

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
September 26, 2018 at 2:00 p.m.
25-A Market Street, Onancock, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

Steve Potts, Bill's Seafood, Chair
Carol Evans, Cape Charles House, Vice Chair
Laura Belle Gordy, Accomack Supervisors
Paige Addison, CBBT
Blake Johnson, The Island House
Monika Bridgforth, BIC
Ace Seybolt, Chincoteague Resort Realty

Staff Present

Kerry Allison, Executive Director
Sarah Barban, Content Producer
Allan Burns, Industry Relations Manager
Sarah Head, Executive Assistant

Guests Present

Russel Jones, Eastern Shore Artisans Guild
Annie Jones, Eastern Shore Artisans Guild
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council
Clarice McGarvey, Exmore
Elizabeth Russel, Northampton Chamber
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague Chamber
Staci Martin, VTC
Carol Vaughn, Eastern Shore News
Joy Marino, Onancock Town Council
Karyn Belknap, Ten Good Sheep

1. Call to Order

- Potts called the meeting to order at 2:05 p.m.

2. Consent Agenda

- Gordy made a motion to approve the consent agenda, Seybolt seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

3. Public Participation

- Marino introduced herself
- Vaughn said she was there to listen
- Martin said VA-1 was coming up, and VTC has launched new campaigns for Love Share and Table Share
- Shotwell said visitation year-to-date was up and August numbers year-over-year were up about seven percent; September was expected to be down because of Hurricane Florence
- Russel gave an update on the Northampton Agricultural County Fair
- Russel Jones said he was there to learn what the future of the tourism commission was
- Annie Jones introduced herself
- Holloway gave an update about Festive Fridays and other holiday events and said there would be a brand for Cape Charles soon
- McGarvey said Exmore's recent weekend of events was very successful. The *Virginian Pilot* was working on a story about Exmore and Northampton County.
- Belknap said she'd had a crazy number of visitors to her shop and credited the ESVA's three welcome centers for helping

4. Welcome Center Report

- Upgrades and changes are underway.
- A former employee returned, there was a new volunteer and another person has expressed an interest in volunteering.
- Nametags and shirts were being ordered for them.
- Visitation was up eight percent from last year.

5. Executive Assistant Report

- The question of auto insurance for TC employees who use their cars on official TC business is being investigated. A new policy would cost \$190 a year but requires all insured drivers to meet higher-than-state-minimum standards and could increase premiums. The TC would underwrite any cost of increased premiums. The next step is to identify which staff should be insured.
- The Digital DC Summit had good workshops about business-to-business marketing.
- A review of the Welcome Center with Burns gave Head an opportunity to look at ways to improve the visitor experience and strengthen sales. Two key improvements are to make the rack card sections as relevant to top visitor queries as possible by sorting racks by activity. The other goal was to entice more businesses to begin advertising in the welcome center.

6. Content Producer Report

- Barban has accepted a new position with Blue Water Development. Her last day is October 4.
- The Digital DC Summit was a worthwhile conference. Learnings include: Turn all customer calls and interactions into blog and FAQ content; how to boost SEO; how Facebook punishes posts that link off to other channels;

9. Old Business

- Advertising for the Welcome Center manager position: Potts asked if that task fell to the personnel committee. Addison said she felt it fell to staff but they were all probably in agreement that the job needed to be filled. Potts said the board should look over the job description and staff would get it published. Allison said there were also a lot of resumes that had been collected when Head's position was being filled and there might be a candidate right there. Addison said even if there was someone there it was important to publicly put the job out there. Addison said she'd like to see the job advertised not later than October 15. Potts said before that would be even better, but by the 15th would be agreeable.
- Sales of annual travel guide: Potts said he wanted to see a travel guide out there but wasn't sure if the commission was able to do one. Seybolt asked if any sales had been done -- money needed to be put into escrow in case the guide wasn't published. Addison said no. Seybolt asked when the guide was normally printed, and Allison said by January. Addison said July and August was when sales normally began. Johnson asked how badly it would impact cash flow. Addison said she didn't think the cash flow was the problem. Seybolt said that based on the financials it was almost a wash. Allison said that last year the guide netted close to \$10,000. Johnson asked if it could be put off for a year. Addison said if that was done there wouldn't be a public advertising arm for the Shore for a year. Seybolt said if you try and book sales but not collect that's a tough sell. Addison said that was the question at hand -- if the commission didn't know what the situation was it's going to be hard, however if you look at the dynamic of the stakeholders someone owed it to someone to have that marketing arm. Head said that historically the visitors guide had been on a January to January timeline but that didn't really match the region's season and many new businesses opened in February and March. She proposed the idea of putting the guide on a March to March timeline which would give them time to work everything out without being up against a deadline. Seybolt said in his experience when you approached businesses in March they were just coming off a long winter and trying to get money out of them was hard. Seybolt said it was a good idea but the bigger question was the commission going to say it was business until it wasn't. Potts said these things had to be taken into consideration and some of it wasn't in their control. Addison said she'd like to see staff continue to evaluate from a seasonal stand point as well as considering downsizing the guide from a cost savings perspective because it was important to have a visitors guide that could point to the new website. The guide is used as the extensive marketing piece that's displayed throughout the commonwealth and other areas, including in the commission's welcome center and throughout the local area in businesses. So, it's important to consider doing something even if it's on a smaller scale or very copy heavy rather than advertising driven. Holloway asked how many guides are mailed out. Allison said requests for print have dropped for the last year -- the commission used to get leads from VTC but they don't provide that anymore. Demand for print guides in the welcome center had also fallen off. Holloway asked if there was a PDF version on the website where hits were monitored. Allison said yes. Holloway proposed the idea of continuing to use the current guides

if there were some left over. Allison said the problem was the guide said 2018 on the cover. Seybolt said he had just ordered his rental catalog and he was warned to expect paper cost to rise. Martin said the region's presence in welcome centers across the state was important. The Eastern Shore was the number one destination for a lot of travelers and a number one generator of tourism-related revenue. Even just a double-sided rack card that pushed people to the website would be a good idea just to have something, she said. Seybolt said that even if the guide was reevaluated Head still needed to go out and make contacts, so people don't forget the commission. Bringing the printed piece to partners could be one way to do that, Potts said. Evans agreed it could be a good way to talk about the new website and help partners get listed on the site. Potts said the topic would have to be revisited soon to work the numbers and figure out what the best way would be to go forward, but there was a need for something. Seybolt said he felt if staff pushed, something could be done in seven or eight weeks without selling advertising. Addison said she'd toyed with the idea of having minimal advertising, such as just business listings. It would be a way to make enough money to produce something so that it exists. Seybolt said they could still sell ads but the money would have to be escrowed. Seybolt said the money would just be put in a separate account. Addison suggested sticking with the copy because the foundation is there and simply update it. Martin suggested the state parks guide as a model. Bridgforth said that with the new website there would be so much content online already and the guide could just give the basic information. Seybolt asked who did the design and Allison said Mona Cossitt. Addison said the commission had the file in house. Allison said the guide was the intellectual property of the commission and she had all the specs for it. Potts suggested an analysis to see what the commission could do efficiently and economically. Addison said that the idea of the guide having a longer lifespan by removing the date should be kept in mind. Evans suggested pushing to the website which would be updated. Seybolt and Addison volunteered to help staff figure out the future of the guide regarding content and cost. Addison said another consideration would be to have a digital version of the guide without advertising that is the copy piece with a rack card that points to it. Head said a rack card wouldn't be as expensive to make so you could produce one for the meantime that points people to the website and then wait until March to put out a guide. Seybolt asked how many guides had been printed for 2018. Allison said 100,000 but the print run was being reduced to however many \$37,000 would buy. Allison voiced concern about sending Head out to do sales while there was confusion in the market about the future of the commission.

- Website: Allison said Otto was currently working on the heavy lifting right now to build the back end and TC staff was working on the static copy. Some of the copy could be pulled from the old site but a lot had to be written. Allison told the board that the soft launch at the tourism workshop on October 22 could be complicated because a survey had been sent to partners to collect data for business listings, but only about 20 percent responded. So, there would have to be a push to get partners to fill out their business listing. Also, events are moving to event owners and the TC will no longer provide this service to industry. Potts said it would be a good opportunity to help people fill out their business listing. Addison said given everything going on it would be a positive. There would be growing pains, but that's expected, and it was important to get it started. Addison asked if there would be multiple work stations set up at the workshop, so board members could jump in and help businesses get their listing. Evans proposed the idea of asking the college to get students to volunteer to sign businesses up. Head suggested putting some text on Square invoices letting partners know that they would need to fill out their own listing. Potts said he hoped everyone would attend the workshop. Bridgforth asked if there could be a tutorial for the board prior to the tourism summit so they could help sign businesses up.
- Board Retreat: Potts asked how everyone felt about going forward with the board retreat on October 17. He said he felt it would be helpful. Evans asked if the board would have a better sense of where they would be by then and asked if it would be a good idea to move it to November. Potts said if the board was going to help at the October 22 workshop they all needed to meet beforehand. Addison said she thought Allison probably had an agenda planned for the retreat, so she leaned towards taking care of the website learning before the workshop. Potts said he felt a retreat would be beneficial. Johnson asked if there was a reason they wouldn't do it. Addison said she felt like everyone was just sitting there with a question mark over their head. Johnson said at some point you must continue with what's normal. Addison said she'd like to feel that a retreat was a positive too and given the circumstances she thought it was important to have a SWAT analysis done with both the funding partners and internally. Seybolt said the date of the retreat would be the same days as the next Accomack Supervisors meeting. Gordy said she felt that the lack of communication was what was holding up the situation.

Addison asked if she had any suggestions. Gordy said the board knew just as much as she did, and that Mike Mason was looking up other funding possibilities. Addison said she hoped that county officials could be at the table as well. Potts said he'd asked both heads of both counties to come to the table but hadn't heard anything. Johnson suggested inviting them to the retreat. Seybolt said that in the case of Accomack where the retreat was the same day as their meeting it gave them an easy out not to come. Addison said she felt they owed it to their partners to invite them. Evans said if the board wanted the supervisors to come it might be good to consider another date. There was some discussion about other dates, but it was eventually decided to keep it on the 17th. It was also decided that county administrators or chairs of both county councils would be invited. Allison said she would reach out to a facilitator.

10. New Business

- Rate of pay for the current/interim Welcome Center Manager: Gordy said she thought they needed to discuss that in closed session. Potts agreed that they would do that.
- Fulfillment/advertisement of the Executive Director position: Potts said he thought that was a job description the board would have to look at as well. Addison said perhaps that was something that could be added to the agenda for the retreat. Addison asked that Allison send out the current position description to the commission.
- Future of ESVATC: Potts said the commission was moving along as best it could and they had a responsibility to their tourism partners but getting the board of supervisors together for a conversation was imperative. It was also important to continue the regional approach, he said. Potts said he'd like to form a structural committee. Addison said she felt that as a commission they had to determine structure together. Evans said she felt the commission's assets were a very important piece of their structure. That would be what they do, how they do it and who they are. Evans said putting those things on paper would be a good idea. Allison said she'd put together a white paper about three years prior which provided all those details and it is provided to all new board members. Potts said that many people saw the welcome center as the biggest asset because it was physical but between that and the website there was a lot more to the tourism commission than just the welcome center. Addison said that it seemed everyone was still sitting with a question mark over their head because there are two counties that provide funding and one of them has threatened the funding. She asked how they could move forward and wondered if the two funders even knew what their assets were. She said she felt it was important to remind them of those assets. Addison said the current was impacting the partners and the region; as much as the commission might want to say it was business as usual, there's a point where doing business as usual wouldn't be possible. Seybolt said he didn't think the supervisors wanted to get rid of the tourism commission but that they wanted to reconstitute it with perhaps even more funding down the road. He said he didn't think they liked the present structure. Seybolt said he'd been told that they were considering having the chamber as administration but didn't want to get rid of the tourism commission because it had some uses. He said the commission also seemed to be caught up in an argument between the two counties. Seybolt said he'd been told to be 95 percent certain that Accomack was going to do something and that neither county had the scale to do tourism by themselves. Seybolt said they had to accept there was going to be change but somehow the commission needed to ensure the two counties do something together. Holloway said the counties do their best to represent their districts but there are towns within those counties that may not share those views and who may have a closer feel for the impact of tourism. Holloway suggested having town representatives and chamber representatives at the board retreat. Russel Jones said he was led to believe that the document that created the tourism commission had a clause that if either county pulls its funding the organization is dissolved, and he asked if that was correct. Potts said to the best of his knowledge that was correct. Russel said he had worked with the commission as both a mayor and with other organizations and he felt it was probably the best and maybe the only organization that had a great working relationship between both counties and it would be a shame to let a vendetta destroy that. Seybolt said they'd have to speak to the supervisors and say try not to kill each other. Potts said from his perspective as a business owner and a taxpayer the sad truth is that the people who will suffer from this are the partners and stakeholders. Evans said she hoped

that partners would let their wishes be known to the supervisors and that the people who would be affected most need to speak out. Perhaps it could be an opportunity to have a conversation between the two counties that hadn't taken place, she said. Addison said it would be important to approach the board chairs and see what they can do to escalate everyone coming to the table and having those conversations. She said she felt a letter writing campaign wouldn't work. Evans said that she felt that their communication with tourism partners needed to progress. Potts said they would certainly address the partners. Part of that piece could be a message about the website coming and the personal assistance the commission would be offering, he said. Evans said that something needed to come out to encourage partners to speak out and to let them know that the commission was still doing business as best they could -- partners have questions and don't even know who to talk to. Johnson said that if there was to be any hope that anyone would listen to the commission it would have to come no later than a week from the meeting. They would need to put down on paper what the commission was, what it did and ask stakeholders to attend BOS meetings to let them know if they believed in the mission of the tourism commission. It was important to get something on paper to show stakeholders what the commission has done, what it does and what it plans to do in the future, Johnson said. Addison asked Seybolt if he had an insight into what the reconstitution of the tourism commission would be. Seybolt said as he understood it Accomack was looking at an option where the chamber would do the day-to-day administration, there would be a tourism commission, but it might not be the people currently at the table. He said John Cocker had sent him an email saying he and Spencer Murray had met with the chamber. Seybolt said he spoke to three supervisors who were friends of his and they said that they knew he was a big taxpayer, but he should pipe down and sit in the corner because this wasn't his fight. Addison said it was interesting that there was a fight going on. Seybolt said that he thought the current chair of Accomack wanted this settled while he was still chair. Barban asked if Seybolt knew if they had thought about if the tourism commission were to go under the chamber if it would move to a pay-to-play system or if the tourism commission would continue to be able to promote all their partners. Seybolt said he didn't know and that he was a member of the chamber so they'd all agreed he'd stay out of it. Barban said she just felt that was an important question to find the answer to. Potts said that's the thing -- it's free to join the tourism commission. Addison said there was also a history between the chamber and the commission. Potts said his common sense leads him to say if we want to do tourism better, how can it be improved, since we've been the fastest growing tourism region in the state for two years what's better? Is it going to be in the nation, the world, the universe? How do you better tourism when you're the best, he asked. Martin said whatever controversy there was aside the commission was experiencing growing pains because of their success and that DMOs had been focusing on marketing for many years that they need to transition to sweep in economic development and entrepreneurial development and that might be where they needed to evaluate where their role is in that. Holloway said one of the ways to speak to what the tourism commission does is to talk about how they are growing partnerships with businesses in the region. She said she worked for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and she worked with many communities like the Shore to work together in a regional way to combine resources and there was a lot of chamber and visitor bureau combinations and that it was not an unusual one; it can be very successful. She said she wasn't saying that was the direction she felt they should go but that it wasn't so farfetched in regions like this. They share resources, but the tourism piece is free, and the chamber piece is paid. Shotwell asked if that wasn't the history of the tourism commission. Addison said yes very much so. Seybolt said he agreed that the commission was better at driving tourism but as far as the back-end office the commission had never gotten their arms around that. He said he felt Northampton's entire contribution would go to keep the welcome center open because their share was about what it cost to keep that open. Allison said that the commission fundraised to offset about half the cost -- by monetizing the center. Seybolt said that they had also realized that the days of volunteer staff were over. Allison said the budget to run the welcome center was roughly \$81,000 and Burns said the welcome center generated between \$30,000 and \$35,000 in income. Addison said the issue was that there were discussions going on, but the TC wasn't at the table to ensure that everything is being taken into consideration that is being done by the tourism commission. The welcome center may be in Northampton County, but it is regional and represents the whole Eastern Shore. Seybolt asked Allison if Robert Crockett showed any inclination towards a regional approach when she met with

him. Allison said they didn't talk about that. Potts said when he'd spoken with Crockett he didn't think that there was a consideration of the business partners. Potts said he felt they needed to have that discussion at the table to look at the best way possible to go forward. Addison said it wasn't about the people sitting at the table it was about the region and the partners and what is the best for them. Belknap asked if the commission could be a voice for the smallest businesses on the shore. She said she is a paid member of two chambers but said that if one year she couldn't pay for those memberships the tourism commission is the equalizer for the smallest of businesses and what Barban said was right. Belknap said the chamber had made it abundantly clear that if she didn't pay she wouldn't get exposure and that larger companies who could fund advertising could continue to do that but the smallest businesses who are part of the fabric of the shore too maybe had the biggest need for the tourism commission to remain healthy and in place. Belknap asked if someone could carry that message for her. She went on to say that about half of her customers that summer told her they came through Southern Gateway and had used the service there. She said it worked for people all over the shore. Seybolt said they were also asking her to represent them to the supervisors. Belknap said she'd be happy to. Annie Jones asked where things currently stood with the county. Potts said according to the papers Accomack was going to send a letter to Northampton. Seybolt said the commission was funded through the summer. Russel said the county could amend their budget and change that. Barban said in the joint resolution it stated that either county could pull funding at the beginning of a quarter and then the tourism commission would be dissolved. Head said Accomack hadn't given and inclination that they were going to do that and that all the commission knew was that they were going to send a letter to Northampton to open a discussion about maybe putting the commission under the chamber and as far as they knew that letter had not been received. Holloway said if the next meeting would be October 17 it would make sense to get partners to that meeting. Annie asked for clarification about what Mike Mason was researching. Gordy said Crockett had asked him to research and see where the county could get the most for the money they give the commission. He suggested the chamber and working with Chincoteague, she said. Russel said it seemed they go the most for their money the way it was now. Gordy said they were wasting their time sitting there discussing it until they knew something, and she said she really didn't know what would happen. Gordy said she hadn't had a call from anyone about it. Belknap asked if Gordy would take her message to the supervisors. Gordy said she'd take a note, so she could be sure that it was in Belknap's words. Addison asked if it would be worthwhile for Potts and possibly others to try and have a sit-down meeting with the chairs of each board to see if they could push the matter along. Potts said he'd love to. Russel said if you had the two administrators at the table you'd get a lot further. Johnson asked for clarification if Potts had already sent a letter asking for just that. Potts said he did and asked for maybe two from the board to meet with them. Seybolt asked if they had someone from the state who had more gravity if it would be better. Potts said the state could speak to a regional approach, but they couldn't get so involved. Potts asked if perhaps Addison or Bridgforth and Johnson would help him ask county officials to come to the table. Addison said she felt they needed to go to them, rather than asking them to come. She suggested scheduling meetings with each of them. Seybolt said he'd asked Crockett and he was told not to waste time on trying to hire anyone or having a retreat and based on comments he didn't think the two chairmen worked well together. Potts said maybe they could meet with one chairman and then the other. Bridgforth said whatever structure it ended up being there was a lot of knowledge on the commission about what didn't go well when it was under the chamber and it was important to make sure those mistakes weren't repeated. She said whether the commission stayed the same there needed to be a regional tourism board that promoted everyone not on a pay to play basis and that all the assets of the region were promoted. She said it did not matter whether it was in that office or down the road in the long run as long as both counties work together and that's what had to get across to both chairmen. Bridgforth said they still had Head and Burns and they owed it to them to make sure they knew what was going on. Seybolt asked if they could give Potts some authorization because they couldn't wait for monthly reports. Potts said if he could go with two commissioners to meet with the board chairs separately that might speed up the conversation or to give them the information that might help them make a decision. Johnson said he primarily wanted to know what the end goal for Accomack County was.

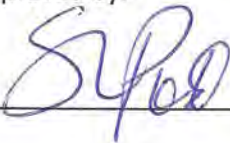
11. Matters by Commissioners

- Evans said that she had invested 23 years in the tourism commission and they'd been through thick and thin and she believed they had a mission on the Shore which she hoped they could continue and she was hoping the partners could be a part of that.
- Addison said she sent everyone an op-ed from the *Daily Press* and she hoped everyone would read it because it was on regionalism.
- Seybolt said rentals were up seven percent and the shoulder season, which brought in older wealthy tourists, was up about 20 percent and real estate sales were up 30 or 40 percent so something was going right on Chincoteague. Bridgforth gave out a few copies of Welcome to the Table and said WHRO had done a live broadcast from the BIC about the Do Drop.
- Johnson said he'd just finished with the Hospital Ball and that Clamboree was coming up that weekend. Then he'd be in planning for the oyster roast.
- Gordy said she started volunteering for tourism in the 70s and then went on the board in 1988 and served eight years as chairman. They had been with the chamber before and there had been lots of up and downs and she'd like to see this one get settled once and for all and they just didn't know what to do. They were at a point where they had to wait and see what Accomack County was going to do before they could move forward.
- Potts said when he joined the commission he was told it was a working commission and he found out it was. The commissioners have not looked at their own individual needs above a regional approach and building more than just a meal or a stay but an experience across a region. Now that we have a younger generation that wants that experience a big part of our success is that that's who we've been all our lives. If others want tourism to be better promoted they need to come to the table and discuss it. But it's unclear how to achieve something better than being the fastest or second fastest growing region for three of the last four years. Things will continue, and he appreciates Kerry's efforts in the digital world and he appreciates the partners and he can't imagine what could be better. He also announced Christmas by the Sea rack cards were out.

12. Adjournment

- Gordy made a motion that they go into closed session for personnel matters at 3:55 p.m. At 5:30 p.m. Bridgforth made a motion to exit closed session and Addison seconded. The board voted unanimously in open session to increase Burns' pay and maintain Sally Richardson's.

These minutes have been approved by:



Steve Potts, Chairman



Date