

Minutes

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Regular meeting

5:30 p.m. March 4, 2026

Board Meeting Room of Town Hall Annex, 105 E. Corbin St.



Present: Chair Meaghan Darab and Victoria Pace
Absent: None
Staff: Planning and Economic Development Manager
Shannan Campbell
Planning Technician Dakotah Kimbrough

1. Call to order and confirmation of quorum

Chair Meaghan Darab called the meeting to order at 5:41 p.m. A quorum was present with two board members in attendance because there is a vacant seat, though they noted needing one more person for a full board.

2. Agenda changes and approval

Chair Darab asked if there were any changes to the agenda. Hearing none, a motion was made to approve the agenda as presented.

Motion: Member Pace moved to approve the agenda. Chair Darab seconded.

Vote: 2-0.

3. Discussion/Action Items

Special Projects and Partnership Funding Requests:

A. Town of Hillsborough A250 Event Partnership- \$12,500

Matt Efird, Assistant Town Manager, presented the request for matching funds for a Fourth of July event celebrating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The town has committed \$25,000 and is requesting \$12,500 from the Tourism Development Authority. Efird explained they are working with the Orange County Arts Commission and Greg Bell, formerly of Festival for the Eno, to organize the event.

The event aims to blend Hillsborough's historic, arts, and small-town family-friendly atmosphere into a free community celebration that drives foot traffic and overnight visitation. Efird noted they are coordinating with the OCVB and other events throughout the weekend to encourage visitors to make it a weekend experience, particularly since it falls on a Saturday.

Chair Darab expressed some concern about the cost given the Tourism Development Authority's smaller budget compared to the town's but noted this is a once-in-a-lifetime event for Hillsborough's 250th anniversary celebration. She also inquired about coordination with Colonial Inn and other lodging sites to create a comprehensive weekend experience.

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Shannan Campbell, Planning and Economic Development Manager, explained that the board would potentially need to dip into fund balance for this and other requests.

Board members agreed this was an important investment given the significance of the anniversary and the fact that other parties had already committed funding. They noted there is typically no Fourth of July event in Hillsborough.

Motion: Member Pace moved to make a budget amendment, if needed, to fund the full \$12,500 amount requested, from the Special Projects and Partnerships line item. Chair Darab seconded.

Vote: 2-0.

B. Riverpark Concert Event Partnership- \$10,000

David Hays presented the annual request for the Riverpark Concert sponsorship, noting it follows the same successful format as previous years. He reported that last year's event was tremendously successful, with the Tourism Development Authority's sponsorship helping them advertise meaningfully. The event generated 200,000 Facebook views in the 90 days leading up to the event and resulted in over 40 hotels being booked.

Hays shared exciting news that they have already secured a headliner for this year's October 24th event. He noted the band has over 155,000 followers on Spotify and recently added a female fiddler to their lineup. The band will also be playing at the Merlefest Bluegrass Festival and the Lincoln Theatre in April, which should generate additional buzz.

Hays explained that they lost \$20,000 worth of sponsors last year due to his departure from Cisco but were able to manage the shortfall and continue the event thanks to the Tourism Development Authority's support. He emphasized that they are working to find ways to backfill sponsorships to become more self-sufficient, having established credibility with eight concerts behind them.

The headliner's contract terms are more favorable this year, requiring no payment until September 24th rather than the typical 50% down payment. They also have an inclement weather policy that allows them to move the event to a future date within six months without losing the deposit.

Board members expressed familiarity with the event and its positive economic impact, with one member sharing an anecdote about randomly meeting people at an airport who came to the concert from Greensboro after hearing about it.

Campbell clarified whether this would be a budget amendment for the current fiscal year or next year's budget. Hays explained that the organizers would like the funds before July 1st to promote the concert effectively, but could also take them after July 1st.

Motion: Member Pace moved to make a budget amendment, if needed, to fund the full \$10,000 amount from the Special Projects and Partnerships line item. Chair Darab seconded.

Vote: 2-0.

C. Moorefields Jazz Festival Partnership- \$2,000

Cecily Nisbet, Executive Director of Moorefields, and Danielle Rose from WHUP presented their collaborative request for a new spring jazz festival. Nisbet explained that following Moorefields' successful tenth anniversary Bluegrass Festival last fall, there has been significant demand from audiences for more outdoor events and music. Rather than another bluegrass festival, they decided to try something different, noting that there was historically a jazz festival at Moorefields.

The collaboration between Moorefields and WHUP demonstrates community building by bringing together different segments of Hillsborough rather than just serving individual pockets. They explained that they have secured nationally recognized performers.

The event is strategically timed for later in the evening with an official after party downtown to drive visitors to restaurants and encourage overnight stays. They have partnered with Colonial Inn to offer prorated rates for jazz festival attendees who book rooms there, with advanced ticket rates as an incentive. They are also working with Holiday Inn on a similar arrangement.

The festival is capped at 750 attendees and features an artisan market focused on Hillsborough vendors and food trucks, primarily from the Piedmont Food Processing Center. Eno River Brewing will serve as the official beer sponsor, further supporting local businesses.

Chair Darab appreciated the hotel partnership component, which addresses how to generate overnight visitation despite Moorefields being outside Hillsborough proper. The later timing and after party downtown create a natural flow for visitors to experience more of the community.

Nesbit noted they have been successful with fundraising so far and hope to eventually become self-sustaining or grow into a multi-day event. This initial festival serves as their blueprint to determine future potential.

Motion: Member Pace moved to make a budget amendment, if needed, to fund the full \$2,000 request from the Special Projects and Partnership line item. Chair Darab seconded.

Vote: 2-0.

D. Draft FY 2027 TDA Budget

Campbell presented the draft FY 2027 budget, noting it looks similar to FY 2026. She anticipated that the Hillsborough Arts Council will likely return to request funding for the Solstice Lantern Walk, which was helpful for their previous event. They are working on gathering data about out-of-town versus local attendance and any room nights generated.

Campbell proposed continuing the \$10,000 annual investment in holiday decorations, noting that while they have acquired fiberglass present boxes and decorations that will last long time, it would be beneficial to add items each year since children particularly enjoy the large decorations.

Chair Darab brought up the concept of more extensive lighting displays, referencing an out of state comprehensive building lighting show that has gained regional recognition. Campbell noted that the Hillsborough Arts Council partners with a company called "Get Lit" for lighting installations, though downtown Hillsborough faces challenges with limited electrical outlets due to the town's age.

The budget includes \$30,000 for performing arts center exploration, assuming the Orange County Arts Commission may return with requests after settling into the mill and completing flood damage cleanup from Hurricane Chantal. Campbell noted that Uproar doesn't occur this year, so those funds wouldn't need programming until FY 28, though there may be a cost share need in FY 27 for promoting the FY 28 event.

Chair Darab questioned the proposed Riverwalk entrance shelter, expressing concerns about the cost-benefit ratio for what would essentially serve 12 or so people under a \$36,000 pavilion. She suggested the southern side location might be more appropriate and questioned whether the expense was justified given existing

mature tree shade and nearby shaded areas like the picnic table on the hill and the heavily shaded riverwalk itself.

Campbell explained that the shelter concept stems from the need for third spaces where people can congregate comfortably, particularly during increasingly hot North Carolina summers. She noted that Weaver Street market had previously used sun sails before trees matured and suggested this might be a cheaper alternative they could explore with Public Space. Campbell emphasized this was just a draft with several months before budget adoption, allowing time for more information gathering.

The budget also includes funding for Calvin Street and Nash Street kiosk signs, which had been planned pre-COVID but delayed. Campbell noted fabrication costs have increased significantly, so they're focusing on the most essential locations - Nash Street for west hillsborough businesses and Calvin Street for the newest Greenway entrance, which many visitors may not know exists.

Board members agreed the budget looked good overall and appreciated having advance notice of the draft proposal.

4. Monthly Reports and Updates

A. Tourism Staff Updates & Occupancy Tax Report

Campbell presented occupancy tax data through December, showing the occupancy tax revenue is down but otherwise seeing typical monthly fluctuations. She anticipates FY 26 results will fall between FY 24 and FY 25 performance levels, hoping to get closer to FY24 numbers now that Colonial Inn has new management and has resolved previous HVAC and operational issues that affected FY 25 performance.

Campbell noted the significant growth trajectory from FY 17 to FY 24, reflecting increased activities and lodging options in Hillsborough. The fund balance remains healthy, providing adequate resources for approving tourism investment and spending.

Campbell shared promising news about recent meetings with a hotel company interested in potentially building a new hotel with small conference center space in Hillsborough. She noted the town's attractiveness to developers due to having two interstate exits and two interstates running through the area, which hotel companies prefer for their investments.

B. TDA Member Comments & Updates

Board members had no additional comments or updates to share.

5. Adjournment

Motion: Chair Darab moved to adjourn the meeting at 6:20 p.m. Member Pace seconded.

Vote: 2-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Planning Technician Dakotah Kimbrough
Staff support to the Hillsborough Tourism Development Authority

Approved: April 15, 2026