

DUVAL COUNTY TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, December 8th, 2021 - 10:00 A.M.
Lynwood Roberts Room, City Hall

TDC Members In Attendance: Terrance Freeman (Vice Chair & City Council Vice President), Aaron Bowman (Past Chair & City Council Member), Jeff Truhlar, Angela Phillips, Dennis Thompson, Joe Hindsley

Excused: Council President Sam Newby (Chair), Dennis Chan, Steve Grossman

TDC Staff: Lillian Graning (TDC Executive Director), Phillip Peterson (Council Auditor's Office), Reece Wilson (Office of General Counsel), Jeff Clements (Council Research Division)

WELCOME

Vice Chair Freeman called the meeting to order at 10:03 and the attendees introduced themselves for the record.

Public Comments

None

OPERATIONS

1) Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the October 28, 2021 regular TDC Meeting were approved unanimously as distributed.

2) Financial Report

Assistant Council Auditor Phillip Peterson gave the TDC financial report. Bed tax revenue collections for the 12 months ending October 2021 were \$7,751,983.45 compared to \$6,179,314.09 for the 12 months ending October 2020 (up 25.45%). October 2021 collections (first month of the fiscal year) were \$668,070.24, up by 43.24% from \$466,406.79 in October 2020. Actual collections for October 2021 exceeded the budgeted amount for the month by \$108,132.74.

Mr. Peterson reviewed the budgetary balances available in the various contract and administrative accounts: Destination Services - \$0; Marketing - \$0; Convention/Group Sales - \$0; Planning and Research - \$42,500; Event Grants - \$27,000; Remaining to be Spent in Accordance with TDC Plan - \$77,309; Administrative Budget - \$205,366.94; Convention Grants - \$322,067.77; Equestrian Center Promotion - \$40,150.05; Special Revenue Fund - \$48,912.50; Contingency Account - \$1,196,060; Development Account - \$1,6621,075.63.

3) Market Report

TDC Executive Director Lillian Graning gave the tourism market report, noting that the long duration of the COVID pandemic is taking a psychological toll on travelers and the appearance of the omicron variant is yet another potential setback to travel industry recovery. Consumer and traveler sentiment is down slightly to 88% of respondents planning travel within the upcoming six months. While only 25% of travelers say COVID has prevented travel plans for the upcoming six months, 46% say it's played a role in changes to those plans. Leisure travel in September and October held steady at pre-COVID levels indicating that while there may be seasonal fluctuations, there is no need to anticipate a new, lower, baseline for the Northeast Florida market. The TDC adopted a fiscally responsible FY 21-22 budget by projecting revenue figures just 15% under pre-COVID levels to \$7.2 million. The revenue trends through October continue to exceed projections and may serve as an opportunity for larger investments in grants and infrastructure toward the middle of the fiscal year. Currently, it appears as though FY 21-22 will outperform estimates and position the TDC well for investment positions for future years.

ACTION ITEMS

4) Visit Jacksonville FY 20-21 Performance Evaluation

Ms. Graning presented the commission with her evaluation scores for Visit Jacksonville Inc.'s performance: Marketing: 99 (A+); Convention Sales & Service: 94 (A); Tourist Bureau / Destination Services: 97 (A+). She explained the evaluation process for new TDC members, which includes lots of detailed backup information provided by Visit Jax to document all its work and deliverables. She noted that the current year is the last of Visit Jax's 5-year contract and the organization is performing well on its relatively new metrics. She believes there could be a better way to evaluate performance without requiring reams of extremely detailed data.

Visit Jacksonville President and CEO Michael Corrigan said he is very happy with the Executive Director's positive evaluation. The current evaluation system is what it is because it was needed by the TDC at one time due to the nature of the contracts in effect several years ago, but probably no longer. There is probably a better way to evaluate performance without the excruciating detail currently required to score many minute measures. Council Member Bowman asked how Visit Jax has performed over the last 5 years and whether this year's scores are a typical rating. Ms. Graning said there didn't used to be a formal evaluation mechanism so there was less specificity and very few deliverables. There was mis-alignment in the evaluation process early in the contract period, and the specific deliverables requirements were added in year 2 leading to a rough transition period. Then the COVID pandemic hit and a lot of the performance deliverables were rendered moot, so it was still problematic. Last year Visit Jax over-delivered on its metrics and performed exceptionally well. There is a renewal option on the contract as it exists now, but at the last meeting the TDC approved starting an RFP process to restructure the contracts and the evaluation mechanism to be more efficient and responsive.

Motion (Bowman/2nd Hindsley): approve the Visit Jax evaluation scores as submitted by the TDC Executive Director – **approved 6-0.**

5) Grant Guideline Adjustments

Ms. Graning presented an amended version of the "TDC Grant Guidelines" document that dictates eligibility and administrative qualifications and procedures for all TDC funded grant programs, as requested by the board at the previous meeting. She said the TDC at its last meeting allocated all of its grant funds for the year at the first meeting of the fiscal year and discussed possibly changing the procedure so that doesn't happen again and preclude future opportunities. Ms. Graning explained the current grant categories and the application process. She proposed a 2-window grant application process with up to 60% of available funds awarded in the first window and the remainder in the second. She would like TDC input on whether to allow future-year commitments for big events that plan beyond the current fiscal year. The amount of grant fund allocations has grown slowly over the last few years as more and more funding requests have come in.

Council Member Bowman asked if there were any restrictions on how far in advance someone could submit an application, trying to get into an earlier window when there was more funds available. Ms. Graning said the TDC could impose some restrictions based on the year of the event (i.e. you can't apply before the year in which the event will take place). If you allow applications in advance, you're committing future years' budget capacity. Mr. Bowman said likes the proposed change and suggested trying it for a year and seeing how it works. There are pros and cons to having just 2 windows for applications, and the TDC need to have the flexibility to consider requests ad hoc for events that suddenly appear. Ms. Graning said the grant guidelines currently have an application deadline of 30 day in advance of a TDC meeting but the TDC Chair can allow an exception to hear a worthy application. Mr. Truhlar asked if there is still a \$5 per room night cap on grants; Ms. Graning noted that it was raised to \$10 at the last meeting.

Motion (Bowman/2nd Truhlar): adopt the revised grant guideless as presented – **approved 6-0.**

6) Allocation of Visit Jacksonville Savings

Ms. Graning reported that Visit Jacksonville had requested approval to reallocate any savings they secured as a result of fiscally conservative strategies in the FY 20-21 for reuse in year FY 21-22. TDC previously approved

this request, and this is the report on how those savings will be allocate for use. The amounts to be reallocated are:

1. Marketing = \$70,393
2. Convention Sales & Service (Group Sales) = \$357,382
3. Tourist Bureau (Destination Services) = \$110,376

Council Member Bowman asked if there are any rules on how long unused funds can be in the budget before they lapse or get reallocated? Phillip Peterson said there are no limits on how long they can remain unallocated, but must be spent only on authorized TDC purposes under state law. TDC funds are not swept into the City's fund balance at fiscal year-end and if not reallocated they will stay in their accounts awaiting future use. Ms. Graning clarified that the TDC previously authorized Visit Jax to propose alternative uses, and the dollars never rolled back into TDC's accounts from Visit Jax's contracts.

Motion (Bowman/2nd Truhlar): approve the Visit Jacksonville FY20-21 funding reallocations as presented in the agenda package – **approved 6-0.**

7) Visitor Center Improvement Request

Michael Corrigan explained Visit Jax's move of the new Downtown Visitor Center 2 years ago and said they could make an even bigger splash with some improvements to that location. A vendor has suggested 3 potential ideas for attractions to draw in both visitors and more local residents: a main space concept (Jax Interactive Advisor video information kiosk); an exterior window concept (streetscape visualizer outward-facing large format video screen); and a 360 degree video concept (Wave Cascade immersive experience). He recommended that the concepts be ranked as follows: window streetscape visualizer first, interactive advisor kiosk second, Wave Cascade concept third. In response to a question from Mr. Truhlar about whether the streetscape visualizer is static or changing, Mr. Corrigan said it would be a scrolling video that can also accommodate promotions of coming attractions and other informational content. Joe Hindsley said likes the concept but wants to be sure that money is being spent first on maximizing the Visit Jax app because that's what everyone is using, including people who don't come by the visitor center at all.

Ms. Graning said she loves all 3 concepts and encourages everyone to visit the downtown visitor center and experience all it has to offer. Visit Jax recognizes that more people are using their phones exclusively and believe that anything that doesn't show up on a mobile app doesn't exist. She loves the interactive capabilities of several of the proposed technologies but wants to explore how they could be taken out to visitors where they are and not require them to come downtown to the center to try it. Physical traffic to the centers is declining so there is a need to get the content out into the world to maximize the return on investment. She would love to have an option for visitors to download the app while standing on the street when they see the streetscape visualizer at night or when the center is closed. Mr. Corrigan agreed that app downloads are vital. Council Member Bowman asked Phillip Peterson if he is comfortable with the proposed expenditure of \$140,000 for the window streetscape – is this a typical TDC expenditure? Mr. Peterson said the TDC's revenues are recovering nicely and it currently has healthy reserves. How to use the funds most appropriately is a policy call for the board. Mr. Bowman how long the lease for the current location runs. Mr. Corrigan said they have 5 more years, and they will likely face a substantial rent increase at that time because of the redevelopment of downtown. This technology will likely be obsolete in 5 years but could be portable if a change in facility was required.

In response to a question from Mr. Truhlar about whether Visit Jax wants all 3 items funded, Mr. Corrigan they do, but want to be reasonable and are willing to take one or two of the items and test the value of those and potentially come back later with another ask for the other elements. Dennis Thompson asked if there is a maintenance contract on the equipment. Mr. Corrigan said haven't talked with the vendor about that but will get a warranty and negotiate over maintenance. Mr. Truhlar asked if the interactive kiosk be visible from the street. Mr. Corrigan said both that and the 360 degree experience will be visible from outside the center. Lori Boyer, CEO of the DIA, said she loves the idea of the streetscape visualizer as a way of injecting light and interest into the downtown streetscape and being very attractive.

Motion (Bowman/2nd Thompson): approve purchase of the interior Jas Interactive Advisor kiosk (\$150,000) and the streetscape visualizer (\$140,000)

Angela Phillips and Jeff Truhlar asked that the items be voted on separately. Joe Hindsley said he would prefer to see smartphone app development prioritized first before these suggested items, particularly because visitor center traffic is declining and app use is increasing.

The Bowman **motion failed 2-4** (Bowman and Thompson opposed).

Motion (Phillips/2nd Truhlar): approve the purchase of the window streetscape visualizer (\$140,000) – **approved 6-0**.

Motion (Bowman/2nd Thompson) approve the interior Jax interactive advisor (\$150,000) –

Mr. Bowman said now is not the time to be timid in investing with the travel market recovering; he advocated for upgrading the visitor center and helping enliven downtown. Ms. Phillips said she thinks there are better ways to spend the money on the app or perhaps another group travel recruiter rather than a touchscreen kiosk inside a building. Ms. Graning suggested asking Visit Jacksonville to work with the vendor on ways to take the proposed technology out into the public realm. Mr. Corrigan said the purpose of the interior kiosk is to work with people already visiting Jacksonville to get them to extend their stay by informing them of all the things they could see and do in town. Mr. Truhlar said he would like for all 3 of the technologies to be visible from the outside and in a changing mode that will attract attention. Mr. Bowman noted that the TDC had previously decided that a downtown visitor center was important and it needs to be attractive and interactive, not just static.

The Bowman **motion failed 2-4** (Bowman and Thompson in favor).

Mr. Freeman relinquished the chair to Mr. Bowman.

Motion (Freeman/2nd Phillips): direct Visit Jax to work with the vendor to explore mobile technologies that can be deployed in the field and could also be used in the visitor center when not deployed; also explore different sizes and costs of technology (i.e. 4 foot screen versus 6 foot screen) and the different effect each has on overall viewer impact.

Mr. Bowman opposed the motion as diverting investment away from the downtown visitor center.

The Freeman **motion was approved 4-2** (Bowman and Thompson opposed).

Mr. Corrigan said that the downtown visitor center, pre-COVID, drew great foot traffic and he expects that that will resume in the post-COVID era. They appreciate the concept of having technology that is mobile but could be used in the visitor center.

DISCUSSION ITEMS

8) Visit Jacksonville Update

Mr. Corrigan thanked and congratulated his staff for their great work under difficult circumstances over the past couple of years. He said Visit Jax is working with the Jacksonville Aviation Authority on providing familiarization trips to new direct flight cities and is working with the Jacksonville Port Authority on their Puerto Ricco service and opportunities. They work with the Jacksonville Transportation Authority on lighting the Acosta Bridge and transporting visitors for groups booking events in the city. Mr. Corrigan noted that the City's Parks and Recreation Department is looking at building facilities (such as large ballfield complexes) that encourage tourism via hosting tournaments. Visit Jax also has a great relationship with Downtown Vision Inc., DIA, the University of North Florida, Edward Waters University, etc. Lots of good things going on with great partnerships. He also noted that many great hotel investments in a variety of types going on across the city, particularly in downtown. He realizes that the TDC needs to do an RFP for tourism services to fix the problems with the current contracts and performance evaluation mechanisms, but that uncertainty about whether Visit Jax will win the contracts again is hard on the agency's 17 employees who are doing great work.

9) Public Comment

Lori Boyer of the DIA said her board meets at noon today and she would like for her board to have the benefit of the TDC's thoughts on their in-progress revision of the downtown development master plan. She particularly wants to know if TDC thinks is appropriate to incentivize construction of additional downtown hotels at this time or if that is counterproductive to maintaining acceptable room rates and occupancy levels. The DIA's consultant believes it is time to "stay the course" and maintain the current policy of not incentivizing new hotels downtown.

Ms. Boyer said that restaurant, retail and residential interest is very high now and the DIA board might want to incentivize a unique hotel that offers something new and different to the downtown market.

Mr. Hindsley, General Manager of the Hyatt Regency Hotel downtown, thanked Ms. Boyer for all the DIA's work promoting and improving downtown. He said he did 2 tours in St. Louis and the retailers and restaurateurs there will tell you they couldn't survive just on downtown residents – they need tourist and convention traffic to generate the foot traffic they need. He doesn't see the advantage to more hotels that will cannibalize business from existing hotels. He said "lifestyle" and specialty brand boutique hotels can develop their own demand, particularly among younger travelers. Jacksonville has lots of mid- to low-price hotels that don't generate market demand on their own. Mr. Bowman said Jacksonville is behind the curve on office demand but off the charts on industrial space demand. He would like to see DIA incentivize downtown office absorption. Ms. Boyer said that is part of their new plan to incentivize use of currently vacant space.

Ms. Boyer asked the hoteliers on the panel what they thought would be a reasonable occupancy rate for existing hotels that would merit DIA incentives for new properties. Angela Phillips said 85%. Jeff Truhlar said many chains will build new inventory when a market reach 70% occupancy, although he doesn't necessarily agree that that is sufficient. The downtown hotels are struggling. Ms. Graning said each hotel brand has its own specific set of metrics that determine when and where they build new inventory. That's what will determine what happens in the market – the development of enough things to see and do to attract sufficient visitor traffic to support new construction should be the priority.

INFORMATION MATERIALS (NO DISCUSSION REQUIRED)

- ✓ CVB Grant Commitments
- ✓ Equestrian Center Grant Commitments

CLOSING CONSIDERATION

Next meeting: Thursday, February 24th, 2021 at 10 am, Lynwood Roberts Room of Jacksonville City Hall

The meeting was adjourned at 11:57 a.m.