

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
November 18, 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 Zoom:

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

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 Representative

Guest Present

Shannon Alexander, Dir. of Planning, A-NPDC
Jessica Steelman, Coastal Planner, A-NPDC

1. Call to Order

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

2. Guest Speaker

- Shannon Alexander, Director of A-NPDC, gave a summary of the projects going on through the Planning District Office that are closely associated with tourism. Shannon overviewed the COVID-19 relief package spending. Of the total amount made available, 2.6 Trillion, a remaining balance of \$800.7 Billion has not been allocated yet. This was mentioned in the context that there is still COVID-19 relief funding available with a possibility of additional anticipated programs in the future. The ESVA Chamber of Commerce along with the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce did receive EDA funding to assist with providing local businesses with emerging opportunities for related COVID-19 assistance. A-NPDC also received funding for a Regional Disaster Economic Recovery Coordinator to serve as a liaison. The new hire is a local young man that has been on the Shore since the age of 13. He is a graduate of Virginia Tech holding a BA in Public Policy. He has worked locally and understands the economics of the Eastern Shore very well. This position will help A-NPDC assess what the economic needs are in both Accomack and Northampton Counties and how to best use recovery resources for economic recovery. The A-NPDC is in the process of updating the Economic Development Plan for both counties. A huge emphasis is placed on Tourism - Placemaking. Leadership across the Commonwealth are pushing to have tourism added into economic development plans. A-NPDC will be focusing on the tourism factor in a major way as an economic driver for the Shore. Specific projects that A-NPDC are involved with:

Eastern Shore Regional Navigable Waterway Committee (ESRNWC), Dredging & Beneficial Use.
All these waterway projects benefit tourism.

2019 WMF Projects underway

Accomack County:

- o Quinby Channel

Northampton County:

- Kings Creek

Cape Charles public beach will potentially be the area for depositing the sediment from Kings Creek dredging project. ESRNWC is pushing hard for beneficial use of dredge materials for resiliency and beach nourishment. The Cape Charles beach, as the possible major recipient of dredge materials, is in the planning and permitting phase. The Northampton County's application for the Kings Creek project will apply for funding through the VA Port Authority, Waterway Maintenance Fund. It is a very competitive process and will require over \$1MM to implement. Shannon may approach the Tourism Commission for tourism dollar stats to help strengthen the application which A-NPDC is putting together.

2020 WMF Projects Funded

Accomack County:

- Wachapreague Channel – Full Phase One.
- Folly Creek – Part A of Phase One

Northampton County:

Part A of Phase One for the following

- Red Bank Creek
- Nassawadox Creek
- Hungars Creek

The above 5 waterways projects did receive funding for the permitting and engineering phase of these projects. Not until permit readiness is completed can these projects go forward. A-NPDC is heavily involved in projects in both counties by providing, resiliency work, policy, planning, and implementation. The revitalization of downtown Parksley is another project that A-NPDC is working on. Currently out for bid is the construction contract for the big 25 x 25 Band Shell/Event Stage and Center. The old Chincoteague Fire House is another project that A-NPDC is working with the town to develop plans for repurposing the building. The A-NPDC gives technical assistance to sewer work and pump out projects. Tourism related transportation projects that A-NPDC are managing; 3 smart scale applications projects for VDOT. These applications are for 3 different sections for the Rails to Trails implementation project. These projects are all pre application work. If the Rail to Trail project does receive approval it is at least 6 years out. A-NPDC is committed to long term planning. Both Accomack and Northampton Counties have been in favor of developing a bike trail over the past 2 decades. A feasibility study for the trail is being done by VDOT. When finished there will be a presentation done virtually. Also, the United States National Park Service has gifted a person to the Rail to Trail project on the Eastern Shore for 2 years. The efforts put forth by the Rails to Trails Conservation Program will have no fee attached. Shannon stated that there are a few new assets for the Shore. One is a new website, Explore Our Seaside, exploreourseaside.org. This new site has a page dedication to every barrier island and the specific limitations for each island. The Eastern Shore has a chain of undeveloped barrier islands. Nowhere else on the eastern seaboard does an ecosystem like this exist. Tourism needs to be pushing the uniqueness that this represents and feature the new website. Another site is, Birding Eastern Shore, birdingeasternshore.org, a beautiful website for birding on the Shore. The Virginia Oyster Trail, virginiaoystertrail.com, is not structured the same as it was in the past. The trail is now an official 501c. There is no paid staff, and the board is all volunteer. Other states now are developing Oyster Trails. The intent is for Virginia to be the king of oysters and maintain the integrity of the Virginia Oyster Trail experience for tourism. DWR (Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources) has a bird and wildlife trail website, dwr.virginia.gov/vbwt.gov. DWR site has a page dedicated to the Eastern Shore and offers a driving map with site locations for birding and observing wildlife.

- Jessica Steelmen, Coastal Planner of A-NPDC, continued the presentation. The Virginia Water Trail, in rural coastal regions of Virginia, was founded on the Eastern Shore and now includes the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Virginia Water Trail has joined with, PlanRVA – The Regional Commission which includes the Chickahominy region. The alliance has been renamed, Coastal Virginia Ecotourism Alliance (CVEA), which mission is to exist to present unique ecotourism activities and destinations for locals and visitors to enjoy. The three alliance partners embrace sustainable, vibrant, health ecosystems & a resilient, diversified nature-based economy. This effort is to maintain and preserve all these coastal regions and to promote no harm and the practice to leave no trace habits and connect visitors to world class ecotourism destination. Each region will be offering a resiliency training opportunity for ecotourism businesses. Also, starting in January the Virginia Certified Ecotourism Course will begin. The course will be 8 weeks, starting January 12 – March 5, the meetings will be held on Zoom.

2. Public Comments

- No public comments

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:36 p.m. Spuck made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Martin reported that VTC is monitoring social media comments hourly, there is a lot of push back from the public for promoting travel with the infection rate so high. VTC may go dark and pull all discussion on promoting travel in Virginia. Martin suggested that our efforts should be monitored also to see if any signs of negative comments are posted. VA-1 was canceled, and everyone will be getting a refund. December 2nd will be an online roll out of the 5-year Tourism Plan. The Marketing Grant press release from the Governor has gone out. The Eastern Shore has received a nice bit of funding.

5. Commission Updates

- **Bookkeeper/Payroll Admin – Updated**
Marsh informed the BOC that the bookkeeping/payroll training by Shannon Wessells is coming to an end. There will be one more training session. Joeckel put together the financials for this meeting with a little help from Sandra Johnson with the ESVA Chamber.
- **Gateway Welcome Center - Update**
Betz informed the BOC that the Eastern Shore Post will be coming to the Welcome Center this coming Friday to write an article on the staff and volunteers. Even during the pandemic, the team at the Welcome Center has been devoted to the efforts of sharing with visitors what remains open and is safe and available to enjoy on the ESVA. The Welcome Center workforce has been our front-line workers deserving to be recognized. Betz is still working on the video that is being created, which features the BOC and Commission staff expressing gratitude to the Welcome Center team. A new TV was purchased for the Welcome Center. The old TV, which was only 3 years old, stopped working. There was trouble shooting done to restart the old TV which did not work. Betz was able to replace the TV with a Black Friday special from Walmart for only \$148 for a 55". Betz husband has volunteered to install the new TV. A conversation has been started with Sally and HH concerning the Covid-19 numbers rising. Consideration will be given for the idea of the tables and plexiglass shields being set up at the Welcome Center door entrance again. Betz

will always make sure that the Welcome Center team is working under the safest conditions possible as they assist travelers.

- Coker stated that the most important factor is safety, not the number of visitors.

- **2021 Activity Guide – Update**

Betz announced that she is not actively selling ads but businesses that have been contacted earlier are still confirming their ad space. It is looking like the sales for 2021 Activity Guide may come in over \$48K. The ESVA headquarter staff will begin going over ad layout by the end of this week.

- **WonderLOVE Promotion**

Morey stated that last Monday she along with Jim Baugh and models went to Tangier to film. Jim stayed on the island for an additional 2 days and was very excited with the results. Tomorrow Morey will give Jim footage film from VTC and logos for the video. Jim will then be able to start editing. The trail brochure rack cards look great and only have a few edits left before they go to print. Morey has conducted talks with Otto on creating the landing page and URL that coordinates with the new trail rack cards containing QR code. The Blogs that have been created are being reviewed by outside sources. All pieces of the WonderLove promotion are coming together. Timing of roll out will depend on Covid-19 levels. The remaining shooting for WonderLove will be done by Morey and Marsh. Coordinating models and favorable weather is in the works.

- **2021 Tourism Summit Planning**

Marsh asked BOC for Tourism Summit date preferences. The BOC prefer the later date, February 22nd from 9:30 am – 3 pm. The BOC decided that the Tourism Summit will be virtual.

- Martin suggested that there are tools in Zoom that can be used to conduct polling and break out session. Holloway suggested if we begin to use Zoom meeting tools now, during the BOC meetings, the team will be well experienced and successful using these tools for the Tourism Summit virtual presentation.

Marsh continued; a notice will be sent out to save the date for the upcoming virtual Tourism Summit.

- **Social Media/Website Analytics**

Morey reported that Google analytics had an increase in users and increase in sessions, but there was a bigger bounce rate. The thought is that people are clicking on our webpage but after they land, they quickly leave. Morey will investigate and rewording our ads so that the ads can be more direct and hold onto those that click onto our website. Instagram is down from last month but still ahead of last year's monthly numbers. The same pattern holds true for Facebook. Engagement is also down on Facebook. Last year there were a lot of events posted for the holidays this year there are not many events. Facebook advertising reach this month was by far strongest with male age group 18-24. In the new year Morey will be revamping the reports.

- Coker asked if there is a way to correlate what these analytics are showing. Are people coming here and spend money and where. Morey responded that the number of people stopping at the Welcome Center, TOT tax, meals tax, and sales tax from the counties and towns are the main ways to see the effect of advertising.
- Holloway asked if there is a call to action in the ads. Having ads that prompt people to go to our website can be tracked by website traffic. The next step is harder, seeing when they arrived on the Shore.

- Martin shared that VTC is now in negotiations with a company called Entrada which has tools that shows conversions from web searches bases on cell phones and then is linked to when that cell phone shows up on the Eastern Shore. If VTC does work with Entrada Martin can share that data.
- Spuck stated that TOT tax from towns can be more measurable 30 days to 90 days trailing an ad post. Meals tax is not as closely connected to tourism because it can relate to so many different things.
- Coker stated that we are just in the beginning process of looking for patterns. In the future we may see trends that help the Commission be more predictive about tourism revenue.
- Holloway stated that the young male demographic reach being so high this month is mind boggling. It is normally females that are the larger gender doing searching.
- Spuck commented that it could be most likely outdoor activity during the fall.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- Coker announced that the next meetings, held in 60-90-day time span, need to be held virtual. The virus is not slowing down any time soon.
- Shotwell shared that Chincoteague's board decided yesterday to cancel the Christmas parade. The Town of Chincoteague and the Chamber are considering other things to do to have Christmas cheer shared on the island. There are people that do not agree with the Towns decision to cancel events. If the town decided to go forward with Christmas events there would be people that would not agree with that decision either. Visitors are still coming to Chincoteague; a slowdown is likely to come with the rising cases of Covid-19. Christmas by the Sea is still evaluating what it is going to do.
- Holloway shared that Cape Charles Town Council will decide tonight on all holiday events. The perception of not caring about people gathering creates a problem during the spike that is happening with Covid-19. It is a huge loss financially for the town if events are canceled. The town will still try to creatively feature town businesses, it may be to shop virtually.
- MacGarvey did not have a microphone to participate.
- Spuck shared that Onancock will be having a driving tour of decorated homes on December 12th from 4-6, entitled "Believe". Ker Place will also have trees decorated on site to correspond with the driving tour, but will also be open for anyone to view them both before and after the December 12th driving tour. The Holiday festivities will be vastly different and hopefully very safe.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:11 p.m. Holloway made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Coker, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairman

Date

3/1/2021

