

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

Commissioners in Attendance

John Coker Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair  
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council  
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee  
Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co Supervisor, Vice Chair  
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co Appointee

Guest Present

Maggie Grant, Onancock Main Street

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt-absent

Tourism Consultant

Evelyn Shotwell

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 12:32 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- No Public

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:32 p.m. Moore made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she met with the Refuge Inn, and Onancock Main Street about grants. Yesterday Laura met with Eastern Shore Coastal Roasting Co. Kristen Willis. Eastern Shore Coastal Roasting is planning to can their cold brew coffee. ANPDC has a new regional planner, Sherry Dudas, her husband's name is Jim Kinsel. They own an agricultural tourism business in Machipongo named Machipongo Orchard and Nursery. This is a u-pick farm offering strawberries, blue berries, pawpaw's, figs, and more. Laura was a presenter at the Tourism Summit last week. This week Laura facilitated the Drive Tourism workshop at the Chamber building which had a great turnout. VTC will be running another statewide orientation next week for any new employees or staff on March 26 and 27. VA 250 grant opens next week. This past month Chincoteague was featured in Southern Living magazine.

## 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported that the Welcome Center is starting to get busy with spring around the corner. The numbers are a little lower than last year by 9% including another 9% lower than the year 2023. The bridge traffic is a little down too. Williams attended the Visitor Centers Seminar in Harrisonburg which was at the same time Eastern Shore Summit was rescheduled. Many of the things suggested during the seminar to increase traffic the Eastern Shore welcome center staff are already doing. The new ideas suggested will be implemented. Williams was pleased that she could attend the summit and shared all ideas with the staff it was very worthwhile to attend.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported a good month with social media with growth in all platforms. Paid social media campaigns are running now promoting weddings, wedding weekends, and extended wedding stays. The Drive Tourism workshop yesterday had many participants from across the shore. February travel numbers are slightly above January's numbers.

- Sabbatini shared a conversation he had with Holloway about government employees going back to work and no longer working remotely. This could impact travel on the Shore.
- Holloway added that extended stays may be shortened for government workers because of new government policies.
- Williams asked how advance bookings are looking for spring through June. At the state seminar some attendees did not have any bookings until Memorial Day.
- Holloway shared March B&B bookings are up over last year only because there were two international stays over a weeklong. Right now, April looks like it is 15% down from last year. What is the most freighting are the bookings for July and August. The whole time I have owned a B&B booking has never been this low. People are booking the last minute, which is a constellation but that makes it unknown and scary. STR bookings are lower in Cape Charles compared to previous years. Holloway did drop her room rates for March, April, and May.
- Joeckel asked if the attendance at the WC has gone down since the Royal Farm has been built. Williams answered most of their stops are from traffic going north bound.
- Moore added with the harsh winter we have been having and snow many schools have shortened their spring breaks.
- Laura will reach out to the VTC research team and see if they have any data on remote work impact.
- Coker added how do we figure out what is holding people back from making reservations and tickle them with ads, from the Eastern Shore, to get them to book. Do we need to sell weekend trips which we didn't have to do in the past. Machen will need to figure this out, with the help from VTC, how to turn this into an opportunity.
- Sabbatini added dollars stretch farther here on the Shore because there are so many things that you can do that aren't costly, beach, hiking trails, birding etc.
- Shotwell added we need to target this area as budget friendly, affordable, family friendly, fishing and gas prices are down, perfect place to distress.

- **Tourism Summit Update**

Sabbatini reported the summit was a great event, Machen did a wonderful job organizing everything including speakers. Joeckel did a great job setting up HH and the welcome center staff did a wonderful job customizing the experience for our partners to enjoy. The board members that attended did a great job, along with Holloways welcome speech knocking it out of the park.

Sabbatini thanked Laura for presenting at the summit. I would like to ask everyone to give their thoughts on the summit.

- Joeckel added that the room at the Chincoteague Center was great. The partners commented it was nicer to be more spacious rather than crowded as it normally was when held at the Community College. The \$10K speaker fee was high. Christine Trippe was a great motivational speaker, but the talk was the same for any audience anywhere in the country. Christine left after lunch. Two years ago, when Jon Schallert was our speaker, he also charged \$10K. There was a lot of pre work he did for his presentation including interviewing businesses before he got here and making local businesses a part of his presentation. On value we got our money's worth out of Jon Schallert plus a 2-hour follow-up zoom a couple of months later with more detail on the steps presented.
- Moore added Sabbatini asked Cynthia Wilder, who had heard Christine Trippi speak before, what she thought. Cynthia said it was the same speech, but it was given to hoteliers. The speech was not customized to us. Moore added the gentleman last year, Steve Chandler, when we went to dinner the night before he asked what businesses would be there, he also didn't do research on knowing who we were to be able to connect dots with people.
- Holloway added that we need to come up with some key factors of who we are to let a speaker know before they come so that customization can happen.
- Shotwell thought the keynote speaker was a little hokey and gimmicky, but a good message, always try to say yes rather than say no, always try to accommodate the customer. The afternoon session needs some work. In the afternoon we lost a lot of people after lunch. I like the fact that we did not have to pick a session to attend and missed another area of discussion because they were held at the same time. There was a year when the summit had a panel of the local businesses, and they took questions from the audience.
- Sabbatini added that Eric Hawkins from Tiny Livin worked with Jon Schallert before and after the summit. Eric attended Jon Schallert's boot camp for a week in Colorado for additional training.
- Holloway added that she spoke to John Park after the summit, John felt creating a panel with him doing social media and an AI panelist would have made a great deal of sense.
- Moore added that what she felt was missing from the AI presentation was demonstrating what ChatGPT does by using an example of a local business. How a business could create a specific task to plug into ChatGPT to see the process and receive a solution. Moore also suggested the printed program to have more of a description of who the other speakers are and a little detail on what they are going to speak about. Also have the program sent out in advance to encourage attendance.
- Holloway added to have a challenge for each table to work on using AI. That gives us experience of how to open ChatGPT. The Drive workshop yesterday was a great learning experience on what hub and spoke means and how when using those tools, it leads to creating partners for a good grant application.
- HH wished everyone at the welcome center could have heard the keynote speaker. HH was disappointed that after lunch many people left.
- Sabbatini heard from several people that they came to hear the keynote they only had a half day free. Some folks offer the suggestion to only do it half day. Sabbatini thought that it would be difficult for people travelling up to Chincoteague. A half day may not be worth the drive.

- Sally asked a partner who has attended all of our summits from the beginning what she thought. She loved the venue but there wasn't anything open to go to dinner which was disappointing. The other suggestion was that so many people from Cape Charles do not know much about Chincoteague, a speaker from NASA and a Supervisor speaking on Chincoteague would have been excellent.
- Laura suggested two things, maybe every other year a big keynote speaker the other year interactive workshop. What is the speaker giving the attendees to make their time well spent. There needs to be more tangibles that people receive.
- Coker shared he likes the idea of every other year. Not because of cost but because you get burnt out.
- Shotwell likes having one sheet to take home on each topic.
- Machen added that she spoke to Christine yesterday. She has agreed to do a follow-up in a video or conference call for a post summit to reinforce what was talked about at the summit.
- Holloway added this was our first attempt at going from one end to the other end of the peninsula for a summit. What hurts us is having to reschedule and having the summit in the middle of the week. The February time frame, when business owners can afford to be away, does work to our advantage, it seemed that we were down in numbers. It doesn't seem like the networking at the end of the summit works. People are ready to leave by the time the event is over. I would have loved to have the hosting town official like Moore, or the Mayor of Chincoteague tell us a little bit about what is upcoming on the island. A list of what is open for dinner in the hosting town would be nice too.
- HH stated 47 people didn't show. Thinking the number count was between 70-80 attending.
- Moore stated the membership meeting was the next day at the Chincoteague Center, that event was also rescheduled because of snow attendance was down 30%.
- **Civil War Trails-Ribbon Cutting April 10<sup>th</sup>, 12:00 noon, Cape Charles**  
Sabbatini reported that the ribbon cutting for the Civil War Trails will be held in Cape Charles on April 10<sup>th</sup>, at 12:00 noon. The press release has gone out on the ribbon cutting and has been picked up by Shore Daily News and the Eastern Shore News. The response has been positive so far. If there are any concerns from anyone, please let Sabbatini know he will be happy to discuss Civil War history with anyone. The ribbon cutting will be at the flagpole at the LOVEwork sign on the beach, 21 Bay Ave. The Carter family will be attending we should have good attendance. The town officials of Cape Charles are planning to attend and VTC staff will be there.
- **Visitor Guide Update**  
Sabbatini shared the 2025 travel guide with the BOC. The new articles on 100 years on the shore turned out extremely well. Sabbatini scrolled through the whole guide, all were pleased. ESVA TC are pushing for Progress Printing Plus in Lynchburg, VA. to be awarded the printing contract which would bring down the freight cost for delivering to us and pallet distribution to our distributors. Chincoteague Chamber has all shipments shipped directly from the printer in Illinois to all their destinations. Chincoteague only has 200 cases shipped to their facility.

#### 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore shared Chincoteague numbers are down about 6% from last year. Calls and emails are up 26%, website hits are up 30%, it is encouraging people are beginning to plan. Chincoteague held, Search for Shamrocks, last weekend there were 567 complete cards that was a new record. Last year it was 502, it was great to see the increase. Chincoteague Chamber is busy planning the Easter Decoy festival April 18-19. Restaurants and shops are starting to reopen. St Patrick's Day


seems to be pivotal for the season to begin. There will be a 100-anniversary pony swim exhibit. Fire Company is planning a parade May 17<sup>th</sup> with an open house afterwards.

- Holloway added the numbers are down, but weekends have been strong. With Spring almost here it is exciting to see the town sprucing up. The Beach cleanup is this weekend. The first Spring Break has taken place with a strong weekend of families visiting Cape Charles.

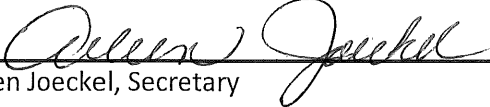
7. Adjournment

- At 1:41 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Coker and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by

  
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John Coker, Chairperson

4/16/25  
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Date

  
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Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

4/16/25  
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Date