

## New Proposal

# Tourism Panel Backs Sharing Tax Revenues With Arts Groups

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AUBURNDALE | Polk County's Tourist Development Council took a step toward restoring county funding for local arts organizations Thursday when it voted to recommend a revenue-sharing plan at a meeting packed with leaders of local arts groups.

The Tourist Development Council, a division of Central Florida's Polk County Sports Marketing, voted unanimously to recommend a change in county ordinance that would funnel 15 percent of tourism tax money for arts organizations. The proposal now goes to the County Commission, which is expected to take up the issue at its July 24 meeting.

A Polk County ordinance passed by voters in 1986 designated a portion of hotel bed-tax funds for promotion of the arts, but at some point in the past 26 years the county modified the ordinance and ceased sharing that money with arts organizations, said Cindy Rodriguez, vice president of the Polk Arts Alliance. That nonprofit group, a coalition of about 40 arts organizations, led a push over the past two years to restore the funding.

Dave Connor, a lawyer and a board member for the Polk Arts Alliance, made a presentation before Thursday's vote arguing for the proposal, which would amend the county ordinance to designate 15 percent of the first two cents of each five cents collected in bed tax revenues for arts and culture.

The equation would yield \$410,000 in fiscal year 2012-13 for arts groups. That represents about 6 percent of the projected operating budget for Polk County Sports Marketing, director Mark Jackson said.

Polk County assesses a 5 percent tax on hotel stays, in addition to sales tax.

Connor cited examples from six other Florida counties with similar ordinances: Brevard, Hillsborough, Orange, Palm Beach, Sarasota and St. Johns.

The proposal the PAA supported would establish continuous funding for arts organizations, and it also included three options for distributing the money:

Have the County Commission appoint a board to manage grants.

Identify an existing group to manage grants.



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Polk Arts Alliance board member Dave Connor speaks in Auburndale on Thursday.

Create a standing committee to do so.

During discussions before the vote, council member Jesse Douthit expressed concerns about how the county can be sure the money allotted for arts group is being used efficiently. Douthit, general manager of Fantasy of Flight, said he had unfairly been labeled "anti-arts and culture" for previously raising such concerns.

Connor said the proposal is based on the Sarasota County plan, which he said has proven successful and been copied by the other five Florida counties. Connor said the plan requires applicants for grants to provide a "metric" that can be used to measure its effect.

Linda McKinley, the deputy county attorney, said county staff had researched the Sarasota ordinance and found the county offered reimbursements to arts groups that can demonstrate their events brought tourists to the area.

Connor said the proposal conforms to state statutes.

In considering the three options for managing the arts funds, TDC members Frank Johnson and Jamie Beckett expressed a preference for having the county commission designate the Polk Arts Alliance as the coordinator for grant applications.

The proposal received the approval of all six TDC members in attendance: Melony Bell, Mike LaPan, Desiree Chasse, Douthit, Johnson and Beckett. Bell is a county commissioner.

About three dozen leaders from local arts groups attended the meeting wearing buttons prepared by the PAA that read, "Stand up for the arts." A few TDC members also wore the buttons.

Rodriguez praised the panel's vote.

"There will be a dedicated funding stream, which should have been in existence all along, quite frankly, because it was voted on by the voters," she said. "I think this action today shows that the board is deeply committed to making sure the will of the people is carried out."

Polk County Sports Marketing, which oversees the TDC, is a division of the Central Florida Development Council of Polk County. The county commission has authority over that umbrella group.

Thursday's vote culminated a yearlong campaign led by the Polk Arts Alliance. Some representatives of arts groups had complained that the TDC shows a preference for sports groups and traditional tourism attractions.

LaPan, a past president of the Polk Arts Alliance, sought to discourage that perception.

"I don't want to paint a picture that the arts haven't been at the table," LaPan said during the discussion.

Those attending Thursday's meeting included leaders from the Polk Museum of Art, Imperial Polk Symphony and Lake Wales Arts Council, among others.