

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
July 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

Jessica Steelman, A-NPDC

Commissioners in Absence

Adam James, Accomack County Appointee

1. Call to Order

- At 12:09 p.m. Coker called meeting to order

2. Public Comments

- No public comments

3. Consent Agenda

- Marsh explained that the June financials are not final. This is a preliminary look at the close of FY20. Right now, we have roughly \$4k to \$5k that has to run through to close out the year.
 - Coker complimented Marsh on a job well done with the financials during these difficult times.
- At 12:11 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Martin announced that 3 WonderLove grants were awarded on the ESVA. A video by influencers hired by VTC will be made public on Friday. The group was a family of 4 wearing mask and social distancing while visiting sights of the Shore. In Virginia Beach 3 restaurants lost their liquor license by not following state guidelines. In response VTC is working on a one-page document about crisis communication. Martin shared that travel data shows 60% of people do not want tourist in their town. VTC's is working on messaging to encourage local communities to travel locally and regionally and let it be known that VTC is not marketing outside the state. Martin has a meeting tomorrow with Secretary of Commerce and Trade, Brain Ball, who is working on putting together a small business grant program. VTC will help promote the program which will be open to more than just the tourism industry. More than likely these grants will be small \$5-\$10K to help cover the gaps during the pandemic. The application process will most likely begin by August

3rd. The next round of marketing leverage grants will be the usual combination of private business, non-profits & DMO's. The grant amount will be capped at \$20K the full details of the grant are not in. It will be a quick turn-around time with a simplified grant application roll out in mid-August. This marketing grant will connect with the *Share the Love* campaign. Martin also has a call with the Federal EDA at 12:45 today. VTC is working on applying for Federal funding so that the marketing leverage grant program can continue into 2021. The state is watching the Covid-19 numbers closely. It could be possible that Virginia Beach and Norfolk drop back to phase II if there is a major swing up in the virus spreading in those locations.

5. Status of New Initiatives

- **Gateway Welcome Center Re-Opening**

Betz stated the number count of visitors is low compared to the same time last year at the Welcome Center but that is to be expected. Good news the number count has been increasing the past two weeks. The staff continues to be comfortable with the set-up we have right now with not letting the travelers come into the Welcome Center space and staff retrieve the brochures for the tourist. When the staff is comfortable, in the future, we will go back to allowing tourist to enter the Welcome Center but only while wearing masks and hand sanitizing first. We are not there yet.

Coker commented to do what is right and stay safe. Whatever the numbers are that does not matter.

Betz added that while on Chincoteague she visited Sundial bookstore. The customers are also required to wear gloves when they come in because of touching the books. Betz is considering, when revisiting policy for safety August 1st, if they do allow travelers inside possibility having everyone use inexpensive plastic gloves. The sneeze guards could be moved to the counter tops so that the staff is protected.

- Holloway reminded Betz to keep track of all Covid expenses. The CARES Act money in the future may be used for reimbursement of Covid operational expenses.

- **Travel Writer/Social Influencer Visits**

Betz spoke about the article by Peggy Sijswerda of *Tidewater Women*. The article was well done, and the tourism partners are very pleased with it. The article is in the link below.

<https://www.tidewaterwomen.com/travel/virginia/cape-charles-getaway?fbclid=IwAR1c9koEwNqrPSIGGXND6LFc6ZE3oR4BE6ilWZypliyHvWfxQ8V8NXUaS8o>

Betz continued *On Better Living* wrote an article on Chincoteague and Cape Charles last year. The combination of those two articles were shared 100k times. Morey and Betz are in talks with the same couple to do a story on Onancock soon.

- **New Tourism Video Promotion**

Marsh reported there was one review that posted on social media expressing personal disappointment in the lack of diversity represented in the tourism video. As a Commission we acknowledged the lack of diversity during the editing process and we did try to correct it. The video was produced during the fall shoulder season and represented actual tourists visiting the area at that time and were not staged with models. The video also represented the attendance at events held during the 50 days to Explore the Shore, per part of the grant funding guidelines. The shorter themed videos that will be produced in the future will have better representation of diversity. The 2020 Visitor Guide does represent more diverse groups of people and ages. The ESVA Tourism Commission does have a very extensive photo library of different age groups and diversity gatherings to choose from. Marsh continued

overall there has been positive feedback on the video. Coker agreed it was all positive comments that were expressed to him.

- Morey reported the stats on the video. Facebook had 14.4K views as of right now. 10K views happened in the first 24 hours after the video was launched. YouTube had 1.5k views as of today. The video has had great exposure and is doing well.

- **Tasley Billboard Design**

Marsh shared the new version of the billboard. The logos have been added which was always the intent but not seen in the first version. The Z pattern of reading the billboard has been accomplished. Marsh explained that it is a tool used by marketing and advertising firms. The visual of the background picture attracts you first. Your eye is taken to the upper left side of the billboard with the red script, *Still driving?* Black script *Be here in 5 minutes!* Your eye takes you to the right across the billboard to #OFF13. Your eye then darts across to the left where you read, *visitESVA.com* and you see a soft-shell crab sandwich. The website color has been enhanced for ESVA to stand out more. Marsh continued in time the New Church billboard needs to be redone. Using similar colors would be a tie in with the Tasley billboard and create consistency in messaging. If a better location for the northern southbound billboard could be found that would also be a plus. The New Church billboard does not have a good line of vision while driving by.

- At 12:32 p.m. by consensus the BOC approved the new billboard design for the Tasley location.

- **VTC DMO Grant: WanderLove**

Marsh informed the Commission that the WonderLove grant application was submitted on time thanks to a team effort. An announcement by VTC should be coming soon on the awardees to the WonderLove Grant.

- **Local's Choice Contest-update**

Morey stated that as of today there have been 700 responses to the Local Choice Contest with a 100% completion rate. Morey is pleased with the results so far. Some comments from locals were that they did not see their favorites listed. Morey explained that for the first year we used our tourism partners businesses but did include a line for write-ins. Marsh added that we also included any business that is listed on our website as an entry for the contest.

- **Draft FY21 Advertising Plan**

Marsh shared the screen with the advertising document for all to view. Morey presented the plan for the FY20-21.

- **Print advertising**

- A 1/6-page ad in *Virginia is for Lovers* travel guide. This will be used on our WonderLove grant in-kind requirement \$4,500.
- *Creation of 6 themed trails on the ESVA:* Rack cards, videos, and blogs to encourage outdoor activities.
 - 1) Bike and Hike: Breath of Fresh Air Trail.
 - 2) Outdoor Education: Love and Learning Trail.
 - 3) Lovin' on the Water Trail.
 - 4) Sun and Sand Trail.
 - 5) Love on the Coastline Trail.
 - 6) Fresh from the Water Seafood Trail.

Currently we have a budget of \$500 if the commission is awarded the WonderLove grant that will change the allotted dollars, some of these costs are in the grant budget.

- *Virginian Pilot insert:* ESVA Tourism travel guide will be inserted into a Sunday August edition. This will capitalize on the late summer early fall season at a cost of \$3,780.
- **Digital Advertising**
 - *Business Leisure Media Programmatic Advertising:* In conjunction with VTC this group takes our tourism ad and turns it into 3 different sizes and promotes the ad on a variety of creditable sites like Travel, CNN, Food network. There were over 724k impressions with 900 users clicking on these ads in May of 2020. May of 2021 this promotion will be done again at a cost of \$2,450.
 - *Facebook Ad Campaign:* Targeting 24-65 age group which will be tweaked as we see results. This targeted group enjoys a variety of outdoor activities and craft beverages etc. Each month the design and copy will change. Targeting VA, MD, DE, and NC. Yearly cost of \$2,124. This type of ad can be stopped or changed as things change.
 - *Google Ads:* New promotional ads will be created which have the same flexibility as the Facebook ads. The cost per month \$150.
- **Bonus Advertising**
 - *New Church Welcome Center display tower:* Revamping the display unit with themed months. This display unit will be an in-kind advertising for the WonderLove grant at \$3k a year
Holloway inquired if a QR code on the display could be added that would take the visitor to VISITESVA.COM when used. Having the ability to measure the effectiveness of this spotlight advertisement is important. Morey responded that the QR code would be easy to initiate. Marsh committed that it would be worth paying a fee so that ESVA TC could track the results of the QR code usage.
- **Billboards**
 - *New Church billboard:* Cost per year \$4,200. If we do a reprint of the skin, which is what ESVA TC is interested in doing, it would be a cost of \$1,511. If possible, a new location would be preferred.
 - *Tasley billboard:* Cost per year \$5,100 with the same print cost for the skin is in the budget.
- **Video**
 - *Short video series:* Six themed videos 30 seconds each. The anticipated cost is in the WonderLove grant application budget. These videos will be used in social media promotions. The comments about the earlier video created during the fall of 2019 will be addressed in these new series of videos.
- **Radio**
 - *One Tank Trips:* Airtime to encourage people from the Hampton Roads area to visit the Eastern Shore. The airtime is schedule for the week of August 24th. The contract contains verbiage that is very flexible because of the Covid-19 virus. There is an option to push out to 2021 if necessary. This promotion stresses Virginians to travel and see the sites of Virginia.

- **Travel Writers**

- *On Better Living*: Betz and Morey are working on scheduling a return trip to the Eastern Shore for Eric Weiss and Heather La Corte to visit Onancock for a weekend. A \$2,000 budgeted has been set for them to return. ESVA tourism partners have been hard hit with the virus shut down. Having a budget to cover lodging and meals will help when it is not possible for partners to cover cost and expenses for travel writers. If writers are not available in July these funds would be used for a later arrival date.

Coker asked how are the travel writer contacts made?

Betz explained that in September or October of 2019 she attended a media lunch hosted by VTC where many contacts were made. There are also travel writers that reach out to us as *On Better Living* did. Marsh stated ESVA TC has a distribution list of media outlets and travel writers that is utilized. ESVA marketing game plan is to send short themed videos to attract travel writers and influencers to come to ESVA and write stories. MacGarvey added that journalist expect to be pitched to and are always looking for content. Staying in touch with writers and nurturing these relationships is important. MacGarvey continued outdoor travel experiences have never been more popular then it is right now. In fact, it is the new gym for a lot of people and the fastest growing market in travel. The ESVA has tons to offer in different outdoor offerings and experiences. Cultivating the relationship that ESVA Tourism has with travel writers is important. Betz added that she has become aware of an organization that in the future she would like to join. Mid Atlantic Tourism Public Relations Alliance, matpra.org.

- **Total Advertising Budget Cost**

- Morey concluded the total budget for marketing is \$32,566 with \$700 left in the budget for wiggle room. This total does not include the \$10k for the WonderLove grant if it is awarded to ESVA Tourism Commission. Marsh asked if there are any comments or suggestions on the planned execution of the 20-21 Marketing Plan.

MacGarvey suggested to have a category for 65+ Facebook demographics that we reach out to. Morey answered that the 65+ range did exist but because of Covid-19 the range was changed. Coker commented his personal experience is to go on more day trips which is a market that should also be addressed for 65+ travelers. Holloway mentioned that 2-day mid-week travel is up especially with folks that have never been to the Shore before and feel safe in smaller communities. Holloway continued all websites should make it clear what our communities are doing for Covid-19 preparedness and our hours of operation. Morey will split the target groups and specialize on a 65+ age group with the suggestions made.

Coker suggested to Marsh that he would like to see a list of all the travel writers that we have had contact with. Travel writers and influencers that we have reached out to, and a list of travel writers that ESVA Tourism wishes to contact because of their reputation and social media following. Creating a list of these types of contacts would be a good way to judge the media reach tourism has. Growing the resource list of

writers along with cultivate relationships with these writers is the goal of ESVA Tourism Commission. Having Martin from VTC look at the list and get her opinion if anyone is missing. Coker requested that every quarter this list should be reviewed.

- **Social Media/Website Analytics**

Morey stated that the google analytics are up 50% in June over January 2020. The Covid-19 shut down did create a huge drop, but we are now on an upward swing. The length of time a viewer is on visitesva.com has also increased. Instagram and impressions have seen the greatest improvement. Earlier in the year 4k images were shared now the number is at 405K shared images. Having businesses and visitors share photos of ESVA is a great asset which is creating these very positive results. The Tourism Commission, in turn, shares these photos which adds to the positive cycle. Regarding the video, Facebook gave us a great reach with video viewing. Although the average length of time watching the video was 12 seconds. ESVA TC believes that the viewer is returning to watch the complete video when the viewer has more time.

- **November Strategic Planning Session**

- Marsh thanked the BOC for participating in the survey to set a time and date to hold the Strategic Planning Session.

Date: November 5, 2020 from 11am to 2pm was selected.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- Shotwell shared that the Chincoteague board will be meeting next week to make the final decision about the Oyster Festival being held or not. The town of Chincoteague is busy, and the beaches are full. She reported that we have lots of visitors including a successful rocket launch this morning. It appears that we have our regular visitors on the Island and you would not know that anything was different other than most people are wearing masks.
- Holloway shared it is surprising the volume of people that are visiting Cape Charles. Holloway added that almost 100% of the businesses in Cape Charles are doing a really good job of adhering to the standards required by the state during these challenging times. The town of Cape Charles held their first event Monday night for the Best of Virginia awards. Cape Charles had 27 winners in the Eastern Virginia region published in the Virginia Living Magazine. The event was attended by 75 attendees with social distancing and mask wearing. The only time people were not wearing a mask was when a picture was taken. Holloway continued, the meals tax and TOT tax most likely will come in stronger the last quarter of the year than anticipated. This potentially could help with Cape Charles contribution to fund tourism. Things are moving along well in Cape Charles including our new bathrooms that have been set-up 2 weeks ago. Marsh asked Holloway if he should contact the town manager of Cape Charles to inquire if ESVA Tourism funding will be reinstated? Holloway added that Marsh touching base in August would be a good idea. Holloway stated she will also let council know how important the Southern Gateway Welcome Center is to businesses in Cape Charles and the tourism marketing initiatives that are going forward. Coker stated that the meals tax revenue is down for Northampton County.
- MacGarvey shared that Exmore continues to be in a wait and see mode. MacGarvey congratulated Cape Charles for the best of categories in Virginia Living Magazine and Chincoteague being awarded Best Coastal Small Town by USA Today newspaper.

- Tarr stated that Chincoteague is as full as it has ever been. Businesses are hoping to break even this year. The pony auction will be online this year, auction site sporthorseauctions.com.
- Coker shared that Northampton County just finished rebuilding the seaside walkway. A \$20K grant from Coast Zone Management was given to Northampton County to rebuild the nature trail using PVC boards. It is a 2-mile walk passing through forest habitat ending at an overlook of the seaside waterway. A parking lot for 8 cars has been installed. The county will keep the grass mowed adding to creating a pleasing experience for people to go birding and or enjoying a walk-in nature.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:22 p.m. Tarr made a motion to adjourn, seconded by MacGarvey, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairman


Date

11/5/2020