

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
April 19, 2023, 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

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co, Supervisor, Vice Chair
Matt Spuck, Accomack County appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C- Z
Clairice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Heather Williamson, DDD -Z
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Sally Williams, Southern Gateway Welcome Cent

Commissioners – Absent

John Coker, Northampton Co, Supervisor, Chair

Guest Present

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-Z

1. Call to Order

- At 12:30 p.m. Tarr called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- No public comments

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:30 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura thanked all those that applied for VTC grants. The awardees have been notified but asked not to share information if they have won until there is a formal announcement by the governor the first week of May. A grant cycle will be opening May 18th. VTC orientation will be opening again.

5. Commission Updates

• **Director of Destination Development Introduction**

Sabbatini introduced Heather Williamson to the BOC. Williamson has accepted the position of Director of Destination Development and will begin May 1, 2023. Williamson is from West Virginia and relocated to the Eastern Shore 2 years ago. Previously Williamson worked for Comfort Suites and Key West Cottages. Williamson degree is in marketing and public relations. Sabbatini expressed great enthusiasm that Williamson addition to the Tourism Commission team will bring a wealth of knowledge and experience with travel businesses and visitor experiences on the Shore.

- **Welcome Center Update**

Sally Williams reported last Saturday 400 people came through the welcome center. The welcome center floors have been redone and the four outdoor chairs have been repainted. Everything looks great with lots of positive comments. The floors are 14 years old and now look brand new. Visitors give complementary comments on the room size and the number of brochures the welcome center carries. HH Scott and Williams have been visiting partners on the Shore delivering brochures selling and collecting rack space revenue. Scott and Williams will be attending the Newport News FAM tour on May 9th. Welcome center visitation is up over last year by 15%.

- **Local's Choice**

Machen reported Local Choice Survey is completed and ready to launch hopefully next week with a press release. A couple of new categories have been added in response to local business suggestions.

- **LOVE Sign**

Sabbatini discussed the LOVE sign for the outside of the Chamber building. Sabbatini, Machen, Joeckel and Holloway met to begin the thought process on what the LOVE sign would represent. The discussion was about dimensions, cost, and what the different letters could represent. We have a good idea about the size and location. Opening the thought process for letter representation to industry partners and schools is another thought.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported website use is strong. Reach on Facebook and Instagram are down a little but engagement and following are increasing. The reach will increase once the summer travel begins. Ponies are being shared as new foals are being born. The Garden Tour is happening this weekend along with Love run in Cape Charles.

- **Familiarization Tour**

Sabbatini explained what a FAM tour is: ESVA Tourism Commission would host welcome center staff from around the state to experience a couple of days of unique experiences found on the Shore. It has been several years since a FAM tour has been on the Shore. ESVA FAM tour to take place the second week of October mid-week Tuesday, Wednesday Thursday of this year. Housing people in Exmore seems to be the best idea.

- Shotwell reminded everyone the Oyster Festival is October 7. Toward the end of the second week would be good for Chincoteague.

- **Audit**

Sabbatini reported the audit is completed with financial reports given to both counties. Sabbatini thanked Joeckel for her work with the auditor from Robinson, Farmer, and Cox. The audit looked very good. There was one deficiency of county funding coming in past the fiscal year end and posted to the wrong year. The audit fiscal year 2022 was not completed in time for Accomack County to release fourth quarter funding. The audit process started earlier to correct the late issue. Sabbatini has started working on the fiscal year 2024 budget and will have a preliminary budget for the next meeting.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Holloway shared Cape Charles has a busy upcoming week with the blessing of the fleet, blessing of the worms and a Love Run and walk happening. Lodging and retail sales are up for the month of March and April compared to last year. In many cases figures are above 2021. Everyone is speaking very positively about the season ahead. Future bookings for lodging are strong. Cape Charles is still working on sewer and water plant sale.

- Spuck shared restaurant sales are up year over year and year over year the previous year. Onancock is trending in the right direction. A mural project is on the way right now three quarters completed. There are other mural projects that are set to begin when this one is finished. Murals have been well received other building owners would like to have murals on their buildings.
 - Holloway stated that Cape Charles is looking into public art with zoning changes that are needed for it to happen.

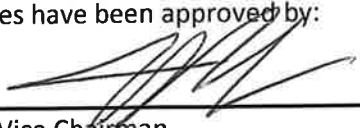
Onancock Marina just opened this past week with a new harbor master. Garden Tour this weekend.

- MacGarvey shared Exmore is booming too. There are two new businesses that are opening with a third business coming. The sewer is about to happen things look like they will explode when that takes place. Things are positive for Exmore.
- Shotwell shared that the Seafood festival is approaching quickly. There are only three hundred tickets left. The Easter Decoy Show had the best attendance since 2003. Attendance at the office is up 25% year to date. Travel guides are going out of the office 40% faster than last year. Key West cottages are finished and open now. Chincoteague Bay RV Resort, on the south end of the island, is scheduled to open June 1st. Blufin Bungalows & Marina are coming along as well. Chincoteague is for pony lover's T-shirt is in. T-shirts are almost sold out and more have been ordered. There is a new Chincoteague app for Apple and Android phones. The Kiosk will be up and running shortly. A webcam is being installed at another location at the harbor that will be a live feed camera. The camera will scan 360 degrees and can capture rocket launches, sun rises and sun sets. We are hoping for installation in the next few months.
- Tarr shared as of Monday night 20 Virginia state ponies have been born. There are usually between 60-70 ponies a season. Tarr asked Shotwell if Chincoteague Chamber & Tourism are involved with saving the Beebe Ranch. Shotwell answered it is being promoted. Tarr explained that the Beebe Ranch is up for sale. Chincoteague Museum is trying to purchase the iconic ranch where the story of Misty of Chincoteague has its origin. The property consists of a 10-acre ranch and a home asking price \$600K. As of Monday, \$350K has been raised. April 30th the museum will renegotiate with the Beebe family to get an extension on the contract. The Chincoteague Fire Company will be donating a nice size check to the fund. Others will also donate as they get close to the asking price. The effort is to save the ranch from being purchased by a developer who would tear it down and build condominiums on the property. Once the property is purchased the museum will apply for grants to rebuild the corrals and stables to bring it back to its iconic site.
- Ace Seybolt shared that the partnership between the ESVA Chamber of Commerce and ESVA Tourism Commission is going well. Eggs and Issues was very successful. The Chamber has reached the 500-membership mark.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:06 p.m. Holloway made a motion to adjourn, second by MacGarvey, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:



John Coker, Vice Chairman

Date

5/17/2023



Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

Date

5/17/23