Fred Leavitt said the focus of Highlands County's tourist tax money should not just be on sports marketing but cultural tourism as well.

"We can do much better," said Leavitt, president of Heartland Cultural Alliance, during Thursday's meeting of the Highlands County Tourist Development Council at the Chateau Elan Hotel and Conference Center. "We're not getting cultural tourists as we should be.

"Cultural tourism is a worldwide phenomenon and is a rapidly growing industry," he added.

Leavitt cited statistics from William Stronge, professor of economics at Florida Atlantic University, the author of "The Economic Impact of Florida's Arts and Cultural Industry."

• 74.9 percent of visitors to Florida participate in cultural activities.

• The arts and cultural sector of Florida's economy grew strongly in the most recent four-year study period. Both direct and total spending is estimated to have tripled during a 12-year period.

• Florida's cultural tourists spend more than tourists not attending cultural events.

"We have what it takes in place to harness this market," Leavitt said. "How do we get all of this together?"

Leavitt mentioned the Museum of Florida Arts and Culture, SFCC Theater for the Performing Arts, Avon Park Depot Museum, the Mural Society in Lake Placid, Lake Placid Art League, Highlands Art League's Artist Village and the Highlands Little Theatre in Sebring are among the places the county has.

In a packet of information he presented to the council, Leavitt said the purchase and renovation plans for the Circle Theatre have "enormous potential" for revitalizing downtown Sebring.

Leavitt said his organization, which has more than 100 members, wants to partner with the tourist council.

He noted Heartland Cultural Alliance needs funding, adding that it gets no money from Highlands County.

The council did not discuss the matter after Leavitt's presentation.