



**Minutes of Meeting
Tourist Development Council
St. Johns County, Florida
County Administration Building
500 San Sebastian View
St. Augustine, Florida 32084
July 21, 2025 - 1:30 p.m.**

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

Present: Irving Kass, District 2, Chair
Troy Blevins, District 5, Vice Chair
Regina G. Phillips, District 2
Krista Joseph, BCC Representative
Nancy Sikes-Kline, Mayor, City of St. Augustine Representative
Michael Wicks, District 4
Charles Cox, District 3
Michael Gordon, District 4

Absent: Dylan Rumrell, Mayor, St. Augustine Beach City Commission, Seat 2

Staff Present: Dena Masters, Senior Tourist Development Council Program Specialist
Jennifer Zuberer, Manager of Tourism Promotional Program
Lex Taylor, Deputy County Attorney
Jalisa Ferguson, Senior Assistant County Attorney
Artricia Allen, Deputy Clerk

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Kass led the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. ROLL CALL

Masters called the roll. Council members Gordon, Phillips, Joseph, Sikes-Kline, Kass, Wicks, Cox, and Blevins were present. Rumrell was absent.

4. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Motion by Blevins, seconded by Cox, carried 8/0, with Rumrell absent, to approve the Agenda, as submitted.

Yea: Blevins, Cox, Kass, Gordon, Joseph, Phillips, Sikes-Kline, Wicks

Nay: None

Absent: Rumrell

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion by Blevins, seconded by Cox, carried 8/0, with Rumrell absent, to approve the minutes for the June 16, 2025, meeting, as submitted.

Yea: Blevins, Cox, Kass, Gordon, Joseph, Phillips, Wicks, Sikes-Kline

Nay: None

Absent: Rumrell

6. PUBLIC COMMENT

Blevins questioned an email he received regarding when the public would be able to speak on the art request, specifically whether it fell under the tourism marketing budget or as a non-agenda item and emphasized the importance of not taking away the public's opportunity to speak.

Public Comment: There was none.

7. TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL MEMBER APPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Masters presented the details of the vacancy application. Cox nominated Kass for another term, which Joseph seconded.

Public Comment: There was none.

Motion by Cox, seconded by Joseph, carried 8/0, with Rumrell absent, to recommend the Board of County Commissioners to approve Irvin Kass for another term on the Tourist Development Council.

Yea: Cox, Joseph, Kass, Sikes-Kline, Phillips, Gordon, Wicks, Blevins

Nay: None

Absent: Rumrell

8. FISCAL YEAR 2026 TOURISM BUDGET DISCUSSION

Dunn presented the details of the recommended tourism budget. Discussion ensued on the inconsistencies in marketing and agency expenses, noting that the original plan was for all marketing to be handled by the selected agency under the Visitors and Convention Bureau's oversight. However, marketing costs appeared across multiple budget categories, prompting questions about outdated practices and potentially misallocated funds. Clarification was given on Category 2 contract allocations, confirming that both major line items supported the same cultural organization through operations, programming, and maintenance.

Members questioned the fairness of directing a large share of funding to one organization while smaller art groups received limited support, suggesting a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate impact. The Nights of Lights budget was also discussed, with some favoring reallocating funds from other areas, for example: delaying a Category 5 project, to restore arts funding cut due to revenue declines. Rising marketing costs, despite strong event attendance, led to suggestions of reducing paid advertising in favor of free promotion. Council members emphasized the need to understand the structure and terms of existing contracts, the maintenance program, and prioritizing funding categories and revenue.

Lex clarified the different budget categories, noting that the Tourist Development Council (TDC) had historically funded both Fort Mose and Sing Out Loud as separate line items. While this practice was not new, the increased maintenance needs for the building had shifted the funding structure, making it appear as a new entity.

Public Comment:

Catherine Avery St. Jean urged the council not to cut Arts, Cultural, and Heritage (ACH) Grant Program funding, stating that local arts were essential to tourism and community identity. She noted ACH funding made up less than 3 percent of the \$23 million bed tax and cautioned against addressing Nights of Lights' challenges at the expense of the arts. She emphasized that artists are key to tourism success and should be included in significant events, urging the Council to support the cultural foundation of St. Johns County.

Albert Syeles expressed support for continued funding for Nights of Lights and acknowledged the TDC's previous response to the loss of state arts funding. He opposed the proposed twenty percent reduction to the ACH Grant Program and encouraged the Council to restore the funding. He stated that the Tourist Development Tax (TDT) was intended to support arts and culture in addition to tourism, and voiced concern that increased promotion of Nights of Lights could negatively impact local businesses. He also noted the funding disparity between Sing Out Loud and other ACH-supported events and urged the TDC to focus more on community benefit.

Mary Clare Branson thanked the council for previous funding and expressed hope for future funding. She described Limelight as a year-round regional theater with a significant role in the community and a variety of ongoing activities that did not create traffic or congestion issues. Branson highlighted the importance of the arts for community sustainability and noted the theater's collaborations at local, state, and national levels. She also stated that ticket sales accounted for only a small portion of the theater's operating budget and urged the Council to maintain arts funding.

Motion by Blevins, seconded by Sikes-Kline, carried 8/0, with Rumrell absent, to move \$110,089 from Category 4 reserves into Category 2 ACH Grants to reach the intended budget amount.

Yea: Blevins, Sikes-Kline, Kass, Joseph, Gordon, Wicks, Phillips, Cox

Nay: None

Absent: Rumrell

Nights of Lights Funding Options

Dunn displayed an option for additional Nights of Lights funding request (Exhibit A). Discussion ensued on whether contract adjustments could help fill funding gaps to support the Nights of Lights event at the proposed \$850,000 level. It was noted that the original funding request was about \$1.2 million, with \$200,000 already budgeted, leaving roughly \$1 million still needed, including shuttles and holiday lighting.

Meredith Breidenstein, City of St. Augustine Assistant City Manager, stated that \$200,000 was budgeted for Nights of Lights, split between shuttles and lighting, consistent with the previous year's allocation. She explained that the City initially requested an additional \$1 million, totaling \$1.2 million, but a revised proposal lowered the request to \$850,000, maintaining the current allocations.

Motion by Sikes-Kline, seconded by Wicks, to recommend that the Board of County Commissioners fund \$850,000 in the proposed budget for the Nights of Lights. [Subsequently amended]

Discussion ensued on increasing funding for the "Angels and Architecture" program, questioning whether it required a county Request for Proposal; the Bank of America parking rental cost; the use of parking structure revenue; how the city would cover any remaining funding shortfall; and the need to identify additional and recurring revenue sources.

Kass recessed the meeting at 2:44 p.m. and reconvened at 2:51 p.m.

David Birchum, City of St. Augustine City Manager, clarified that the program was already covered under an existing contract and did not require new procurement, and that the City aimed to secure donated barricades, as done in the past, but cautioned that shuttle services could be reduced if donations were not obtained. Additionally, he mentioned the potential for increasing parking garage entry fees and illegal parking fines.

Motion by Sikes-Kline, seconded by Wicks, to recommend the Board of County Commissioners to fund \$850,000 in the proposed budget for the Nights of Lights, including the Tourist Development Council members' recommendations to address personnel concerns, and to review the Summer Haven Management Study, specifically aiming to identify a way to offset the \$325,000 from either Category 1 or Category 5, except for \$34,000 out of Category 4 reserves, as amended. [Subsequently amended]

Discussion ensued regarding the \$325,000 expense, which was for renting the "Huddle House" entertainment tent, not for player support or transportation as previously believed. Members stated that if the expense were classified under Category 1 (marketing), it should be part of a focused tourism familiarization trip rather than general entertainment. Support depended on a clear marketing purpose, despite logistical challenges, for example: limited hotel availability during the Tournament Players Club event. The funding source was from Category 1 reserves instead of the regular advertising budget, prompting concerns about reducing emergency funds. The contract had several years remaining, and if the expense stayed in marketing, the marketing contractor, Visitor and Convention Bureau, would need to be held accountable and keep the cost in Category

4. Overall, the Council recognized the marketing intent but viewed the \$325,000 as a nonrecurring expense subject to future reconsideration.

Public Comment: There was none.

Motion by Sikes-Kline, seconded by Wicks, carried 8/0, with Rumrell absent, to recommend the Board of County Commissioners to fund \$850,000 in the proposed budget for the Nights of Lights, with consideration for the funding source to come from either Category 1 or Category 5, excluding \$34,000 from Category 4 reserves, as amended.

Blevins: Yes

Cox: Yes

Gordon: Yes

Joseph: Yes

Kass: Yes

Phillips: Yes

Sikes-Kline: Yes

Wicks: Yes

Nay: None

Absent: Rumrell

9. MONTHLY REPORTS PROVIDED IN PACKETS

Kass stated that the monthly reports were provided in the agenda packet.

Susan Phillips, President and Chief Executive Officer of the St. Johns County Visitors and Convention Bureau, provided a brief update, noting that while tourism numbers remained flat across Florida, the new advertising agency had significantly increased campaign impressions from 30-40 million to nearly 70 million monthly. She highlighted the ongoing challenge of converting interest into actual visitor spending. Phillips announced the continuation of the "Forever Summer" campaign and stated that the "Sing Out Loud" initiative would be presented at the next meeting, aiming to promote September as a "month of music."

Jeff Potts, St. Johns Cultural Council Director, provided an update on the ongoing work of the St. Johns County Cultural Events, including their weekly farmer's market. He reported that the Arts, Cultural, and Heritage grant review process was nearly complete, with a panel meeting scheduled for July 29, 2025, and invited members to attend. He also announced the upcoming launch of the Black Heritage Trail, which would begin with a kickoff event at The Waterworks. He emphasized the high quality of the materials developed for the initiative. In conclusion, he shared that the Council had revised its proposed budget after identifying a \$42,000 overage and had adjusted consultant usage to ensure alignment with available funding.

10. MEMBER COMMENTS

Joseph expressed appreciation for the high visitation numbers for Ponte Vedra.

Phillips expressed gratitude to the staff for answering questions and clarifying details from previous meetings and appreciated the opportunity to review the information in advance. She also noted that, in addition to the local launch of the Heritage Trail mentioned by Potts, she and members of the Cultural Council planned to present the trail nationally at the Association of African American Museums in Charleston to gain broader exposure.

Cox emphasized the importance of ensuring that one advertising agency supported all categories if collaboration continued, including marketing under the Chamber's contract, which should likely revert to the Visitor and Convention Bureau.

Blevins announced that they had recently rebranded the Castello Beach Hotel as part of the Tapestry Collection by Hilton. He expressed excitement about the new product and thanked Susan Phillips, the Chamber, and others for their support in the successful opening.

Kass thanked the Council members for nominating him for another three years and stated that he would not be attending the next meeting.

11. NEXT MEETING DATE

The next meeting was scheduled for August 18, 2025.

12. ADJOURN

With no further business to come before the Council, the meeting adjourned at 3:53 p.m.

Approved _____, 2025

TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL
OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY, FLORIDA

By: _____
Irving Kass, Chair

ATTEST: BRANDON J. PATTY,
CLERK OF THE CIRCUIT COURT & COMPTROLLER

By: _____
Deputy Clerk