

## Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

### Meeting Minutes

April 15, 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  
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

Jon Demptster, Northampton Co. Supervisor

#### 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 - Z

#### 1. Call to Order

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

#### 2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, congratulated the Tourism Commission for putting on the best tourism summit ever. The New Church Welcome Center is seeing people on the move. International Tattoo is playing in Norfolk at the Scope this weekend. Tattoo is a patriotic festival of live music including bagpipes and military bands from around the world. You can go every day at 4:30 and sit outside the Scope to hear the bands play. The night-time performances are indoors and require tickets. Saturday in Norfolk there is a NATO parade with different countries participating.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street, reported gas prices are expected to stay high for a while. A good promotion would be to reach out to areas where we are one tank of gas away.

#### 3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:37 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

#### 4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she is in Charlottesville with the governor who has released the new statewide tourism strategic plan. Laura will forward the plan shortly. The regional plan will be released in about a week it will be forwarded to the Tourism Commission when received by Laura. Laura remarked the summit was very well done. VA250 will be doing another grant round which will

help with tourism development. There are no predictions as to what the summer will look like with high gas prices. The 250 Anniversary of the country has strong ties historically to Virginia the thought is summer travel should be good for Virginia.

## 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Williams reported that the welcome center has exploded in the last two months. March had good visitation. Easter weekend had 3-4 days in a row with over 500 people coming into WC. WC also had Easter eggs outside. Inside each egg was a note to come into welcome center to receive a prize. Adults were just as excited to get their prize as the children. 250 passport books are in. Williams and her husband went down to Charleston SC for a week vacation. William's observation was that it is cheaper the further south you travel than what prices are here on the Shore. Hotels are cheaper, food is cheaper, and gas is cheaper. Williams could use more volunteers at the welcome center. Some volunteers have moved away others are getting older and don't want to volunteer anymore. It is hard to find people to work on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

- Holloway suggested putting something in Cape Charles Happening publication asking for volunteers for WC.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson reported that the welcome center now has the Virginia Oyster Trail Pearls of Fun activity booklets to hand out. The booklets are great for families that want to learn about oyster culture. The booklet contains coloring pages and I Spy activities. The Accomack Co. Revolutionary Trail has been finalized. The trail is through northern Accomack Co. Accomack Co will now have two historical driving trails. TC will apply for the MLP grant for advance marketing visibility to promote the trails. Marketing: TC has tracked 22 new media mentions. Mobile app is up 6 %. ESVA TC Instagram and Facebook accounts have more than ½ million views those are very high numbers for one month. Random influencers have been posting about Eastern Shore. TC has not paid for any of the influencers for content development. TC has been tagged and received 600 new followers with tons of views from the content created by the influencers. Everything is good on the website it is up 110% over last year with 67k clicks on the site. All ESVA TC engagement analytics are up, up, up. Lawson will get the Virginia Oyster Trail Pearls of Fun activity booklets out to Chincoteague and the New Church Welcome Center. Visitor Guide deliveries will be happening soon.

- **2026 Tourism Summit-Recap**

Sabbatini thanked Lawson, Joeckel, Williams, Scott, Welcome Center staff, volunteers, commissioners, and board for everyone's involvement in the summit. The first session was great with Jon Schallert but happy to report that many people stayed for the sessions after lunch, which wasn't always the case in the past. Everyone seems to have gotten a lot out of the summit. AI was brought up and there is a lot of interest in having a workshop to cover that. ESVA Chamber of Commerce has a big AI workshop planned for October 14.

- Moore suggested asking partners what they are struggling with. Have the workshop be instructional and interactive.
- Lawson suggested looking at what the attendees want and coaching our speakers to address those topics and have a give and take session.
- Tammy suggested, think about how our visitors use AI in planning a trip. It all ties to content creation helping our industry partners build content so when visitors use AI there is content that AI goes too. Holloway would like to see a mid-year seminar where issues are addressed.

- Ace added he receives reports from AI but comparison to what for Ace to track to see what is effective.
- Lawson suggested to Ace you might ask about a conversion to track your stats to bookings.
- Moore added to have the panel not be about selling their business/services. VA1 breakout sessions are about educating attendees not selling their business services.
- Sabbatini continued, let's think about a date for 2027 summit. The past two years in a row the tourism summit has been postpone because of weather.
  - Tammy suggested mid-March for the summit. Be aware of Easter's date in 2027.
  - Karin asked how the makeup of the attendee ran.
  - Lawson replied, it was a good mix with a few more from Cape Charles. When it was in Chincoteague there were a few more attendees from Chincoteague.

Sabbatini mentions that next year we might want to consider Vaux Hall Farm for the 2027 summit. 126 partners signed up to attend the summit, 90 showed up if staff, and vendors are included it was a total of 100 people.

- **Marketing Coordinator Update**

Robert is pleased to announce that we have made an offer to someone and she has accepted. Two interviews were held last week a front runner emerged from the interviews. She is currently working on her master's degree from Texas A&M and doing an internship with Disney. Her name is Anna Huff she is young and ambitious. We believe she will be a wonderful asset for tourism and the Eastern Shore. Her start date is May 11<sup>th</sup>.

- Tammy added that she has a passion for rural living and she is intrigued by the Eastern Shore.

- **New Technology (Smart TV's) Installed**

Sabbatini showed off the new smart tv in the board room with all the bells and whistles. Technology of smart TV is state-of-the-art and easy to use.

- **Miscellaneous**

Sabbatini has two miscellaneous items. A budget is being worked on for FY27 it will be presented in May. Accomack County is working on their comprehensive plan the Chamber and Tourism were invited to be part of the focus groups.

- Lee Pambid added there will be 4 focus groups, Community organizations, Infrastructure, Land Use Development, Economic & Workforce Development.

## 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore shared the town of Chincoteague Easter Decoy show had just under 1,200 attendees. Spring Pony Round up was last weekend. Spring Flounder tournament is coming. Beebe Ranch and museums will be opening soon. Farmer Market will reopen May 9. Chincoteague Spring Garden tour will happen for the first time on May 30<sup>th</sup>. June 4<sup>th</sup> Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce will be hosting the Beacon Awards. Visitation has been consistent with last year. April was up 22% on the island. That is a positive sign going into the tourism season.
- MacGarvey shared a new boutique opened on Main Street it is online only. Earth Day April 25<sup>th</sup> in Exmore Park. The Sawmill demonstrations in Nassawadox is the first weekend in May. Brownsville Preserve Open House is also happening.
- Rush-Monroe shared there are three candidates for Onancock town manager position. The interviews are set for next week. The clean up at the Historical Onancock School completed early. Work is now beginning on upgrades to the building. On May 4<sup>th</sup> Onancock Main Street is holding their 4<sup>th</sup> business and tourism workshop at Bizzotto's from 3pm -5pm. Guess speakers

are Megan Lawson and Laura Messer. It will be about tourism trends and resources. June 12<sup>th</sup> – June 14<sup>th</sup> will be Sail Fest weekend. The town will also be celebrating new businesses in town and improved businesses.

- Holloway, shared in Cape Charles, the Rail Trail path is noticeably coming along so much so that people are using the trail illegally. Community yard sales are this weekend with businesses doing sidewalk sales too. Next weekend starting Friday is Blessing of the Fleet, Love Run Saturday, Blessing of the Worms on Sunday. The Fire House is having a fundraiser called: Ignite the Night on April 25<sup>th</sup> with the Amish Outlaws band playing. May 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> Chamberfest, Bluegrass Festival is June 13<sup>th</sup>. June 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> is Sail Fest with lots of things happening every day. Numbers are up for meal tax and tot tax. Summer bookings look good. A Mexican restaurant, Del Sol will be going into the Distillery building. A new plant store called Wild on Mason Ave will be coming soon. The Decoy festival will be coming back to Cape Charles in the fall on November 7<sup>th</sup> starting at the fire house and vendor displays will be up and down Mason Avenue.
- Tarr spoke about what it was like in the 70's when gas prices were 36 cents a gallon and jumped to 86 cents a gallon. One Tank Away Trips were the marketing campaigns back in those days. We should revisit a campaign like that.
- **BOC Treasurer**
- At 1:40 p.m. Tarr asked for a motion to select Moore as Treasurer of the ESVA Tourism Commission. MacGarvey made the first motion, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:42 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Moore and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr  
Billy Joe Tarr, Chairperson

6/17/2026  
Date

Aileen Joeckel  
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

6/17/26  
Date