

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
February 18, 2026, at 12:30 PM
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

Jon Dempster Norhampton Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair
Tammy Holloway, C C Town Council, Vice Chair
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co. Appointee
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague C of C-Z
Karin Rush-Monroe Accomack Co Appointee

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co. Supervisor, Chair

Guest Present

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

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-Officio Non-VTC Representative

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

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

Holloway asked all participants in the BOC meeting to introduce themselves to the newest Commissioner Jon Dempster, Northampton County Supervisor. All in attendance did so.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, reported in the month of February there is a blitz for Virginia Beach. In March the blitz will be put on by Chincoteague. Welcome Center numbers for FY 26 are up 25 percent. The month of January was up by 800 people. The bridge tunnel numbers are the true traffic numbers and they are down. New Church Welcome Center is committed to having lures to get people to walk into the welcome center and not just to use restrooms.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street, reported positive news today not just middle of the road economic news. The outlook of the consumer appears to be more bullish by Wall Street standards. Changes in the tax code could result in bigger tax refunds, creating more disposable spending.
- Lee Pambid, Deputy County Administrator for Community and Economic Development, reported Rocket Lab on March 23rd Monday at 3 PM is planning a rocket launch weather permitting.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:39 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Moore and passed unanimously.
- Sabbatini reported that the ESVA TC audit came back excellent all attending Board of Commissioners received a copy of the audit. Thank you Joeckel for providing all documents and

materials needed for the audit. Sabbatini will be delivering a copy of the audit to Accomack County and Northampton County. The ESVA TC financial position is very healthy financially. There are big expenses coming up travel guide, and tourism summit next week Monday February 23rd. Sabbatini has presented the FY 27 budget request to Accomack County and next week will be presenting FY 27 budget request to Northampton County.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported that the notes from Chincoteague board of action plan will be posted to Moore for review. The second meeting with Chincoteague will be held March 11th. Laura met with Onancock Main Street in February and discussed VTC data. A workshop on marketing is set for May. There was missing data in the VTC reports that Laura summited. When the additional data comes in the reports will be sent out again with updated numbers. The new Short Stays accommodations in Onancock was mentioned along with the new restaurant, Bread and Butter. A new grant cycle has opened. Media postings for the month are listed on the VTC media document that was in everyone's packet.
 - Holloway added that you can use the media earned in media document packets that Laura sends out in grant applications. It is a great resource for grants.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Williams reported January has been crazy with the wind restrictions and closing of bridge during high wind restrictions. January numbers were still up 2 percent over last January.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson reported ESVA Tourism Summit next Monday we believe it will be the best one yet. The community is showing signs that they too are excited with attendance right now at 130. There are many local vendors that will be providing food, it is going to be a taste of Cape Charles. We have great sponsors and 11 giveaways prizes. Jon Schallert is ready with his keynote speech and a live workshop session with 5 local businesses. Lawson attended multiple meetings during the month please look to Google Drive docs for meeting list. There have been 26 media mentions about the Shore which is higher than last year. There are 183k combined impressions across social media, 7,400 new users to the website which is higher than last year. February is one of our busier website months. The website had 6,900 clicks to our partners sites. If a partner asks I let them know how many clicks are directed from the tourism website.

- Holloway wanted to mention, through her business Bay Haven Inn of Cape Charles, how popular TC Wonderlove trail rack cards are with her customers. Holloway thought it would be a good idea to bring the rack cards to the summit for partners to see how to engage our travelers to direct them to trails that interest them. Some of our partners don't even know the rack cards exist.

Lawson is planning to update the rack cards with the new grant opportunity that she is applying for.

- **Visitor Guide**

Sabbatini reported Lawson has done a great job pulling the travel guide together. Sabbatini pulled up the 2026 Travel Guide on the big screen for everyone to view. A big change to the guide all partners who have rack cards with TC will have their businesses listed under Tourism Partners-Eat, Drink, Stay & Play section. Partners who purchased ads have their businesses highlighted in this section.

- Laura liked the guide having a theme, VA250. Laura's thought is to always have the guide with a theme.

- **2026 Tourism Summit/Schedule**

Robert thanked Lawson and Joeckel for the work done preparing for the summit. The schedule for the summit was reviewed. The panelist for the afternoon session; Destination Bootcamp a live strategy session will have Drizzles, Wachapreague Inn/Daytrippers, Country Way Mercantile, Wave Riders, and Laughing King Oyster Co. as panelist. Cape Charles Tiny Livin will give a testimonial on his trip out to Colorado attending Jon Schallers' Destination Bootcamp. Many businesses from Cape Charles will be providing lunch. Sabbatini asked for commissioners to be at the summit at 9 am to help greet our partners.

- **Hospitality**

Sabbatini reported Hampton Roads SBCD will be speaking on hospitality. With prices rising our visitors are expecting a value of service that follows a price increase. Our partners need to know how to reinforce customer service so that the experience that visitors receive is exceptional.

- **Miscellaneous**

Sabbatini added ESVA Tourism has a marketing position open. Tourism Commission is a sponsor for Chamberfest this year there will be an all-veteran sky diving team of 4 that will descend on Chamberfest carrying flags. Also, the lead ski diver has a 2015 NASCAR Sprint Cup series driven by Andretti. The car will be parked in front of the tourism tent for people to get into for a picture. The car is wrapped in Americana décor. There will be another surprise announced later.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore shared there were 19 community partners that attended the Chincoteague board of action plan. A follow-up meeting is on March 11th. Visitation at the Chincoteague welcome center was up 24 percent over last year. February numbers should be strong as well. There was Death by Chocolate last week a record breaker with 981 completed cards. Well over 1,000 people participated, which is 250 over last year. The weather was great, that was a big factor in the event. Search for Shamrock will be in March.
- MacGarvey shared Havana on Main will be opening soon and the Bank building is going to be leased to someone who will be opening a restaurant in that location.
- Rush-Monroe added that Onancock is still searching for a new town manager. There is work being done on Sail 250 promotion and Saint Patrick's Day parade is on March 14th. The next business workshop is set for March 9th. Bread and Butter is a new restaurant in Onancock that has had a successful opening. There was a fire in the Historic Onancock School, more smoke damage than fire damage, which was not good for the businesses that had fiber businesses. The community has opened their homes to some of the artisans for workspace.
- Dempster shared what he can report from his perspective that January was better than last year, but February was down which could be related to the weather.
- Holloway shared the Oyster Farm restaurant is going through a refresh which includes a new chief. Cape Charles is looking for a new business to go into where the Distillery was located. Cape Charles is looking forward to Chamberfest, Sail Fest and Bluegrass Fest coming to town. Cape Charles is sponsoring Love Run April 25 and the Job Fair April 4.
- Laura added that if weather gets above 50 degrees the Rail Trail will begin paving in the Cape Charles area.
- Sabbatini added if there is any negative chatter on the cost of the Rail Trail be mindful that the funds were allocated just for Rail Trail projects. If the Eastern Shore didn't get the funding, it would have gone to another community for a Rail Trail project.

