

Town of Swansboro
Swansboro Tourism Development Authority
April 9, 2026, Regular Meeting Minutes

In attendance: Leah Evans, Jack Harnatkiewicz, Preston Patterson, Michael Diehl, and Linda Thornley. Randy Swanson was absent.

Call to Order

Vice Chair Linda Thornley called the meeting to order at 2:30 pm.

Finance Report-(3rd Qtr. FY 24-25)

Finance Director Sonia Johnson reviewed the third quarter financial report for Fiscal Year 2024–2025. She reported a beginning fund balance of \$242,072.10, with revenues from July 1, 2025, through March 31, 2026, totaling \$77,174.50. Expenditures for the same period were \$62,174.42, resulting in a cash balance and available fund balance of \$257,072.18.

Approval of Minutes

On a motion by Mr. Diehl, seconded by Mr. Patterson the October 9, 2025, regular meeting minutes were unanimously approved.

Business

Marketing & Advertising Status Update Discussion

The marketing and advertising status update provided by Anne Marie Bass with Front Row Communications was included in the agenda packet materials that board members had received. Finance Director Johnson shared that any questions related to the update would be relayed back to Ms. Bass for further details. If members had any questions later on, Finance Director Johnson provided direction for board members to email her their questions. It was noted that Ms. Bass would be present at the budget workshop to provide detailed information on marketing efforts.

Town of Swansboro-Visitor Center Revitalization Project

Town Manager Jon Barlow, reviewed the funding request for the ongoing visitor center revitalization project. He shared that it began in 2022 with county-approved funding, leading to equipment purchases for bathrooms that have remained unused due to mold issues discovered in 2024. Manager Barlow reviewed that the situation resulted in the ability redesign the interior to accommodate more amenities like bathrooms and laundry facilities, a concern echoed by downtown merchants. The upgrade included handicap-accessible and gender-specific bathrooms, washer/dryer services, and office space. Project costs totaled \$97,760, with \$55,000 already allocated, and \$21,760 and \$21,000 sought from TDA and Onslow County TDA, respectively, with most funds covering construction.

In response to inquiries from the board, Manager Barlow clarified that there would be a code lock for 24/7 access available for transient boaters, alongside with security measures, maintenance plans, as well as regular cleaning.

On a motion by Mr. Harnatkiewicz, seconded by Mr. Patterson the funding request of \$21,000 in addition to reallocating the original request of \$30,000 which had been previously approved to support the revitalization of the Visitor Center. The motion passed unanimously.

Town of Swansboro- PirateFest Special Event

Parks & Recreation Director Anna Stanley reviewed the funding request for PirateFest operated in collaboration with Onslow County Parks and Recreation. Director Stanley shared that the event had grown to over 7,000 attendees, marking a 77% increase since 2019. She reviewed that prior year's economic impact was recorded at \$42,617, with \$40,000 attributed to daytime economic impact and \$2,000 to overnight accommodations. The request submitted was for \$2,000 designated for television advertisements, representing PirateFest's inaugural attempt into TV marketing. Parks & Recreation Director Stanley elaborated on marketing initiatives, which included in-kind radio partnerships with five stations, newspaper ads, and promotions in Our State Magazine, encompassing all community events. The proposed TV advertising would be executed through Channel 9 (WNCT), featuring 72 slots throughout the month and supplemental bonus advertising. The commercials would incorporate genuine footage from the prior year's event, supplied by a participating pirate.

In response to inquiries from the board, Director Stanley confirmed that there would be compliance with TDA branding requirements in the advertisements and that there was a net audience reach of 131,433, with different times throughout the day.

On a motion by Mr. Patterson, seconded by Mr. Harnatkiewicz, the funding request of \$2,000 for PirateFest was unanimously approved.

Town of Swansboro-Swansboro Festivals

Parks & Recreation Director Stanley presented a request for \$6,500 for two purposes: (1) the purchase of a visitor analytics software platform (City Data AI, at \$5,000 annually) to track visitor behavior, demographics, movement patterns, and event attendance; and (2) the remaining \$1,500 toward advertising and marketing for the Arts by the Sea Festival. Parks & Recreation Director Stanley reviewed that the City Data AI platform was a cost-effective alternative to Placer.ai, offering 13 location licenses and unlimited user access—allowing both the Parks & Recreation Department and the TDA's marketing contractor to utilize the data. TDA marketing contractor Ann Marie Bass provided written support for the platform, noting its potential to create a unified, data-driven approach to event planning and tourism marketing.

Board members expressed support for the concept but requested a clearer plan for how the data would be used to generate measurable outcomes for tourism, including defined key performance indicators (KPIs) and a formal reporting structure. Concerns were also

raised about the validity of cell-phone-based location data and the long-term recurring cost of the subscription. It was noted that Ann Marie Bass had not yet presented a coordinated plan for how the software would be integrated into the TDA's broader marketing strategy. The Board agreed to table the software purchase pending further planning and suggested that the \$6,500 in funding be directed toward advertising, with the software purchase to be reconsidered upon receipt of a substantive implementation plan from both the Parks & Recreation Director and the marketing contractor.

On a motion by Mr. Diehl, seconded by Mr. Harnatkiewicz, the funding request of \$6,500 was approved for advertising only, was unanimously approved.

Town of Swansboro-Tree Lighting Ceremony/Flotilla

Dockmaster Justin Webb presented a request for \$2,000 toward the purchase of a replacement Christmas tree for downtown. The existing tree, approximately 8–15 years old, had exceeded its typical 5–8 year lifespan per the manufacturer, and was experiencing deteriorating garland, failing light sockets, and increasing difficulty of assembly. A replacement tree from the Town's long-standing vendor was quoted at \$14,419.74 after the post-Christmas discount period (approximately 33% off), compared to the full retail price of approximately \$21,000. The plan was to wait until January to place the order, allowing the current tree to be used for one additional season while capturing the maximum discount. The Town's proposed FY 2026–2027 budget would fund the remainder of the purchase, including shipping.

On a motion by Mr. Diehl, seconded by Mrs. Evans, the funding request for \$2,000 towards the cost of a replacement Christmas Tree downtown was unanimously approved.

National Travel & Tourism Week

Finance Director Johnson presented a request for \$300 to reimburse Kelley Brown for travel expenses associated with attending the National Travel and Tourism Week event on May 7–8, 2026. Mrs. Brown address the board sharing that she planned to represent Swansboro at the event by distributing promotional materials and operating a prize basket featuring items from downtown merchants, with a QR code and paper ballot system to collect visitor contact information for future event marketing.

On a motion by Mr. Harnatkiewicz, seconded by Mr. Diehl, the reimbursement request of \$300 to Kelly Brown for travel expenses was unanimously approved.

Proposed FY 2026-2027 Budget

Finance Director Johnson presented the proposed FY 2026–2027 budget. It was noted that the TDA's auditor had informed the Town that he would no longer be providing audited services, and that an RFP would be issued to see a replacement. The audit line item was

increased from \$3,000 to \$6,000 as a precautionary measure. It was also noted that the marketing contractor's fees had increased by approximately 15%. The budget as submitted reflected all requests received, with the understanding that adjustments would be made at the upcoming budget workshop.

Set Date to hold a public hearing/adoption

Pursuant to G.S. 159-12(b), Finance Director Johnson advised that a public hearing must be held prior to adoption of the budget ordinance. The Board discussed scheduling a budget workshop with the marketing contractor present, to be followed by a public hearing and formal budget adoption.

By consensus the board agreed to hold another special meeting on May 7, 2026, for further budget discussion and/or the public hearing.

Board Projects/Discussion Items

Mr. Diehl raised the question of how the Town planned to connect with transient boaters who moor or anchor in Swansboro waters but do not make formal dock reservations, noting that this population would benefit from—and arguably be entitled to use—the planned Visitor Center shower and bathroom facilities. He recommended that the Town develop a proactive system for reaching and charging these visitors prior to the facility's opening, rather than addressing it after the fact. It was noted that the Dockmaster's existing reservation software (ActiveNetwork/Dockmaster) had mooring management capabilities that could be utilized. Dockmaster Webb and Town Manager Barlow acknowledged the concern and agreed to give it further consideration.

Adjournment

ON a motion by Mr. Diehl, seconded by Mr. Harnatkiewicz the meeting adjourned at 4:02 pm.