

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
August 20, 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
Joanne Moore, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce-Z
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z
Clarice Mac Garvey-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Megan Lawson, DODD
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant-Absent
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

John Coker Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street-Z
Maggie Grant, Onancock Main Street-Z
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center-Z
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street-Z

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Tourism Consultant

Evelyn Shotwell

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center reported; Fall in Love with Virginia, a regional promotion day, will be hosted by the New Church Welcome Center on September 6, from 10am – 2pm. All partners and businesses on the Eastern Shore are invited to attend. Almost thirty partners have signed up from the Eastern Shore and Coastal Virginia. Visitation into the New Church Welcome Center is up 25 percent for July. Year to date for August we are up 18 percent. This is the highest we have been for any August Cherron believe the WC will be up at least 25 percent by the end of the month. Cherron does not believe there are more people out there with the Bridge Tunnel traffic being down. What the New Church Welcome Center has done is to lure folks in with free item giveaways on the sandwich board in front of the WC.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main reported; so far that the shore is faring well with tourist dollars. Travelers are going after a consistent experience which the Shore offers. As time goes on and the economic factors take shape there may be a change in the future.
- Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street reported; Cape Charles is having a good summer. The concerts in the park exceeding all numbers. Restaurants are telling us they have been up this year 20-25 percent. Some people say it doesn't look busy, but our numbers are up. Love Fest will be on August 30 from 6-9pm.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:35 p.m. Spuck made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Moore and passed unanimously.
- Spuck wanted to add a comment on the financials stating that the Tourism Commission finished June with a \$32K surplus with all of it going to cash this increases the value of the ESVA Tourism Commission.
- Sabbatini added that we just finished our audit with all preliminary findings, we look very good, strong, and healthy. Sabbatini commented that Northampton County was late in sending the Tourism Commission their quarterly payment it does not show in the July financials. Northampton County will be sending the second quarterly payment in with the first quarterly payment to make up for the delay. Sabbatini will make note of this when the next financial statement comes out.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported her monthly report in the packet was longer than usual because of the July meeting not being held. Laura thanked everyone for their participation in the statewide strategic planning meeting. The next VTC orientation will be September 23 and 24 the link is in the packet. The state economic impact was released on August 5th. There was a record 35.1 billion dollars in visitor spending in FY 2024 which is a 5.4 percent increase. 2023 visitor spending was 33.3 billion dollars. There was an increase of one million people with overnight visits, which is 44.7 million people in 2024, up from 43.6 million people in 2023. VTC media coverage was very successful and reached many that were not followers. There was also great media coverage by outside sources, a total of 4 full pages of links to media sources like Southern Living, Travel and Leisure. The links are on the pages that Laura provided in her report. Locality numbers will be out in September around Labor Day when those numbers are released, they will be shared with everyone.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the visits for July were down about 4 percent from last year. The WC is busy on Saturday the musicians have been well received by everyone including the workers I want to thank Lawson for lining up the musicians up.

- Lawson added that we have even had google reviews on the entertainment everyone enjoys it.

In August, our numbers have exploded we have days of 600 plus visitors during the weekends.

- **Director of Destination Development**

Lawson reported we have kicked off travel guide sales with 4 reserved so far. We are going with Lunar Cow again and that kick off has taken place. Megan will start designing the layout of the guide with town sections there may be a section on the shoulder season to encourage travelers to come back. Incorporating potential advertising placements inside of the articles on the towns. There are a lot of ideas we are working through. I have joined the CBTA Board, Virginia Oyster Trail Board. Lawson helped to complete the new Oyster Trail rack card. The Sail 250 rack card for Onancock and Cape Charles was worked on by Lawson. There has been a lot of partner engagement, all are listed in Lawson's report. The wall in the hall has all the Love sign submissions nineteen in all. Please take a look and give us your opinion. Hopefully by next month we can reach a consensus on the design. Marketing: Instagram surpassed 10,000 followers, which is great, that is up 14% since May. A lot of that is thanks to the pony swim. We were awarded the Vacation Starts with Virginia grant, which begins in September. A half-page ad was placed in Blue Ridge Outdoor magazine which included three newsletter ads. In Blue Ridge Outdoor magazine, History

Adventure Guide, the Eastern Shore was featured in a full-page advertorial. There was a great ad placement in Virginia Living Magazine next to the pony swim article. We are waiting to hear from VTC about the Co-op grant. TC does not have that funding right now and our paid social media has gone offline. As a reminder our paid social media represents forty percent of our website traffic. Once we hear about the social media grants, we will get that back up. Visitation is up across all our platforms those reports are on Google Docs. The sponsorship application is on the agenda. It would be great to have that approved so that we can get that up and we have many people asking about it so they can apply.

- Laura wanted to thank Lawson for all her efforts in keeping our numbers up while Lawson manages both positions until the marketing position is filled.
- Karen asked to see a copy of the visitation report on the Shore.

Lawson appreciated Laura's acknowledgment and would send the report to Karen.

- **2026 Visitor Guide**

Sabbatini reported that the committee got together to review the upcoming travel guide. Lots of great ideas and themes have been addressed and we are looking forward to this new guide to be improved from last year. If anyone has any ideas that they would like to suggest for a photo cover, please send that to Lawson or Sabbatini. Karen has some photos of Sailboat tall ships that she will send to Megan. The travel guide committee has another date set when they will be getting together.

- **Welcome Center Love Sign**

Sabbatini added that there have been some great submissions of artwork for the Love sign. For those that are here the artwork is on the wall outside the boardroom. Lawson will send the artwork submissions digital to everyone.

- **Sponsorship Application**

Sabbatini thanked Laura for the updated sponsorship agreement that she sent. TC wants sponsorship for the towns to be done the right way, it's important that TC does this and support our town. Laura and Tammy mention that they want to be on the committee. Cape Charles Sail Fest, Onancock Sail Fest, and Chincoteague have submitted requests for grant.

- **2026 Tourism Summit**

ESVA Tourism Summit will be held in Cape Charles on Monday February 23. The snow date will be March 2. The Tourism Commission has reached out to Rosenwald School to be the host site we are waiting to hear back from them shortly. If the school is not available, the Oyster Farm is our back-up choice. The next item is the keynote speaker, Sabbatini believes Jon Shallert would be a good choice it has been 3 years since Jon was at the summit.

- Laura added Jon will be the speaker at the VA1 Summit but the only people that will have seen him are in the room right now.
- Evelyn asked if he would have a different topic.

Sabbatini added that Jon also has an advance course that he runs TC would want him to do a deeper dive on that experience. We want to push our partners to go to the next level, which is what Jon could bring to our partners without repeating what we have experienced last time.

- Holloway has heard Jon speak four times he has always tweaked the talk every time. TC would want Jon to speak in the afternoon on an advanced level for those to take bigger steps.
- Cherron asked if TC would consider the head of another state tourism authority. The head of Florida Tourism is David Dodd he is a great speaker on visitor interaction and customer service is his specialty.

- Moore added that at one point the discussion was about having locals speak at the summit that were successful. Tiny Livin comes to mind having someone speak so that locals can have a go to resource for our partners.
- Holloway added for another segment of the summit is to have a panel of locals that can speak to the attendees, and among themselves on a comprehensive level of different topics.
- Jay added if the panel has added focus on what was learned and implemented in past summits that they found successful.
- Laura added that Cnythia Wilder created a niche for birders at the Refuge Inn by installing a bird puck that records the number of different birds in the area.
- Cherron added that Cnythia is a third-generation tourism family.
- **Audit Complete**
Sabbatini announced that the 2025 audit has been completed. The final report will be in the next month or two when that happens it will be shared with the commissioners.
- **End of the Year Strategy**
Sabbatini reported that the Tourism Commission has heard a lot of positives today. August numbers are up the pony swim was successful we finished the year strong. We will continue to focus on folks coming here regionally from VA Beach, Norfolk, and Richmond. Is there anything else we could be doing to finish out this year strong. A slowdown that could be around the corner is the TC thinking of everything we can do to be on top of working to get folks here through the end of the year. We might not have an answer today but think about it for the September meeting.
 - Holloway suggested tapping into all the things we do during the holidays from tip to top packages. From Oyster Roast to the many different holiday experiences that you can have in our small towns coming here for a long weekend. It might be worthwhile packing what is happening in Cape Charles, Chincoteague, Onancock, and the other events going on during the holidays.
 - Lawson added; Style Blueprint is a digital lifestyle publication that focuses on young families ages 35-44 looking for itinerary based travel. Lawson had the thought of Hallmark Holidays on the Eastern Shore. Partnering with VTC would give us good rates.
 - Karen has Fall Happenings in Travel Taste and Tour magazine.
 - Evelyn suggested recreating the small-town appeal that we promoted during covid that was very successful using those clever tricks to make an experience simpler. Driving the message that there is something for everyone here on the Shore.
 - Cherron suggested going from November to February, Winter fun on the Eastern Shore.
 - Clarice added that she is in Vermont, and they are promoting the 4 seasons to entice tourists to come more than just to ski with lots of free things to do.
 - Jay asked if the TC ever tried to compete with an area like Cape May and their events like Festive Fridays vs the Eastern Shore Festive Fridays which have a pricing difference of thousands of dollars. It is just an hour longer drive coming to the Eastern Shore from PA compared to driving to Jersey Shore.
 - Lawson added that our travelers from New York are down, but the dollars spent by individuals from New Yorker are up thirty-eight percent.
 - **Miscellaneous updates** - Sabbatini reported on updating of the building. Updating the board and conference room on all-inclusive equipment. Improve drop signal for Wi-Fi, another ethernet drop into the conference room, and speaker system throughout the building. It is all lumped into one job done by Brian Manley of Netwavz, work should begin.

by the middle of next month. Also, renovations of bathroom, kitchen, and conference room. Met with Elizabeth Webb a residential and commercial designer. She will be drawing up design ideas for those renovations. The other item is NASA Wallops Flight Facility Visitor Center, Rita McClenny has been contacted to see what the Virginia Tourism Corporation can do to find funding to assist with the budget cuts. NASA Wallops Flight Facility Visitor Center is under review to close along with a few more things on Wallops Island. Rita McClenny and Congresswoman Kiggans are both looking into the schedule closings to see if they can help. Since covid, the hours of operation have been limited. It is the same for the wildlife refuge.

- Cherron asked if TC would be in favor of writing a support letter to not have the closing of the NASA Wallops Flight Facility Visitor Center.
- Evelyn added that all the Main Street and both Chamber of Commerce should also write a letter of support stressing the importance of visitors having the visitor center open.
- Holloway added the FY25 tourism numbers that have been released and what the Eastern Shore contributes to the state will be hard proof the contribution tourism brings.
- Laura suggested sending all letters to her so that Sabbatini doesn't have to be the point person in gathering supportive letters for Rita McClenny.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Spuck shared Onancock has had the biggest Second Fridays in the history of Second Fridays two weeks ago. There was live music, streets were closed, and a wedding reception in the street. Main Street has two new murals going up. OBCA is actively planning Christmas in Onancock. Crab Cracken was sold out last Saturday at Ker Place. Onancock Welcome Center is open 8:30 am to 6 pm Monday through Saturday.
 - Samuel D Outlaw is holding their second annual Shoe Box Lunch festival this Saturday August 23rd from 10 am to 2 pm.
- Holloway shared that a lot of businesses in Cape Charles are saying this is the best August they have ever had and that is the same for the B&Bs. In the beginning of the season, it looked all doom and gloom. Love Fest is the next thing on the horizon set for next weekend. Normally Love Fest brings in 2,200-2,500 people. The Concerts in the Park typically bring in 1,200 – 1,500 people the DeLorean brought in this year 3,900 people.
- Moore shared Chincoteague's visitation in July was up over thirty-five percent over last year. It was the biggest year Chincoteague Chamber has had in their office. Calls to office up twenty-five percent. Beach parking is closed due to the breach of Assateague Island. Second week of September is Pinaire and Poker Run, October 11 is the Oyster Festival.
- Tarr thanked Moore for getting all the people to Pony Swim. The Chincoteague Fire Co surpassed all records at the Pony auction. The 4th of July was insane you couldn't move on the carnival grounds. T-shirt sales will bring in four million dollars in sales. Tarr asked about VA 250.
 - Cherron reported that the VA 25 mobile museum will be in 3 locations on the shore.
 - Sabbatini added on Saturday October fourth the VA 250 mobile museum will be at the Agi Fair in Machipongo from 10 am – 2 pm there is a lot of Eastern Shore history attached to the museum. ESVA TC has multiple ideas about putting a rack card together about Accomack Co. ESVA Tourism Commission has applied for a grant to make this possible. Cara Burton is very involved with the lead on Northampton Co participation with VA 250 making this a regional attraction is what we are all working towards.
 - Laura suggested creating a QR code so that both Accomack Co and Northampton Co have both county sights and attractions easy access for anyone to be aware of when following the trail on the shore.

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