

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
November 19, 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
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce-Z
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co. Appointee

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center
Karin Rush-Monroe, Main Street Onancock

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-Officio Non-VTC Representative

Laura Messer, VTC Representative-Z

Tourism Consultant

Evelyn Shotwell

1. Call to Order

- At 12:30 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, reported welcome center numbers are up. Cherron does not think there is more traffic, they are just doing a better job of getting people into the welcome center with lures like a sandwich board is used to promote what the giveaways are in the welcome center. A Biltz for Christmas by the Sea in Chincoteague is running this month and next month. VA-1 starts today, it is the governor's conference on tourism. A second VA250 mobile museum will be dedicated to the western part of the state. Virginia has a tourism site passport program which is handed out at 70 Virginia welcome centers and Mount Vernon and Monticello. There are historical sites throughout the state where your passport can be stamped. On the Shore we have two locations where your passport can be stamped Barrier Island Center and Ker Place. The program will continue through the end of next year. We are only a week into the passport program, and we have had several requests for the passport.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street announced that there is an uptick in mortgage foreclosures and credit card debt is high which shows stress for the middle- and lower-income earners. The higher income earners are doing well. Festive Fridays begin the day after Thanksgiving and go through Friday December 19th. Last night there was a highly successful soup event at the Fire House in Cape Charles well over a hundred people it is called heart and Soul where the community brings a bowl and soup is shared. There were 13 or 14 different soups.

- Sabbatini added that he is hearing from the business end in both tourism related businesses and Chamber of Commerce partners there is concern on business strength at this moment.
- Coker asked what we can do to help businesses on the shore.
- Sabbatini continued, the summer was not as good as the business owners thought it was going to be.
- Holloway added that business owners need to look to 2019 as their base line. The Shore experienced an anomaly in 2020, 2022, and 2023. Our recovery was during and after covid. Travel is not coming here exclusively anymore. 2024 did take a dive but if you compare it to 2019 numbers everyone sees growth. It is hard for businesses to look back that far. Costs of goods have gone up 25-50% in some cases, which is a strain and not budgeted for.
- Evelyn added it is important for both industries to continue to show partners their value and assist businesses. Suggest to businesses you know are struggling to have an open house, getting local people interested in shopping local is a thought, meet and greet. But you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink.
- Holloway added that during covid many locals rose to the occasion to help local businesses and patronize them.
- Karin added in Onancock the template was given to local businesses for them to use the same messaging that is used by the town.
- Laura Messer added that the Saturday after black Friday is small business Saturday traditional a shop local day that needs to be promoted. Also, Laura worked with Sabbatini and Lawson on a Small Business Development workshop (SBD) that was well received. All and marketing tactics were presented. There will be a second workshop in the spring and SBD will be happy to do any counseling with business that requests their help.
- Sabbatini added that SBDC did a great job on hospitality for lunch and learn. Sabbatini suggested looking forward to the tourism summit and bringing the same hospitality/ marketing presentation that given by SBDC that would be a good plan.
- Coker added that a plan must be made now if things do not go well economically. Spring is around the corner and now is the time to plan for the initiative to assist businesses.
- Karin reported they are in search of a new town manager for Onancock. Matt Spuck will become the new Northampton County Administrator he was with the town of Onancock for 5 years. Christmas in Onancock is starting from December 3rd to the 31st. There are plays, two movies, and music, many events are going on throughout the month of December. Main Street won a VTC grant which is funding a billboard in Eden Maryland. Onancock has a campaign called, "Open for Business" under a grant which will help assist business owners. Onancock also has many store fronts that need fixing there is grant funds for that. The empty store front windows will be decorated by artists, so the downtown looks appealing. On February 2nd we will be conducting a small business marketing workshop on social media and web design. The first workshop Onancock held had attendance of 30; February workshop will be larger. There will be two more workshops in the spring.

3. Consent Agenda

- MacGarvey found an error and asked to have the agenda fixed to state Clarice MacGarvey is a Northampton Co. appointee not from Accomack.
- At 1:00 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she is attending VA-1 conference. Laura attended a meeting with Elisa Mc Math from the Rosenwald School Impact Center.

- Coker asked what the prognosis is statewide on tourism in 2026.

Everyone is extremely excited about the efforts on VA250, there is a lot of effort and new products that are going to be available for driving vacations to experience history. Luxury travel is a hot point. VTC will be monitoring what the trends are, and Laura will report on anything that is out on the horizon of travel. Outdoor recreation continues to have growth highlight the different nature experiences and preserves is important. The Rail Trail will be a huge boom for the shore when that opens.

- Coker added if the experience with customer service could be superior that would be the key to making the shore an outstanding place to visit.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally reported that the Southern Welcome Center is down just 3% year to date, a lot of interest in Festive Fridays a lot of interest in the Thanksgiving weekend art show. WC has partnered with Quail Cove and hands out peanuts, material picked up use bags with ESVA logo printed on it, picture postcards with scenes from the shore, and ESVA bumper stickers that are handed out. We will have Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus every weekend in December from 10-12 noon.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson continued speaking about Mr. and Mrs. Claus that will be at the welcome center. They are authentic with real beard and all. They will be able to read to kids and represent a great Christmas spirit on the shore and pose for photos. Google rating on the welcome center is outstanding, always a 5 star reviews 15-20 times a week. Thinking about QR codes posted saying if you have had a wonderful experience please share with us. Lawson is interested in the VA250 passport and seeing if the Southern Welcome Center can hand out the passport as well. Holloway has encouraged Lawson to look into it. The ES has three regional historical driving trails for VA 250 we are a destination worth visiting. Cherron suggested talking with Gary and Val at VA-1. 150k plus viewers saw our social media last month way above last year. Website views had 16k last month, which is good for ESVA, but we should get it higher. Our click through rate on our social media post continues to be 2 ½ points above industry average. Travel guide sales are going well. The common remark from partners is that they do not have it in their marketing budget, which has been cut down since last year. We have discounted everyone 10% and offer payment options. It's a good idea to do open houses with our partners to help promote their businesses in other ways to local people. I met with the folks at the Impact Center, and it is looking great I think they will have parking for 100. Save the date will be going out tomorrow with a formal invite going out next month.

- **2026 Visitor Guide**

Sabbatini reported that the travel guide committee is doing a great job. We have rescheduled the meeting that was to follow this meeting because so many people could not attend hopefully first week of December the committee can get eyes on the guide.

- **Hospitality workshops**

Sabbatini reported the hospitality workshop that the SBDC did at the Community College was one of the best ones Sabbatini has seen. It would be great to also use them at the summit.

- **2026 Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini pulled up the summit schedule the group went into discussion over the schedule and length of time allotted each category. Jon Schallert will be the keynote speaker, and we will have him for the entire day. There will be a 6-person panel that Jon Schallert will be working with in advance of the summit. Eric Hawkins will also be a panelist. The hospitality section of summit needs to be worked on it should be more of a customer care term like southern hospitality, Eastern Shore Hospitality. The term being just hospitality has folks thinking about hotel experience not customer care that needs to be the focus in all aspects of a visitor experience. Sabbatini will work with the schedule for the day of the summit to get in all the mentioned time slots adjusted.

- Holloway suggested starting at 9:30 rather than having registration for a full hour 9-10 am.

- **December Board Meeting**

Coker asked if the December board meeting should be held for the Tourism Commission, traditionally it is canceled.

- At 1:33 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to not hold a December meeting, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore shared Chincoteague is down 3 % over last year, down 8% for the month of October for the year to date. Website hits are off the chart's web traffic is doing very well. Chincoteague staff is heading to VA-1. Moore went over all the holiday events that are happening in Chincoteague which include horse drawn carriage rides and trolley rides December 19, 20, and 21st. Visitor guide will be going to the printer by the end of this week.
- Holloway shared September meal tax numbers are extremely high over last year. TOT Tax was even for September. October will be different because the government shutdown influenced the town. STR have moved from weekly rentals to daily rentals in some cases. The home decorating contest is coming back there will be judging of best outside decorated homes. There will not be carriage ride this year it will be a train. Rosenwald school / Impact Center is doing their kickoff open house January 19th. The cookie trail in December 13 a Saturday. Last year they had 700 people come through. This year the cookies for the trail event will be baked at the impact Center. What discourages homeowners from baking is the number of cookies you need 1,300 cookies each home.
- Evelyn Shotwell attended her last meeting. She will be looking forward to enjoying all the events as a visitor. Coker thanked Evelyn for all her years of participation.
- MacGarvey shared Exmore will be losing two antique stores. December 4th Christmas fair, Old Fashion Christmas in Exmore which includes New Ravena hosting an employee craft sale also. There is also a downtown light competition. The 13th is the Christmas parade.
- Coker announced this is his last meeting his supervisor position expires on 12/31/25. Jon Dempster will be John Cokers replacement from Northampton Board of Supervisors. Coker thoroughly enjoyed his commission with the Tourism. Coker thanked everyone's commitment to the commission that has contributed to its overwhelming success on the Shore. Billy Joe will take over as Chairperson. Holloway will be Vice Chair for the next 6 weeks We are in a great place to keep going Sabbatini thanked both Coker and Evelyn for their time and commitment to the commission.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:57 p.m. Halloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 1/21/2020
Billy Joe Tarr, Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 1/21/2020
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date