

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

Meeting Minutes

April 16, 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
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Megan Lawson, DODD
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co Appointee

Guest Present

Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center
Miranda Duston, New Church WC Assistant

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Tourism Consultant

Evelyn Shotwell

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 12:33 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis listed all the events happening for the state of Virginia. Next week is National Work Zone Awareness Week. It is celebrated all over the country. North Carolina is the host state this year. This campaign is called Go Orange. Everything will be orange in celebration of orange roadside cones, orange safety vests. VDOT will be handing out Corner Bakery donuts at the New Church Welcome Center. This is all done to bring awareness to safety for the roadside workers. National Tourism Week will be held the first week of May. New Church WC has invited different communities throughout the shore to tell their story. Refreshments will be served that day along with an art show by local artists. A FAM tour in May will take place in Shenandoah Valley. Cherron introduced her new assistant, Miranda Duston.
- Miranda Duston spoke about the VA250.org website and the Welcome Center Facebook page which also hosts events on VA 250. Right now, the Two Lights for Tomorrow campaign is running. This is a national initiative running from April 11 – April 22 in commemoration of the Paul Rever ride and in solidarity with the VA 250 event. An upcoming event is the Military Tattoo held in Norfolk, April 24-April 27. VTC would like to help any business promote a Revolutionary reenactment that they have created. An example would be a kayak tour experience recreating a historical water route.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:40 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Tarr and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported she facilitated a strategic planning session for Cape Charles Main Street last week. Laura attended the Civil War trail marker unveiling in Cape Charles. VTC has procured a partner to do the statewide strategic plan update. The company will do outreach throughout the state. There is a new partner collaborations form created by the VTC content team. There has been a lot of media coverage about the Eastern Shore, you can review all media coverage in Laura's packet. Garden and Gun magazine has featured Pony Swim, and National Geographic has done an article on Chincoteague Island. There are at least 10 articles in the past month featuring the Eastern Shore. Construction will start on the first portion of the Rail Trail April 23rd. There may be a groundbreaking event which may have state officials attending.

5. Commission Updates

- Sabbatini introduced the newest member of the ESVA Tourism Commission staff, Megan Lawson, the new Director of Destination Development. Miscellaneous announcements: Chamberfest date May 17th in Cape Charles at Canonie railyard right next to Shanty Restaurant. The Tourism Commission is a major sponsor of the music festival TC has tickets for all the commissioners and their spouses. Please let Joeckel or Sabbatini know if you plan to come. If there are VIP members that are important partners or relationships for tourism that we need to work on we want to invite these people, please let us know if you can think of anyone.
 - Laura asked if we invited Senator Bill De Seph or Delegate Rob Bloxom, Senator Tim Kaine and Senator Mark Warner.

Sabbatini answered yes. We also have folks coming from all over the country to attend Chamberfest Sabbatini reported. Holloway, Beth Sharpley and Sabbatini will be doing a live interview on Chamberfest with a new twist to the interview. There will also be a TV commercial featuring the Tourism Commission as a major sponsor promoting Chamberfest. Cara Burton, Lawson, and Sabbatini are taking a major lead with a grant for the VA 250 Accomack County program. This will make VA 250 a regional event. Moore suggest including Chincoteague Island Museum in on the trail. VTC website will also be updated with Accomack County participation in the VA 250 program.

- Coker added don't let the VA 250 be too distracting. Tourism may have a down year because of the economy our focus is to bring people here now for this summer 2025. It is important that we do not get diluted with next year when we need to focus on this year. The bookings do not look close to what they were last year. Coker likes the VA 250 program, but our focus must be on today filling up all the beds in both counties with visitors.

Sabbatini agrees that it is a great point we need to talk about what those factors are during this meeting.

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported that the Welcome Center visitation is down 2% and last year WC was down 10% over 2023. There have been more phone calls from local areas, Chesapeake, Richmond, and north interested in coming for the weekend. The big thing they are asking for help with is finding economic stays. Not everyone can afford high priced stays or high-priced restaurants. Williams spent a half hour with a lady from Chesapeake pricing out all the hotels for

her. Lodging is high here. The prices went up over covid and have not come down. My husband and I went to Northern Neck, and I found some economical hotels there. People need to look at their price points and see if they can come down or people aren't going to come. People are scared not knowing the future.

- Laura added there was a workshop in Cape Charles and a point was brought up, businesses are going to start shifting their prices down to get bookings. Laura added the market will have to adjust for budget friendly travelers. That is what we are seeing.

Williams added 2019 was the benchmark year the Welcome Center numbers have been going down since 2019 which had 14,296 visits. In 2025 visitation number was 9,917. Bridge Tunnel traffic is down 6% this year.

- Evelyn added visits aren't the only factor if they are not getting information at the WC, they are getting it on the website which has growing hits.
- Moore added that Chincoteague is down 19% over 2019 on visitations but website hits are up 45%. Apps and other tech resources are also being used. People are shifting to how they get travel information travelers don't necessarily need to enter a Welcome Center.
- Cherron added Welcome Center numbers are one part, but the CBBT numbers are indicative of what the traffic is.
- Ace added Pony Penning has been sold out for 2 weeks now with two hundred houses rented. Chincoteague has 30% more beds so there is a complaint that the traditional hotels are not full. Rental pricing in Cape Charles is 40% higher than Chincoteague. Chincoteague is a Walmart crowd whereas Cape Charles is a Richmond crowd.
- Evelyn added that restaurants need to make a profit but a simple meal for two people with no alcohol is \$100. A family can't afford that kind of pricing.
- Coker added he can drive across the bay for dinner, and it is cheaper than eating in Cape Charles. Coker has friends from Cape Charles that have the same sentiment about restaurant pricing in Cape Charles.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson reported it has been like drinking from a fire hose absorbing information from VTC. The tourism team here is a wealth of knowledge. Sally and HH came up with a great plan for visiting partners. I have helped edit the travel guide which should be in-house soon. The guide is looking great this year. I'm already thinking ahead to next year about what the travel guide could look like. As I meet partners and hand out the travel guides it will be a good time to seek information from partners and start to think about the redevelopment of the upcoming guide. Machen has been very kind in letting Lawson tag into marketing calls. Lawson commented on the downward trend of visitation that Sally mentions. Lawson asked Laura if there could be similar data from VTC. Cherron added there is a research department that VTC has that can be tapped into for that information. Lawson is looking forward to diving into planning VA250. The Cape Charles Main Street meeting was very positive. Sabbatini invited Lawson to do a Chamber Chat. All sales material for travel guide and rack card spaces have been updated. A sales pitch is being worked on to engage partners in value the programs TC offers. Travel Guide distribution is coming up; Machen and Lawson have discussed launching the Local Choice survey in May.

- Holloway added that this may be a challenging year for all businesses. Holloway would like to talk about a package that includes both north and south welcome centers. There are not many Cape Charles businesses in New Church Welcome Center, if we could come up with a package even though both WC are separate. A newsletter created that offers travel data, trends, and tips to our regional partners. A talking point sheet to leave with partners and potentials partners is very valuable. Showing a combined discount pricing

structure if you are in both welcome centers. The up-charge difference for the Southern Gate Way WC also gives free listing on the website.

- Joeckel added that the cost difference for Southern Welcome Center is in the past there was an up charge package if a business would be listed on ESVA website. TC dropped that when the new website was created, it was free for any business to be listed. Being a partner has the added benefit that we do blogs Machen includes articles about our partners.
- Cherron added some folks don't know that there is a difference between the two WC they think it is one in the same facility.

Lawson added we provide data, trends and tips to TC partners. There is an embedded valuable benefit we bring to our partners.

- Shotwell added that the website is a value difference between the two WC pricing structures. Once you lower your price you cannot go back.
- Coker added if the two WC have different pricing there needs to be talking points around that.

Lawson will be attending the Newport News FAM Tour to see how that is run.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported website visits are up and so are the interactions with content that is on the website. That leads us to believe that visitors are planning trips to the Shore. ESVA TC is working on regional partnerships to offer more to our travelers. Social Media reach is a little down, but engagement is up, and we are continuing to grow TC following. Welcome Center listing on google is performing well. Everything is up there, we had 1500 views and 269 direction requests. Paid social media had over 100K impressions, 3500 landing pages views, and 6,000 clicks. We are receiving great engagement from those programs.

- Coker added those are great stats how do we drive that to hooks that turn into bookings. We have a short fuse that will be gone in 45 days if we don't get bookings now.
- Ace added most of the rental companies have switched to dynamic pricing software which is just like what the airlines use. When you get to so many days out from arrive date it automatically cuts the pricing. A lot of it is automated now.
- Holloway website also uses that system.
- Moore added that the widget is blank for events. It should be an automatic link to the ESVA TC website.

Machen added we are almost finished with a major re-coding of the website. Last summer we had issues with the website crashing at peak season. Machen has been working with an entire team to re-code the entire back end of the website. This should be done within the next week or two and everything will be up and running at that time and our website will sink to widget. Virginia.org and ESVA TC can no longer be linked with the changes made to Virginia.org site. ESVA TC must manually go in and add big events to the state website. Last month we did some advertising showing ESVA is an affordable place to come to also promoting free outdoor activities. ESVA TC outbound link clicks are largely clicked to places to stay.

- **Civil War Trails-Ribbon Cutting**

Sabbatini reported the event was well attended, it was a great event for Marsha Carter and the entire family. There was a lot of positive press and feedback from the event.

- **Visitor Guide Update**

Sabbatini reported that the visitor guide is finished and on the way. The online version is up on the website. The Chamber and ESVA TC are pushing to let everyone know the guide is up to view.

- Showell added that if anyone wants to change their ad, they can send it to Lunar Cow, and they will drop it into the online version. There is no charge for that.

- **Budget Preparation**

Sabbatini reported budget preparation will begin next week. If you have ideas for next year, please send them to Sabbatini. Sabbatini is happy to report Accomack and Northampton will both match each county's contribution which is set at \$234,000 from each county. This has increased over the last year. In addition, Accomack County will be sending a true up TOT tax payment to ESVA TC. The true up is a percentage of the TOT tax collected by Accomack County during FY 24, that is an additional payment to ESVA TC. The check has been approved and cut for \$100,438 to ESVA TC. This entire group, VTC, welcome centers, and staff deserves a pat on the back. The Tourism Commission needs to make sure the NHC follows through with the same agreement to match what Accomack County provides financially with the ESVA TC. As soon as this check is in hand there will be an ask to John Chandler at NHC to match the amount. For next year's budget the TC will have an extra \$200K at its disposal to do something major. Sabbatini will present a draft budget next month. Please begin to think of ideas about where we want to use these extra funds. It could be national, international or marketing closer to home that some of these funds go towards.

- Joeckel added that the amount of true up for FY 24 is \$18K more than last year and these funds do not include Chincoteague TOT tax.
- Holloway added that when this kind of money comes in you need to look at the increase in staff. The Tourism Commission staff are working hard and stretched very thin. An intern would be a good direction to go. Helping Machen with data entry is one thought.
- Laura added VTC has a Co-op program that is coming on next month that would be a good opportunity to maximize even more dollars.

Sabbatini stated we could help sponsor more events beyond Chamberfest. There is the Seafood Festival and other events happening around the Shore. Cape Charles Main Street, Onancock Main Street, including other towns outside the three bigger towns, need to benefit from sponsorships that ESVA TC can support. The TOT tax in Accomack County has increased as folks explore the whole Shore, we must make sure we give back to all the Shore.

- Coker added what he wants Machen and Lawson to think about hiring help that they need to ease up their time so that there is more outreach that they can do. The mundane stuff that you are doing we can hire someone for that.
- Shotwell asked if some of the money could be used for TV ads.
- Coker asked what can be done to fill up the beds in the next 45 days.
- Cherron added we should look at what we did years past, before this commission was created. The Eastern Shore is 300 miles within 80% of the population in the country. One Campaign offered a gas incentive, and it worked.
- Shotwell added Paige Addison would know how the program worked. Steve Pots was also on the TC at that time.
- Cherron added hotels would pay for the promotion. Restaurants were not included with the reimbursement.
- Holloway had a promotion called; Across the Bay We Pay Your Way, people did come but they never asked to be reimbursed. That could be a great promotion if it was too late, we could get it ready for the fall.
- Moore added with ARPA money Chincoteague did TV ads that streamed in regular time slots that were very successful.
- Holloway added on the lower Shore traditional lodging and STR are down 22 – 28 percent year over year through Labor Day. The STR number is more antidotal. STR used to be

weekly rentals. They are now on 3–4-day rentals and are becoming competition to Holloway B&B. The town of Cape Charles only has 40 rooms of traditional lodging. STR are a necessity, and it adds different values and family experience. B&B has a different audience with no children, pets, and shared bathrooms. What we are seeing is very last-minute bookings. June is starting to be booked with rates reduced for mid-week stays from Sunday to Thursday.

- Laura added that trends are showing that bookings are coming in late in the week.
- Shotwell was booking a stay in Louisiana if you booked 4 nights you got 20% off so we booked to stay an extra night.
- Cherron added there are a lot of travelers coming from the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Delaware.

Sabbatini added the top three visitor markets are; DC coming in at number one, Richmond/Petersburg has moved up to 2nd and has replaced Philadelphia. Our top three markets are now DC, Richmond and Philadelphia.

- Holloway added Delaware has a definite presence here now.
- Coker asked what we can do to sell to this crowd that will be planning in the next 6-8 weeks.

Sabbatini added promoting the walk ability of our towns through social media and pushing our website to direct folks to town information websites.

- Coker added creating a sense of urgency letting visitors know we are open for business but filling fast.
- Moore added the fear of missing out on experiences of the Shore. Gas reimbursement is for a limited time. 10 weeks to capitalize on this opportunity of staying 3 days.
- Shotwell added Chincoteague did a campaign during Covid, We Can't Wait to See You.
- Lawson added to create packages that appeal to this marketing program.
- Laura added the Blueberry Festival attendees add on to their stay and see other parts of the shore.
- Coker added when I go someplace, we check to make sure there is stuff to do for the whole length of time we will be there.
- Holloway has a magazine that also taps into TV commercials.
- Moore added when you do stream commercials, they tap into the target area you want the ad to run in for example: Richmond, DC, Baltimore. A B-Roll is put together with photos that you submit. Another idea would be to host an accommodation round table to get the managers together to share information. We don't want staff running up and down the shore gathering ideas.

Sabbatini added to get social media and website posting stories and gas cards. Lawson and Sabbatini will reach out to Paige to see how the last program was brought together. Get a list of partners from Joeckel to reach out to our hospitality partners.

- Laura added a good split on the funding would be to spend ½ on staff contracted work and the other ½ half on social media. The VTC promotion, Vacation starts in VA campaign starts in the fall September through December.
- Holloway asked if we spend the money on social media what is the co-operative split on that.
- Laura's answered the money is gone for that.
- Shotwell added try to get into free TV placements like the Hampton Road show, Delmarva life.
- Coker asked Sabbatini to do a weekly summary of the action we are taking.

- Holloway added this isn't a reflection on what staff are not doing. We are reading the markets and see that a pivot needs to be made.
- Coker added this ESVA TC staff is doing an awesome job. The extra true up TOT tax \$100K is an example of that.

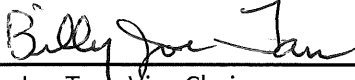
6. Matters by Commissioner


- Moore shared Chincoteague's Easter Decoy Show will be this weekend at the Chincoteague High School. There will be eighty-eight exhibitors this year which is an increase over last year. The Seafood Festival will be in two weeks. Ticket sales are going well. Two Chincoteague Restaurants will be featured on America's Best Restaurant Roadshow. The filming will be tomorrow at Bills Seafood Restaurant and Harbor End Restaurant. Work on Assateague's new beach access has started. The same public beach location will be open this year. No changes will be made to the hiking and biking trails and lighthouse. The new beach access and car park will be ready for next season.
- Ace Seybolt asked Ms. Moore if it's business same as usual this summer at Assateague. Moore answered yes it would be.
- Tarr reminded everyone about marketing campgrounds on the Shore. The Eastern Shore has a lot of campgrounds bringing in a lot of people spending a lot of dollars on the Shore.

7. Adjournment

- At 2:13 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

	<u>5/21/2025</u>
Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson	Date

	<u>5/21/25</u>
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary	Date