

Minutes

TOURISM BOARD

Regular meeting

5:30 p.m. March 2, 2026

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



Present: Chair Victoria Pace, Rainbow Cabbage, Barney Caton, Meaghun Darab, Scott Czechlewski, Spencer Welborn, and Eryk Pruitt

Absent: Vice-Chair Megan Kimball, Smita Patel

Staff: Planning and Economic Development Manager Shannan Campbell
Planning Technician Dakotah Kimbrough

1. Call to order

Chair Victoria Pace confirmed the presence of a quorum and called the meeting to order at 5:33 p.m.

2. Agenda changes and approval

With no agenda changes proposed, the board proceeded to approve the agenda.

Motion: Meaghun Darab moved to approve the agenda. Member Eryk Pruitt seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

3. Minutes review and approval

The board reviewed the January 5, 2026 meeting minutes.

Motion: Member Scott Czechlewski moved approval of the January 5, 2026, minutes as submitted.
Member Pruitt seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

4. Event Funding Request

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

Matt Efird, Assistant Town Manager for Hillsborough, presented a proposal for a July 4th festival celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The town is requesting \$12,500 in matching funds from the Tourism Board, with the town having already committed \$25,000 and seeking an additional \$12,500 from the TDA.

Efird explained that this represents a generational opportunity to celebrate a significant milestone in the history of our country, within a town steeped in revolutionary history. The event is scheduled for July because it's typically a slow month for both occupancy and food/beverage tax collections. The town is partnering with the Orange County Arts Commission and event organizer Greg Bell, formerly of Festival for the Eno, to organize the event.

The proposed \$50,000 budget includes entertainment featuring local bands and a community orchestra, with a laser show as the finale. Originally planned to include food provision, the event has been refocused to offer light snacks like watermelon and water, while encouraging attendees to visit local restaurants for meals.

Board members expressed both support and concerns about the proposal. Chair Pace noted her biggest pause was around the dollar amount, stating that "a \$12,500 ask seems high compared to budgets we see from other organizations for similar events," especially given the board's efforts to tighten the belt elsewhere. However, she acknowledged it would be nice to have a Hillsborough-specific draw on July 4th for the 250th anniversary, since the town can be "a little ghost townish" in July.

Darab supported the concept, believing it would bring people to local restaurants, especially with the shift from food trucks to light snacks. She noted that Festival for the Eno is not happening this July, creating a void this event could fill.

Member Czechlewski initially expressed skepticism about the high cost but ultimately supported the proposal, explaining that if this was a normal July fourth, he would probably be extremely critical of this. But seeing as this is the 250th anniversary of the country, and we don't have anything else going on for it, the ask is worth having a history focused event here.

The board discussed that the full \$50,000 budget would be necessary for the event to achieve its goals, as Efirid confirmed that without funding from both the Tourism Board and TDA, they would have to downscale expectations for the event significantly. The event represents the only dedicated A250 celebration planned for Orange County, positioning Hillsborough as the central hub for Orange County's commemoration.

Motion: Member Pruitt moved to fund the event with a corresponding budget amendment request to the town board. Member Barney Caton seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

5. Presentations

Contract Partner Quarterly Reports & Bi-Annual Reports

1. Hillsborough Arts Council

Heather Tatreau presented the Arts Council's quarterly report, highlighting their successful programming during the second quarter. The Last Fridays series in October drew over 150 people to the courthouse lawn, featuring 11 paid performers, 25 art market vendors, and over 80 participants in their creation station activities.

The Solstice Lantern Walk and Market proved highly successful again, with several operational improvements implemented this year. Most significantly, they eliminated the designated start time that had previously created long lines and bottlenecks, allowing families to begin the walk when convenient for them. The event was also moved to Saturday to accommodate working families.

Registration data showed 73% of attendees came from outside Hillsborough, with Durham County representing the next largest contingent after Orange County. The Arts Council implemented new trifold brochures with maps and QR codes, expanded outreach to the Fairview community, and piloted the circulator shuttle bus in partnership with the Alliance.

Tatreau noted that while the shuttle bus wasn't utilized as much as hoped, those who used it provided positive feedback about the convenience of connecting West Hillsborough to downtown. The service helped some residents attend the event for the first time by eliminating parking concerns.

2. Alliance (Visitors Center)

Dani McIvor, Executive Director of the Alliance for Historic Hillsborough, reported on their second quarter activities. The revamped spirits tour, now called "Haunting Hour," successfully maintained attendance levels despite the previous format becoming stale. Their field trip crawl was particularly popular, moving participants between three venues with different speakers, though it was capped at 25 people with others requesting entry even when sold out.

Kelly Arnold spoke about the Jingle and Joy weekend collaboration with the Chamber which proved highly successful, bringing back candlelight tours in a new format. McIvor highlighted their growing social media presence and successful influencer partnerships, including collaborations that reached 200,000 new viewers through various partnerships.

A significant achievement was the reopening of the Oconeechee Replica Village after tropical storm damage, accomplished through dedicated volunteer work. The Alliance is also developing a new iteration of their oral history program "Telling the Full Story", focusing on Black and indigenous histories in Hillsborough.

Marketing efforts included successful collaborations with WCHL radio station, print features in Our State Magazine's "Streets with a Story" series highlighting Churton Street, and various partnerships with local businesses and influencers.

McIvor noted challenges including lower-than-expected utilization of the fall festival market, difficulty scaling the field trip crawl while maintaining intimacy, and the need for better marketing of the shuttle service for future events.

3. Burwell School

Commissioner Matt Hughes, representing as Chair of the Historic Hillsborough Commission, reported on the Burwell School's activities through the first two quarters of fiscal year 2026. Despite starting the year with HVAC system failure that closed them for half of July, they maintained strong programming and visitor numbers.

Notable collaborations included working with NC Central University's archaeology department to map movement of people of color throughout Orange County. They expanded their historical interpretation to include the Collins family, who occupied the property during the Civil War when fleeing from eastern North Carolina.

Tours continue to be strong, particularly with public schools and homeschool groups. A highlight was hosting the historian from Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, who discovered interesting connections between the Burwell School and the church through Elizabeth Keckley.

Visitor statistics showed 436 Orange County residents served alongside 1,227 tourists from as far as Paris, France and Perth, Australia. The school benefited from 45 volunteers contributing nearly 1,000 hours, with recent beautification days bringing 47-50 volunteers each day for landscaping projects.

Hughes announced that site director Emma Vadney departed in January for a new opportunity, prompting immediate hiring efforts. Eleven qualified applicants applied for the position, with interviews planned for

March and hoped-for onboarding by mid-April. The departure necessitated postponing or canceling the annual spring gala, creating some fiscal constraints but manageable through salary savings and increased fundraising efforts.

4. OC Museum

Courtney Smith, curator of the Orange County Historical Museum, presented the report. The second quarter was quieter following their successful Third Provincial Congress weekend in the first quarter.

Programming balanced scholarly and entertaining offerings, including a piano performance event and their popular chocolate and cocktails tasting featuring international Kit-Kat comparisons. They hosted scholarly talks on slavery-related topics, emphasizing that "black history is year-round and not just in February."

The museum's reach extends through Courtney's speaking engagements across the state, often drawing 50-150 people to talks about Orange County history, which generates subsequent museum visits and tour requests.

Looking ahead, they're focusing extensively on America's 250th anniversary programming, running from September through the current year. Upcoming events include dedicating a plaque to Anne Hooper, wife of Declaration of Independence signer William Hooper, on March 14th, with descendants of signers attending.

Their major 2026 exhibit "United We Stand" examines unity and division in Orange County history. Smith noted the project has grown beyond initial scope, essentially becoming the first comprehensive Orange County history since 1952, though presented in a more accessible, colorful format distributed free through sponsorships.

6. Regular Discussion/Action items

A. Chair and Vice Chair Appointment(s)

The board addressed leadership appointments, with current chair Victoria Pace and vice chair Meaghun Darab's terms requiring renewal. Campbell explained that Megan Kimball may be rotating off the board due to changes in her Alliance board position.

Motion: Member Rainbow Cabbage moved to nominate Chair Pace to continue in her role. Member Pruitt seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

The vice chair appointment was tabled until the next meeting to allow for consideration of potential candidates and clarification of Kimball's board status.

B. Review/comment on draft grant schedule (Spring 2026 for FY 2027 awards)

Campbell presented the draft grant schedule following the established timeline. Grants would open on Monday with five weeks for applications, closing Friday, April 17th at 5 PM. Board members would have a week and a half for scoring, with discussion at the May 4th meeting and final decisions at the June 1st budget adoption hearing.

The board discussed the possibility of inviting applicants to present or answer questions, with Campbell noting this was previously common but discontinued when applicants began relying on presentations rather than completing thorough applications. The board agreed to consider inviting specific applicants if questions arise during the May 4th review.

Victoria Pace noted she would be unavailable for the June 1st meeting, making the vice chair selection more critical for the budget adoption process.

Motion: Member Welborn moved to adopt the draft grant schedule as proposed. Member Caton seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

- C. Review/comment on Contract Scopes of Work and Scope of Work Response for FY 2027 contract partners
Campbell presented the contract scopes of work for the four partner organizations, noting minimal changes from the previous year. The board discussed adding a requirement for each organization to conduct at least one fundraising event annually, recognizing that most partners already engage in some form of revenue generation through admissions, donations, or special events.

The board agreed this requirement would formalize existing practices and encourage sustainability beyond tourism board funding.

Motion: Darab moved to add the fundraising requirement and adopt the contract scopes of work as amended. Member Pruitt seconded.

Vote: 7-0.

7. Monthly reports and comments

A. Tourism Staff/Visitors Center/OC Visitors Bureau Updates

Campbell reported that food and beverage tax collections are up approximately \$10,000 over the previous year through December, though January and February may show declines due to weather-related closures and reduced activity.

She highlighted discussions at the Orange County Visitors Bureau meeting, where a consultant praised Hillsborough as a "hidden gem" in Orange County. This led to formation of a subcommittee, including Matt Hughes, to explore ways the Visitors Bureau can better support Hillsborough and Carrboro within their Visit Chapel Hill brand.

Regarding the Savannah Bananas baseball game coming to Chapel Hill, Campbell expressed skepticism about capturing significant spillover business in Hillsborough and a lack of desire to try to 'compete' with Chapel Hill/Carrboro for the business they worked hard to draw, though she agreed to explore any low-cost opportunities for cross-promotion.

B. Tourism Board comments and updates

Board members had no additional updates to share, though Campbell welcomed Spencer Welborn as the newest board member representing Eno Brewing.

8. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 PM by Chair Pace.

Respectfully submitted,

Dakotah Kimbrough
Planning Technician
Staff support to the Hillsborough Tourism Board
Approved: April 6, 2026