

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
May 21, 2025, at 12:30 PM
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

Billy Joe Tarr Accomack Co Supervisor, Vice Chair
Matt Spuck, Accomack Co. Appointee-Z
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce-Z
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-Z

Commissioners – Absent

Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co Appointee
John Coker Northampton Co Supervisor, Chair

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street
Becca Meyer, Advance Travel-Z
Maggie Grant, Onancock Main Street-Z

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt - Absent

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

Tourism Consultant

Evelyn Shotwell-Z

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella commented on a tree top look at the economy which has turned fine-ish compared to the woefully unknown. Tourism should be able to muddle through. I believe folks will be looking towards value in a spot to visit.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:35 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported VDOT will be holding a groundbreaking ceremony tomorrow on the Rail Trail in Cape Charles at 2PM near Rayfield's. Laura has completed the Cape Charles Main Street Strategic Plan. A new small business development program is in progress. Two four-hour sessions covering marketing, Human Resources, and support to tourism-related businesses on ESVA. This program will be piloted on ESVA and then shared with other SBDCs across the Commonwealth. It will begin in fall on the Eastern Shore and then share with all the small businesses across the state. The second session may be done at the tourism summit next year.
 - Sabbatini added that there is a new hire to the Hampton Roads Small Business Development, his name is Tood Du Rose. He is from the Outer Banks. I will introduce

Todd at an upcoming Lunch and Learn to our small businesses. Todd is particularly good on the tourism side, I will highly recommend attending that Lunch and Learn. Todd has owned his own business and is on the gift back side of his career.

Laura continued the Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program opens June 10 and closes July 24 there will only be \$5,000 tier.

VTC Co-Op Opens June 2 for DMO's. There have been media cover for the Eastern Shore many publications featured Cape Charles and Chincoteague. Laura will not be attending next month's meeting.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the WC is doing well, there has been more bus traffic. HH broke his leg. The plan is to get musicians and artists to play music or show their art at the WC on Friday or Saturday during the summer and fall. New partners have joined the WC this month.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson reported she had a great month meeting a lot of people while attending multiple business meetings around the Shore. Chamberfest for the Tourism Commission was great. We invited our partners who advertise to come to our tent and celebrate. We had folks from Cape Charles, Onancock, and Wachapreague. The tent was also full of other partners coming by to say hello. As Sally mentions, Lawson is working on a calendar of events to take place at the WC. One or two musicians, artists, and historical events will give folks a great first impression. This will take place between 10am and 2pm on Friday or Saturday. We are working with local groups to get the calendar filled in. The Tourism Commission is working to get the LOVE Work sign advertised for local folks to submit their ideas, this includes any art group, especially schools to participate. Sabbatini added if anyone here or if you know of an artist who has an idea for the letters, please encourage them to submit their thoughts.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported that all social media was up across the board google listing has a great jump in engagement and people asking for directions to get to the welcome center. Our website project is nearly complete cleaning up final pieces to make sure everything is functional. The website is more responsive and not crashing all the time. Our share of overnight trips is up in the month of April.

- Holloway shared that she had her first reservation that stated how they found her B&B was through ChatGPT it was a 5-day booking. As a user of ChatGPT what I need to do to tap into ChatGPT to be successful.

Machen responded that Microsoft Bing binges into ChatGPT, which is the search engine for ChatGPT. ChatGPT is tied to Microsoft products.

- **LOVE Sign – Welcome Center**

Sabbatini reported Lawson, Holloway and Williams went down to the WC last month and decided on a new location for the LOVE sign. The first location considered was the southern end of the WC parking lot. The new location is the norther end of the parking lot on the north side at the entrance/exit location. It is a grassy area, easy access and handicap accessible. Good parking and can be seen from both north traffic flow.

- Holloway added that Jeff Holland and Paige Addison all agree it's a great location.

- **Visitor Guide Update**

Sabbatini reported the travel guides are here. Everyone has one in front of them. The cover is the bridge. When you open the booklet you have the beautiful Chincoteague ponies on the full cover. We are very happy with the guide and the committee that came together did a great job.

We incorporated all if not most of everyone's ideas. Sabbatini thanked Joeckel, Machen, and Lawson jumped on right when she came on board. It was a great group effort and now we are all out delivering the guides.

- Lawson added that we received an advance shipment that was handed out to all the advertisers who were very pleased with the guide and the placement of their ads.

- **Tourism Summit 2026**

Sabbatini announced the date has been selected for the upcoming summit Monday February 23rd, mark your calendars for that date. The snow date will be the following Monday our materials will be published with both dates. The location will be in Cape Charles, at either the Oyster Farm or the Cape Charles Rosenwald School. Sabbatini would like to see the summit kicked up a notch in 2026. I believe we need to focus on our businesses that do have lots of tourism knowledge but need to kick it up a notch.

- Holloway added that our charm is southern hospitality if we could have those that practice that principle share how they present that to their guest. How to care for a guest from the start it begins at the welcome center including gas station stops. When I hire a new employee for housekeeping, I train them on the details of first impression. I also have them spend the night in a room and receive the whole experience of what hospitality is. Most people we hire have never experienced the type of hospitality that we want them to extend to our guests. That is a major transformation for employees. The best training is to serve the people that normally serve. Teach how to teach so employers are training five things you can do with your staff to instill superior skills when dealing with the public.

Sabbatini suggested bringing Jon Schallert back again. Jon gets us and understands small business and hospitality.

- Moore shared that Jon Schallert gave a high overview. Maybe if he comes back, he can give a boot camp experience with this presentation.
- Shotwell shared that on her most recent trip she stayed at B&B exclusively and we were blown away that the hospitality was exceptional.
- Lawson added that entrepreneurship is so important to our economy because we are small business orientated.
- Messer added that a moderated panel on marketing would be good. Refuge Inn Cynthia Wilder has a bird device that can hear and identify bird songs and has identified 90 different birds 130K times recorded in one week. The Refuge Inn is being promoted as a bird watch site, a unique promotion. This type of story could be a great guest on the panel.
- Moore added Eric and Sylvia Hawkins would be good to be on the panel they have gone through the Schallert boot camp and have the entrepreneurial success.

Sabbatini made two announcements: Senator Mark Warner will be in Cape Charles and Chincoteague on Friday if you are interested in going Sabbatini can sign you up to attend at either of those locations. Second, what can TC do to create value for our industry partners during the summer months. It does feel like things are unstable how can we assist our partners if a downward slump does happen and we have anticipated with endeavors preemptively. If anyone has ideas, we can go into it next month.

- Holloway added there seems to be a gap from August 15 to Labor Day. We could suggest making The Eastern Shore the last stop before getting back to school, this would also help the campgrounds.
- Shotwell suggested promoting our uniqueness and how we are affordable.

- **Budget Preparation**

Sabbatini reported on the proposed budget. There has been an increase of \$25K requested and approved of by both counties and this puts us into a solid position this year. We are anticipating an Accomack County true-up payment be built into our budget. Sabbatini does not have the NHC true-up payment built into the budget. The goals of both counties are to match what each county supports of the Tourism Commission. Once the funding is received from Accomack County Sabbatini will reach out to NHC for their match. Grants in FY 25 came in at just below \$50K I will budget for FY26 to be \$40K. Summit budget \$9K, Visitor Guide sales budget \$55,

- Holloway added that when you think of value, we need to create packaging that we can bundle ads with rack card space and other creative ideas to help our partners with promoting their businesses. Creating some package choices will create value. Including email blast. Lawson has some great ideas already. Teach our partners how to measure success with a QR code is another thought.

Sabbatini added last year's advertising budget was \$89K. We spent \$122K and we will go up on that budget line to \$162K with \$40K going toward sponsorship for town events. The good will will increase 10-fold for the Tourism Commission. A one-page application is needed for towns to apply for event grants. For the Love sign at the WC \$25K has been allocated. There will be a profit at the end of the year and the staff has ideas of what we would like to do to create something big with a big return, we ask for BOC suggestions on big ticket items. Thoughts go to building improvements or a national publication. Send Sabbatini any suggestions you may have.

- Holloway suggested putting \$20-25K aside alone with the Chamber and addressing the bathrooms.

Sabbatini gave Machen the floor to make an announcement. Machen announced this is her last BOC meeting she has accepted a new position with Miles Partnership. It is bittersweet, it has been a great opportunity to work with everyone at the ESVA Tourism Commission.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Spuck shared Onancock reservation numbers are down 22% people are booking last minute. Great Spaces building has a new business coming in. The Bank building also will be opening, and the town Marina is up and running.
- Moore shared Chincoteague's visitation numbers are down but the last few weeks the events have been well attended it is great to see the island fulling up with accommodations and restaurants full.
- Holloway shared downtown Cape Charles is full but not in lodgings, they are down 24%. Holloway does not know what the sales tax number is. Cape Charles is benefiting from day trippers so retail may be strong. Chamberfest was a benefit for Cape Charles. Tot tax and meal tax has been down for April Cape Charles is adjusting the town budget in those two areas. Most store fronts are full except one.
 - Karen Zamorski announced the Love Run was a great success with over 425 people attending. Cape Charles is hoping to have the 10K run sanctioned.

7. Adjournment

- At 2:00 p.m. Halloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Spuck and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 9/17/2025
Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 9/17/25
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date