

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

Meeting Minutes

June 17, 2026, at 12:30 PM

19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417

Commissioners in Attendance

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co, Chair
Tammy Holloway, Northampton Co, Vice Chair
Karin Rush-Monroe, Accomack Co, Appointee
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague C of C, Appointee

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Jon Demptster, Northampton Co. Supervisor
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co, Appointee

Guest Present

Colvin Willis, Tourism Intern
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center
Lee Pambid, Deputy Co. Administrator, CZA -Z
Grace Woodworth, Admin. Assistant

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Jay Abella

Ex-Officio Non-VTC Representative

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Absent

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Sabbatini introduced Colvin Willis, the summer intern, to the Tourism Commission.
- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center stated everything is very busy.

3. Consent Agenda

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

4. VTC Updates

- Laura was on vacation; Sabbatini gave a brief update on the Micro Business Marketing Leverage grants that opens June 23rd and closes July 31st. Sabbatini continued saying Laura does a great job letting BOC know when the Eastern Shore is featured in any media postings. Laura's report can be found in the document packet

5. Commission Updates

• **Welcome Center Updates**

Williams reported the WC has been very busy everyday not just weekends. Last weekend we had donut holes from Quail Cove, peanuts, and musicians playing. A lot of folks from all over the country are driving this summer we had folks from Utah, California, and New Mexico. WC carry 20 different maps from around the country which is extremely popular with the driving public.

Currently the traffic flow is going to the Outer Banks with a lot of New Jersey folks heading that way. Chesapeake Bay Bridge tunnel is taking staff on the Spirit of Norfolk Tour this weekend. CBBT takes very good care of staff at the WC.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson added to the WC report almost every weekend is filled with musicians entertaining our visitors as they walk into the building. Print is not dead and the WC is running out of rack cards all the time. WC visitation was up 4.6% May 2026 vs May 2025. Chincoteague Chamber is going to have a lightbox. Town of Wachapreague is moving into the lightbox space of the Island House which is triple the size of the other lightboxes. Wachapreague will be purchasing a full-page ad that has the participation of several town owned businesses in the 2027 travel guide. On July 31st the Tourism Commission is working with the town of Wachapreague to have a community viewing party shown on an inflatable outdoor screen showing, Gone Again with Carter Andrews. Public is in courage to bring lawn chairs. A couple of food trucks will be present. The street will be closed for artisans to sell art. Wachapreague General Store has a liquor license and has expanded across the street. Everyone on the shore will be able to attend this free event. Andy Dunton has offered to host a second viewing party for the lower shore. Andy has all the equipment at the museum so it will be hands-free for the tourism commission with that event. TC has changed our marketing promotions to a call to action, Book it Now. There has been a 21% increase on the promotion page since the campaign began. Sail 250 promotions have been doing well. TC has kicked off with Lunar Cow to begin planning and developing the 2027 travel guide.

- **Marketing Coordinator**

Huff added she has been busy meeting a lot of people. Huff is creating a driving trail with material from Cara Burton. Once the map is developed the trail will be turned into a rack card. A mockup of the LOVE sign has also been developed by Huff.

- **Welcome Center LOVE Sign – VTC grant**

Sabbatini gave a big shout out to Lawson and Laura Messer for the hard work that went into receiving grant funds for a LOVE sign at the Welcome Center.

- Lawson added that the grant award is \$10k. There have been over 20 art submissions for the LOVE sign. Huff is a brilliant designer and found a way to represent all of Shore. It must be completed by the end of VTC fiscal next year.
- Huff handed out copies of the rendition which represents many ideas that you see on the wall of the Chamber hallway.

Sabbatini added that this project is coming together nicely now that we have direction. The committee will get together and push forward.

- Huff explained she looked at a lot of different LOVE signs around the state. The design should be its own advertisement for the Shore. Huff looked up how many people crossed over the bridge; last year it was 4.2 million. Tourism must get the design of this LOVE sign right with that many possible views. If just 1% stop that is 42k people a year. This LOVE sign must identify with the shore being specific to the shore. Letters: L- the Light house in Chincoteague, O - the sun rise or sunset with a rocket launch, V- the CBBT bridge, E- aqua culture and natural landscape of this area. These are ideas you see this isn't the final. There was much discussion back and forth on the LOVE sign. It was asked if the LOVE would be lit up at night and the response was yes.

- **July Tourism meeting**

Sabbatini began the discussion; in the past because of how busy the commissioners are in the month of July there has not been a meeting traditionally. Commissioners responded it is not necessary for a July meeting.

- **Summer Marketing Initiatives**

Sabbatini stated the push on this is to make sure that everyone knows that the ESVA Tourism is a source for everyone. If any commissioner is aware of any areas of lodging, restaurant, recreation that needs a specific boost from TC please let us know. The Tourism Commission wants to be known as a go to for resources for marketing to help our partners.

- Holloway added when the marketing push was changed to book your stay Holloway had a couple of people comment to her that's how they learnt about Bay Haven Inn. If Holloway received two people for my business, can you imagine the exposure the rest of the Shore received. June bookings have tremendously increased.
- Lawson added that most of our campaign was in that message. The message can be changed on a moment's notice. Onancock harbor master asked if we ever did a campaign to the Western Shore to sail over to the Eastern Shore
- Holloway suggested a campaign on ways to get to the Eastern Shore; by sea plane, sail over, cross the bridge that would be a fun campaign.

Sabbatini suggested to wrap it all up with; once you get here our towns are walkable.

- Rush-Monroe added that Maggie, from Onancock Main Street, produced a piece for the harbor master that fits what we are talking about and stresses walkability once you are in Onancock.
- Lawson added that TC could utilize the industry partner email list to post ads which could be paid exposure for amenities and services our partners offer.
- Holloway agreed that could be an easy offer for paid advertisement.

- **VTC Statewide Tourism Plan meeting (August)**

Sabbatini has been working with Laura on this. Right after our August Tourism meeting, we will move into the state strategic plan at about 1:30. The hope is that everyone can attend and participate. Sabbatini will send a reminder out and put it on the agenda.

- **2026-2027 Draft Budget**

Sabbatini went over ESVA Tourism draft budget which is a balance budget. Some areas were increased as discussed in May. Main income driver; Accomack Co., Northampton Co., and Cape Charles. It is anticipated TC will work to bring in grants amounting to \$50k. Sabbatini explained points of interest in budget. Sabbatini asked for any questions, there were none. Sabbatini asked for a motion to approve 2026 – 2027 FY budget.

- **At 1:10** Holloway made the first motion to approve ESVA Tourism Commission budget for FY 2026-2027, second by Moore and passed unanimously.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore reported Chincoteague has sprung back to life. It was quite spring. Hotels and campgrounds are full. Visitation was down in Chincoteague office a smidge. Year to date meals tax and tot tax returns are up. Chincoteague has begun work on 2026-2027 travel guide. Beacon awards were held on June 4 recognizing our businesses and the community. 140 people attended. We are seeing good traction for pony swim and looking forward to the carnival.
- Rush-Monroe, shared Town of Onancock, just had the big Sails Forward weekend. The weather was partially good. The one tall ship that was scheduled to sail to Onancock harbor was Lady Maryland which arrived on Thursday. Friday night the event with Lady Maryland was canceled because of rain. The rest of the weekend was great. There were legal fireworks that were shot off at the Historic Onancock School, they were fabulous. Sails Forward was a rally for the town to pull together businesses, community organizations and residents working together for this

one event was wonderful to witness. Rush-Monroe does not have exact numbers on crowds, but the restaurants were full. Part of the VTC grant awarded to Onancock will go to an influencer to come during the summer for a couple of days. This effort is to go after younger demographics. The influencer specializes in nature and history. Demographic followers of this influencer has a strong female base from New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia markets. Onancock has launched a new campaign; Open for Business, to get our store fronts filled. Empty store fronts are being decorated by artisans, and a page will be dedicated to information on bringing businesses to Onancock. Couple of events coming to Onancock are; Sunshine and Margaritas on the lawn this Friday night at Kerr Place. Crab Cracking is August 15th Kerr Place. Tour de Shore is starting and ending in Onancock this Saturday, Ice Cream Social is July 3rd at the Historic Onancock School. Onancock is creating a media page on their website for town businesses to see all the media attention that Onancock is receiving.

- Holloway added that it is a great place to have the media mentions stored that Onancock receives. When applying for grants you have one place to research all the earned media you have otherwise, it can be forgotten.
- Holloway reported Cape Charles had an excellent June. From May 28 until now it has been full steam ahead summer. Kids got out of school earlier and wow they all were here. Cape Charles is gearing up for Sail Fest. Three ships will be arriving. The event days are Friday and Saturday with ships arriving on Friday afternoon. One unannounced ship has already stopped by. The event is only charging for parking, everything else is free. Cape Charles for this event has also had a great partnership between NHC, ESVA Tourism Commission, and town of Cape Charles Main Street. The kickoff concert series starts this Saturday. The Empact Center is doing a big Juneteenth on Saturday. There is a Juneteenth event in Exmore this weekend too. Del Sol has opened and doing well they will be hosting a big band on Friday night this weekend. That is great because there isn't anything going on Friday night in town. Karen Zamorski is retiring. The position of Director of Main Street is open. Karen's last day, I believe, is Friday. The job will be posted immediately.

- **Closed Session**

7. Adjournment

- At 2:05 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Rush - Monroe and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

	8/19/2026
Billy Joe Tarr, Chairperson	Date

	8/31/26
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary	Date