

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**August 21, 2024, 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  
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C  
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director  
Heather Williamson, DDD - **Absent**  
Emily Machen, Marketing Director-**Absent**  
Aileen Joeckel, Executive assistant  
Sally Williamson, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

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

Guest Present

Karen Zamorski, Main Street Cape Charles-Z  
Bill Stramm, Main Street Cape Charles-Z  
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome  
Jenny Gehman, Onancock Main Street -Z  
Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street  
Eric Hawkins, Cape Charles Tiny Livin

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

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

- Jay Abella thanked the tourism board for their influencer campaign. Eric Hawken, Cape Charles Tiny Livin has benefited from the campaign. If this can be replicated to other businesses on the Shore, taking advantage of these types of media outreach all would benefit. The markets are stable at this present moment. The retail consumer side is soft currently.
  - Sabbatini added that the Jobs Report has been revised year to year down 818,000 jobs. Jay stated most jobs created were in the government sector or new jobs for illegals. This is an uphill battle for the tourism commission, stated Jay.
- Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street, added Love Fest will be August 31<sup>st</sup>.
- Jenny Gehman, Onancock Main Street, is applying for the Mirco Business Grant if awarded it would be \$10K for marketing promotions.
- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, stated there will be a mobile unit being built for the anniversary of the 250 years of our county. The hope is there will be interest in the mobile unit coming to towns around the state of Virginia. September 14<sup>th</sup> is the big event held at the New Church Welcome Center, Fall in Love with Virginia from 10 am to 2 pm 28 partners have signed up to be represented at the WC. During Pony Swim a group from VTC were on the island taking pictures. The hope is that the one-hundred-year anniversary of the pony swim will make the cover of the 2025 state travel guide. The photograph group also went to other towns, Onancock, Parksley, Wachapreague, and Cape Charles to gather photos and content from other locations on the Shore.

### 3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:38 p.m. Spuck made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Shotwell and passed unanimously.

### 4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported the state has released the economic impact data. 33.3 billion has been spent which comes to ninety-one million dollars spent a day in Virginia. When the county numbers are released in a few weeks that data will be sent. Cape Charles has been featured in the Southern Living magazine; it is a multi-generational getaway to Cape Charles.

### 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the third weekend in August is always a big travel day for the Welcome Center. Six hundred people on Saturday entered the WC. The total for the weekend came to 1,400. The Southern Welcome Center is down about 13%, the bridge tunnel is down over 7% compared to last July. All other bridges are down, Hampton bridge numbers are down 11%.

- **Destination Development Update**

Sabbatini reported for Williamson, selling ads is the focus on right now. There was a great meeting with the travel guide committee. Laura suggested one hundred years on the Shore and to reach out to the towns and see what that looks like in association with the 100-year pony swim. There is a two year build up in the travel guide for the VA 250 Anniversary of the country. The plan is to have the printing of ESVA Travel Guide ready in January. The next travel guide meeting will be September 4<sup>th</sup>.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Sabbatini reported for Machen. The initiative of getting influencers here on the Shore and exposing and acknowledging the different towns and businesses that are on the shore is going well. Website usage for July was up significantly. New users for July were 23,452, that was 9,000 more people than in June. A lot is coming from influencers and paid marketing that draw new users in. Seventy-one percent of folks coming here are from out of state. It is a lot of outdoor recreation that has been the draw. In July, the number one item money was spent on was food.

- **Strategic Plan**

Sabbatini reported with the help of the staff, commissioners for their input, the community input, and Laura, the strategic plan has come together. Sabbatini requested a vote on the strategic plan to put the plan into motion.

- At 12:54 p.m. Shotwell made the first motion to approve the ESVA Tourism Strategic Plan, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

Sabbatini continued that the strategic plan is a living document that should be reviewed every year. The last time it was updated was 2008.

- Holloway asked to have the plan visible for everyone to see.

Sabbatini stated the plan will be on the tourism website and both county websites.

- Laura also suggested having it on the industry page of the website and having a press release on the completion of the strategic plan.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini reported Machen attended the Wytheville, VA Tourism Summit. ESVA summit and Wytheville summit are similar in doing great things but differently. ES TC looks to combine the things that we have not been doing and are successful in the Wytheville Summit. TC is working on a schedule and will share with the commissioners when completed. TC intent is to have the best experience for our partners with the new ideas that Machen has brought back from Wytheville. We are looking at speakers for the summit now. Holloway suggestion for a speaker currently is the front runner. The date of the 2025 Tourism Summit will be the last Monday of February the 24<sup>th</sup>.

- **National Heritage Area**

Sabbatini reported Cara Burton and himself are working on several grants to complete the feasibility study that is required to become a National Heritage Area. One grant is from ESVA Community Services Board amounting to \$50K. Another grant has been applied for to National Endowment of the Humanities in the amount of \$20K. The feasibility study cost \$117K Sabbatini believes the Chamber and ESVA Tourism need to put in some money toward the grant application. It is a thought that will be brought up with the commissioners later. This can be discussed in more detail in future meetings. Sabbatini is getting quotes on the renovations of the building. Once all quotes are in from contractors the quotes will be sent out to everyone. Renovations to the Chamber building will be a part of the budget for the NHA.

## 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Shotwell shared the town of Chincoteague numbers are up for the year for the month of July and August. There has been good engagement with videos posted from the pony swim. This week and next week are a little slower on Chincoteague with kids going back to school. Visitations will pick up again in September. Plen air is on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September. Oyster Festival the 12<sup>th</sup> of October. It has been a busy summer on the island. There is also a new mural in Chincoteague on the main street.
  - Ace commented that the numbers are being reached for rental units, but they are all last-minute reservations. Laura added that it is a statewide issue with last-minute reservations.
- Holloway shared weekly rentals in town that used to be full weeks has changed to 3–4-day rentals. The Cape Charles beach has been busier than it has ever been. The cape Charles will not be limiting STR in the historic district of the town but there will be a 10-person max occupancy. Street parking will not be addressed. It is requested that the listings properties note that parking is limited and should be kept to four cars. Bay Creek will produce their own standards for STR. The distillery moved into the old hardware store building last weekend. 76 West will move into the empty Distillery building. Peach Street shops are almost full, the street parking is finished. Main Street did get a grant and will be transforming the Strawberry Street sidewalk. August numbers are looking strong they are just last minute.
- Matt Spuck reported Onancock is looking into the 250 Revitalization grant that gives the opportunity to renovate the exterior of buildings back to the era of when they were founded. Onancock has applied for the DMO Grant to extend the room night stay. which were at 2.2 nights and dropped to 1.6 nights. The revolving loan fund that Onancock received has spent \$600K. The reality company renovations are outstanding which are in the building utilizing the loan fund. Onancock app is up and running. King street parking lot is being renovated.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:21 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Spuck and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tart 9/18/2024  
Billy Joe Tart, Vice Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 8/18/2024  
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date