

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
January 21, 2026, at 12:30 PM
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co. Supervisor, Chair
Tammy Holloway, C C Town Council, Vice Chair
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co. Appointee
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague C of C-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Megan Lawson, DODD
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Sally Williams, Southern Gateway Welcome Cnt

Commissioners – Absent

Chamber of Commerce – Observer
Ace Seybolt

Guest Present

Jay Abella Cape Charles Main Street
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center-Z
Maggie Grant, Onancock Main Street
Lee Pambid, Deputy Co. Administrator, CZA
Grace Woodworth Admin Assistant
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street -Z

Ex-Officio Non-VTC Representative

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 12:34 p.m. Tarr called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, reported numbers are up and has surpassed the number of visitors for the month of January last year. People have been on the move with a destination not snowbirds driving by. Visitor Center Seminary will be hosted in Fredericksburg VA this year. The event will be March 9, 10, and 11.
- Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street, reported Festive Fridays, the four weekends before Christmas, hosted 13,200 people. Social Media Face book hit 2.4m views. Love Run a 5K and 10K run will be April 25th.
- Maggie Grant, Onancock Main Street, reported there is a marketing workshop at Mallards on February 2, from 3-5 p.m. The workshop is on marketing, social media, and design. Onancock is going to promote Valentine's season with VTC grant funds received for this promotion. The website will be listing all the Valentine events that will be happening in town. There is a new restaurant in Onancock called Bread and Butter scheduled to open by Valentine's Day. Social media has performed well in 2025, Onancock reaching 2.1m views, Instagram received 60k views. This is incredible for a town of 1,300 people. Lawson was in a reel featuring Onancock which received 4k views and growing it was an organic post the town did not pay for. Onancock received a Downtown Investment grant which will be used by thirteen businesses to fix building facades with up to \$5,000 to be used by each business. Maggie also informed the commission of a new short term rental opportunity in Onancock called Short Stays located on second floor of the newly renovated Lilliston building. There are six apartments, each with one bedroom and a pull-out sofa which could sleep a total of four people. Onancock has an interim town manager named Bill who

will be in Onancock 3 days a week. Applications for a full-time town manager are coming in. Interviews have not started.

- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street, reported that people with higher incomes are still coming to Cape Charles. Marketing to those locations with population of high income is important.
- Lee Pambid, Deputy County Administrator for Community and Economic Development, attended his first meeting. Mr. Pambid stated to tell the complete economic picture for Accomack County Pambid needs to know about tourism on the Eastern Shore and know what the numbers are. The department of Economic Development is a regulatory agency which includes building codes, zoning, sub-divisions, environmental and economic development which is a strategic based initiative. Grace Woodworth (in attendance with Mr. Pambid) is the Admin Assistant that supports economic development task. The Accomack County Supervisors will be considering who the consultant will be for reviewing the upcoming Comprehensive Plan tonight. The Comprehensive Plan must be reviewed every 5 years. The comp plan needs to be revised in plain language, so it is easily read by the public and understood. Virginia Space is getting ready to kick off their master plan which includes changing the clam processing plant in Mappsville into the Mars Industrial Complex. Currently Accomack County and VA Space are beginning to kick off their policy and vision statement in strategic planning at the same time. VA Space also includes Space Tourism in their plan. Mr. Pambid is here today to get a better picture as to what the Tourism Commission does and factor tourism into the comp plan.

- Laura Messer asked if Accomack County has a strategic plan or just a comp plan.

Mr. Pambid replied, the County follows the Board of Supervisors' strategic priorities. The County Administrator works with the Supervisors on strategic priorities on an annual basis in a two-year cycle. Comp plan is a 20–40-year look into the future.

3. Consent Agenda

- Sabbatini ran through the financials to give a mid-year update. TC balance sheet checking account is very strong with over \$105,000 at this time. Expenses and revenue are running in line with our budget. Budget requests have been submitted to both counties. Sabbatini will be presenting in front of both county boards in February.
- At 12:54 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she had outreach with the town of Onancock as well as the town of Exmore. Chincoteague will be holding their strategic planning session tomorrow Laura will be facilitating. As soon as the statewide document plans on tourism are released Laura will forward The Eastern Shore section. Cara Burton has been a tremendous asset in the development of VA250 on the Shore. There are new restrictions for grants with some DMO's no longer eligible to participate in. VTC handouts containing media coverage for the month are in the packet.
 - Sabbatini thanked Laura for her grants assistance which included Lawson and Cara Burton. Additional good news the special events grant was awarded to ESVA Chamber Fest.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Williams reported December numbers were down 6% the Bridge Tunnel numbers are down about the same. This January we are about 10% above last year. There is not a lot of traffic, but visitors are coming into the welcome center. The Wildlife Refuge has redone the corner of the welcome center that they represent. TC has painted sections of the facility that needed attention WC looks bright, shining, and fresh.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson shared Northampton VA250 updates. Cara Burton with NHC funding will create a passport for NHC which includes fifteen stops. A stamp will be created for the passport. Cara is also developing the Heritage Trail, Driving trail, Walking trails, Hiking trails, Water trails, Art trails, and every type of trail that we could have. Accomack Co will do the same. Also, Accomack Co. has created a VA250 trail called "Be Free Rebel On". In the next couple of months, ESVA TC will have trails that will lead people up and down the Eastern Shore. The State of Virginia Passport for state sites can only be picked up at the Barrie Island Center, Ker Place, and New Church state Welcome Center. Most of the trails will be on ESVA Tourism app. The Island House had the largest lightbox at the welcome center TC will replace that lightbox with promotions about VA250, Sail Fest Cape Charles, and Onancock Sail Forward. The summit will have about six different businesses working directly with Jon Schallert who is the summit keynote speaker. Jon will work with each business on personalized ways to market their businesses. Jon will be on the Shore February 21st, two days before the Summit to meet with panelist in person. The selected group will sit on a panel in the afternoon and share what they personally learned and how to apply it to their businesses. The summit is Monday February 23rd in Cape Charles at the Impact Center there is a wait list with twelve people right now. Lawson reported WESR will be sponsoring a wedding event at Moonrise Jewelry on March 21st.

- Laura added that people are spending less on weddings. The Shore could be a niche for a more intimate pop-up wedding venues.

Lawson shared social media numbers: website received 2.4m views last year, which is 15% increase over last year. Eastern Shore had twenty-three media mentions in December. TC received the 2026 Arrivalist grant. Arrivalist is data that comes from cell phones which tracks a person once they arrive on the Shore then follows them back to their home. The data is a great sample set to view who is coming to the Shore and how they are spending. It does not track everyone, only those that allow tracking on their phones. TC was awarded second round VA250 grants.

- Holloway added January 27 is plan your vacation day. A post geared toward securing your vacation on the Shore by this weekend would be nice.

Lawson added that the gaming app has a high rate of clicks as does Facebook marketplace. A request has been placed for the VA250 mobile museum to come to the Southren WC in April on a Friday and Saturday weekend.

- **2026 Tourism Commission Meeting Dates**

Sabbatini reported the Tourism Commission meeting dates are the third Wednesday of every month beginning at 12:30 p.m. There is one month that we do not meet and that is December. July or August is extremely busy for everyone, one of those months may be canceled.

- **Natural Heritage Area (NHA)**

Robert explained that NHA is a designation from the federal government of areas and places where historic, cultural, and natural resources combine to form cohesive, nationally important landscapes. Tourism Commission is working to have both Northampton Co. and Accomack Co. receive this designation. There is a lot of leg work in the feasibility study that must be done prior to approval of this program the cost of the study is \$120k-\$140k. Tourism and the Chamber are looking to be joint partners. It is an exorbitant amount of money to get started in the program. Cara Burton and Sabbatini got together a few weeks ago and both decided that they would write the feasibility study. If we get the feasibility study done by October it can be in front of the general assembly in time for a decision. We are going for the full amount of \$700K coming to the Eastern Shore. The money can subsidies preserving our history and heritage such as events, festivals, Christmas parades, crab shack houses, and museums. Recently Sabbatini was on a call

with Delaware and Maryland representatives who are also pursuing the same program and wanted to know if the Eastern Shore would be interested in joining them. It would make a three state National Heritage Area. The pro, a bigger group, assists with the project. The con, a larger group does not mean a larger budget. Tourism Commissioners want to go after the NHA designation on our own.

- At 1:26 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to enter the Natural Heritage Area as Accomack Co. and Northampton Co. region, second by Moore and passed Unanimously.
- **Parkway Partnership Update**
Sabbatini reported ESVA Tourism Commission Vice Chairman Tarr, and Chairman Coker met with the Chamber of Commerce Chairman Jennifer Annis and Vice Chairman Ann Klye Doughty for an annual meeting. A motion was made to up the annual reserve payment of \$12k to \$15k for each partner per year. There is one quote for the building bathroom upgrade another quote will be coming. The women's restroom will stay the same. Men's restroom will lose a stall and have a family restroom added with a new entrance.
- **2026 Visitor Guide**
Sabbatini reported that Lawson is doing an excellent job pulling together the travel guide. There has been one hiccup Lunar Cow received our content on time but did not act on it for a month. Draft available soon.
- **Hospitality**
Sabbatini reported we do have a hospitality session built into the summit which will be put on by Hampton Roads Small Business Development Center. Sabbatini will keep Hospitality on the agenda to keep awareness at the front of our minds. As folks pull back on spending the experience visitors have is important.

6. Matters by Commissioner


- Moore shared paid social media was up 213%, website wide visits up 72%, office visits up 5% in Chincoteague. Winter season is still busy, birding, snowy owl sightings, hunting, fishing, a 400-600 lbs. tuna caught. Death by Chocolate February 13 and 14. Search for Shamrock March 20 and 21.
- MacGarvey Shared that Exmore will be getting two new antique stores to replace the two antique stores that have closed.
- Holloway shared an upgraded portable bathroom unit will be installed for the upcoming season. The welcome center will be ready by June. Meal's tax and TOT tax up significantly for the year. The annual resident survey had four hundred respondents, which was exceptionally good.
- Tarr will be away for the February BOC meeting but will be able to attend the summit.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:45 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by MacGarvey and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:


Billy Joe Tarr, Chairperson


Date


Aileen Joeckel, Secretary


Date