

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

Meeting Minutes

January 15, 2025, at 12:30 PM

19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417

Commissioners in Attendance

John Coker Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair
Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co Supervisor, Vice Chair-Z
Clarice Mac Garvey, Northampton Co. Appointee-Z
Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Director
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

Joanne Moore – Chincoteague C of C

Guest Present

Karen Zamorski, Main Street Cape Charles-Z
Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Bill Stramm, Main Street Cape Charles -Z
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center
Evelyn Shotwell
Becca Meyer, Advance Travel - Z

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Z

1. Call to Order

- At 12:31 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella commented that during the holidays he visited all over the northern east coast the strength of the upper end consumer is beyond belief. Cape May during holiday festivities was so crowded that you couldn't help but trip over people crowds everywhere. Besides what you hear about the economy on the news, the strength of the higher-end consumer that we are looking to attract to our area is the ones with the most disposable income and spending it. Directing our efforts to high-end quality offers rather than marketing to quantity offerings is the direction we should continue to work on attracting. We are like Cape May just on a smaller scale both with accommodation and restaurants. Fish where the fish are was the comment from Spuck.
 - Ace added that his real estate company is starting to advertise in Cape Cod the acquisitions cost difference is 10%. It is the same mileage as it is from New York to Chatham, MA or from New York to Chincoteague.
 - Mac Garvey is zooming in from rural Vermont. All the hotels are packed with raised rates. Tourism is hot in Vermont even though it is freezing, wintry weather.
 - Holloway added that Cape Charles has always had a strong market from Philly and Bucks County.
- Cherron Davis from New Church Welcome Center, brought with her the Virginia state travel guide that has just been released. The Spring cover is promoting VA 250 with a church cover. The

summer cover is of the 100 Anniversary Pony Swim in Chincoteague. There is a six-page spread on Chincoteague inside the guide.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:39 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Mac Garvey and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported next week a press release about the Mirco Business Marketing Leverage program will be released. The upcoming Marketing and DMO grants will open in February and close in March. The next 2025 Micro Business Marketing Leverage program will open in June and close in July. The Governor Tourism Summit will be held November 16 – 18. There has been good media coverage featuring the Eastern Shore in the Southern Living magazine about Onancock. Chincoteague was mentioned in a Readers Digest article and Cape Charles. There was an autumn bird migration article which featured Kiptopeke and Chincoteague. Laura shared all this information with those vicinities. Laura has also shared all the grants received by Shore for the Mirco Business Leveraging Totaled Forty thousand dollars.

5. Commission Updates

• **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams' report for the Welcome Center reflects a 2024 review. The number shows a downward tract ever since covid. WC is down 9% for the year. What this welcome center is known for is the maps we hand out from coastal states to mid-western states.

Digital Marketing Analytics

Machen added to comments on the welcome center. Google reviews consistently give the Southern Gateway Welcome Center 5 star reviews. Data shows good reach and engagement happened during the holiday season. ESVA TC had high click-through rates with our paid ads with Advance Travel which were done on social media and paid search. We saw traffic going to our accommodation. Going forward we will be promoting off-season event through the spring such as Weddings under the Micro Business marketing program. Destination weddings filled up accommodations during the shoulder season we will be leaning into that type of promotion with this grant. There is also a 2024 report that you can review.

- Becca Meyer, from Advance Travel, reported on google analytics and traffic. ad campaigns are up 12% over last year. Search in marketing is up 14%. Organic search is up 15.5%. Those types of searches are when people come to your website because they have seen your brand and have become acquainted with your area and want to learn more. Google analytics has a way to watch and see how long people are on your website and time that is spent on pages, how many pages they click on and read, and go to partners pages. Returning users are up 18% which reflects that your ads have been seen, and viewers come back to take another look at your website. New users are up 28% over last year.

Machen added that we are on tik Tok and u-tube.

- Sabbatini suggested trying to get younger people to stop at welcome centers.
- Holloway also added that the new love sign will draw younger people in for pictures.

• **Tourism Summit Update**

Sabbatini reported that he is pleased how the summit is shaping up. As a reminder we will be in Chincoteague this year on Monday February 24 beginning at 10 am and doors open at 9 am with breakfast registration. 10 am is the kickoff welcome talk. Cheryl Wilson from VA 250 will speak at 10:30 am followed by our keynote speaker Christine Trippi running until 12:30 followed by lunch.

12:45 Laura and VTC will give their presentation. A break will be after lunch, an AI Workshop at 1:00, at 2:10 Marketing workshop with Advance Travel. A break from 2:30 to 2:40, at 2:40 the CBBT comes in with updates by Jeff Holland on the tunnel. 3:00 Social Media workshop. 3:20-3:40 Accommodation workshop, 3:40-4:00 wrap up and give aways. Networking and giveaways until 5:00 pm.

- Spuck suggested submitting questions in advance for the workshop topics so that the 20-minute time slots are adhered to.
- Holloway suggested to have handout on each topic workshop so that folks could have a take home. Have keynote speak first followed by Cheryl on VA 250 topic then lunch.

Sabbatini would like to have at least 150 attending summits.

- **Visitor Guide Update**

Sabbatini shared a page from the travel guide as the style of upcoming publication. We are looking forward to the rest of the guide as it comes together.

- **Civil War Trails-Ribbon Cutting**

Sabbatini reported that the Civil War Trail ribbon cutting is planned for Tuesday March 25th around lunchtime for a marker for Peter Jacob Carver. The Eastern shore is on the map as a trail site. Does the March 25th date work for everyone. Holloway has a board meeting in Onley that day as does Cara Burton. Thursday March 27th has been penciled in. Sabbatini will see if the family can attend.

- **Director of Destination Development Position**

Sabbatini reported he has begun zoom interviews with candidates they are very promising. Once that process is done the top picks will come in for live interviews. Staff and commissioners will be part of the process which will begin in the first week of February. Sabbatini is confident TC will land a particularly good employee.

- **Miscellaneous**

Funding request for both counties Accomack and Northampton have been submitted. Chamber and Tourism Chairs and Vice Chairs had particularly good meetings with discussions on building and renovations for the Chamber building. Talks on bathrooms and upgrading technology in both the boardroom and conference room. New TVs, sound bars, and cameras are all a part of the upgrading of the systems.

- Coker added technology up to date will be user friendly.
- Spuck added make sure zoom and power point presentation are capable of being used simultaneously.
- Sabbatini discussed the bathroom designs which include a family rest room.
- Sabbatini also informed commissioners that Onancock welcome center will open in April.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Spuck reported that Onancock has a lot going on. Sunset Park where Mallards is located, and the boat ramp there will be a stamped concrete patio put in where folks can go to watch the sunset. A premier entry sign into Onancock is being organized. All new street signs are being put up downtown. A street light program for redoing all of the town squares including flower beds and irrigation is designed. Queen Street Parking area is just about done. Lilliston building ground floor has occupancy certificate. The 6 apartments/ STR upstairs are being sheet rocked as we speak. The old dinning room for the Charolette is going to be ice cream shop where the ice cream machine makes it in front of you for you to watch, plus fudge will be sold. Above the Town Hall there will be rental space available.

- Holloway reported the town manager interviews went well with an offer to be made shortly. The new hire will begin mid-April and overlap with the current town manager for a month. Holloway is waiting in the news for continuation of the welcome center plans for Cape Charles. The new bank on Mason Avenue is coming along. A grant has been awarded to bring shade to Strawberry Street Plaza. The Rotary is funding a giant clock in partnership with Main Street. Karen Zamorski added the Decoy Show will be a two-day event January 31st and February 1st at the Oyster Farm. There will be a shuttle bus that will pick folks up from Oyster Farm and shuttle them downtown for shopping and eating. 2000 people are expected to attend. April 26 is Love Run. There will be a job fair prior to the opening of the season.
- MacGarvey reported that Exmore is in transition and the new town manager is Taylor Duke who started January 1. The Christmas season was successful, the Winter Art Fair and Christmas parade drew big crowds. Sales for retail and restaurants are up. Advance Auto and Auto Zone will be opening on HWY 13.
- Shotwell reported for Joanne Moore on Chincoteague. Visitation numbers were up for December and the year. There was good attendance at the Christmas parade, Horseshoe Drop, Polar Plunge, Holiday Home tour all was well attended. The cover of the state travel magazine means a lot to Shotwell she started 5 years ago pushing the idea of having the pony swim on the cover for the 100 year anniversary. The Chincoteague Travel Guide is due to arrive any day now.
- Tarr stated Accomack County is doing very well.
- Coker stated in the last 6 weeks Cape Charles has been booming. Last weekend, with no water in Richmond, anyone that had a home in Cape Charles or knew of the town visited Cape Charles. Karen Zamorski added that during Festive Fridays Cape Charles Main Street had 12,200 visitors.

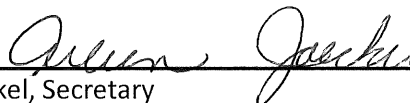
7. Adjournment

- At 1:49 p.m. Spuck made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:


4/16/26

 John Coker, Chairperson Date


4/16/26

 Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date