

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
January 19, 2021, at noon
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

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
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

Jessica Steelman, ANPDC
Elizabeth Lankford, Blue Crab Bay Co.
Meredith Restein, Moonrise Jewelry

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Staci Martin, VTC Representative

Commissioner Absence

John Coker, Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council

1. Call to Order

- At 1:00 p.m. Tarr called meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Elizabeth Lankford mentioned the upcoming St. Patrick Day parade in Onancock. Any participation with the upcoming parade is welcomed.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 1:00 p.m. Shotwell made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Martin stated there is an online seminar on how to apply for grants, January 25th at 2 pm. To sign up go to VTC.org/grants. Grant awards should be announced around April 15 th. If a town has two Special Event Grants that they would like to apply for they can only apply for one event per town. Changes to MLP and Special Event grants will be that some cost for insurance policies can be submitted and some production cost (stage rental, tent rental, fencing). There is a Commonwealth History Grant that is coming online that can help pay for capital improvements. Martin's replacement has not been announced yet. Martin is looking forward to attending the ESVA Tourism Summit.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Update**

Betz stated numbers are low for the Welcome Center. Staff and volunteers are only coming in if they feel safe with the COVID numbers that have been rising. Betz has covered some days at the Welcome Center. The 2021 attendance numbers were down about 25% from 2019. All to be expected. The goal is to get the attendance numbers for 2022 back to where they were in 2019.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported that she receives notifications for online reviews for the Welcome Center about every day and they are always five stars. Welcome Center staff is doing a great job. The month of December was great having an opportunity to promote holiday events and festive towns. There was a lot of positive feedback. A birding season wrap up video was shared. Keptopeke Hawk watch went over extremely well. A lot of information was shared to provide future interest for this coming year. Machin is working on finalizing the marketing planning of the Drive 2.0 grant and MLP so that the roll out of those grants can begin. Machin is also working on the website improvements which is receiving higher SEO scoring already with an improve score of 24% in December.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini reported the ESVA Tourism Summit 2022 preparation is going well. Staff has worked out the finer details of the day. RSVP are up to thirty-one as of today. Our cap for the summit is about 130 people. Sabbatini asked for feedback from BOC on the capacity for the room with the virus numbers that are rising today. Sabbatini understands that this virus strain will level back out quickly.

- Shotwell offered the Chincoteague Center if a larger space were needed, but it would not be centrally located.
- Martin suggested N95 masks for the summit.

Sabbatini also stated that the summit will be recorded for anyone who does not attend.

- Tarr stated to keep date and location as is. The recording of the Summit is a good option for those who may not be able to attend.

- **EDA Grant**

Sabbatini reported there is a Federal EDA Grant available. The ESVA Tourism Commission and ESVA Chamber of Commerce have partnered together along with Kurt Krause, the President CEO of Visit Norfolk, who will be the lead for this grant. There are many others that are a part of this grant initiative. Specific to the Tourism Commission the goal is to create a middle Shore Welcome Center. The Chamber building was originally designed to also be a Welcome Center. Both the Chamber Board and Tourism Board is committed to make this happen. Chincoteague, Onancock, and Cape Charles are also partnering in this EDA grant. These towns are looking to update and or construct rest room facilities. Cape Charles is also looking into updating a rail car into a Welcome Center. All of the grant applications have been submitted. A grant writer is being secured to write and pull together all parties that are participants in the EDA Grant proposal.

- Tarr asked what dollar amount has been requested.

Sabbatini stated the Tourism Commission has requested \$1 million.

- Spuck asked for Sabbatini to explain the partnership between the ESVA Chamber of Commerce and ESVA Tourism Commission and the spending plan for the \$1 million.

Sabbatini gave background information stating the Chamber of Commerce has purchased the building that the Chamber occupies. There is an agreement between the Chamber, Tourism Commission, and another individual to rent the building. The Chamber of Commerce is now the landlord, and the Tourism Commission is a tenant. There are conversations going on to have the

building be joint owned by both groups. The Chamber of Commerce will have a meeting tomorrow where this topic will be discussed on what the partnership will look like and ownership. The relationship and agreement between the Chamber and Tourism needs to be ironed out. The spending plan for the EDA funding is to create a Welcome Center in the Chamber building. The building needs updating, the second floor is unfinished and can be turned into office space. There is an opportunity for a wow factor to make this building an exciting stop for visitors.

- **VTC ARPA Money to Counties**

Sabbatini gave an overview of the VTC funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). These are federal funds that have been carved out for all counties in the state of Virginia to receive funding for tourism, specifically for marketing. Accomack County will receive \$260K, Northampton County will receive \$100K. The DMO's have been tasked to develop a plan for marketing. Chincoteague, Onancock, and the Tourism Commission are all DMO's. Developing a county regional plan that includes all the incorporated towns is what the Board of Supervisors of both counties have requested. The plan must be submitted to the Board of Supervisors for approval in each County. The same process will happen with Northampton County. The Tourism Commission and Cape Charles, which is also a DMO, will work out a plan for Northampton County approval. A work session is needed to discuss the amounts for the DMO's

- Martin stated that there are some visitor plan improvements that are allowed. Completed approved plans must be submitted by December 31, 2022, to the state.
- Tarr suggested to go into a work session to discuss allotment of funds to each DMO spending plan.

6. Matters by Commissioners

- Shotwell shared that Chincoteague visitation is slow right now. Death by Chocolate is coming up in February. Search for Shamrock will be in March. The Chincoteague Chamber has a Business Resilience workshop on January 26th. Annual General Membership meeting is the 23rd of February. Visitor Guide is at the printers no date on delivery. 2021 numbers ended up strong all numbers were double of what they were in 2020 and not far off from 2019 visitor numbers. Chincoteague is looking forward to the funding opportunity that might be possible in 2022 making the future even stronger.
- Spuck shared that it is slow in Onancock. Marketing plans are being developed by the Main Street and OBCA organizations to make sure everyone is working in the same direction and not duplicating efforts.
- MacGarvey shared that there is nothing new to report regarding Tourism. There was groundbreaking on six new homes for affordable housing.
- Tarr shared that House Bill #75 has been introduced. This bill would place a cap on transient taxes up to 5% to be dedicated to tourism. What that would mean is that the transient tax that the town receives to maintain the towns public works, roads and police force would be stripped away. This legislation is strongly opposed by the Counties.

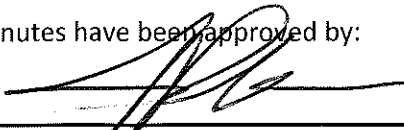
7. Adjournment

- At 1:36 p.m. Spuck made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell, and the meeting was adjourned.

8. Works Session

- During the work session it was discussed how the disbursement of the VTC ARPA funding would be allocated to the DMO's in Accomack County.

These minutes have been approved by:



2/16/22

John Coker, Chairman

Date



2/16/22

Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

Date