

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
August 19, 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-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Megan Lawson, DODD
Anna Huff, Marketing Coordinator
HH Scott, Southern Gateway WC
Sally Williams, Southern Gateway WC

Commissioners – Absent

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

Guest Present

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

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Jay Abella

Ex-Officio Non-VTC Representative

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella reported the K shape economy is getting wider. ESVA Tourism ability to attract the top tier of those travelers has done a great job. Taking those travelers and converting them into multiple night stays is valuable.
 - Tarr commented that on the 4th of July on the Island you could not turn without touching someone. Gross revenue was down \$50k. On the Friday before Pony Penning gross revenue was up over last year \$25k.
 - Holloway added traditionally shoulder season, has 2–3-day bookings at STR. Now this summer there is still more 2–3-day bookings with lots of slots open during the week but somehow the STR are pulling it off with getting multiple groups staying during a week. By the time the week is here STR is fully booked. This has been the strongest season for STR.
 - Moore added during the week you see more folks on the island, but the weekends seem quieter. It could be rates are higher at weekends. STR are down this year, and some are down significantly.
 - Tarr commented that one business owner of 6-STR said it was his best summer. It is very unpredictable.
- Cherron Davis added there are still folks that travel full week stays but there are more that are staying 3 days and last-minute bookings. August will not be comparable to last year because of the late date of Labor Day being the 7th of September this year.

- Holloway added that the multigenerational family travel is booked for a week in Cape Charles. The young family with non-school age kids are filling in the gaps with the 3 day stays.
- Sabbatini asked what about marketing to homeschool families which continue to grow. These families look for educational opportunities. All agreed that homeschool families are a group that extends the visitation window on the Shore.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:48 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Rush-Monroe and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported that last weekend Governor Spanberger reported that tourism spending for FY 2025 was up for the 4th year in a row with the total amount spent \$36.2 billion for the state. The locality specific data for our region will be available around Labor Day. Laura was a part of a National Heritage assessment on the Eastern Shore. Between Northampton County and Accomack County there are 100 plus sites that will be included in the comprehensive plan for the Heritage Trail. There is a new managing director of grants at VTC who will start in September, Stacy Martin is no longer with VTC. There was a lot of good media press that happened on the Shore.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Williams reported the WC has had big number increases up 4%, it looks like 75% of the traveler's returning north are from New Jersey there have also been a lot of foreign travelers Germany and the Netherlands.

- **Marketing Coordinator**

Huff reported she has been busy. Huff favorite event was going up to the New Church Welcome Center and seeing what they do at that location. Huff has created several media stories on all the places she has attended this past month. The 2 last videos will be posted soon. There have been 376 media mentions this past 4 weeks. Facebook metrics have been crazy with 1.1m views up 137% these views mostly can be related to pony swim. Viewing across multiple platforms is up an astronomical number 327k views of 3-minute videos, 423k views of 1-minute videos. The time watching videos equal 109 days of people having eyes on the Shore. Another surprising fact is 86% of those views are non-followers. That means a vast majority of people have just now discovered Eastern Shore. Huff is busy doing blog posts and writing stories, editing videos, and working on the travel guide.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson added this has been an incredible time on social media for the Eastern Shore. With what Anna has been creating and posting not including paid social media ads Eastern Shore has 3.5m eyes on what we are doing. As Williams mentions, WC numbers are up 4%. VTC bookings report by hotels are down 6.5 % for the region that is year over year to date. Arrivalist reports are also down 5%. Bridge traffic is down 5.5 %. For July and June.

- Holloway added that the VTC data only counts hotels and doesn't include other stays like B&B and STR. At Holloway B&B it has been the best summer in 14 years. VTC data isn't always relevant to us.
- Laura added that there is a rise in RV and camping travel. You must look at all data to get a true snapshot of what is happening.

Of the 15 Saturdays at the WC musicians playing has gone very well. Next week on Saturday the National Park Rangers will be at WC with things for kids to see and do. Chincoteague lightbox will be going up. Wachapreague light box took over the Island House lightbox and looked amazing. There is one vacant light box that is available over the reception desk. If anyone knows of a town, please send them my way. Lawson has spoken to several new partners, including a potential horse farm in Accomac County that is having rack cards made. They would like to sponsor a second viewing party for the Carter Andrews film at a fall festival on the farm. The farm owner is hoping to put on a Festival September 26. Lawson is looking for more sponsors for that event to support the screen expense. Lawson and Huff went to Tangier on a new ferry out of Crisfield, Maryland, Elisabeth Joy is a new charter to Tangier. Tangier is hurting with the Onancock ferry not running with Mr. Crockett not well. The 2026 travel guides will be depleted this year. We did order 20k less for 2026. We have confirmed 12 ads to date for the travel guide. The Carter Andrews watch party was a great community event. We partnered with the town of Wachapreague, the Wachapreague Inn, the Wachapreague General Store, Lilliston Seafood, and Eastern Shore Catering. There was a block party before the show, wine and beer were sold, we think we had 300 people. The event inspired Wachapreague General Store to host Friday evenings with live music and serve a special to go dinner. ESVA Tourism has received 3 grants. \$5k for meta spend, 5k toward google spend and ½ the cost for a video/ photograph to shoot at 6 locations on the Shore to add to our photo library which has a huge need for a refresh. We must have models ready and sites selected. We only have 2 days with the photographer, and it must be done before May.

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

Laura announced that the meeting will begin at 3:00pm after the Tourism Commission meeting. Jacob Bower from the Richmond office will be presenting.

- **Travel Guide (Cover Photo)**

Sabbatini reported the travel guide is coming along nicely the committee met in July. A selected photo for the cover is a group of kayakers on Onancock creek showing historic homes up on the hill. There is diversity in age and great color in the photo.

- Karin asked if another shot could be taken with the same idea but with Mallards in the background with people dining out.

Sabbatini added last year travel guide order was for 80k if we need to bump it up, we can and get it back to 100k. If there are other input for a cover photo, please let us know.

- **LOVE Sign**

Sabbatini thanked Laura for her efforts toward the VTC grant for the LOVE Sign. The sign must be up and done by June 30, 2027. The LOVE Sign will be on the agenda every month going forward.

- Lawson added with our budget we can only do 2-D artwork, the structure will be 3-D. A lot of the cost is going towards the structure. The detailed work will come from the artist. Lawson is interviewing artist to find the right fit to do the artwork. Lawson is also setting up a meeting with New Ravena to ask if they can provide the back of the letters with stone.

- **Tourism Summit-Keynote Speaker Ideas**

Sabbatini also wants to keep this on the agenda until we come up with an idea of who will be the next keynote speaker for the summit. Theme is still open and what area do we want to focus on for our partners. We do a great job with our folks that are just starting out but how do we get partners who are in mid-range to find greater success.

- Huff added that at Texas A&M there are several professors that do conferences that are amazing presenters. Huff added the chair of master's committee at Texas A&M is the # 1 in tourism research and trends and speaks worldwide.
- Laura stated research could be the way to go we have not done that in the past. VTC has an expert on STR and talk about travel trends. We have done customer service we have had Jon Schallert twice helping people utilize their data is missing.
- Holloway added helping our partners using their data can be very useful. It is a lot easier to keep a customer than find a new customer.
- Rush-Monroe added we get beat up often because we aren't doing enough for our partners. Teaching partners how to use their data empowers them for success.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Moore reported Chincoteague July was a strong month because of Pony Swim. The numbers in the Chincoteague Welcome Center were down compared to last year, but we were competing against the 100th anniversary Pony Swim. Island has been busy and full. Still events happening every weekend in September. There is a 911 celebration on 9/11 at 6 pm on Chincoteague. October 10th the Oyster Festival is at Tom Coves Park.
- Rush-Monroe, shared Town of Onancock on October 9th-10th is showing a Shore History 250 movie, Inaugural Restaurant week will be the same week. Onancock has applied for a grant to light up the town at Christmas time.
 - Laura asked that once you start promoting events on the Onancock website send it to her so that the events can be put up on VTC website. VTC has a master restaurant blogger.

October 23-25, we start Halloween events. Main Street hired an influencer named Hunter he is known for making quirky stories. One of his posts received 22K views has a good following mainly in NY, NJ, and DC Hunter is based in DC. Hunters' followers are 25-45-year-olds. Onancock does well with the older crowd we are looking to expand this younger age bracket. Open for Business marketing campaign is going on to let people know about our empty store fronts. Onancock is targeting emails to 93k small business owners in Virginia.

- Holloway reported Cape Charles is doing well TOT tax is up, and the meals tax is up. Cape Charles is searching for a new Main Street Director; there are two great candidates for the job. We have funding for an event coordinator this year, unfortunately Allie has moved on.
 - Huff asked for information and she would pass to graduates that she knows who are looking for positions in marketing.

Summer Series music in the park has been very strong this year. LOVE Fest is Labor Day weekend. Jimmy Buffet tribute band is the last concert in the park. The following weekend is the Crabby Blues festival. Fall Festival is on October 10th and November 7th is the Decoy Festival on Mason Ave in tented areas and at the Fire House.

- Sabbatini reported the Parkway Partnership meeting between the ESVA Tourism Commission and ESVA Chamber of Commerce took place in July. Three major discussions went on. Renovations on chamber building bathrooms will be made by Lawson Builders. Supplies are coming in and work will begin in September. A bathroom trailer may be needed but hasn't been decided yet. Chamber building will only have a small half bath available for use while under renovation. The Chamber will be a major sponsor of the Tourism Commission Summit next year. The agreement between the two entities on the Executive position which was coming due in July was extended to ten years. Lastly it is an honor to thank an outstanding role model, a person who is always up to the challenge, even if his leg is not cooperating, HH you are an amazing example of dedication. This is an ESVA Tourism Impact award for you to acknowledge everything you do.

- HH responded that it is a joy to meet all the people he has met.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:52 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Rush - Monroe and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 9/16/2026
Billy Joe Tarr, Chairperson Date

Ailée Joeckel 9/16/2026
Ailée Joeckel, Secretary Date