

# Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB) Final Meeting Minutes

1   **Date:**             Sept. 17, 2025  
 2   **Time:**            3:00-4:30pm  
 3   **Location:**        Sciencenter/Via Zoom

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 5   **Attendees:**

Member		Representation	Member		Representation
Amanda Bisson	P	TC3	Teri Tarshus	E	Lodging
Brett Bossard	P	At-Large	Marian Levy Ware	P	At-Large
Laura Winter Falk	P	Agriculinary	Vacant		At-Large
Jeff Golden	P	Ithaca College	<i>Megan Barber</i>	P	<i>CAP, Non-voting</i>
Alexis Zaharis Grimm	P	Lodging	<i>Peggy Coleman</i>	P	<i>Chamber, Non-voting</i>
Ken Jupiter	P	At-Large	<i>Frank Doldo</i>	P	<i>Transportation, Non-voting</i>
Doug Levine	P	At-Large	<i>Suzanne Smith Jablonski</i>	P	<i>IDCC, Non-voting</i>
Kelly Makosch	P	Recreation	<i>Kurt Anderson</i>	E	<i>IAED, Non-voting</i>
Rick Manning	P	Recreation	<i>Nan Rohrer</i>	P	<i>DIA, Non-voting</i>
Greg Mezey	A	At-Large	<i>Mike Sigler</i>	A	<i>TC Legislature, Non-voting</i>
Bethany Parisi	E	Arts-Culture	<i>Vacant</i>		<i>CVB, Non-voting</i>
Barbara Romano	P	Cornell University	<i>Michael Miller</i>	E	<i>Associate Member</i>
Monika Roth	P	Agriculinary	Nick Helmholdt	P	Tourism Program Director
Jason Sidle	P	At-Large	Kristin McCarthy	P	County Staff
Steven Stull	P	Arts-Culture			

6   **Guests:** Matthew Colbert, Lauren Garnese, Michelle Kortenaar, Roxan Noble, Steve Selin, Chris Stephany,

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 8   **Opening Remarks/Changes to the Agenda/Privilege of the Floor** – Chair Doug Levine called the meeting to  
 9   order at 3:06pm. No changes to the agenda. Guest Steve Selin introduced himself.

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 11   **Action: Approval of August 2025 STPB Draft Minutes** – The August draft meeting minutes were approved  
 12   (motion by Alexis Zaharis Grimm, second by Steven Stull) as submitted.

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 14   **Chair's Report** – *Doug Levine*

15   Doug gave a quick overview of the agenda and commented on the exceptional sunshine recently, hoping it  
 16   reflects well on September room stays.

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 18   **Sciencenter Update** – *Michelle Kortenaar (executive director) & Lauren Garnese (director of development)*

19   Michelle and Lauren reported on and discussed various topics such as visitor statistics, funding challenges,  
 20   and tourism impact. The Sciencecenter sees approximately 100,000 visitors annually, with about 64,000  
 21   unique visitors and 14,000 from out of state or internationally. They noted that families cite the  
 22   Sciencecenter as a reason to visit Ithaca, and it serves as a draw for rainy day activities. With 26 staff  
 23   members serving 100,000 visitors and a \$3 million operating budget, front door admission subsidizes only  
 24   about \$300,000 (10% of budget). Approximately 22% of visitors come for free or at extremely low prices  
 25   through various assistance programs. Revenue streams include a traveling exhibit portfolio generating  
 26   about \$750,000 and federal grants, though both face headwinds from federal grant uncertainties.  
 27   Discussion covered summer tourism numbers, with August notably slower compared to July, and a  
 28   significant decline in Canadian visitation. Michelle invited board members to return for a behind-the-scenes  
 29   tour of the facility.

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## **Tompkins County Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB) Final Meeting Minutes**

### **Staff Report** – *Nick Helmholtz*

Nick's report and the subsequent discussion covered several key topics, including updates on short-term rental regulations, the ongoing debate over room occupancy tax, and airport funding discussions. Recent developments included the passage of room tax law modifications for short-term rentals on Sept. 2, the relaunch of IthacaTrails.org, and the release of the Economic Impact 2024 report for the Finger Lakes Region. The County Legislature's Budget, Capital, and Personnel Committee is considering a room occupancy tax increase. A key upcoming decision will be the proposed allocation of approximately \$500,000 from room tax revenue to the airport as part of the 2026 County Budget process, set for debate and vote in early October with a final vote in early November.

### **ITH Airport Presentation** – *Roxan Noble (ITH Airport) & Matt Colbert (InterVistas Consulting)*

Roxan Noble and Matt Colbert gave an update on airport operations and funding needs. Their presentation and the subsequent discussion covered multiple topics including performance metrics, cost challenges, and future projections. The airport served 118,000 passengers in 2024, currently offering two daily flights to Washington Dulles and two to JFK, generating \$57.4 million in annual local economic impact. Flight performance has improved with overall load factors at 77% full and DC service outperforming the former Newark route. A significant focus was cost per enplanement (CPE), which is significantly higher for Ithaca compared to other area airports, and concerns about funding impacts on tourism capital and other grant programs. Board members expressed frustration about transparency, planning difficulties when recommendations are overridden, and precedent concerns about using room tax for infrastructure. The airport outlined marketing partnerships including up to \$250,000 in airline reimbursement and opportunities for tourism collaboration through terminal displays and the airport website, with projections that within five years, lowered CPE and increased flights could reduce funding needs.

### **Report/Action: Community Celebrations Grant Review Committee** – *Doug Levine*

Doug presented a summary of the grant applications received, thanking the committee and staff for their support of the Community Celebrations program. Approximately \$11,000 was available to spend, with about \$9,500 awarded. One application was not funded because participation in the event did not appear to be free and that the event's purpose was as a fundraiser. He shared that the recommended events are geographically spread throughout the county.

**Action:** Doug Levine made a motion, which Kelly Makosch seconded, to recommend the Tompkins County Legislature approve the 2025 Fall Community Celebrations grant awards for funding. Motion carried.

### **Report/Action: Tourism Advancement Grant Review Committee** – *Alexis Zaharis Grimm*

Alexis presented a summary of the applications received, thanking Kristin and Nick for excellent notes. The committee recommended fully funding applications from Hammerstone, Sciencecenter, and Downtown Ithaca Alliance. They partially funded Ithaca Festival, Ithaca Shakespeare, and Trumansburg Conservatory of Fine Arts. The funding decisions reflected a geographic spread across Tompkins County and included off-season winter applicants.

**Action:** Alexis Zaharis Grimm made a motion, seconded by Doug Levine, to recommend the Tompkins County Legislature approve the 2025 Fall Tourism Advancement grant awards for funding. Motion carried.

**Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee** – Due to time constraints, this item was postponed until the October STPB meeting.

**Member Announcements** – Members shared news and events of interest. These included the Ithaca Farmers Market celebration party, Kitchen Theater productions, Greater Ithaca Art Trail Open Studio

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80 Weekends in October, Experience! The Finger Lakes community wine classes at La Tourelle, Cayuga  
81 Chamber Orchestra and Finger Lakes Chamber Ensemble concerts, and Porchfest. Chamber of Commerce  
82 announcements included Meet the Candidates forums and Business After Hours at the State Theatre; State  
83 Theatre updates included new LED lighting and upcoming concerts. Other announcements included Apple  
84 Harvest Festival (September 26-28) and Conference Center events, including the NYS Ornithological  
85 Association Conference.

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87 **Adjournment** – Chair Doug Levine adjourned the meeting at 4:44pm.