

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
May 19, 2021, at noon
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-
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Christy Betz, Destination Development Dir.
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Staci Martin, VTC Representative

Guest Present

Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center
Jessica Steelman, A-NPDC

Commissioner in Absence

Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council

1. Call to Order

- At 12:01 p.m. Coker called meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis from New Church Welcome Center is pleased to report that the ESVA TC will be promoting the WanderLove trail rack cards and 6 trail videos at the northern WC. As of June 7th, the WC will be fully opened allowing travelers full access of the WC and selecting brochures as they please. Visitors have not had access previously because of the pandemic. All signs have been taken down requiring masks. Staff will wear masks only if they choose. The unvaccinated are required to wear mask.
 - Coker asked if visitation is up. Davis responded very much so. This is going to be a crazy busy summer.
 - Shotwell added that many of the visitors coming to Chincoteague currently are still first-time visits.
- Steelman reported that the VTC applications for the current round of the Marking Leverage Program grant has opened and will be closing June 22nd.
- Sabbatini added that Martin had a meeting with TC staff last week and gave a wealth of information including the MLP grant. ESVA Tourism Commission has great ideas for the new MLP grant opportunity and has high hope TC will be able to land the grant.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:08 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center**

Betz reported that the Southern Gateway Welcome Center has seen number increase to pre 2019 level. All staff and volunteers are vaccinated. CBBT is keeping up the signs that states masks are required. Betz has told the staff that it is up to everyone if they want to wear a mask or not. Betz reported next Friday she is going to change the hours for the WC, as a trial, to see what visitation is like when hours are extended to 6 pm closing. Betz feels that with the WC closing at 4:30 pm a lot of weekend traffic is missed. The extra 1 ½ hours will be logged in with a count on visitors during that time-period. If the count is high the new closing time will be for Friday and Saturday only. We have taken down the 5-person room limit. If the staff feel overwhelmed the signs will go back up.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini reported on the beginning development for the 2022 Summit. The date for the Summit will be February 28. Coker suggested to circulate the date to members to make sure there are not any conflicts. Sabbatini stated the theme for the summit will be maximize profit and revenue for 2022. If the BOC had any suggestions for a tag line for the day, it would be appreciated. Coker suggested a session on lessons learned from the pandemic should be considered.

- **Locals Choice**

Betz spoke about the roll out of the 2nd Locals Choice contest. A few categories were deleted from last year and a few new categories have been added. Machen has created a survey monkey for the contest which has been sent to the Post and WESR. The hope is to have the contest published this coming Friday. An eblast is being created to go out to our industry partners. There will be social media posts also. Betz asked MacGarvey and Shotwell to send the survey to their distribution lists. There are about 34 different categories.

- **WanderLove Campaign**

Sabbatini discussed the WanderLove Campaign. New Church Welcome Center will have a spotlight featuring the 6 video and corresponding 6 rack cards. Sabbatini and Machen are almost finished with overseeing the edits for the videos. Sabbatini believes we have the talent and skill to product our own videos with Machen on board.

- Spuck asked if local hotels and town hall could also distribute the rack cards. Betz said yes and she would bring them right over. Betz will also be delivering the rack cards to Chincoteague.

- **Recovery MLP Applications**

Betz announced the tourism team will be working on the MLP application following the BOC meeting. The plan is to nail down ESVA marketing ideas and have the application completed before the deadline.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen stated that overall, the website is seeing an increased in new visitors. There is a decrease in session time. Machen is working on changing a few things, so people stay longer on the site. Developing an event page for each town is one thought. An event page on the website will hopefully represent a robust event list for visitors. Facebook has been experiencing more followers currently with more engagement. Facebook has changed how they rate posts that link to outside sources. Facebook does not want to promote those post. Facebook wants their platform used and does not promote links that take followers off Facebook. Instagram is performing like Facebook percentage wise. There are more interactions with content on Instagram because it is photographic based. WanderLove is being heavily promoted with paid boost.

- Sabbatini gave an update on marketing efforts that he is personally involved with. People in the central part of Virginia down to the southwestern part of the state Sabbatini is personally targeting those regions to come to the Eastern Shore. A personal goal of 10 people Sabbatini will reach out to and encourage these folks to come to the Shore. Chincoteague, Onancock, and Cape Charles are the areas that are being promoted. The hope is to create word of mouth exchange with their friends back home. Central Virginia, and the Roanoke area vacation every year in Myrtle Beach. Most people do not realize what there is in their own back yard here on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.
- **Logo**
Sabbatini stated it is the best practice for ESVA Tourism Commission to yearly evaluate the logo. Having a fresh look that is up to date and represents the direction the commission wants the Shore to go. Logo's take time money and are pricey to roll out. It is important in the tourism business that we review this regularly. Sabbatini believes that the logo needs to be on the BOC radar. Sabbatini asked for thoughts from the BOC.
 - Coker agreed it is important to stay on top and not have a tired look.
 - Shotwell stated Chincoteague had just gone through customer service training from a group in Baltimore that shared their experience with re-branding of Baltimore. The marketing group that did the re-branding was called Bellwether.
 Sabbatini will add logo as a future agenda item.
 - Martin stated that the VTC grant rounds can help pay for consulting on a new logo.

5. VTC Updates

- Martin reported hotel rates are high in Virginia Beach, \$400 a night at Comfort Suits, \$850 at the Cavalier, other hotels are running \$200-\$299. With pricing being so high people may be moving up the Shore to find cheaper vacations. Hotels may be holding back inventory by having higher rates because of the lack of staffing. VTC has plans for an influencer to be writing an article on lesser-known beach towns. Onancock will be included in the list. Virginia.org is not taking any new listings or event postings to their website right now until the new system switch over has been completed. VA-1 Tourism Conference will be happening this year. The conference will be held in Northern Virginia and most likely be held in November. Martin met with Sabbatini, Machen and Betz on the Drive 2.0 program. Martin stated there is a \$10K incentive if DMO's use the Drive 2.0 program as a strategic plan. The grant application opens in June with meetings held in the fall. Drive 2.0 will give the TC team a good foundation with strategic planning to begin in the spring. The Virginia Senate Bill 1398 OTA Tax Revenue bill will be managed by VTC the funds are available for DMO's only. Applications may be opening in September for those funds. Martin stressed to TC to start thinking about what additional funding the Commission could use. American Rescue plan funding might also have opportunities for funding for tourism, but it has not been determined yet. Martin asked if the TC would consider creating rack cards to promote space tourism. The expense of a couple of thousand dollars could be placed into the MLP grant that ESVA is being put together. Martin stressed that a competitive like campaign could be done targeting Virginia Beach and Norfolk. Hotel cost are so high this could be a successful campaign to lure travelers to the Eastern Shore.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- MacGarvey shared that there are no new events planned for Exmore. Juneteenth celebration is coming together including a parade in Exmore. Shakespeare in the Park is scheduled with an artisan festival planned the next day. A car show is planned for October.

- Shotwell stated March, April and May have been up over 2019 numbers. Chincoteague is hopeful that the governor will lift all restrictions so that the Oyster Festival will be held this fall. The Blueberry festival is scheduled for July. Chincoteague will be applying for the MLP grant. The Farmers Market will open on Memorial Day weekend for the first time in 2 years. The Theater will be opening. The lack of workforce is an issue for businesses in Chincoteague which has led to restaurants being limited to the number of days they can be open.
 - Martin added that summer enrollment at ODU is up which is adding to workforce decline issues.
- Tar stated that there will not be Pony Penning this year.
- Spuck stated Onancock is spending a lot of time on strategic oversight which includes the roll out of a new logo, new branding campaign and a new website called "Experience Onancock". This Friday Reggae on the lawn at Kar Place will take place. Ice cream social is back with dates being determined. A new playground at the Historical School is going up.
- Steelman shared that the Master Gardeners and Naturalist are working on a Native Plant Garden behind the Historic Onancock school. The garden will be completed by the end of summer.
- Coker stated that Cape Charles is booming. Reservation towards the end of the week at any restaurant in town is difficult to make. Pearl Market has open. The pandemic has heightened people's awareness to get outside. The Federal government is interested in supporting rails to trails projects as the state is also offering dollars for rails to trails projects.
 - Betz announced that she and Sabbatini have both joined the Rails to Trails working group.

Coker announced that in July the Tourism Commission meetings will be in person at the Chamber of Commerce building in Melfa.

8. Adjournment

- At 1:06 p.m. Spuck made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairman

6/22/2021
Date