

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
February 16, 2022, at 1 PM  
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

\*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic concerns, this Board Meeting was held as a hi-bred in-person or by Zoom Call for comfort level of participants.

Commissioners in Attendance

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  
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee  
Clairice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee

Staff Present

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

Chamber of Commerce- Observer

Ace Seybolt

Guest Present

Elizabeth Lankford, Onancock Main Street  
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Staci Martin, VTC Representative  
Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 1:10 p.m. Coker called meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Elizabeth Lankford taking notes for Onancock Main Street.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 1:11 p.m. Shotwell made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Martin introduced her replacement, Coastal Destination Development Specialist, Laura Messer. Messer will be attending the ESVA Tourism Summit at the end of the month and meet everyone personally. Messer previously worked for James City County; her title was Tourism & Marketing Coordinator. Messer has worked on many projects for economic development, small businesses and Agri-tourism in her former position and looks forward to working with the Eastern Shore in her new position. The whole Commission introduced themselves to Messer.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Update**  
Betz stated numbers at the Welcome Center were great for February. Starting March 13, the WC will stay open until 5 PM because of daylight saving time. The WC is discussing, starting in May, to

be open until 6 PM during the summer. In January the WC was closed for a few days when the Covid-19 numbers were high. Betz is looking for new volunteers possibly 2-3 more.

- Coker inquired what is the number of paid staff, and volunteer help. Coker added that there should be more funding coming from Northampton Co. and Accomack Co. this coming FY. A raise for employees should happen.

Betz reported 7 paid staff, 8 volunteers. Betz stated that staff is paid \$11 an hour, which is minimum wage. Management is paid \$13 to \$14 an hour. The plan is to give a dollar raise soon if the budget allows. The average visitation rate in 2021 was 200 people a day. We still require masks for people to enter the WC. Average summertime visitation runs at 700 people a day. The Welcome Center had 25K views in January and always receives 5-star rating Machen added. The staff is an amazing group of people.

- Holloway suggested to reach out to Connie Morrison, at the Eastern Shore Post, to do a feature story on the volunteers and staff at the WC. It will be an opportunity for people to know about the Welcome Center need for volunteers and value it gives to the Shore businesses.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported all platforms were up across the board for social media. Snow days on the Shore gave Machen an opportunity to capture the Shore covered in snow. The response on social media was great. Promoting upcoming rocket launch, Chatham Vineyard Wine and Oyster Weekends, and Historic Garden Week are all being pushed out. National Plan your Vacation Day has been promoted with a great response from that push. Machen is working on completing the items needed for the MLP grant. The Virginia Space Loop is part of the grant focus. The Virginia Space Loop is a statewide initiative. The Shore is the first to initiate and promotion the Space Loop in Virginia. The rack card for the Space Loop is almost completed it will list all the sites in Virginia. An interactive web page where they can find locations to watch rocket launches on the Shore is part of the promotion. Wallops Island is going to be the front and center focus on the ES rack card.

- Coker stated that good work is happening on pulling in information on what is happening on the Shore. What is needed is more push out of this information so that folks are aware of what is going on here.
- MacGarvey asked is Facebook is being utilized. Machen stated that the grant has up the money for more social media outreach which has been greatly increased for push out of information.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini stated to our new VTC representative, Laura Messer, that the staff here at ESVA Tourism Commission is extraordinary. The Board of Commissioners are very engaged. If there is anything that Messer may need from this team, please feel free to reach out. ESVA Tourism team will always be reaching out to Messer for resources to add to the TC success. The ESVA Tourism Summit is almost here which is held at the ES Community College on February 28. The summit is fully booked with attendance at 121 folks and a wait list for any cancellations. The summit schedule was handed out for review by the BOC. A treat of shucked oysters will be delivered to each table to enjoy, from Lambert Shellfish Co., before lunch is served. There will be 13 different door prizes. Everyone will receive a goody bag which includes a T-Shirt with our logo on it, a notebook and pen, hand sanitizer and face mask. Name tags will be handed out at sign in. Tables will be named after Barrier Islands. Seating will not be assigned.

- Coker added that the theme of the summit: Maximize Profits and Revenue, the staff should add a statement of: What more can we do for you, how can we help you. Have a follow up evaluation sheet for attendees to fill out.

- The last big door prize can be given out to the attendees that turn in the evaluation sheet, was the suggestion from Betz. KN95 masks have been order for the summit in individual packaging. The college requires mask to be worn.

Sabbatini mention that the Rail to Trail is a hot topic. Sabbatini will have a talking point cheat sheet for a list of contacts and the lead on the Rail to Trail working group if someone has questions. Sabbatini also asked for Commissioners to be at the college by 8:30 AM to help greet. The Tourism Summit will be recorded and available for those that don't attend.

- Martin invited the Commission to join the VTC representatives to dinner at the Island House at 6 PM after the summit.

- **County Budget Requests**

Sabbatini reported the whole ESVA Tourism team attended the Northampton County Board of Supervisors budget meeting last week and made TC budget request. Two days later the Accomack County budget meeting was also attending by Sabbatini and Betz. All indicators are positive on TC submission to the two County budgets.

- Coker added that the TC is doing a great job, the increase in funding is based on that.
- Tarr stated it is the same belief from Accomack County that the TC is doing a great job and keeping the county informed on what is being done and accomplished for the Shore.
- Holloway asked if someone has contacted the TC from Cape Charles on funding from Cape Charles? Sabbatini responded that Cape Charles has contacted TC and the funding request will be submitted on time.

- **VTC ARPA Money to Counties**

Sabbatini reported Accomack has carved up the amounts that would go to the DMO's. Sabbatini and Joeckel have continued to meet with the town representatives on the marketing funds that are available and give them all the necessary information for developing a plan. Sabbatini is requesting to keep application letters to one page and be as specific as possible in their request. There are a few towns that have not responded back but we will keep trying. These are small towns that are not always open regular hours. Sabbatini would like to have plans submitted early so that the funding can be used this season.

- **EDA Grant**

Sabbatini reported that all EDA grant applications have been submitted by TC, Cape Charles and Onancock and Chincoteague

- Coker inquired on the total request amount:

Sabbatini reported: Melfa Welcome Center improvements \$1M, Chincoteague \$130K, Onancock \$125K, Cape Charles \$125K bathrooms plus \$130K information Center.

- Martin stated that the federal money totals \$225M for this fund. There were over a billion dollars in grant applications received. The strength is that this is a regional grant application that includes the Eastern Shore, Visit Norfolk, and another coastal region.

- **Miscellaneous items**

Sabbatini reported that our old 2021-2022 Visitor Guide, 16,800, have been inserted into the Richmond Times-Dispatch Sunday edition on February 20<sup>th</sup>. It was a great deal; we were able to get the guides inserted for \$500 less then what was quoted. ESVA Tourism Commission annual audit is taking place right now with Robinson, Farmer and Cox Associates, CPA out of Richmond. Things are going as smoothly as can be expected at this time. When completed there will be an update. The new Visitor Guide is scheduled to be here next week.

## 6. Matters by Commissioners

- Holloway shared that Cape Charles is officially reprinted 30K town maps. Cape Charles is featured on one side of the map and the Eastern Shore on the other side. An event in February was held

called, Shop and Stroll, which was a huge success. Looking forward to some Spring events, Sidewalk Sale second week in April, Love Run 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. There will also be some Easter festivities.

- Spuck shared that the new advertising campaign has gotten started for the boating season, Onancock St. Patrick Day parade is on. There will also be a car show the same day. North Street will be closed before the parade begins, music and restaurants will be open. The parade will have two performance stops on the parade route to stretch the parade out.
- Shotwell shared that Death by Chocolate was very successful last weekend with the added plus of great weather. This upcoming weekend will be full again with the rocket launch. March event will be, Search for Shamrock. Easter Decoy Show is being planned April 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> at the school. Visitation in January was up over last year, but still behind 2019 and 2020. 2021 was a great year for Chincoteague, visitation was up. Pony Swim is schedule to happen, and all events are scheduled to take place this year.
- MacGarvey shared that there are no events to report. Exmore is becoming a foodie town. Liv's, which is a new restaurant, open only a few months has double in size already. Exmore new website is scheduled to go live today, Exmore.org.
- Coker shared that the ARPA funds that were talked about earlier should be considered for rebranding if this is the direction the commission wants to go. Rebranding is not easy; we will need to get professionals in to help us with the effort. At the next meeting I want everyone to think about rebranding and discuss if this is the direction we want to go. VTC has grants for events. If the event grants will still be open for our partners after the summit, TC should be available to assist groups that will be putting on events.
  - Martin added that the event must be two consecutive days, otherwise, the grant must come from the MLP grant. The event must have been held at least twice before Covid-19 hit and the attendance numbers from the prior events must be included in the grant application. All grants close March 8<sup>th</sup>.

Coker added that people are going on vacation again. During his travels the volume travelers were unbelievable. This should be a good travel season ahead of us.

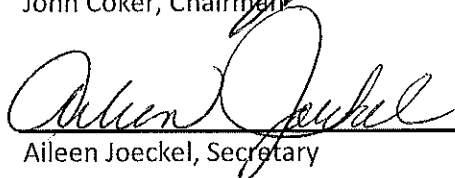
#### 7. Adjournment

- 2:09 p.m. BOC went into Special Session all parties other than Commissioners signed out.

These minutes have been approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
John Coker, Chairman

3/16/2022  
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Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

3/16/2022  
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Date