



**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
February 17, 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-
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
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Susannah Morey, Marketing Manager-absent

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Staci Martin, VTC Representative

Guest Present

Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis from New Church Welcome Center informed the BOC that the Welcome Center is interviewing for a travel counselor position which is a retirement replacement. Last January 2020 had the highest tourist number count in 10 years. January 2021 WC count cannot be compared to January 2020. Bad weather in the northern corridor has added to the low numbers.
 - Coker asked what the travel sentiment is from visitors that interact with staff. Cherron responded that folks are cautious and optimistic that the vaccines will help. A negative factor is that gas prices are going up and changes in the economy add to uncertainty. Virginia Tourism's hope is that by the end of May an increase in travel will begin because of the rise in vaccinations around the country.
 - Shotwell shared a call that was received by the Chincoteague Chamber inquiring if the pony swim will be on. The caller, a senior citizen, commented seniors have received their shots and will be ready to go. Shotwell stated it may be an older generation traveling.

3. Consent Agenda

Shotwell inquired about ESVA activity guide cost and the number count that is being printed. Marsh answered that the number being printed is the same as last year. This year's guide has a 2-year date, in case we have extras left over next year the activity guide can be used in 2022. The printing cost of the guide does have shipping cost included but the drop shipments have not been finalized. It is expected that there will be added cost for shipping, which is typical.

- At 12:13 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Martin has three areas to cover. Legislation: Virginia Senate Bill 1398 has passed. This bill references retail sales and transient occupancy taxes on room rentals. Retail sales and hotel taxes on transient room rental will be computed on the total price paid for the use of the room paid to contracts with an intermediary collecting the room rate. Example: Priceline sells a room and collects funds. Priceline is required to separately state the taxes on the bill to the customer and collect the taxes based on the total charges that the customer paid. There is a portion of that tax that is collected that will be dedicated to Virginia Tourism Authority to administer grants for tourism promotion. The fund will be started out with an allocation of money so that grants can be offered now in advance of waiting for funding to accumulate. Virginia Senate Bill 1298 has passed the senate but is in a second read. This bill references the establishment of tourism improvement districts. This bill authorizes any locality to create a local tourism improvement district plan, consisting of a special use fee charged to businesses and used to fund tourism promotion activities and capital improvements. Under the bill, the locality is authorized to contract with a nonprofit entity to administer the activities and improvements. This bill is not completed yet. New hire: VTC has hired a new research director to begin in March. Also, VTC is in the process of hiring a new position in the Partnership Marketing department based in Richmond to help with grant programs. ESVA TC Strategic Plan: Martin will take data that has already been discussed and include resource information from the USDA Recreation Economy Resource Guide plan. Martins goal is to draft a strategic plan melding the two together creating a rough draft which can be used for onboarding the new positions that ESVA TC will be hiring. The Tourism Commission would have one document to look through and review strategic tourism goals for the Shore. Martins plan is to hand it to the BOC by the 26th of February. This document will be framework to work from. Coker agreed that was reasonable.

5. Commission Updates

- **WonderLove - Update**

Marsh updated the BOC on the WonderLove grant program. An extension has been requested and granted until September 30, 2021 to submit all the completed paperwork. There is one more major filming session and a smaller filming session that needs to take place. The models for this project had been in California and have now returned. Once the weather breaks the final filming will take place. Jim Baugh will create 6 videos, in draft form, for BOC to review.

- **Bi-Weekly Commissioner Calls – Clarification**

Marsh asked what the Commissioners preference would be for the continuation of the bi-weekly meetings. It was decided that the commissioners would have a commission only phone conference the first Thursday of the month for simple “pulse checks” from each region and no official Commission business would be voted on during these calls.. The regular BOC meeting, including the public, would be the third Wednesday of the month where normal updates and decisions would be carried out.

- **Update: New Church Billboard Facing**

Marsh reported that the changes requested to be done to the new billboard image, making the sky and water bluer, cannot happen with the selected photo. The consensus is to see if the photographer has a better image that shows the water and sky brightly define. The VTC photo with people of diversity on a dock is also a favorite. Marsh will have the VTC photo mocked up with the edits the BOC requests and send it out for review. It was suggested to take our time and get the right photo for refacing the billboard. Marsh asked if by Tuesday of next week, the BOC

could forward any new photos that are felt could be a possibility for the billboard. Shotwell will see what the Chincoteague Chamber has in their photo library that might work.

- **Update: February - Take-Out Month**

Marsh reported, February Take-out month has received lots of positive feedback. Morey will continue to track the postings of photos from participants. The contest ends February 27th.

- **Ready, Set, Go Taskforce – Update**

Marsh reported the survey is out and circulating to business owners and decision makers. Press releases have been placed in the Eastern Shore News and Eastern Shore Post including e-blasts. The next e-blast will be for a save the date notice for the round table discussions that starts the week of March 8th. Chamber Chat included the Read, Set, Go timeline as the main discussion. Marsh also inquired if the BOC are interested in keeping the tourism summit on the calendar for March 22nd.

- Coker stated that with all the changes the TC is in the process of, hiring an Executive Director and Marketing Director, when those slots are filled that will be the time for significant communication with the tourism partners.
- Holloway, MacGarvey and Tarr all agreed. Holloway continued, what our members need is the Ready, Set, Go, 4-part game plan. Focusing on getting a restart for our businesses as we come out of the COVID-19 shut down.
- Shotwell added it is not a bad thing to not have a summit this year. Once the new staff settles, 2022 would be better timing for a summit.
- Coker added, the next 6 months to a year will be a struggle for everyone. Doing what can be done to help local businesses and focusing on getting information to our members is what is needed.
- Martin informed the TC that by the end of April, she will be fully vaccinated and able to come to the Shore to set up help desks in Cape Charles, Onancock, and Chincoteague. Consulting with businesses one on one for 15-20 minutes, providing VTC info, and navigation of what is available and how funding can be used. BOC all applauded Martin and thanked her for her outstanding support.

- **Gateway Welcome Center - Update**

Betz announced that the numbers at the Welcome Center continue to be down which is to be expected. Travelers will be ready to travel once they are vaccinated. Sally has been a great help with adding businesses to VISITESVA website. At least 90 new businesses have been added.

- Coker requested while editing the website to review everything that is listed so that all businesses have current information and have not closed. Betz will see to it that every couple of months business listings are reviewed for accuracy.

Marsh added that the business updating to the website is huge. We have tried with great efforts to get businesses to list on VisitESVA website for two years. The work Betz and Sally are doing was needed and is a huge help. He is very grateful to both for their hard work.

- **2021 Activity Guide – Update**

Marsh reported that the visitor guide is at the printers there is not an exact delivery date, but it should be delivered in the next two weeks.

- **Social Media/Website Analytics**

Marsh asked if there are any questions about the report that Morey submitted.

- Coker asked if going forward to just bring up the high lights presented in the report. What looks good and looks bad so that we focus on what is working or needs to be improved. Marsh suggested to pull out the top 3 to 5 stats that need to be discussed.

- Holloway stated that the report has good information which is deep information and will help BOC make decisions going forward. The Tourism Commission has been set up for success with these analytics.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- Shotwell stated Chincoteague's travel guide is at the printer. This Saturday, February 20th, the Antares rocket launch to the International Space Station is due to take place if good weather prevails. The Chincoteague Chamber's annual general membership meeting is February 25th and will be virtual. The Easter Decoy and Art Festival and Chincoteague Seafood Festival have both been canceled. There will be two alternative events, no details yet. Death by Chocolate did happen last weekend which went well and with the Health Departments blessing. Over 300 people participated even with the unpleasant weather during the weekend. Search for the Shamrocks-March 19th and 20th will take place. The WonderLove grant is moving forward with ads being placed in different publications.
- Spuck stated that Onancock has just completed the decision making process on their advertising campaigns. The publications that were chosen to place ads in are Virginia Living and Chesapeake Bay Magazine. Social Media will be pushing the same image promotion. The town is working with Main Street on the advertising grant that was awarded to Main Street Onancock. There are no upcoming events for Onancock. St. Patrick's Day parade has been canceled. Onancock's goal is pushing the foodie scene the town has to offer. Another project that Spuck is over seeing is to try and fill the empty store fronts in Onancock.
- Martin added the next few weeks are going to be information overload. Once everything is sorted out BOC will be updated in late Spring or early Summer. Virginia Water Trails has obtained funding from NOAA through 2023.
- MacGarvey shared that Exmore received a \$15K grant from Virginia Outdoor Foundation which will be used to upgrade the town park. The only event that seems to be a go is Shakespeare in the Park which is held in September. Juneteenth may go virtual; it may be too soon for that event to take place live. Keeping the event going, in some form, is important to everyone.
- Holloway stated there were a lot of hoops to go through with the VACDC grants. Twenty-two grants have been administered, for 15K each, to Cape Charles businesses so far. No events are planned except for the Love Run at the end of April. Cape Charles was full Valentine/President Day weekend. The short-term rentals have been full during off season, many are booked for the summer. A promising sign for the up-coming season.
- Tarr added that all the good work that is presented is fantastic and had nothing else to add.

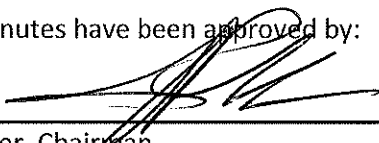
7. Closed Session

- At 1:09 p.m. Tarr made a motion to go into closed session to discuss personnel positions, seconded by Coker, and passed unanimously.
- At 1:29 p.m. Tarr made a motion to reconvene in open session, second by Coker. All members were polled, and the commission came out of closed session.

8. Adjournment

- At 1:30 p.m. Tar made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Coker, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:



John Coker, Chairman

3/17/2021

Date