

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
August 17, 2022, at 1 PM
19056 Parkway Melba, 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 County Supervisor, Chair
Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street
Bill Stramm, Cape Charles Main Street

Chamber of Commerce- Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 1:01 p.m. Coker called meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Karen Zamorski from Cape Charles Main Street stated Harbor for the Arts Summer Festival-free concert series in Central Park will feature the band The English Channel September 3 at 7 PM.

3. Consent Agenda

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

4. VTC Updates

- Laura Messer reported the VTC Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program is now open. The max award is \$5K available for 150 recipients for microbusinesses or shoulder season visitation marketing. The close date for this grant, September 20, 2022. Messer asked to remind Tourism Partners to sign up for the VTC newsletter if they have not already done so. DRIVE Outdoor Grant Program is for 10 DMO's. If a DMO has previously completed DRIVE 2.0 the funding available can be up to \$20k.
 - Sabbatini reported that the Tourism Commission will be partnering with the Eastern Shore Rail Trail for the DRIVE Outdoor Grant. The grant allows funding to be used on Infrastructure needs.

- Coker added; Northampton County reserves 15-20% of the tourism tax to be given out for infrastructure grants each year. There is no dollar limit on infrastructure grants that NHC awards. As ES Rail Trail builds out sections of the trail be sure to apply for grants from Northampton County. Coker continued; trail heads need to be more than just a parking lot. Bathrooms, bike racks and bike repair stations need to be included.

5. Building

- Coker stated the contract for the building is still being worked on between ESVA Tourism Commission and ESVA Chamber of Commerce. The process may take months. The goal is to get the contract easy to understand for both parties.

6. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Update**

Betz reported everything is running smoothly at the Welcome Center. A new paid staff member started in August she had been a volunteer for the last eight months. A new volunteer will start in September.

- Coker shared an idea that he had that may or may not work for the Southern Welcome Center. The Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge has reopened on the weekends. The Refuge needs volunteer help. Is there a possibility that the volunteers from the WC can also help staff the Wildlife Refuge?
- Betz stated that she cannot give up any of her volunteers, but she will investigate that idea.
- Coker continued that there may be funding for paying some of the staffing needs but that is not a promise.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported a particularly good month on social media everything is growing steadily. Machen shares blogs written for the website now on Facebook. The results of cross over sharing have been very positive.

- Coker asked what are the demographics looking like to date?

Machen responded that 70% are women, 29% are men, ages 35–65.

Machen stated ESVA TC marketing plan is based on the VTC content calendar. There are four seasons, and each month has a different theme. An example: August would be craft beer small towns. Machen would create a story based on the theme for that month.

- **Advance Travel and Tourism**

Sabbatini stated our group believes we are ready to turn a corner regarding our marketing plan. ESVA TC wants to create a story line calendar with content developed for each month. The content developed will go to a direct marketing group that targets people that have shown interest in the Eastern Shore from across Virginia and the United States. The group name, Advance Travel and Tourism can help us with the push out. On social media this group would know when to purchase ads and or boost ads. Next month we plan to have a full presentation done by Advance Travel and Tourism for BOC.

- Betz added, Advance Travel and Tourism has a heat map that indicates when a cell phone number is on the Shore and the zip code attached to the cell phone. The cell phone also leaves data on the stops made and how long they are on the Shore. The data collected does not pertain to folks that are driving straight through. Themes and content produced by Machen can be push out to a select groups strategically.

Sabbatini stated this will be an immense help for us to target areas and regions that the TC is not aware of. Advance Travel and Tourism mapping showed VA Beach, Norfolk, DC and Northern VA

are high impact areas that come to the Shore. To our surprise there are other areas that we have not been targeting that equally spend time on the Shore.

- Coker asked the cost of the program.

Sabbatini responded that it will be \$1k a month. The first year the ARPA funds will be used to pay for the program. The TC will add Advance Travel and Tourism into the budget if we see that this form of marketing performs as well as we think it will.

- **Audit Complete-Fiscal Year end June 2021**

Sabbatini announced the audit is completed and everything is in good order. Joeckel did an excellent job in overseeing the audit and providing documentation needed. There was a deficiency with some old unreconciled items. The accountant came in and cleared them out, everything is in good order now.

- **Local's Choice**

Machen reported the Local Choice contest had a great participation. There were 1,348 responses to the contest questionnaire. Almost five hundred more responses than last year. Machen passed the list out for BOC to view; the public has not been made aware of the winners. First place has "Winner" on the decal. The two runner ups in the same category say, "Best Of".

- **VTC ARPA Money to Counties**

Sabbatini reported everything has been submitted by both counties for the ARPA Marketing grant. We have not received any notice that any application has been rejected. A third party has been contracted to review the plans. Once the reviews have been completed the monies will be released to the counties. Sabbatini also reported that he has been informed that any monies that have been used towards town plans can be reimbursed if the expenditure was done after the ARPA program had been announced.

- **VA Coastal Magazine**

Sabbatini reported that Coastal Virginia Magazine published a Best of Coastal Virginia issue which left out the Eastern Shore. The error created an opportunity for ESVA TC to go to Coastal Virginia magazine and bring this to their attention. Coastal Virginia magazine will now dedicate a whole issue to the Eastern Shore. A nomination survey from Coastal Virginia magazine will go out next month. Using TC list of local choice contestants as a resource will help folks to select businesses for the best of issue. The May/June issue will list the Eastern Shore winners. Sabbatini asked for the cover of the May/June issue to be a picture of the Eastern Shore at no additional charge.

- **Budget**

Sabbatini remarks on the 2023 budget; the visitor guide advertising will stay at the number described. Sabbatini made clear to the BOC the current economic situation could influence what is achievable in ad sales. Inflation and the recession that is looming could change the outcome of what ad sales will bring in for the upcoming visitor guide. Last year ad sales were over what was budgeted. The hope is that it will happen again.

- Shotwell added that Chincoteague has begun ad sales. There has not been a huge downturn, as of yet. Some ads have downsized, a few new ads, some sitting on the fence. One ad sale may go from a half to a full-page ad.

Sabbatini continued the advertising budget monies from ARPA will roll into the next budget year. The funding does not need to be spent until December 2023. There has been an adjustment for benefits and payroll for staff.

- Coker stated he fully supports and approves of staff benefit. Coker also suggested to add the 2023 Summit to all following agendas.



7. Matters by Commissioners

- Coker shared; Northampton County had two mishaps concerning fish kills. Senator Lewis and Delegate Bloxom have been contacted along with Virginia Marine Resource Commission (VMRC). The fishing vessels must be more responsible. Accomack County had Chicken guts spilt from Exmore all the way to the bridge tunnel. Both counties have worked hard and are successful growing tourism on the Shore. These two incidents, if they continue to happen, could kill all the hard work that has been done to encourage visitors to our region.
- Tarr shared; the Pony Swim was very successful. Still working on the bookkeeping and paying bill.
- MacGarvey shared; Exmore will be hosting the first annual Fall Festival September 24th. Vendors, crafts, bakers, growers are all invited to participate. Come spring of 2023 Exmore is planning to have a weekly festival one night a week. October 15th Exmore Auto Show will be held at the town park. Restaurants are thriving and the hotels are full in Exmore. There will be no Shakespeare in the Park, the group has disbanded.
- Shotwell shared; Chincoteague had a very successful pony swim. The visitor numbers are above 2021 but slightly lower than 2019. Tourism is good on the island. Labor Day weekend the Chincoteague Decoy Carvers and Artist Association show will be held at the Chincoteague Center. September 10th is the Plein Air event. The 10th is also the date of the police department Poker Run. The video that Shotwell took of the pony swim had 6M views almost 16M people reached. Governor Younkin attended the pony swim. During the parade Shotwell ran out to the Governor with a Chincoteague Travel Guide and snapped a picture of him holding the guide.

7. Adjournment

- 1:54 p.m. Tarr made a motion to adjourn, second by MacGarvey, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

 Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairman	10/19/2022 Date
 Aileen Joeckel, Secretary	10/19/2022 Date