

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
February 19, 2025, at 12:30 PM
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

John Coker Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair-Z
Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co Supervisor, Vice Chair-Z
Clarice Mac Garvey, Northampton Co. Appointee-Z
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director-Z
Emily Machen, Marketing Director-Z
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant-absent
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Center-Z

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee

Guest Present

Bill Stramm, Main Street Cape Charles -Z
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center-Z
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague-Z

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt-Z

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Z

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis from New Church Welcome Center is interviewing for a new assistant manager. An offer has been made. At next meeting in March Cherron will be able to introduce the new assistant manager. The Visitor Center Seminar is in March it will be held in Harrisonburg. Sally Williams will be attending, Sabbatini added.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:33 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Mac Garvey and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she has had meetings with Onancock Main Street, Barrier Island Center and Cape Charles Main Street. The meetings were about the DMO grant and Marketing Leverage grant which will close March 13. The Drive Tourism plus grant will be opening again. Cape Charles, Exmore, Onancock and Chincoteague will be eligible to apply. The ESVA Tourism Commission was awarded the Drive grant during the last round. The Drive grant closes February 28th. There was media coverage on Cape Charles in Southern Living.

5. Commission Updates

• **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the bridge had a bad accident and has been closed for 6 hours today. The welcome center attendance this month is the same as last year, about 100 to 120 a day.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported throughout all digital platforms we have had good engagement during January. Facebook was up significantly which gave FB a good reach. We are promoting weddings and off-season activities with our digital marketing.

- **Tourism Summit Update**

Sabbatini reported on the Tourism Summit next week Monday February 24th which has led to conversations with many folks on the snowstorm arriving today with a prediction of up to a foot of snow. Sabbatini and Machen have investigated a backup plan for the summit. Our keynote speaker is flexible with dates that are also good for Cheryl Wilson from VA 250. Sabbatini spoke with Laura to work out alternate dates that work for VTC. With the amount of snow that is expected and the set-up date this coming Friday it is questionable whether staff would be able to get to Chincoteague to set up. Sabbatini asked to open the discussion to get everyone's thoughts on the Summit date.

- Coker added if we do get a foot of snow how much is going to get cleaned up by Monday.
- Holloway agreed that the back roads are not maintained, which stops people from getting out. The venue has been changed to Chincoteague, there is a risk in getting lower shore people to attend the summit. It is good that we have flexibility with our speakers. The new date does not have to be Monday but defiantly not a Friday. Holloway would like to see how much snow we get tonight then making the call tomorrow morning.
- Shotwell stated that even if we get 3-4 inches it will not be going anywhere by Sunday and Monday. It is going to stay cold, and I believe it will hinder attendance from Northampton Co.

Sabbatini will consider all the dates that do not work and discuss with Joeckel and Machen to get available dates from Keynote speakers.

- Coker asked Moore what the expected snow fall is for Chincoteague.
- Moore stated the town does do an excellent job of plowing town property. The Chincoteague Center is a town property where the roads have been pretreated but that only works on a certain amount of snow. Postponing the summit is a good idea.
- Tarr added if the summit is not Monday, he will be out of town on vacation.
- MacGarvey agrees planning to postpone the summit is a good idea. Attendance and safety are important issues.
- Shotwell agrees with everything said. See how much snow we get then make the call tomorrow.

- **Visitor Guide Update**

Sabbatini started by thanking Joeckel, Holloway, and Laura for all their input on all the revisions and drafts. We are waiting on a few ad approvals from businesses. Once that happens, we will send it to a couple for folks to get eyes on the guide and make sure there is no more major revision. This guide will be a wow for us this year and I am excited to get it out.

- Holloway shared it will be a reference guide with many pieces that people will refer to.
- Laura commented that the guide is full of text and there are no spacing issues. The cover photo that the commission selected is great.

- **Director of Destination Development Position**

Sabbatini was pleased to announce that after the help from the tourism team including Holloway and Laura, one candidate rose to the top. An offer was extended, and she has accepted. Her name is Megan Lawson she is currently with New Ravena in Exmore. Megan has been a great asset to New Ravena. She has a family now and is looking for a different place in life. Her experience at New Ravena has established relationships around the world. Her ability to connect

with people is a skill set Magen will bring to our partners. A start date is being worked on for Magen to transition out from New Ravena. Sabbatini added that very qualified individuals applied for this position. This is a testament to how the Tourism Commission is involved with our community and folks wanting to be a part of what we are doing.

- Holloway added it is a complement to Sabbatini's leadership to have a wide choice of candidates and narrowing it down to the last two which were excellent quality professionals. Megan will fit in naturally with the team.
- Laura added that she has put together a document for on boarding Megan to help get her up to speed.


6. Matters by Commissioner

- Holloway shared Cape Charles is gearing up for the season and finishing towns projects. Cape Charles has made an offer to a new town manager that will begin April 15th with a month that will overlap with John Hozey who is stepping down. A Main Street perspective on tourism; advanced bookings are thin. From a telecommuting perspective it will impact travel on the Shore significantly especially the lower shore. There is a strong Hampton Roads, Northern Virginia following. These visitors' impact on the lower shore length of stays can be extended from a 2-day to three or even 4-day stays. That is a concern for lodging, which is a measure for other businesses in town. We need to be conscious of the change that is accruing in the Federal government employment policy. Possibly the plus side might be people won't be traveling internationally. Ten years ago, Holloway had a campaign called Across the Bay and we will pay. It was effective to break down the barriers to encourage people to plan a trip to the Shore.
- MacGarvey did not have anything to share this month on Exmore but believes we should steal Holloways' campaign idea; Across the bay and we will pay.
- Moore shared the visitor guides have arrived with 76,000 guides being distributed. The Annual General Membership meeting was to be held this week but has been postponed because of the snow we are getting. Chincoteague Chamber and Visitor Center is working with the town and fire company organizing for the 100-pony swim. Also, the visitor center is keeping an eye on the staffing at the refuge and park service and how that will affect the travel experience. Death by Chocolate had 721 people attending, attendance was down about forty-six from 2024. A lot of restaurants were slammed Friday and Saturday that weekend.
- Tarr added the fire company is working hand in hand with Moore for the 100th event. The hotels are already booked.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:07 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Holloway and the meeting was adjourned.

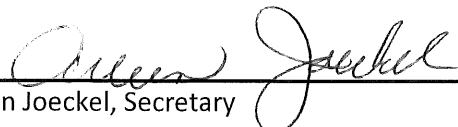
These minutes have been approved by:



John Coker, Chairperson



Date



Aileen Joeckel, Secretary



Date