

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
June 17, 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

Commissioners in Absence

Adam James, Accomack County Appointee

1. Call to Order

- At 12:07 p.m. Coker called meeting to order

2. Public Comments

- No public comments

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:08 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed Unanimously.
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4. VTC Updates

- Martin announced VTC is under travel restriction until the end of July. There will not be out of state travel until the end of August and no international travel until the end of September. VTC will be hiring photographers and influencers to do road trip stories. The Eastern Shore will be included in content development for these story lines and a photographer may also be included. The Governor will be announcing tomorrow a marketing leverage grant for DMO's only. This grant is \$10K and there will be a no cash match requirement, only an in-kind match. There will be only 50 grants awarded out of 114 official Virginia DMO's. The deadline for the grant will be July 2nd with awards being announce July 15. The \$10K will be given up front just like the 50 Years of Love grant. DMO's will have until June 30, 2021 to spend down the money. The Eastern Shore has 4 official DMO's and if all 4 DMO's receive this grant, a strategy of a full year of promotions could occur like what happened with the 50 Years of Love campaign. VTC is revitalizing the *Wonder Love* campaign for this grant cycle. Specific content graphics and co-ops will need to be used for this grant. *Wonder Love* is the bridge campaign that will be followed by the national campaign, *Share the Love*, in the fall. Martin reported in Mid-August another marketing leverage

grant round will begin, which will be open to everyone, DMO's and attractions. These grants will be capped at \$20K, with no cash match required. This will be an in-kind match also. There will be specific co-op and templates that will need to be used. These awards will be super competitive. Martin continued, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has block grant money. Martin spoke with Cape Charles Main Street about the block grant opportunities and included Marsh in on this information. VTC has put pressure on DHCD to allow communities to apply to DHCD for up to \$500K per locality to support tourism related businesses. Through rent abatement, underwriting other business cost. Martins recommends that counties look at this program along with Chincoteague to get some money into the community. The money will be funneled to DHCD, passed to the counties, then onto the local community, then passed to the local businesses. The locality would have to be able to fiscally manage the money and get it to the businesses. DHCD is requesting a 1-page proposal from the locality requesting block grant funds. The proposal will be reviewed and if a community is selected to move forward, the town will then complete a full application. The locality must be able to manage and be accountable for handling these funds. Martin continued, this afternoon there will be a call with Secretary of Commerce and Trade, Ball. VTC is looking for Federal dollars to apply for.

- Shotwell asked if there is any word on fall events and festivals being able to go forward. Martin reported event planners are still holding off before a decision is made to hold fall events. There is no clear word yet about large group gatherings. Shotwell is concerned with the Oyster Festival held in October on Chincoteague Island. Martin suggested to send an email to Rita McClenny so she can bring it up for guidance with the heads of VTC.

5. Status of New Initiatives

- **Gateway Welcome Center Re-Opening**
 - Betz stated that the re-opening of the Southern Gateway Welcome Center has been great, but it is slow in comparison to last year. There has been a 36% increase in this past weekend compared to the weekend before. CBBT reports traffic had been down 50-75 percent in March and April. Currently the car count is down 20% over last year this time. Betz commented that travelers had been apprehensive about people contact. The travel brochures placed in a bag and handed to travelers has been well received. Welcome Center hours are Thursday – Sunday 9a.m. – 4p.m. Sanitizing is being done regularly masks are required to enter the building. There has been no negative feed-back from travelers. The volunteers will begin to come back in July as each of them are comfortable in doing so.
- **Updated New Tourism Video**
 - Marsh shared the newly updated video with the changes that were requested at the last BOC meeting. The request was to remove one section, at a minimum, and if possible, change out Cape Charles scenes to represent more action shots with people. Marsh was able to find existing video that was done by Jim Baugh. Marsh gave Jim explicit instructions on what to take out and scenes to replace them with. While the scenes requested to be added were indeed added, the scenes that were requested to be removed were not removed. The Tourism Commission was charged an additional \$400 for the 4 hours of edits. The BOC viewed the video and agreed it was much improved. Marsh commented that this is the bigger longer video that will be shown at the Welcome Center and used to attract travel writers and influences to come to the Shore. The shorter themed videos of 30 seconds will be created later and designed to be used for social media.

- **Local's Choice Contest**

- Marsh explained the thought process of the Local's Choice Contest. To have locals go out and spend money locally. At the same time create a best of contest chosen by locals to promote local businesses. Visitors to the Shore love to do and experience what locals love about the Shore, so later on a marketing campaign will highlight the winners and will be designed to promote directly to our visitors from off the Shore. Betz explained this year we chose our tourism partners to be highlighted in each category. In the lineup of each category there is a blank space called *other* for write ins. There would be a plaque and window cling given out to the winners which would also recognize the runner ups. The roll out of the survey should happen within a week.
- Coker suggested to have a rating of the top 3 place holders in each category and possibly add chowder and a few other seafood choices.

- **Tasley Billboard Design**

- Marsh reported that TC has selected a billboard by the Tasley overpass for our next location. With the help of family members of Janet Fosque, who have done design work for national magazines, Marsh presented a visual of the billboard to the BOC for feedback. The contract for the billboard will begin July 1st
- The opinions on the billboard was to have the food shot represent seafood. The Onancock harbor shot with a stand-up board and paddler should be in focus. There are three different fonts used in the messaging. It was suggested to only have two different fonts.
- Marsh stated the adjustments will be made and the new version will be sent back for Commissioners to review. The goal is to get the billboard up as close to July 1 as possible.

- **Social Media/Website Analytics**

- Morey stated this month was a little down, but VISITESVA website search is up. Instagram had a slight decline as did Facebook. Morey believes this is because of February and March declines in posting. Marsh stated that the go ahead has been given to begin pushing out more advertisements and newsletters now that we are preparing to open businesses back up on the Shore.
- Coker stated these are hard choices to open or slow it down. The Shore certainly does not want to be left behind, if we like it or not, we see the volume of traffic has increased everywhere we look.
- Martin added that small towns and rural communities are the direction that people are wanting to go to get away. Playing up our coastal area is what we need to play on. Nowhere else in the world can you find birding, the Bay, crabs, seafood, undeveloped barrier islands. Playing up these unique assets is what sets us apart from other rural experiences that tourist may be looking for. Research also shows that people also want to go to places they have been before as they begin to venture out.
- Shotwell shared that her only affordable way to reach out for media coverage is through press releases. Chincoteague does have a list of 5K emails which also includes media groups. The press releases contain information on what you need to know about social distancing while on the island, hand sanitizer and the requirements of wearing face masks. Most people are coming from other states that

may not have the same requirements that we have. Chincoteague is pushing outdoor trails and the beach. Museums and events are not open yet.

- Marsh share that the ESVA TC has also sent out our June newsletter to our distribution and email list including previous visitors letting them know we are open. Included in the newsletter is a blog featuring Johnny Mo highlighting ways to enjoy blue crabs. Also, the ESVA Tourism Commission has a travel writer on the Shore right now.
- Betz continued the discussion with details about the travel writer. Betz met Peggy Sijswerda owner of, *Tidewater Women publication*, at a media lunch held by VTC in Richmond. Peggy was interested in writing a story on girl's weekend getaway for the June issue. The weather was not good, but she did have a great trip with wonderful experiences to write about.
- Holloway added, *Virginia Living Magazine*, has a Best of Virginia article in the July – August issue that has the Eastern Shore well represented. We need to share that when it is available and put legs on it to send it all around.
- **Tourism/Chamber Contract Renewal**
 - Marsh informed the Commission that the agreement between the Chamber of Commerce and the Tourism Commission expires June 30th. This renewal is a management service agreement along with a commercial lease agreement set for 2-years. The Chamber building agreement, with the owner of the building, has gone up 10%. A proportionate amount is reflected in a 10% increase in the lease portion of the agreement, increasing by \$100 per month. The lease agreement includes all utilities, paper, toner and use of the entire facility.
 - Coker stated that the new lease agreement for 2-years is agreeable. The rest of the Commissioners agreed.
 - Marsh will have the building owner sign off on the agreement along with the Chamber.
- **Schedule Strategic Planning Session**
 - Marsh stated now that businesses are opening, he would like to get a date on the calendar for the next strategic planning session. Coker suggested sometime this fall October or November. Holloway and Tarr suggested November would work for them the rest of the Commissioners agreed. Marsh will select some dates and send to the BOC.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- Shotwell shared that Chincoteague is in the running for USA Today 10 Best Coastal Small Towns. As of today, Chincoteague is in first place. Shotwell encourages everyone to vote. Even if Chincoteague does not win this is good free PR.
- MacGarvey commented that Juneteenth was canceled this year because of Covid-19. Next year there are plans to work towards making it a bigger celebration.
- Martin shared that VTC will be reaching out to more Black and Hispanic travel writers and featuring more travelers of color in the content that is produced. VTC will be more honest and careful about what is said about plantations that are travel sites. Being truthful about history is our goal. Knowing that we will make mistakes, but we will correct them as quickly as we can.
- Coker commented that when you come from the right direction and fix mistakes fast that works.
- Tarr commented that it is good to see folks back on the streets again in Chincoteague. It looks like people are practicing social distancing and wearing masks.

- Holloway shared that Cape Charles will be deciding on the 4th of July celebration tomorrow. You can follow it on Facebook.

6. Closed Session

- Coker asked Marsh if the closed session is for the budget. Marsh answered yes. Coker recommended that a closed session was not necessary. The budget is an open budget and is public knowledge. Through consensus, the Commissioners agreed not to go into closed session over the budget and stay in open session.
 - Marsh sent out the budget to BOC yesterday to look over in advance of his explanation. With the budget pulled up on screen Marsh proceeded to explain. The highlights: cutbacks at the end of FY20 in marketing and advertising and being on an accrued basis in revenue receipts Tourism Commission will have a projected positive \$43K at end of year not spent. Accomack County plans on keeping funding set at same level for FY21. TC budget does not include the usual overage TOT funds that Accomack County collects. There will be no planned TOT revenue from the Town of Cape Charles. Northampton County will cut funding by \$22,500 in FY21. Onancock is planning on TOT revenue to be the same in FY21. Also \$20k has been budgeted from grants, with an offset of \$20k in advertising if we do not receive any grants. Last year, FY20, \$50k was budgeted for visitor guide. FY21 visitor guide revenue budget is \$37,500 (past advertisers will be given a 3-month discount if they advertise in the upcoming FY21 visitor guide). Welcome Center revenue will have the same 3-month discount applied for light boxes, rack space and spotlight creating another short fall. Anticipated advertising: 2 billboards (one in New Church and the other in Tasley), social media and google ad, Virginia Pilot insert, Wavy Zip Trips and grant advertising, and Spring Tourism Summit. FY21 has a revenue short fall of \$57K. FY21 will have a Net Income short fall of negative \$35,368. TC will use unspent budget funds from FY20 to help off-set negative budget numbers for FY21. A decision will be made, in the future, on the direction TC will be going with the FY21 visitor guide (virtual, ad sales, no ad sales, page count, volume to print etc.).
 - Martin stated that VTC is working on state grants that could be used for rent and payrolls for DMO's
 - Coker was please with the results of Marsh's hard work in putting together a budget with funding short falls because of the COVID-19 pandemic that has created this unprecedented situation we have had to face. Coker also reminded the Commissioners that we do have funds in the bank if there is a unique opportunity for the Tourism Commission to be a part of.
- At 1:30 p.m. Coker made the first motion to approve the proposed FY21 ESVA Tourism Commission budget, second by Tarr, and passed unanimously.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:32 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

8/13/2020