**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission**

**Meeting Minutes**

**October 16, 2019 at 12 p.m.**

**19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23410**

Commissioners in Attendance Staff Present

John Coker, Northampton County Supervisor Robie Marsh, Executive Director

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Supervisor, Vice-Chair Christy Betz, Assistant ED

Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce Susannah Morey, Marketing Director

Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council -by phone Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant

Adam James, Accomack County Appointee

Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee Guest Present

Laura Dodson, Northampton County Chamber

Ex-Officio Non-Voting Member-Absence Cherron Davis, NC Welcome Center

Staci Martin Barb Johnson, Onancock Main Street

Karin Rush-Monroe, Onancock Main Street

Curt Smith, A-NPDC

Shannon Alexander, A-NPDC

1.Call to Order

* Coker called meeting to order at 12:07 p.m.
* First item is to approve the FY 20 Budget that was put together by Marsh and the Finance Committee. Marsh explained the biggest change to budget was the increase in advertising. In previous years the advertising budget was set at $20k we have increased the advertising budget to 49K to reflect the marketing initiatives we have planned. Coker explained Tourism received an increase in funding from Accomack County.
* At 12:08 MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the FY 20 Tourism Budget, second by Tarr and passed unanimously.

2. Public Participation

* Dodson wanted to thank everyone that came out to the Ag Fair which was a big success. The attendance was over 800 which was slightly down from last year but with 3 to 4 other events happening the same day the turnout great. The volunteers commented that the feedback was very positive, and several families traveled from Maryland to attend. Dodson also wanted to remind everyone about the Christmas Home Tour on December 7th at Bay Creek. There are 6 homes committed each with a different holiday theme. The tour begins at the Beach Club with a Holiday pop-up event of 7 vendors. We will be serving mimosa & snacks the cost will be $25 per person kids under 12 are free. We will have advance registration through Event Brite and next month I will have rack cards available to promote the event.
* Smith shared a decision made by Accomack and Northampton County Economic Development Committee to undertake a new annual process to identify economic strategies for new markets of local products, recreation and other general economic matters. A-NPDC sees the Tourism Commission needing to have a seat at the table during this planning process. The kick-off of the Downtown Parksley revitalization project has happened. The Commission was solicitated by other towns who were interested in being a part of a revitalization planning grant, Onley was selected to be the next in line to apply for grant.
* Coker asked how the Tourism Commission could get involved with the Economic Development Plan. Smith explained that in 2020 when the development of the marketing strategies begins would be the ideal time to sit at the table with A-NPDC. There is going to be a handpicked group of marketing experts on the Shore to investigate various marketing strategies for local products. This would be an opportunity for Tourism to be represented and play a role from the onset of what we are trying to create here on the Shore.
* Alexander announced that A-NPDC is continuing to develop programs for virginiawatertrails.org website. Next year they will be signing a contract with, Consociate Media & Marketing, they will be designing a 36-month marketing strategy for the Virginia Water Trails. There will be targetable deliverables for each of the three regions independently as well as messaging for the overall branding which is focusing on rural Virginia Water Trails. Alexander’s hopes are that while ESVA Tourism is working on the marketing strategy there will be complete transparency so that both marketing strategies build on each other. Also, Department of Conservation and Recreation will be here on November 14, at 10 am at VIMS. Robby Roe will be here for our annual update to look at our Virginia Outdoor Plan.
* Rush-Monroe shared that this is the 20th anniversary of the Onancock Christmas House Tour. They are planning 20 events around the 20-year anniversary. The home tour will be Saturday December 14th and the kick-off event will be the Onancock Christmas tree lighting on Friday, November 22nd. They plan on special events mostly on Fridays to be held for 5 Fridays during the holidays.
* Davis reported that visitation is up over a 1,000 over last year in October. Davis also recommended, regarding Onancock holiday events, to sending a weekly list of events to the Welcome Center so travelers can be made aware of what is going on during the holidays in Onancock which is a good supplement to the Onancock Holiday rack card.

3. Consent Agenda

* At 12:21 Tarr made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

4. Status of New Initiatives in 2019

* **New Website**

Marsh reported that the tourism website has a new page added for 50 days to Explore the Shore. We have signed up with Otto for ongoing maintenance and updates. Marsh feels good about the future of the website.

* Coker asked if we have investigated linking with other websites? Have we done everything we said we were going to do on the website?
* Morey answered we do link to other websites if our business listing also has a website link, we link to it. All our materials have links to other websites, 50 days to explore links to our partners websites and to websites that sell tickets to events. We are trying to be the hub, but we do need more business partners to be listed on our website.
* Coker commented that we want to be proactive. We need to be the ones that reach out to the community. Our answer shouldn’t be, “business did not contact us, so they aren’t on the website”.
* Holloway asked what is our next plan of outreach? Main Street Cape Charles has a business listing with all the businesses plus the new businesses from this year and last year that you may not have reached out to yet.
* Morey answered, “Now that 50 days to Explore the Shore has been launched we have time to revisit businesses that have not gotten onto our website whom haven’t responded to our outreach and also reach out to those that we believe should be on our website and are not”.
* Shotwell commented that Chincoteague has a business listing on their website that Morey could go by to make sure tourism hasn’t missed business.
* Holloway added the importance for a business to list their events onto VTC website which then automatically lists to our VISITESVA website, there are so many events goings on things can be missed if they aren’t listed on our website.
* Marsh commented that we need to make a standard check list of instructions to be given to new businesses which includes how to list on to VTC website. Also, to contact Main Street programs along with towns to hand out a packet with instructions for businesses that would benefit from these listings on our website and explain the importance of listing with Virginia.org.
* Smith reported that it will be mandated in the revitalization initiative program in Parksley and if Onley is successful with their grant that businesses will be required to apply to become Main Street affiliates, which will be another opportunity to reach those business list.
* **50 Days to Explore the Shore**

Morey announced everything was on schedule for an October 1st kick-off for 50 days to Explore the Shore. There were 2 events last weekend and 3 events this weekend. We hired Rachel Stevens from Bayside Photography to be our photographer this year. Rachel will be at the Exmore Auto Show and Swine and Wine this weekend and Jim Baugh our videographer will be filming at Meet at the Table. I have various businesses and events for both to concentrate on. Rachel will be focusing on nature shots along with the Saxis Island Museum and the Railway Museum. Tourism has 2 paid advertisements running right now, another coming up next week, a press release was sent out 2 weeks ago about the 50 Days to Explore the Shore, Morey has been using Instagram stories to show how easy it is to do this event.

* **2020 Visitor Guide**

Betz stated that the Visitor Guide ad sales are going well we have a little over $44K in paid advertisements. Betz is in discussion with the town of Onancock and Parksley to sell each town a full page of ads shared by different businesses. This has pushed the Visitor Guide deadline back a bit Betz hopes to get the new Visitor Guide on doorsteps by mid-January. We do plan on changing the content around we are in discussion with Shirley Deeds on that.

* Coker asked if by our next meeting a small presentation can be given on the plans for the changes to the Visitor Guide. Betz’s responded she will try her best to make that happen.
* Holloway inquired how will the event section be handled differently. Betz stated she is working to get as many dates nailed down so that the event section can be full. Betz plan for the Visitor Guide is to have the first edits to begin the first week of December and ready to go to print the end of December.

Betz announced if anyone has an idea for content and pictures please send them to her. Marsh announced that our new budget has a camera slated for Morey to purchase. Morey will have the opportunity to be taking high quality pictures and video’s for data for our tourism library along with the film we will be collecting from the professions we have hired.

* **New Billboards on Route 13**

Marsh shared a visual picture of the proposed billboard with the Commission. We would like to have 3 billboards, one on the Lower Shore, another on the Middle Shore and one on the Upper Shore which is the photo that is being shown. The Upper Shore billboard is located southbound outside of New Church. Marsh continued that this billboard is trying to hit the market of the travelers that are heading south to the Outer Banks and other southern beach locations. The New Church billboard has a scene of an oceanfront beach with sandcastles and scrip saying “Still Driving you could be here in 5 minutes” with #off13 printed, our website address and You’ll Love our Nature logo also on billboard. The Commission suggestion was to make wording darker/bolder so that it is easy to read and add “Virginia is for Beach Lovers” logo.

* **Social Media/Website /Analytics**

Morey reported analytics are about the same as last month. A press release is planned to announce ESVA Tourism website; other promotions of the new website will be through billboards, newsletters and continuous posts on Facebook and Instagram. Marsh added we are planning on press releases to be sent out of state where most of our travelers come from

* Holloway suggested in February and March to purchase google ad words, have Facebook ads that are driving viewers to the website. Morey stated we will be specifically targeting ads in states that are around us most of our visitors are coming from in the northeast.
* Shotwell asked if we have any money in the budget for SEO and do we plan on having anyone hosting our site? Chincoteague uses Inter Coastal Net Design (ICNC) for their work. Shotwell has seen tremendous results with Chincoteague’s analytics since ICNC has been hired. After Chincoteague website was redone, supposedly the SEO work was to have been improved, but that was not the case with our web site. After hiring ICNC they redid our pages to make them search engine friendly we also went with ICNC to do all our google ads. ICNC bids on words for us they know what they are doing. ICNC has also done google ads for us and our fall has been fantastic, and our numbers are way up on our website.
* Smith inquired if we have a way of tracking the popularity of our hash tags and their effectiveness. Morey responded that how frequently the tags are being used is our indicator. Tide and Thyme used #off13 in 2016 and Morey hopes that we can build upon that tag because it has a base of followers. Smith asked which hash tags right now are most popular on the Shore. Morey answered the most popular is #visitesva, but also the Virginia hash tags through VTC. Shotwell shared that it can be measured by pull up the post and you can see how often it is used.

5. Matters by Commissioners

* Tarr announced that Chincoteague motels are still booming, and people are still out and about in town. The fall pony-round up is this weekend which is becoming very popular.
* MacGarvey announced the Exmore Car Show is this weekend, the following weekend is the CBES Bike Tour with 1100 bikers on the Shore. The Shakespeare in the park attendance numbers where down from last year. The thought is the play wasn’t as well-known as other plays. Exmore is committed to hosting another Shakespeare play next year. Exmore’s future goal is to work towards being known as the home of New Ravenna Artist Festival.
* Shotwell shared that Chincoteague had a successful Oyster Festival with 3,000 people attending and over 300 volunteers helping run the event. It was a beautiful calm day, but they had flooding in several areas because of the hurricane that was offshore. The next weekend the fire house has their open house at noon. On November 30th they have a Holiday Market and Waterfowl Show and on December 7th, the Holiday Home Show and Christmas Parade will be held.
* James announced that the Croaker Classic fishing tournament was held in Onancock and was a success, drawing 350 people from local and out of state. James is encouraged that the town is interested in hosting more events in the future. The Harbor Challenge, another event held in Onancock was not as successful as they had hoped. It was the same day as the Hospital Ball, which could have affected the numbers. The Hospital Ball continues to grow and has become very well attended. OBCA is having the Holiday home tour December 14, 1pm-5pm. It is a great event for locals and visitors to the area. The following day at 5 pm is the Christmas parade. James believes it is important to bridge the gap between Cape Charles and Chincoteague and sees the potential for Onancock to become a corridor between the two cities. Onancock Main Street is in the process of hiring a Project Manager.
* Shotwell asked if the Tourism Commission could help with a creative way to launch a campaign to promote shopping locally throughout the Shore this season. A slogan was suggested, “You can’t buy what we have on Amazon - Shop Local”. A couple of videos showing artisans making their product, feature shops that create their own designs and gifts.
* Holloway mentioned that each community designates a day that it promotes shopping local. If tourism could promote a unified campaign promoting shopping locally the whole holiday season it would be a great opportunity including videos from each community with a statement you can’t get it on Amazon. Morey mentioned that all the shops will be open at Historic Onancock’s event, Champagne and Oyster Tasting, Rachel our photographer will be there taking photos we could make a slide show from different events. Morey is partnering with the Artisan Guild for the next newsletter. Also, Morey is working on an Antiquing blog and wanting to have a rack card to go along with the trail. Morey is eager to have all these ideas including Festive Fridays be a part of what we are promoting during the Holiday shopping season if some photos come in late, we will have them for next year. Shotwell added that the holiday market in Chincoteague which is late in the season can all be put into a slide show and used for next year and a few years out too.
* Marsh mentioned that WESR last year did a Chamber Chat where Marsh invited towns and businesses from up and down the Shore to discuss shopping local and the great shopping experiences that are available here on the Shore. The Chamber will be doing this again to promote local shopping.
* Holloway added that this would be a great press release and story about what is going on right here on the Shore.
* Holloway shared that Cape Charles Festive Fridays begin November 29th and ends December 20th. New this year, with Northampton County Infrastructure Grant money Cape Charles received, they are promoting the four Festive Fridays as Festive Weekends. Cape Charles has planned enough events into each weekend to encourage weekend stays. Festive Weekend Event Guides will be ready at the end of October and will be distributed. Cape Charles Main Street is getting ready to apply for its full designation. They will not hear until FY 2021. Main Street initiatives are a big deal, as once you are designated you are then promoted throughout the state, as well as more grants become available to you. The millionth visitor is staying at Bay Haven Inn. We hope to have a lot of press promoting their stay. Holloway would like to suggest to the Commission to add another member to our board, someone representing the creative artisans we have. Coker felt that a version of this would be a great idea. He said that we want to be transparent and inclusive with this body of directors. Holloway has a meeting with her group to begin the process on designing the LOVE sign that will be in front of the ESVA Chamber, which could include the grant process to pay for the sign.
* Smith announce Tangier has agreed to be a part of a television series about island life on Tangier. It has been approved by producers and is now being shopped around to find a network to carry the program which will run for several episodes. Smith encourages tourism to participate in the promotion of this opportunity. The Commission was enthusiastic about the focus it would be bring to our area, but equally concerned that Tangier be represented with integrity of their lifestyle.

6. Upcoming Dates

* November Board Meeting – Wednesday, November 20, 2019 at 12p.m.

7. Adjournment

* 1:31 p.m. James made a motion to adjourn, MacGarvey seconded, and the meeting was adjourned.
* 1:46 Strategic Planning Session began

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairman Date