

# TourismMarketing Today

The Official Newsletter of Destinations Florida | [www.DestinationsFlorida.org](http://www.DestinationsFlorida.org) | April 2024

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## Advocacy for 2025 Starts Today

by Mat Forrest, Destinations Florida Government Affairs

The 2024 Legislative Session adjourned sine die as scheduled on Mar. 8. Unless a special session is called, the Legislature will not assemble again until after the General Election when lawmakers meet for committee weeks.

### Session Highlights

1. The most significant proposed changes to the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) statute failed.
2. Language impacting the TDT in both the House and Senate tax packages was removed in the final "delete everything" amendment.
3. Legislation expanding TDT uses and allowing local governments discretion failed.
4. Legislation that allows a one-time use for certain affordable housing projects in the Keys passed.

5. VISIT FLORIDA funding was not controversial this year and will maintain an allocation of \$80 million for the 2024-25 fiscal year.

### Legislation

#### Tax Packages ... TDT Renewal & 25% Single Project Provisions – **FAILED**

Initially both the Senate and House tax packages included language that impacted the TDT statute, section 125.0104, Florida Statutes.

The House bill was by far the most significant. HB 7073 limited all new TDTs to six years and required existing TDTs to be approved by voters by July 1, 2029. This section of the bill received a lot of attention from members during its initial committee hearings. The

*ADVOCACY FOR 2025 continues on pg. 4*

## Proactive Advocacy

by Robert Skrob



In summer 2022 and again in fall 2023, we prepared as if Legislative Sessions 2023 and 2024 were

going to be the toughest we had ever faced. And we were right. We did face some of the worst Tourist Development Tax proposals we had ever seen.

Many lawmakers stepped up to support your local marketing efforts and expressed determination to protect the current uses of the TDT.

This is a huge testament to the work you and your industry have put in over the last two years.

*E.D.'s MESSAGE... continues on pg. 3*

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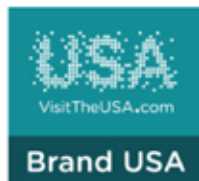
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#### On the Cover

The Capitol Complex includes the Historic Capitol, the 22-story Capitol, the Knott Building, and two five-story office buildings for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Open to the public during business hours, the Capitol Complex welcomes visitors and residents to take a tour, learn more about the state's history and government, and enjoy panoramic views from the 22nd floor observatory/art gallery.

Photo: Savannah Sams

## Konnie Patke Named Executive Director of Columbia County Tourist Development

Meet Konnie Patke, newly appointed executive director of Columbia County Tourist Development. She moved to Lake City, Florida, from Texas, where she spent almost nine years as director of group sales for the Fredericksburg, Texas CVB. During her time in Fredericksburg, Patke developed the destination as a corporate retreat, small conference, and incentive option, increasing the group room night production by more than 300%.

Patke's short-term goals for Columbia County tourism include becoming a resource for local partners and visitors by using an updated website or mobile app to provide information and engaging with local partners to foster a collaborative tourism community. She says that leveraging social media and targeted marketing campaigns to showcase the diverse attractions of Lake City and Columbia County will captivate potential visitors' interest beyond the well-known springs.

In the long term she plans to develop social moments for visitors and locals to share their experiences on social media with initiatives such as photo contests, branded hashtags, and Instagramable spots around the city to stimulate engagement. Patke and her team will also build relationships with sports leagues, event organizers, and group travel planners to position Lake City as a top destination for group and sports tourism. Finally, they will work to expand their marketing efforts beyond Florida, partnering with influencers, leveraging digital advertising, and attending national or international tourism expos.

Patke truly believes and lives, "None of us are as good as all of us." She plans to participate in Destinations Florida events to gain insights into tourism-friendly legislation, potential funding opportunities to support tourism initiatives, and the latest trends in tourism marketing and management. She also looks forward to meeting with other DMO leaders in the state to share best practices, to collaborate on regional marketing efforts, and to learn from their experiences.



Konnie Patke

"Our strategic approach to both immediate and long-term goals, supported by the resources and networking opportunities provided by Destinations Florida, positions Lake City well on the path to becoming a standout destination within Florida and beyond," Patke said.

When she isn't promoting tourism to Lake City/Columbia County, Patke keeps busy with an eclectic variety of pastimes that include sports, fitness and health, viticulture, animal rescue/fostering/adoption, reading/learning, and family/community activities.

"My local favorites include exploring trails, enjoying the eclectic culinary scene, and attending local events to highlight the diverse appeal of Lake City," she said.

### E.D.'s MESSAGE... continued from pg. 1

While we have been successful in defending against expanding the uses of the TDT, in the near future we will need to become proactive in our advocacy.

As TDT revenues continue to increase, there will be more local elected officials calling for expanding the permissible uses.

Although we've done a ton of work the last few years to prepare a strong defense, now we must scale our relationships, our understanding of the law, and our advocacy efforts to become

proactive. We must do this to be prepared for what happens after election day, when lawmakers will again become focused on the TDT as a potential funding source after they've secured their offices.

You'll see a lot more on this over the next several months. It's always a great idea to foster stronger relationships between your tourism industry and your elected officials. The strength of those relationships will determine how well we are able to protect the tourism marketing efforts that drive Florida's economy.

members on the committees expressed concerns about the TDT renewal provision and hoped it would be removed in later versions, which it eventually was. Thank you to everyone who reached out to their delegation members to voice your opinion.

The Senate tax package, SB 7074, also contained changes to section 125.0104, F.S., and included language similar to the provisions of SB 1748 Tourist Development Tax by Sen. Brodeur (R-Seminole, Orange), which required a super majority vote for a specific project to be allocated more than 25% of the TDT funds in a county.

**Both of the provisions affecting the TDT were left out of the final version of the Senate tax package bill, which passed on Wednesday, Mar. 6. The House concurred with the Senate bill on Thursday, Mar. 7, and the bill was approved.**

## Tourist Development Tax Bills

Five initiatives that impacted 125.0104, F.S., Tourist Development Taxes, were filed at the start of session. In the end only one passed, allowing surplus TDT to be used for affordable housing in areas of critical state concern (Monroe County).

### Affordable Housing Expansion – PASSED

**SB 1456 and HB 1297 Affordable Housing in Counties Designated as Areas of Critical State Concern by Sen. Rodriguez (R-Miami-Dade, Monroe) and Rep. Mooney (R-Monroe)**

As the name states, these bills were for counties designated as areas of critical state concern, namely Monroe County. They amended several tax codes, including a provision that permits the county to transfer surplus TDT revenue for affordable housing purposes. Both bills moved slowly and were modified at almost every committee hearing. SB 1456, the more specific of the two bills, passed. If approved by the governor, the bill is effective July 1, 2024.

### Local Government Expansion – FAILED

**SB 1072 and HB 1081 Tourist Development by Sen. Avila (R-Miami-Dade) and Rep. Porras (R-Miami-Dade)** These bills applied to Miami-Dade County. They distributed half of the TDT collections to the municipalities where it is collected. Senator Avila has introduced this idea before, and it's likely we'll see versions of it again. The bills make several changes, and I recommend reviewing the language completely so we are prepared for future sessions.

### Film Production Expansion – FAILED

**SB 872 and HB 1453 Tourist Development Tax by Sen. Stewart (D-Orange) and Rep. Valdes (D-Hillsborough)** These bills have been around for several sessions without much movement, if any, and it was the same this year. Neither bill was heard. They authorized TDTs to be used toward funding incentives for the production of films and television series by certain production companies.

### Limited Single Entity Restriction – FAILED

**SB 1748 and HB 1599 Tourist Development Tax by Sen. Brodeur (R-Seminole, Orange) and Rep. Truenow (R-Lake)**

These bills restricted how much can be allocated to a single project (25%). The Senate bill moved well, unanimously passing two of three committees before stalling. The House bill was never heard. Similar language was also included in the initial Senate tax package, SB 7074. The language was left out of the final bill and was not included anywhere else.

### DMO Funding Requirement – FAILED

**SB 1594 Tourist Impact Tax by Sen. Stewart (D-Orange)** This bill required a supermajority vote of the county commission to reduce the funding of the county DMO in counties that fund the organization with less than 50% of all TDT. The bill did not have a House companion, and it was never heard.

## Other Legislation

### Vacation Rentals – PASSED

**SB 280 and HB 1537 Vacation Rentals by Sen. DiCeglie (R-Pinellas) and Rep. Griffiths (R-Bay)** Despite opposition from the Florida League of Cities and various vacation rental groups, legislation relating to vacation rentals finally passed both chambers this session. SB 280 was very controversial and debated heavily in both chambers. It narrowly passed the House by a vote of 60 to 51 and the Senate by a vote of 23 to 16.

SB 280 is supported by some hotel associations. From the DMO perspective, we support the changes as it clearly requires full collection and remittance of the TDT. It also requires that registration numbers be posted in an online listing, which should help identify properties.

For local governments, the bill continues to grandfather in all local laws, ordinances, or

regulations adopted on or before June 1, 2011. It adds a new grandfather date, Jan. 1, 2016, for any county that has established county registration requirements for rental of vacation rentals. This reportedly only applies to Flagler County. With those exceptions in place, the bill specifically states, "The regulation of advertising platforms is preempted to the state" and then contains 197 lines of what a local government can include in their local ordinances in regard to registrations, fees, fines, and revocation. I recommend you review the 37-page bill in its entirety if you're interested in this issue.

If approved by the governor, it is effective July 1, 2024, except for the sections that are expressly delayed, such as the DBPR vacation rental license information system (July 1, 2025). This bill remains controversial, and many groups will be advocating to the Governor's Office in support or opposition. If you are interested in this bill, please send your comments, position, questions, etc., directly to Robert Skrob, executive director of Destinations Florida.

### Budget

I'm happy to report that for the first time in many years, funding for VISIT FLORIDA was not a heavily debated issue. The governor recommended \$100 million. The Senate proposed \$80 million, and the House accepted the Senate offer without debate. This maintains the current level of funding for VISIT FLORIDA, which was a record high last year.

### What's Next?

The 2025 Regular Session dates are "late," so it is actually 14 months before the next Regular Session will conclude. It will convene on Tuesday, Mar. 4, 2025, and conclude on May 2, 2025. The next session will be the start of new leadership teams in both the House and Senate, new committee chairs, and several new members after the November 2024 elections. Pre-session committee weeks have not been announced and probably won't be until after the November elections. However, they will likely take place in December 2024 and January to March 2025.

Even though the leadership teams will change, based on the House Ways & Means Workshop this session, we anticipate there will be legislation related to the Tourist Development Tax filed next session.

We are also getting closer to the next convening of the Florida Taxation & Budget Reform Commission. Florida's Constitution requires this commission to convene every 20 years and examine:

- State's budgetary process;
- State's revenue needs and expenditure processes;
- Appropriateness and efficiency of the State's tax structure;
- State's revenue-raising capabilities; and
- State's constitutional limitations on taxation and expenditures.

The commission issues a report of the results and proposes to the Legislature any recommended statutory changes "not later than one hundred eighty days prior to the general election in the second year following the year in which the commission is established ... ."

This commission could also recommend changes to the TDT statute. We are reaching the end of the current 20-year cycle, and this report will be required before the 2027 session. The commission will likely begin its work in 2026.

In short, your engagement with your delegation over the next couple of years is critical to the next 20 years. Strive to personally know each legislator and educate them on the issues that are important to the tourism industry. The campaign trail is a great time to meet and discuss issues, not only with incumbents but also new candidates. It is never too early!

The 2024 session is over. Advocacy for the 2025 session starts today.

## J. Auvis Cole Selected to Lead Citrus County Tourism Division

Citrus County has named J. Auvis Cole the county's new director of tourism. Cole assumed his new duties on Feb. 19.

Auvis Cole comes to the county by way of South Carolina and brings over 15 years of executive-level experience in the tourism industry to the post, including executive director of the Union County (S.C.) Tourism Commission, senior vice president of sales and sports development for the Rock Hill (S.C.) CVB, and director of sales and service for Visit Fort Wayne (Ind.).

"Auvis Cole brings vast and valuable experience to Citrus County," said County Administrator Steve Howard, "including a keen awareness of the role tourism plays in the big picture of economic development."

Cole said of his appointment, "I'm extremely excited to be a part of not only a progressive county, but a dynamic tourism destination with both an amazing

brand and multiple opportunities for future growth."

He says his immediate goal is to get out into the community as much as possible.

"I really want to hear from not only our stakeholders but equally from our citizens to ensure we grow tourism the right way," Cole said. "Speaking of long-term goals, we need to develop a strategic plan, a plan that touches every part of Citrus County. Building off us being the Manatee Capital of the World, I believe the rest of the county is poised to see the same excitement and growth in our other rich areas."

With several family members living in the area, Cole is well acquainted with what the destination has to offer, and he is enjoying life in his new hometown.

"So far I have enjoyed biking around the Withlacoochee State Trail, attending my

very first Strawberry Festival in Floral City, and yes, of course, hanging with the manatees at Three Sisters Springs," he said.



J. Auvis Cole

Cole graduated from Ohio's Central State University with a B.A. in communications and earned an M.B.A in international business and marketing from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

A recognized leader in the hospitality industry, Cole successfully completed South Carolina's Economic Development Institute and is a Riley Institute Fellow in the Diversity Leadership Initiative program at Furman University. He is also a Sports Events & Tourism Association (Sports ETA) Certified Sports Event Executive.

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## TikTok Rule Update: Prohibited Applications List Released

by Steven M. Hogan

Over the past several months, we have tracked the progress of Florida's implementation of the "TikTok" ban under section 112.22, Florida Statutes. This statute went into effect on July 1, 2023, and bans "prohibited applications" on government-issued devices.

We have referred to the statute and the rulemaking process as targeting TikTok because of the rhetoric around the passage of the law, but it goes beyond TikTok to impact other apps the Department of Management Services (DMS) deems to be prohibited applications.

In December 2023, DMS finalized the rule implementing the TikTok ban. The full text of the final rule can be viewed here: <https://bit.ly/tiktok-dms-rule>



Prohibited applications on government-issued devices are QQ, TikTok, WeChat, VKontakte, and Kaspersky.

The rule states that DMS will create a list of prohibited applications and will periodically publish that list. Today, we have that list—DMS has published it here: [bit.ly/tiktok-dms-list](https://bit.ly/tiktok-dms-list)

As expected, DMS has applied the ban to TikTok and other applications it has deemed prohibited on government-issued devices. The applications are

1. QQ
2. TikTok
3. WeChat
4. VKontakte
5. Kaspersky

Government employers can request waivers to use prohibited applications. The final version of the waiver request form created by DMS can be accessed here: [bit.ly/tiktok-waivers](https://bit.ly/tiktok-waivers)

*Steven M. Hogan is a shareholder with the Ausley McMullen law firm in Tallahassee. Destinations Florida has retained Mr. Hogan to consult with our members on the Tourist Development Tax and related legal issues. You can contact Mr. Hogan at [shogan@ausley.com](mailto:shogan@ausley.com). Nothing in this article constitutes legal advice. Please seek counsel of your own choosing before making decisions that impact yourself or your organization.*



Steven M. Hogan

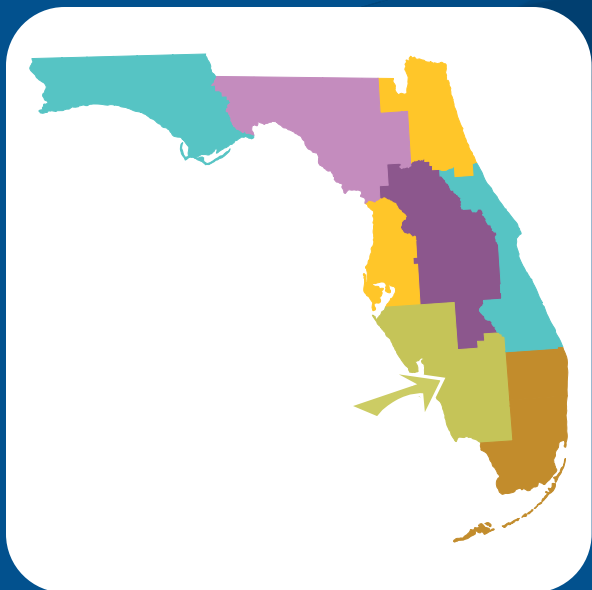
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- Bradenton Area CVB
- Fort Myers Islands, Beaches & Neighborhoods
- Hendry County TDC
- Naples, Marco Island, Everglades CVB
- Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach VCB
- Visit Sarasota County

## Bradenton Area Reveals Convention Center Plans, Launches Sustainable Water Ferry

In January 2024, the Bradenton Area CVB revealed key updates to the expansion and renovations of the convention center. From humble beginnings as a local civic center, the \$48 million project will add a 14,000 sq. ft. ballroom with pre-function space, enabling the convention center to attract corporate and association conventions from Florida, the Southeast, and beyond. The building will also have a climate-controlled corridor connecting it to the Palmetto Marriott Resort and Spa, adding more than 8,000 sq. ft. of indoor meeting space available to event planners.



The Gulf Islands Ferry offers services from downtown Bradenton to Anna Maria Island four days a week.

The CVB also celebrated the maiden voyage of the Gulf Islands Ferry. The water ferry connects downtown Bradenton to the Anna Maria City Pier and the Bridge Street Pier. With two boats in service, the Downtown Duchess and Miss Anna Maria, the ferry is an affordable way for beachgoers to avoid stressful high-season traffic. The fully ADA-accessible ferries are powered by renewable energy sources and feature modern energy-efficient design elements.



The Bradenton Area Convention Center reveals updates to its \$48 million renovation and expansion, expected to open in 2025.





## Lee County VCB Rebounds With Arts Focus

Bright spots appear throughout Lee County as the Fort Myers area destination recovers from Hurricane Ian's direct and devastating blow in September 2022.

"Hurricane Ian gave us the challenge to go beyond the beach and promote other unique areas," said Tamara Pigott, Lee County VCB executive director. "Artistic efforts like mural installations throughout Lee County celebrate our history as well as local artists. And we have nine webcams that have been installed throughout the county to give everyone a look at our vibrant neighborhoods and beautiful beaches in real-time."



One of several murals in North Fort Myers

Some highlights include:

- In December, Margaritaville Beach Resort opened on Fort Myers Beach and includes 254 guest rooms and six restaurants.
- With VCB funding, the Fort Myers Mural Society has been commissioned to create 10 full-scale murals. Thus far, Cape Coral, Pine Island, and Lehigh Acres have been included in this outdoor artistic endeavor, and more are planned for the months ahead.
- Island Hopper Songwriter Fest celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary with 10 days of music, Sept. 20-29. The VCB-sponsored event brings thousands of visitors to the destination during the shoulder season. With performances on Captiva Island, Cape Coral, downtown Fort Myers, and Fort Myers Beach, the intimate venues give visitors the opportunity to discover the stories behind the songs.

Fiscal year-to-date tax collections are 15% higher than fiscal year 2023.



The webcam at Manatee park is a partnership with Lee County Parks and Recreation.

## Florida's Paradise Coast Takes Home Several HSMIA Adrian Awards

The Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMIA) presented the 2023 Adrian Awards in February 2024, and Florida's Paradise Coast won big. Most notably, the next generation of the already successful Only Paradise Will Do campaign featuring a bold new look and large "ONLY" graphic took home one of the CVB's four President's Awards. This signature "ONLY" immediately captured the attention of the destination's audiences and conveyed the exclusive

nature of the brand and its promise of an elevated experience. Other wins included three President's Awards for the ONLY Scent Card, ONLY Integrated Campaign, and Partner Recovery Series (Post-Hurricane Ian).



Florida's Paradise Coast ONLY Campaign ad promises an elevated experience.



AC Hotel Naples 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue began welcoming guests in December 2023.

While the destination hasn't shied away from awards, there have also been exciting openings worth noting. The AC Hotel Naples welcomed guests beginning in December 2023, bringing a new offering to the iconic 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue district, steps from Tin City. Welcoming guests with unparalleled sophistication to Florida's Paradise Coast, the design-driven hotel features modern guest rooms plus a signature rooftop bar and lounge, Limón. Compass by Margaritaville opened in March, bringing a laid-back, all-suite property perfect for families or large groups. And after much anticipation, The Turtle Club plans to welcome back guests in early April—a long-awaited opening post-Hurricane Ian.



## Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Wins 2023 Reader's Choice Award

Travelers continue to experience the best of the outside piece of paradise in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach, and now the destination's meeting and conventions has taken off to a new level. Jeff Berg, meeting market and sales manager, has continued to increase the number of meetings and events in the

destination and was recently honored as the Convention South 2023 Reader's Choice Award winner.

Berg continues to promote the destination and has sealed future conventions with groups such as Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighting (ARFF) Leadership Symposium, Fusion Academy EPIC!, and US Sports Congress, to name a few. Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach has also been named the official host site for US Sports Congress.



Jeff Berg (at right) receives the ConventionSouth Reader's Choice Award.

Visitors to the area combine business with pleasure at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center in Punta Gorda or on the beach at the Palm Island Resort in Englewood, where they continue to offer beautiful spaces for meetings and conventions. In December 2023, the destination launched the opening of the new Sunseeker Resort Charlotte Harbor that features nearly 600 hotel rooms, more than 180 extended-stay suites, 60,000 sq. ft. of meeting and event space, a golf course for guests, 20 food and beverage concepts, two pool-side escapes, and a spa. Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach now offers more options to meet groups' needs for their next meeting or convention.

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## Visit Sarasota County Holds Satellite Media Tour

Visit Sarasota County (VSC) arranged a satellite media tour this year to showcase the newest, most updated outdoor and nature offerings in the county. Spokespeople representing Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, The Bay Park Conservancy, and The Green Orchid Restaurant participated in more than 25 interviews featured on TV and radio stations across the country.



KEF Media associates work to perfect the lighting for the interviewees and the backdrop for the media tour.

"It was exciting to see these topics featured, with fantastic press generated, all the while focusing on our area's commitment to a net positive future," said VSC President & CEO Erin Duggan.

All from the gorgeous setting of Marie Selby Gardens, representatives got to highlight the recently opened phase one of the gardens' master plan, which includes the Living Energy Access Facility (LEAF) and The Green Orchid Restaurant, the first net-positive energy restaurant in the world. The Bay Park Conservancy is preserving, restoring, and transforming city-owned land along Sarasota Bay to be a gathering place for the entire community.



Michael Klauber, co-owner of Michael's On East Restaurant, and Jennifer Rominiecki, president and CEO of Selby Gardens, prepare for their first interview of the morning together.

The media tour amassed an audience of 36 million total across both regional and national markets. VSC is always thrilled to be able to share more exciting additions in the county that offer new ways to enjoy the Florida sunshine.

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## Florida's Adventure Coast Unveils Newest Mermaid Statue

Florida's Adventure Coast Visitors Bureau, Brooksville-Weeki Wachee is thrilled to announce the unveiling of "Meraki," the newest addition to The Mermaid Tale Trail! This captivating sculpture joins the growing collection of vibrant mermaid statues scattered throughout Hernando County, enchanting residents and visitors alike. Standing proudly at the VISIT FLORIDA Welcome Center in Jennings, Florida, "Meraki" embodies the Greek concept of putting your soul, creativity, and love into everything you do. [FloridasAdventureCoast.com](http://FloridasAdventureCoast.com)



John Athanason from Florida's Adventure Coast unveils "Meraki" with David Dodd from VISIT FLORIDA.

## Discover Lake County Brings Central Florida's Charm to Miami

In February, Discover Lake County traveled to South Florida to spotlight the destination's many draws to Smorgasburg Miami attendees. Highlighting activities for nature enthusiasts, foodies, culture junkies, and shopaholics, the Discover Lake County team engaged with hundreds of people and more than 100 leads were collected through the use of a custom vending machine. The activation was a huge hit, dispensing branded ear plugs tying to the county's Tune Out to Tune In campaign and driving leads and social media traffic. [DiscoverLakeFL.com](http://DiscoverLakeFL.com)



Discover Lake County brings personalized travel itineraries and custom earplugs to Smorgasburg Miami.

## Visit St. Lucie Tourism Generates Over \$1 Billion in Total Economic Impact in 2023

In partnership with Downs & St. Germain Research, Visit St. Lucie recently completed its year-long visitor tracking and economic impact study. Compared to the last study (2017), the latest study revealed major increases in direct economic impact (+56.4%), direct spending (+55.2%), and other KPIs. Since wrapping up the study, Visit St. Lucie staff has launched a local public relations campaign including a digital media distribution plan, a speaker's bureau, and various community outreach efforts to share the story of the value of tourism in the community. [VisitStLucie.com](http://VisitStLucie.com)



Charlotte Bireley, director of tourism and marketing for Visit St. Lucie, presents the value of tourism to St. Lucie County residents.

## Visit Orlando Warms Up NYC—Inspires Travel to Orlando During Cold Months

Visit Orlando brought a little warm sunshine to New York City's Winter Village at Bryant Park for its second annual Warm Up with Visit Orlando activation. Thousands of New Yorkers enjoyed Orlando Skate Nights and Family SUNDAY FUNday, ice skating to a customized sunny Orlando Playlist around an orange glow ice rink. Families captured memories in Visit Orlando's "No Snow" sun globe and Wall of Warm, sipped hot chocolate, and bundled up with branded orange scarves. Winter Doesn't Exist is a complete integrated campaign that combines advertising, publicity, social media, activations, and more to inspire travel to Orlando. [VisitOrlando.com](http://VisitOrlando.com)



Visit Orlando inspires travel to Orlando with engaging activations, including a unique skating experience, photo ops, and hot chocolate.



## Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Spreads Their Wings to Germany

Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach expanded into the international market just last year and quickly engaged with German travel writers and leisure sales opportunities to promote the destination. Leisure and International Sales Manager Aimee Blenker and Public Relations Manager Lois Croft attended ITB's Travel & Tourism Conference in Berlin, Germany along with Vera Sommers from the DMO's German marketing and public relations firm, Touristik. A special media luncheon and three days full of appointments with German tour operators and agencies helped them promote Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach to the German market. [PureFlorida.com](http://PureFlorida.com)



Lois Croft, Vera Sommers, and Aimee Blenker promote Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach at the ITB Travel & Tourism Conference in Germany.

## Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches Sponsors Native American Festival for Second Year

In February, Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches sponsored the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Princess Place Preserve Pow Wow, a two-day festival highlighting Florida's indigenous peoples. Attendees got an up-close look at Native American culture via traditional dance performances, weapons demonstrations, encampment displays, wildlife exhibits, and more. It was PCFB's second year of sponsoring the event, which had more than 7,000 attendees. [VisitFlagler.com](http://VisitFlagler.com)



Sponsored by Palm Coast and the Flagler Beaches, the Princess Place Preserve Pow Wow features traditional Native American dancing.

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## Visit Jacksonville Explorers Program Enjoys Successful Relaunch

Visit Jacksonville recently relaunched its popular Beaches Explorers program as Visit Jacksonville Explorers to give visitors an opportunity to explore what there is to see and do in all areas of Jacksonville. The first two Explorers events of the calendar year were a big success. A standing-room-only crowd competed in Jacksonville trivia night at Engine 15 Brewing, and nearly 100 kids participated in ice skating at the Community First Igloo. [VisitJacksonville.com](http://VisitJacksonville.com)



People skate at the Community First Igloo as part of the Visit Jacksonville Explorers program.

## Visit Sarasota County Expands Networking Opportunities

Visit Sarasota County hosts monthly Partner Coffee events, but recently held one as a co-event in conjunction with the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce. Held at Pop's Sunset Grill, both a VSC member and a Venice COC member, each organization invited members to enjoy a water-view breakfast and outstanding networking. With nearly 100 attendees, new relationships were built and new partners were gained by each organization, which work collaboratively as community partners in multiple capacities. [VisitSarasota.com](http://VisitSarasota.com)



Members of Visit Sarasota County and the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce gather for coffee and networking at a local restaurant.

## Greater Miami CVB Showcases Miami Countryside

Miami-Dade County Commission Vice Chair Anthony Rodriguez and the GMCVB's Rolando Aedo showcased Greater Miami's countryside at the Houston Rodeo in February, spotlighting Miami-Dade's own CountryFest. The family-friendly tradition returns to Tropical Park in April, hosting the renowned Miami International Livestock Show and Rodeo, live music, and more. Established in 2015, the weekend-long event draws cattle breeders from around the world and locals and tourists hoping to kick up their cowboy boots. [MiamiandMiamiBeach.com](http://MiamiandMiamiBeach.com)



Miami-Dade County Commission Vice Chair Anthony Rodriguez (second from left) and the Greater Miami CVB's Rolando Aedo (second from right) showcase CountryFest at the Houston Rodeo. Photo: [MiamiAndMiamiBeach.com](http://MiamiAndMiamiBeach.com)

## Discover The Palm Beaches Launches Brand Campaign at NYC Event

The Palm Beaches Collection brand campaign was officially launched on Mar. 6 at the Gansevoort Rooftop in New York City. A total of 117 guests, including traditional journalists, influencers, and sales clients, enjoyed the event. The evening's highlight was a speech by Discover The Palm Beaches President & CEO Milton Segarra, in which he outlined how visitors can curate their perfect collection of vacation experiences with the many diverse attractions and offerings available in The Palm Beaches. [ThePalmBeaches.com](http://ThePalmBeaches.com)



Discover The Palm Beaches team members pose with emblems of the many attractions and offerings in the destination.



## Motorcyclists Celebrate 83<sup>rd</sup> Annual Daytona Beach Bike Week

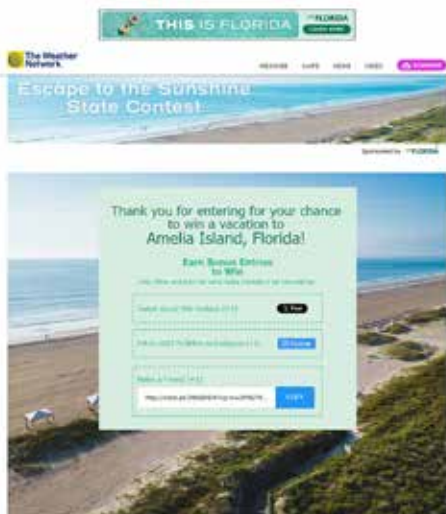
Hundreds of thousands of motorcyclists from around the world flocked to the Daytona Beach area and Volusia County to attend the renowned 83<sup>rd</sup> annual Daytona Beach Bike Week on Mar. 1-10. Visitors enjoyed the beautiful Florida weather, live music, industry's top vendors, bike shows, motorcycle racing at Daytona International Speedway, and miles of scenic rides along famous A1A, historic Main Street, and the scenic loop. The dates for next year's rally are Feb. 28-Mar. 9. [DaytonaBeach.com](http://DaytonaBeach.com)



Motorcycle enthusiasts ride the Scenic Loop during the 83<sup>rd</sup> annual Daytona Beach Bike Week in the Daytona Beach area and Volusia County. Photo: Daytona Beach Area CVB

## Amelia Island CVB Promotes Sunny Escapes to Canadians

In February, Amelia Island CVB partnered with VISIT FLORIDA on a nationwide Canadian promotion with Canada's Weather Network. The Florida Flyaway promotion offered Canadians dreams of a sunny escape and provided a significant and timely boost to Amelia Island brand awareness and consideration. The effort set a record for the Weather Network, generating more than 3.2 million impressions, 77,700 entries, and nearly 7,000 email opt-ins. And thanks to the support of VISIT FLORIDA and local island partners, the promotion didn't cost the CVB a dime! [AmeliaIsland.com](http://AmeliaIsland.com)



A contest page from the Weather Network invites Canadians to escape to sunny Amelia Island, Florida.

## Space Coast Tourism Wins Five Addy Awards

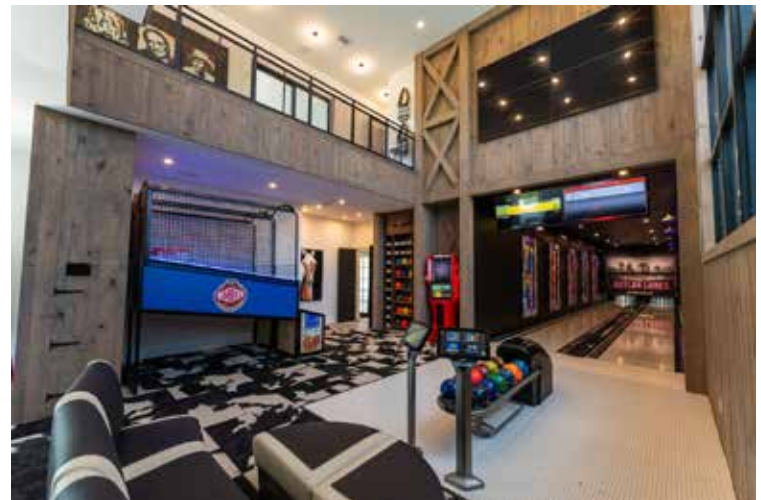
The Space Coast Office of Tourism and their marketing firm &Barr won five Addy Awards. For the SCOT Countdown ad: Gold – Elements of Advertising, Cinematography and Silvers for Cross Platform Campaign, Consumer, Regional/National; Elements of Advertising, Video Editing; and Television, Regional/National, Single Spot. For the SCOT TikTok Astro Campaign: Silver for Social Media Campaign. [VisitSpaceCoast.com](http://VisitSpaceCoast.com)



The award-winning Countdown ad features a launch countdown voiceover with iconic activities around the Space Coast.

## Kissimmee Mansion Reaches for the Stars With Extravagant Theming

Known as the Vacation Home Capital of the World®, Kissimmee is a hub for a variety of vacation rentals, from two-bedroom condominiums to 15-bedroom mega mansions, many of which are expertly decorated and themed. The latest home to hit the market is Morlando, a 16,000 sq. ft. house of epic entertainment. A three-story rocket room and play area with 18 bunk beds, laser tag, a bowling alley, and a theater room are among its features. Learn more at [Jeeves Florida Rentals](http://JeevesFloridaRentals.com) and search "Morlando Space Mansion." [ExperienceKissimmee.com](http://ExperienceKissimmee.com)



The pictured game room is on the first level of Morlando, located at 1228 Grand Traverse Parkway in Kissimmee.



## Visit Tampa Bay Announces Largest Calendar Year Tourism Numbers

Visit Tampa Bay has announced its stellar calendar year results for Hillsborough County tourism in both hotel revenue and TDT collections for 2023. Total taxable hotel revenue for 2023 came in at \$1,081,186,149, an increase of 4.82% compared to 2022. TDT collections for 2023 reached an impressive \$64,886,741, showcasing the aggressive efforts of Tampa Bay's tourism community. Recently acclaimed as Florida's "It" city by Condé Nast Traveler, Tampa Bay continues to experience a steady increase in revenue and visitations against its competitive sets. [VisitTampaBay.com](http://VisitTampaBay.com)



Santiago C. Corrada, president and CEO of Visit Tampa Bay

## Rock the Block Comes to St. Pete/Clearwater

The beautiful beachside community of Treasure Island, in St. Pete/Clearwater, is taking on the starring role in the new season of HGTV's *Rock the Block*, which premiered in March. The fifth season of the hit TV show pits four teams against each other to renovate waterfront condos and is hosted by popular carpenter, craftsman, and design expert Ty Pennington. Visit St. Pete/Clearwater is looking for the show to have the same reach, impact, and smashing success of last season's *Rock the Block*, which attracted more than 12.7 million total viewers. This year's season marks the seventh time HGTV has filmed in the destination. [VisitStPeteClearwater.com](http://VisitStPeteClearwater.com)



Cast members of *Rock the Block* get ready to work in St. Pete/Clearwater. HGTV enthusiasts: how many can you name?

## First-Ever 3D Printed Artificial Reefs Deployed Off Destin-Fort Walton Beach

On Feb. 26, the first-ever 3D printed artificial reefs were deployed nine miles offshore of Destin-Fort Walton Beach. The 25 concrete modules, ranging from 60 to 90 feet deep across five permitted areas, join the thousands of reefs in place, providing new homes for sea life, as well as new spots for divers to explore and anglers to fish. The project is part of a grant received from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission through the Natural Resource Damage Assessment Artificial Reef Creation and Restoration Project. [DestinFWB.com](http://DestinFWB.com)



The successful deployment of these innovative man-made reefs was overseen by the tourism organization's Coastal Resource Team led by Alex Fogg. Photo: Courtesy of Okaloosa County Public Information Office

## Florida Keys Launches Cultural, Arts Giveaway

A Florida Keys Cultural Heritage Quest showcases the Key's creative, artistic heritage through a trivia-based quiz giveaway. The winner receives stays at Islamorada's Casa Morada and Key West's Westwinds Inn, a tour of Morada Way Arts District, and a gyotaku session with artists; an Old Town Literary Walking Tour, a Sacred Space Gallery art class, and performance at Key West Theater in Key West; and visits to four cultural museums and Keys-crafted gifts. The giveaway attracted more than 3,100 entrants. [Fla-Keys.com](http://Fla-Keys.com)



The winner of the Florida Keys Cultural Heritage Quest giveaway will experience a tour of Islamorada's Morada Way Arts District with artist Michelle Nicole Lowe, among other activities. Photo: Michelle Nicole Lowe





## CAUSEway Car Show Cruises Back to Panama City, Florida

Destination Panama City was thrilled to welcome back the fourth annual CAUSEway Car Show to Historic Downtown Panama City. This community event, hosted by the dedicated nonprofit 850 Crew Car Club, raised an impressive \$28,000 to support local children battling cancer. More than 8,000 spectators joined the festivities, showcasing a shared passion for classic cars and a heartwarming commitment to giving back. [DestinationPanamaCity.com](http://DestinationPanamaCity.com)



Car enthusiasts fill the streets of Historic Downtown Panama City for the CAUSEway Car Show.

## Orlando North, Seminole County Continues Strong Partnership with ECNL

In January and February, Orlando North, Seminole County showcased its vibrant sports tourism scene by hosting the ECNL Girls and Boys Regional Events, drawing 170 teams each. This successful collaboration between Seminole County and ECNL, spanning over a decade, continues to flourish, generating substantial economic impact—\$3.7 million and \$3.6 million respectively. This longstanding partnership underscores Seminole County's commitment to excellence in hosting premier sporting events, fostering community engagement, and boosting sports tourism. [DoOrlandoNorth.com](http://DoOrlandoNorth.com)



The ECNL Tournament is held at Sylvan Lake Park and the Seminole Soccer Complex.

## Ocala/Marion County Launches Interactive Walk of Champions Experience

Ocala/Marion County recently completed the interactive Walk of Champions experience, providing the opportunity to discover history behind the Horse Capital of the World®. Twenty-four bronze plaques now adorn two sidewalk blocks adjacent to Ocala's Historic Downtown Square, each honoring a nationally recognized equine champion connected to the destination. Complementing the physical plaques, the OcalaMarion Travel Guide phone app features a Walk of Champions digital experience that launched early last summer. [OcalaMarion.com](http://OcalaMarion.com)



Community leaders celebrate the installation of plaques honoring equine champions at a ribbon cutting in downtown Ocala. One of the plaque honorees, Magic, attended the event and visited her plaque.

## Alabama BBQ Team Wins Inaugural Triple Crown

When you're hot, you're hot. The grill team Poppa Pig from Alabama was recently crowned the inaugural Florida Triple Crown of BBQ winner. As part of Visit Central Florida's culinary initiative, the contest utilized three existing Kansas City Barbecue Society-judged events in Polk County. The cumulative winner overall in the three events—Pigfest, Grills Gone Wild, and Ribs on the Ridge—walked away with a cash prize and the coveted whiskey barrel trophy. [VisitCentralFlorida.org](http://VisitCentralFlorida.org)



Visit Central Florida's Kris Keprios (left) and Chad Ward (right), owner of Whiskey Bent BBQ Supply and national spokesman for Traeger Grills, present Eric Coley of the Poppa Pig BBQ team with the inaugural Triple Crown of BBQ Grand Champion trophy.



## Visit Sebring Expands Parking at Popular Fishing Tournament Park

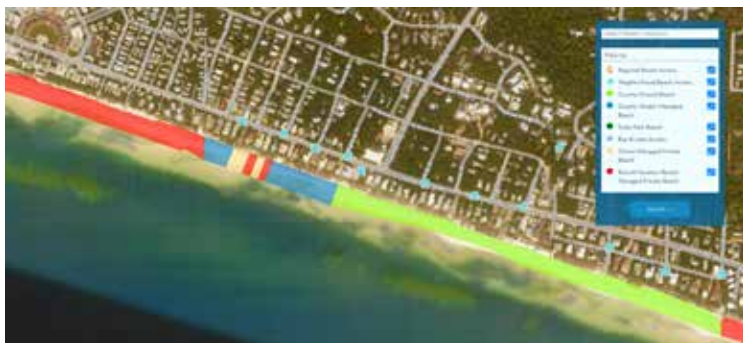
After research showed that 70% of fishing tournament participants come from outside Highlands County and meeting with fishing tournament directors regarding facility needs, Visit Sebring used its dedicated Lakes Funds to double the number of parking spots for truck and trailers at Lake Istokpoga's Istokpoga Park. Istokpoga is one of the area's most popular lakes for trophy bass fishing. The project was partially funded by a grant from FWC's Florida Boater Improvement Program. [VisitSebring.com](http://VisitSebring.com)



Loretta Rose shows off her 8-pound-plus trophy bass caught and released in Lake Istokpoga.

## Walton County Tourism Launches Interactive Map

Walton County Tourism launched an awareness campaign clarifying beach dynamics for residents and visitors. This includes an interactive map with geolocation technology, more clearly distinguishing between county-owned public and privately managed beaches. Users can input addresses to find nearby beach access and usage details. Signage with QR codes linking to the map will be placed along beaches. This initiative aims to address inquiries about beach access effectively and to ensure visitors enjoy the best possible experience. [WaltonCountyFLTourism.com](http://WaltonCountyFLTourism.com)



Walton County Tourism's new interactive beach map will help visitors and residents better understand where and how they can access Walton County beaches.

## Florida's Sports Coast at ITB Berlin 2024

Adam Thomas, executive director, and Raul Nardi, communications and marketing manager, represented Florida's Sports Coast at ITB Berlin 2024, a pivotal gathering for the international tourism industry. The team engaged with various European destinations, media representatives, and travel professionals to help showcase the outdoor adventures and natural beauty of Florida's Sports Coast to travel operators worldwide. Florida's Sports Coast is delighted to have participated in this impressive event and eagerly anticipates the new international opportunities it has in store! [FLSportsCoast.com](http://FLSportsCoast.com)



Florida's Sports Coast's Adam Thomas and Raul Nardi man a table at ITB Berlin 2024, the world's largest travel trade show.

## Visit Pensacola Hosts Community Quarterly Marketing Meeting

Visit Pensacola hosted its community partners and stakeholders this past month for a quarterly marketing update. Downs and St. Germain Research shared industry trends and travel data, and Showcase Pensacola, Visit Pensacola's marketing agency, debuted the team's spring and summer paid marketing efforts. The Visit Pensacola team members shared insights into social media best practices, website and content strategy, and public relations efforts. The nearly 50 partners who attended learned more about how they can implement marketing strategies and align with Visit Pensacola for the spring/summer season. [VisitPensacola.com](http://VisitPensacola.com)



Visit Pensacola hosts its community partners and stakeholders for a quarterly marketing update.



## Gainesville Raceway Kicks Off 2024 With Roaring Success of NHRA Gatornationals, NMRA Spring Break Shootout, and NHRA Baby Gators Drag Racing Competitions

Each year in March, 70,000 fans rev up for fun at Gainesville Raceway for four days of exhilarating drag racing at Gatornationals, one of Alachua County’s busiest tourism weekends. It is estimated that Gatornationals supports 1,700 local jobs and creates \$9 million in direct spending and \$14 million in induced economic impact. Together with the NHRA Baby Gators competition and the iconic NMRA Spring Break Shootout in February, the three races further establish Gainesville Raceway as a beloved destination for race fans. [VisitGainesville.com](http://VisitGainesville.com)



The NMRA brought its iconic Spring Break Shootout event to Gainesville Raceway for the first time with the support of Visit Gainesville, Alachua County. Photo: Courtesy of National Mustang Racers Association, President & CEO Steve Wolcott of ProMedia Events

## Crystal River Celebrates Favorite Animal at Manatee Festival

Each January, Crystal River—known as the Manatee Capital of the World—celebrates its favorite animal at the widely popular Manatee Festival. The team at Discover Crystal River Florida was excited to join the festivities and speak to hundreds of attendees, pass out visitor guides, and network with local business partners and vendors attending the family-friendly event. It was a wonderful weekend to promote the natural beauty, eco-adventure, and unique animal encounters Citrus County has to offer. [DiscoverCrystalRiverFL.com](http://DiscoverCrystalRiverFL.com)



Kelly Miller from Discover Crystal River Florida greets attendees at the Manatee Festival.

## Florida’s Historic Coast Is Home to The PLAYERS Championship

The 50<sup>th</sup> annual PLAYERS Championship took place at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach Mar. 12-17. As in years past, the St. Johns County TDC and the St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra VCB have partnered with the PGA Tour to host community leaders, meetings planners, travel professionals, and leisure journalists to share the excitement and the importance of professional golf on Florida’s Historic Coast.



The Hospitality House at TPC Sawgrass provides guests of St. Johns County tourism guests the perfect view of the world-famous 17<sup>th</sup> island hole during THE PLAYERS Championship.

[FloridasHistoric-Coast.com](http://FloridasHistoric-Coast.com)



## In the News

### Florida’s Sports Coast has a New Communications and Marketing Manager

Raul Nardi is a dynamic marketing and communications professional with a wealth of experience spanning various business domains. As marketing and communications manager at Florida’s Sports Coast, he oversees all aspects of digital and print content creation and campaign development to help tell the story of Florida’s Sports Coast. This includes website management, collateral development, and social media management across multiple platforms. Prior to his role at Florida’s Sports Coast, Nardi was a marketing specialist and key user at Mettler Toledo. [FLSportsCoast.com](http://FLSportsCoast.com)



Raul Nardi

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**INSIDE: Learn what passed (and didn't) in the 2024 Legislative Session.**

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## Destinations Florida



Destinations Florida serves as the single unifying voice for all of Florida's DMOs, providing continuing insight and direction as we face an increasingly competitive tourism marketplace. Organized in 1996, Destinations Florida strives to increase the overall effectiveness of Florida DMOs' destination marketing efforts through industry education, legislative outreach, enhancing professionalism and facilitating communication.

Destinations Florida represents the 56 official county DMOs that promote their communities throughout the world. Tourism promotion activities help to attract 136 million visitors to Florida, adding \$101.9 billion to Florida's economy and supporting more than 1.7 million jobs. These activities are made possible by Tourist Development Taxes provided by Florida Statutes Section 125.0104. Statistics: VISIT FLORIDA Research

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