

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
April 15, 2020 at 12 p.m.  
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**



*\*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic concerns, this Board Meeting was held via a publicly advertised Zoom Call to avoid exposure to the virus.*

Commissioners in Attendance

**All by conference call:**

John Coker, Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair  
Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Supervisor Co. Vice-Chair  
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C-  
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee  
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council

Staff Present

Robie Marsh, Executive Director  
Christy Betz, Assistant Executive Director  
Susannah Morey, Marketing Director  
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Staci Martin, VTC Rep.

Guest Present

Karyn Belknap, Ten Good Sheep  
Janet Fosque, Onancock Main Street  
Jessica Steelman, A-NPDC

Commissioners in Absence

Adam James, Accomack County Appointee

1. Call to Order

- Coker called meeting to order at 12:04 p.m.

2. Public Comments

- Karyn Belknap of 10 Good Sheep informed BOC that this year's Artisan Guild Eastern Shore of Virginia Holiday Tour would not be held, but they are considering making it virtual with online sales. The holiday tour will resume in 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic concerns were the reason for postponing until fall of 2021. Barrier Island Center has canceled Art & Music on the Farm for 2020.
- Jessica Steelman from A-NPDC reported on the efforts of the Working Waterfronts. A press release is in the works with partnerships from the Middle Peninsula PDC, Northern Neck PDC, Virginia Oyster Trail, Consociate Media marketing firm and Martin from VTC. The press release is intended to help promote aquaculture and local watermen to stimulate the movement of buying local. When the project is ready for release Steelman will provide links. Marsh commented please do supply us with the press release and the links once they are available.

3. Consent Agenda

- Coker asked to have the March financials pulled from the Consent Agenda to be discussed after the other items are voted on.
- At 12:12 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed Unanimously.

4. Items Removed from Consent Agenda

- Coker had questions on the Budget Performance page of financials. The "revenue -rack-card space single space", revenue is down \$10K? Marsh responded the invoices are to go out in May and June, this is a timing issue. Coker inquired about "funding partner revenue" YTD is also

down? Marsh answered this is a timing issue we received Accomack County funding this week. We are expecting Northampton County funding before the end of Q4. Coker asked about "marketing – advertising", ESVA TC is under budget by 20K. Marsh responded that we are waiting to come out of the Covid-19 stay at home order, if that happens after the close of Q4 Marsh would recommend those unused funds to be added into FY21 advertising budget, which will be greatly needed, Coker agreed. Coker inquired about "expenses-marketing", is printing of visitor guide over budget by \$5K? Marsh answered yes that is correct. Coker inquired about "operations and maintenance - accounting services" are under budget by thousands. Marsh responded the audit invoice for close of FY2019 has not arrived yet, again a timing issue. Coker asked Betz why the Welcome Center- "salaries and wages" are \$25K below budget. Betz's informed Coker that in November, December, January, and February the staffing needs were adjusted because of change in winter visitation. In the winter months Betz only has one paid staff member working from 8:30 am - 4:30 pm, one volunteer coming in during the busy shift 10 am – 2pm. Betz also is at the Welcome Center a couple of days a week to help. During the summer those extra paid staffing hours will be needed.

#### 5. COVID-19 & ESVA Tourism Industry

- **What are we doing now?**

1. Partner Tools/Resources Online

- VISITESVA website has a tourism partner page with updates of business hours of operations & specials.
- Industry Page has links for online resources for industry partners, we regularly send out eblast to them on information.
- Betz has been doing a great job of sending out eblast informing tourism partners of webinars that are available and updates from SBA on PPP and EIDL loans.
- Susannah has been collecting recordings, photos and blogs all in preparation for when the timing is right for promoting the ESVA.
- Martin, Betz, Susannah and Marsh have been on phone conferences getting resources together for us to put together a webinar for our tourism partners. This is in the works and an ongoing process.

2. Promotion/Social Media

- Morey has been working on 8 weeks of videos which will come out each Friday. The short video series features beautiful relaxing visuals of the Eastern Shore of Virginia highlighting activities that you can do while social distancing. Included in the series is an art video of Nikki Toms creating a watercolor painting. Instagram is scheduled out all month with two main feed post a week and posting Instagram stories every day. Facebook has fallen back this month while looking for appropriate content to post, the videos that have been created will be shared on YouTube and Facebook. Morey is working with tourism partners on blogs and trying to gauge what topics are appropriate during "stay at home". Historical topics may be the route to go. During "stay at home", projected topics for this time period have changed.
- Marsh stated that he had sent to the board a draft version of the living-breathing document of the post COVID-19 marketing proposal which Morey put together. Marsh would like the board to take some time to look it over.
- Coker asked if ESVA TC could put together a pro forma and give recommendations to the vision of the marketing plan including cost and type of

each promotion that is appropriate to our needs. BOC will then go over the proposed post COVID-19 marketing plan.

- Marsh stated that a final page will be added to the document which will be a chart version showing publication, timing, and pricing keeping in mind that some proposals may not occur until the next fiscal year depending on “stay at home” decisions for the state. ESVA TC marketing recommendations will be highlighted for BOC. Marsh added, yesterday he was part of a discussion group with Cape Charles partners. The discussion revolved around preparing for “yellow light” reopening, what that looked like for the town, and what precautions needed to take place. The feeling of the consensus was that the ESVA will be a prime destination because we are rural and within driving distance of many major cities. The feeling was that travelers are not going to want to get on planes nor go to crowded places.
- Coker added that Martin stated that 65% people surveyed said they would not be going to crowded destinations nor fly on airplanes.
- Marsh added he is going to put together a survey for all our industry partners asking for input on what publications are their preface and timing when they are comfortable reopening.
- Holloway asked for a webinar to go out first to our industry partners so that they are aware of the steps needed to be in place for their businesses to have social distancing standards for customers and employees.
- Marsh stated he will explore that idea.

- **Resource Planning Webinar**

Martin stated the survey, which has been referred to by Coker, mentions that small rural communities are the preferred destination of travelers. Public safety and crowd control will be import for these small communities. The system of Red light, yellow light, and green light will be the system that will be in place. Most likely we will be shuffling back and forth between all three phases for the next 12 to 18 months. Red light means closed, yellow light means open but social distancing standards are in place, green light all systems are go. Webinars teaching these three concepts and what’s involved will be necessary. Before we send out a survey to our industry partners asking for input on marketing, we need the webinar first. Documents for our community leaders to look at are being created that explain red light, yellow light, green light procedures. Leadership will then send these documents to their business communities. VTC has a Coronavirus Tool Kit online with fonts for the marketing campaign “We will be waiting for you”. Also, included in the tool kit is a how to guide to advocate for tourism budget preservation and storytelling to community leaders to achieve this. We want to help folks understand how to conserve tourism budgets. Rita has made a request for additional funds for small business and DMO’s. She did not know what that would look like until after the April 22<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly meets and votes on the budget.

- **Tourism Commission Strategic Planning**

Martin stated in terms of the strategic planning update large institutions like ODU have scrapped their 5-year strategic plan. She asked if the ESVA Tourism Commission wanted to start over with developing a new plan? She asked “Do we take time to reach out to and consider sentiments from consumers, residents and businesses and design good surveys to figure out what the next steps are?” She stated that working on a strategic plan for the next

5 years is hard at this time when we don't know what the next 3 days will bring. Martin suggested to revisit the strategic planning in the next 30 days. We must adapt to our new reality with the coronavirus, we can still hustle but in a new way.

- Holloway voiced concerns on what our new reality is going to be when things open. This team is one of the leadership teams to help other businesses create a pathway to what our new normal is going to look like. It is scary to think if we do have the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in Cape Charles. She wondered what that would look like with lots of people. We want those types of crowds, but we can't handle it as other responsible businesses have expressed to me. SBA help is needed as businesses are now working on a smaller scale for health safety reasons but still have the same overhead costs.
- Shotwell expressed concerns over all the events that have been canceled in Chincoteague. There is no cash flow for marketing with these canceled events. Shotwell is the only employee now at Chincoteague Chamber. Shotwell has applied for every funding opportunity that is out there with no luck in receiving funding. The upcoming Oyster Festival held in the fall is an event that we must have, but I'm scared how do we handle 3,000 people and be safe and profitable. I hope we can have it. Martin stated that Shotwell needs to contact her insurance agent about holding a large event. The motion picture industry is not in production right now in the state of Virginia. Insurance coverage has huge ramifications. Martin will bring these issues up in her meeting tomorrow with the Economic Task Force and the Deputy of Commerce for the state of Virginia.
- Martin stated the reason the state gets involved in tourism by locality is for the tax revenue. Greater tax revenue brings more services to residents in improved school funding, more infrastructure services etc. The state wants a full recovery to the level that even more tax dollars are realized when this is over. Businesses must adapt to the new reality. Martin stated she is here for to help us all get through it and rebound.

## 6. Status of New Initiative

### • **New Tourism Video Edits/Estimates**

Marsh asked for final feedback on cost estimate for the three different options for the tourism video edits. Coker stated that estimate A and B should have been included in original contract. A review of the video without edits from us the customer is not acceptable nor is its normal practice. Marsh, Holloway, and other Commissioners agreed that at least one round of edits should have been included in the contract. Marsh will contact Baugh to convey this message.

### • **Social Media/Website Analytics**

Morey stated that Instagram is up across the board. Facebook was down due to everything that was scheduled to go up during March had to be taken down because of COVID-19 pandemic. The content was no longer appropriate in promoting events that no longer were happening. Morey continues to use Facebook. The messaging on Facebook has changed to remind travelers that we are here with beautiful scenic views.

- Coker replied, that is exactly what we want to do. Once we get a yellow light, we want folks to think about coming here. Tourism partners with the help of ESVA TC can pull it together and create safe working standards for our travelers. That is the work that is ahead of us all.
- Holloway shared from a lodging perspective she is encouraging people to buy now and stay later. Holloway is selling stays at her B&B with no set date. If you purchase a \$500

gift card you also receive a couple of \$10 gift cards from retail shops in Cape Charles at no charge.

- o Martin suggested to Morey a promotion of, "Buy yourself a prepaid vacation with an open stay date" is a good campaign idea.

#### 7. Matters by Commissioners

- Tarr commented on Shotwell's concerns over 3,000 people attending the Oyster Festival. In July we are looking at 50,000 people coming for a week for Pony Penning. As of today, everything is on, but it looks dimmer and dimmer every day. The fire Department as it stands is in good shape for 1 year. Regardless if we have Pony Penning or not the ponies must be sold. No one wants to purchase a grown horse. Insurance will also play a part in what we do going forward.
- Shotwell shared that Chincoteague Chamber has been posting, "We'll be waiting you". Immediately after Shotwell put up that post a comment on Facebook popped up that folks were planning to come that weekend. Now Shotwell adds to the post, "When travel restrictions are lifted". Travel will resume when things are better. We are a destination people look forward to going too.
- Holloway stated that TOT funding is an issue. Cape Charles Main Street had to give back TOT funding as it did not come in as expected. Cape Charles Main Street did preserve funds for marketing from the TOT tax they received. ESVA Tourism Commission needs to have advocates in Coker and Tarr with the County budgets staying in place for tourism. The last thing that needs to happen is to lose our marketing arm. When restrictions are lifted, we need to market and get that business back that was lost during the pandemic.
- Coker stated that Northampton is re-working 2021 fiscal year budget now. The projection for 2021 TOT tax is not looking good and may affect how tourism is funded. This is the same for Accomack County.
- Holloway stressed that the BOC needs to be prepared in how we communicate to the Board of Supervisors that TOT tax will never get built up again if we don't fund our marketing arm, ESVA Tourism Commission needs to be funded and not cut at this time.
- Coker stated that he understands how important funding the Tourism Commission is and believes in it too. This is a once in a lifetime event that we all are going through that is what a rainy-day fund is for. He also suggested since so many people are on email now this would be a good time to create a super email list for the Tourism Commission or a greater newsletter list.
- Marsh commented that the virtual cocktail hour on Facebook was stated here on the Eastern Shore by Bill Hall. There are now 20k followers around the country. This is another marketing tool to promote the Shore with beautiful scenic shots of drinks on porches and backdrops of outdoor scenes and tag our partners in these posts. MacGarvey added there are folks overseas too that participate.

#### 8. Adjournment

- At 1:23 p.m. MacGarvey made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

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John Coker, Chairman

  
Date 8/13/2020