contracts have been signed with the building owner and artist, and the mural will be located on a historic building at Orange and Magnolia.

The mural will be part of an unofficial "greetings from" mural tour, aiming to attract visitors and provide photo opportunities.

New veteran-themed banners have been installed downtown, with plans for a veteran celebration.

A vintage market will launch in June 2024, running from October to May, based on recommendations from a state marketing evaluation.

Additional events include:

Veteran celebration on November 8 (Second Saturday)

Merry Market on December 13 (Second Saturday)

Wine Walk with a new format: wine will be served in booths on the street due to liability concerns over store insurance.

Distributors will serve and sell wine and craft beer at the event.

The event format is inspired by similar events in Sebring.

Ms. Ames added that several new businesses are opening, including a men's collectibles store, a photographer, a dog groomer, and a potential restaurant.

The men's store will focus on collectibles such as baseball cards and fishing poles, providing a space for men while others shop downtown.

Despite closures, there is optimism about new additions and ongoing revitalization efforts.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

n/a

COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Ms. Lempenau discussed a custom mobile app that Peace River Campground is looking into called App My Community. The app is suitable for campgrounds, RV resorts, chambers of commerce, and communities, allowing organizers to communicate directly with customers and community members.

STAFF COMMENTS

Ms. Guffey mentioned that the annual "DeSoto's Got Talent" event is scheduled for September 9th, featuring a new competition among first responders. The event is part of efforts to create more family-friendly weekday activities.

Mr. Sutphin stated that new businesses have opened over the summer, including Pletcher's on Monroe, a tea shop, and a barbershop. Ongoing efforts are being made to connect with local high school project managers and other community stakeholders. Local businesses like Joshua Citrus are promoting new products, such as quarts and pints of ice cream.

Ms. Guffey discussed the DeSoto Tourism staff's attendance at the upcoming Florida Governor's Conference on tourism. A tourism award ("Flagler") has been won, though the level was not known.

ADJOURN

Chair Anthney called for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Lempenau made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 2:56 p.m., Ms. Ames seconded. All approved.

NOTE: For quasi-judicial matters, any party desiring a verbatim record of the proceeding of this hearing for the purpose of an appeal is advised to make private arrangements for the production of a

record and anyone wishing to present documents or other written evidence to the Board must provide

eight (8) copies of the written material. If special accommodations are required in accordance with

the Americans with Disabilities Act, individuals should contact the County Administrator's Office by

calling 863-993-4800 at least forty-eight hours prior to the hearing.