

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
September 18, 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
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton Co. Appointee-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Sally Williamson, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

John Coker, Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

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

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Karen Zamorski reported Cape Charles has new rack cards for two walking tours. One tour is on Historic Mason Avenue, the other walking tour highlights, Sears kit homes. The train in Cape Charles is being painted this week. The Strawberry Plaza has picnic tables installed. In the next month or two shade footers will be going in with pavers to follow. Cape Charles received a Dig grant of seventy-five thousand dollars for this project.
- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, reported numbers are good for fall travelers on the Shore. "Fall in Love with Virginia," was Saturday it was phenomenally successful. Twenty-eight partners attended with 1,907 people attending the event. The same event will be held next year on September 13th.
- Ace Seybolt added that STR using Dynamic pricing is being sued by the Justice Department. The dynamic pricing software is also used by airlines for booking airfares.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street, added the economy is split. Half the country will not make big ticket item purchases. The other half has no problems with the economy. Waiting for November 5th, half the people will be happy the other half will think the world is ending.
- Sabbatini added that an announcement was made by Amazon that all employees are to return to onsite offices. That will create a shift for those that have been working remotely and traveling at the same time. This could have an impact on tourism all over the country. It is possible all companies may take the same lead that Amazon has taken.

3. Consent Agenda

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

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported the state has released the economic impact data broken out by county. Accomack County revenue \$179.6 million in 2023, an increase of 8% over 2022. Northampton County tourism revenue 68.3 million, a 3.5% increase over 2022. ESVA Tourism received a Drive Tourism Plus grant. Twenty-three applicants applied for this grant and only ten grants were awarded. VA-1 will be held November 13-15.
- Sabbatini asked about the two-day festival grant. Can this be the first time a festival moves from one day event to a two-day event and qualify? Laura responded that adding a second day does qualify.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the Welcome Center is down 15%. Previously seventy-five thousand people were going through the WC a year but for the last 5 years it has been fifty thousand people coming into the WC. Since covid people have not been coming into the WC at the same rate. HH and Sally are visiting all businesses promoting rack space sales. Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel includes Welcome Center staff and volunteers in all companywide activities CBBT does for their employees. The whole staff was taken to a Tides baseball game.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported a good month for social media. There was a dip after Pony Swim which is normal for social media to go down after a big event. Tourism Commission had a successful campaign with Daisy Island Cruises to promote pony swim. Two influencers came to the Shore, John Park and Happily Ever Exploring. In August a free collaboration of videos with Devine Retreats, a local Airbnb on the Shore, and Loren ZRay took place. There was a dip in TC analytics on how googles tags the Shore. Machen is meeting with our web developer to get this resolved. Machen attended Celebrate Tourism Summit in Wytheville to network and see how other summits are run. It is Machen understanding that Wytheville is the only other locality that does a regional summit. TC also had a blitz at the New Church Welcome Center.

- **Tourism Summit Update**

Sabbatini reported on the tourism summit. The Tourism Commission is considering Christine Trippi as the headline speaker. Christine comes recommended by Holloway. Christine offers two packages; we are going with the VIP package for fifteen-thousand dollars. Machen negotiated the cost down to ten-thousand dollars. The package includes a ninety-minute keynote address that is interactive, including an intake session. A tool kit that is given to every attendee to implement which can be used after the summit.

- Shotwell add, the Chincoteague Center has upgraded the public address system. If Chincoteague Center is selected as the site of the ESVA Tourism Summit, it is best to get on their calendar as soon as possible.
- Holloway would like to work on the summit invite to include Christine Trippi colors and style. This could set the tone for enthusiasm.

- **Visitor Guide Update**

Sabbatini reported TC has a committee working on the travel guide. A lot of excellent ideas have been generated to go into the guide next year. Committee members are working on different sections and ad sales have begun. The committee suggested looking at different publishers for the guide. Lunar Cow has been selected. First price point: sixty-eight thousand five hundred dollars if Lunar Cow does sales and publish. Second price point: twenty-nine thousand five hundred dollars

if TC sells the ads and Lunar Cow publishes the travel guide. Shotwell stated that Chincoteague sells the ads for the Chincoteague travel guide.

- **Love Sign Welcome Center**

Sabbatini reported he and Sally met with Jeff Holland and Paige Addison at the Welcome Center as a fact-finding mission on where to put the Love Sign. Jeff and Paige are extremely excited about the project. Guidance on location was given to select a good spot where visibility is prime, and folks can still take pictures and not be close to the highway. The Southwest corner of the WC parking lot is the first suggestion for the site of the Love sign. The VA 250 sign will be in the same area. Next step will be getting a group together to start talking about design. Thoughts are to include the CBBT into the concept of the love letters. After the group is formed artists will be invited to give their ideas. Sabbatini asked who would like to be on the committee. Volunteers: Holloway, Shotwell (until January) Cherron Davis, Jenny Gehman, Karen Zamorski, Sally Williams, with Laura Messer consulting and Sabbatini.

- **Audit**

Sabbatini reported the audit for FY 24 has been completed. Sabbatini thanked Joeckel for getting all requested materials to the auditor. TC has received a draft copy of the audit everything looks good, no concerns. Once the final draft is received it will be sent out to all the commissioners for review. With the FY 2024 audit completed there will be no delays with receiving funds from either county.

- **Economic Impact Data**

Sabbatini stated Laura has touched on the data of revenue for the two counties. Sabbatini added a huge thank you to all the folks in the room, the numbers are impressive. Both counties work together to make the visitors experience one that is the best possible experience one can have. The results show we have achieved that with consistent growth.

- Joeckel asked if all other regions in Virginia fared as well as the Eastern Shore. Messer responded no. The locations that have casino did extremely well. Their data is huge and falls under recreation. Portsmouth, as an example, opened a casino which had a 700% increase in their data. Laura added that with the areas that she represents Accomack County increase of 8% is high compared to the other areas she works with. You want the numbers to be high, but you do not want them too high because it is not sustainable.

Sabbatini continued the Chamber is sponsoring the Ag Fair in Northampton County October 5th from 10 am to 2 pm at Machipongo Middle school. The projected number of attendees is 1,000. New features of the Ag Fair are a blacksmith shop, a new competition largest pumpkin grown, skillet throwing, and an antique tractor parade.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Spuck shared the town of Onancock meals tax numbers are up 5%. The TOT numbers only come in quarterly and are not available. A couple of grants Onancock is working on, 250 Preservation Grant has accepted four buildings will move into the next round for consideration. A new website is up and running, there is also an app for android and apple phones that can pull up Onancock's website. Onancock has tree lined walks, historic house walks, and many other things available on the Onancock app. Halloween in Onancock is bigger and better than ever. Pumpkin carving on the town square, CBES bike tour starting and ending in Onancock during Halloween weekend. First time this year a Halloween parade, food trucks, North Street Playhouse Haunted theater, Rocky Horror Picture Show will be playing, Ghost tales and Cocktails at Ker Place, Witches Paddle on Onancock Creek on Sunday. Homes have been selected for the Christmas Home tour. The

new Onancock Welcome Center will be open to the public and decorated. More to come for Christmas holidays later.

- Shotwell stated she assumes the Main Street merchants will be doing Trick or Treat this year. There are only 150 tickets left for the Oyster Festival October 12th. The Christmas parade is being organized including lots of activities that will be posted on the events page. Visitation has been through the roof this year; June up 19%, July up 48%, August up 16%. September has not slowed down some days are as busy as days in July. Still a lot of first-time visitors to Chincoteague. September has been good; the poker run was last Saturday. Plein air art show was last Saturday night at the Chincoteague Center.
- Mac Garvey shared Exmore numbers for TOT tax and retail numbers were up. Exmore is on a wave of growth with the sewers coming online. All types of requests from business developers have been coming to town. The town is moving slowly to do the right thing for the residents. Right now, growth is in the tourism sector of business inquiry. The outdoor marketplace is well attended on Saturdays. The first Friday night of each month shops are open and are well attended. Exmore Fall Festival will be September 28th. This will be the third year in a row for the festival. A new antique store is opening in town; merchants are getting together and calling the bustling Main Street, "Antique Alley". Exmore will have 8-10 antiques businesses with some of the businesses being upscale antiques. For Halloween the merchants are putting on a street Halloween for the children.
- Holloway reported Cape Charles has outsourced harbor management the past few years but will bring it back into a town management position. There is a lot of discussion over the new beach master plan. The plan was based on survey results received from over 45-50 town residents who answered the survey. The plan is directly aligned with the survey and will be implemented over a ten-year period. The first town meeting to discuss the results and plan will be held soon. Parking, bathrooms, shade, and dune management are the first areas being addressed. Cape Charles is featured in Coastal Virginia magazine. FY 2024 Meals tax and TOT tax were down for the year. It was not significantly down but it appeared early on Cape Charles would not be reaching our goal for FY 2024. TOT dollars are aligned with those numbers being down 10% nationally. 2025 is looking strong right now numbers for September are looking better than June and may finish higher than August. There have been multiple weddings per weekend in the area. Weddings are making a strong revenue stream for the Shore in the Fall. Cape Charles is working on a new event called Porchacella for next year. Halloween has not been announced yet. Cape Charles has a change in staff, Holloway does not know if the Halloween Hootenanny will take place this year. Dock Dog will be on Veterans Day weekend in the park. The Distillery moved to its new location including restaurant two weekends ago. A hair salon is moving into the Distillery space. Holloway met with John Coker last week, the news from VDOT on the Rail to Trail portion in Cape Charles may have a groundbreaking January 2025. Funding will include Cheriton being looped in.
- Tarr reported the Assateague National Wildlife Refuge is going to have a public information session next Wednesday September 25, from 3-7 pm at the Herb Bateman Center. The outlay of the new parking lot for the beach will be on display. You can attend anytime between 3-7 pm to learn more about the relocation of the Assateague beach parking lot, repairs to the Assateague Channel Bridge, and the Chincoteague Creek bridge. The causeway to Assateague beach and old beach access will be kept open during the building of the new beach parking access. The last time Tarr was informed of the cost for the new parking it was forty-million dollars from the Federal Hwy Commission

7. Adjournment

- At 1:41 p.m. Shotwell made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Holloway and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 4/16/2025
Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 4/16/25
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date