

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
January 17, 2024, at 12:30 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
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Heather Williamson, DDD-Z
Emily Machen, Marketing Director -Z
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant

Commissioners – Absent

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella reported it was a good year at the investment firm, those folks that are well invested have done well. The Eastern Shore attracts people with greater means more so than people with modest means. Data on this is from the number of second homes on the Shore and high-end rental units, STR & B&B's. Knowing who comes to the Shore is a profound asset to the Shore and the economics for businesses. There has been natural growth tailing off as businesses have reached a plateau. These businesses will be reaching out for more assistance. The economic slowdown may be softer for the Eastern Shore.
 - Coker responded that ESVA needs to keep looking at demographics and know who is coming here and market to those people and areas they are coming from.
- Cherron Davis announced the Virginia State Travel Guide went live. The Spring / Summer cover will have Cape Charles fishing pier view. Robert suggests that we need to contact VTC to lobby for the Chincoteague Pony to be on the cover of the State Travel Guide in 2025 which is the one hundred Anniversary of the Pony Swim. Travel visits are slow right now at the New Church Welcome Center. Last year yearly total travel visits were up 18% over 2019 numbers. 2019 was the previous highest travel numbers on record for any year. The Eastern Shore corridor is an important part of travel for the state.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:47 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Shotwell and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported on upcoming grants opening Feb 8, closing date March 14. There is a DMO grant that has a \$50K eligibility with the match 2:1. Laura also reported webinars are posted to help communities apply for grants.

5. Commission Updates

• **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported Southern Gateway Welcome Center, this month's report, compares the end of 2023 to the other previous 12 years. The numbers have not passed the 2019 record. Over the last 5 years the total number of folks entering the WC is under 100K a year. As in the previous 10 years the totals have all been over 100K for the year. It could be they are not walking into the WC as they have in the past and just using the restroom facilities. Tourism Information Request (TIR) for brochures has gone down. More people are going online for information. The older folks still request brochures and maps. At the end of the year the WC was 2% up on 2022. In January 2024 WC is down 2% over last January 2023.

- Coker stated for Northampton County 2021 TOT Tax is the highest on record. TOT Tax has leveled off since 2021. Northampton County has run out of places for visitors to stay.
- Ace Seybolt stated rental dollars are up 3%, nights booked down 6%. Two years ago, there was an increase in rental rates because payroll went up so high so fast. On Chincoteague we normally have homes for sale 100-120 listings. This year there are only twenty-five listings with three of those listings under \$300K. There is no market for locals being able to purchase a home on Chincoteague.
- Shotwell reported Chincoteague TOT Tax numbers, calendar year 2023 over 2022 was up almost 6%.

• **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported the new travel guide content has been completed. There has been a complete redesign of layout and content this year. The team is a little biased, but we believe this is the best guide to date.

• **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported there has been great overall digital performance in November and December. It was surprising to see that TC overall performed well. The holiday season is a strong season for big markers to push out ads, TC digital placement of organic happenings performed very well against competition. TC has the header for the outdoor page with Virginia.org website. Virginia Living Magazine offered an opportunity to put an ad in the magazine at a discounted rate. We jumped at the opportunity to work with Virginia Living Magazine again.

• **Strategic Planning**

Sabbatini thanked Laura Messer for conducting the strategic planning meeting, it was a worthwhile exercise that will give the TC a guide for moving forward in the next 3-5 years.

- Laura stated the final draft report will be given to TC by February 16th. Five goals have risen to the top out of one hundred goals noted. Two goals in the top five were extended itineraries and outdoor recreation. Making sure the Shore does not lose its character and preservation was a strong point brought up over and over during the planning session.
- Coker stated referring to the sentiment of keeping the character of the Shore. Northampton County likes STR, NHC wants STR, NHC wants to grow STR. What

Northampton County does not want is to modify how we live. The fact is we want to sell the Shore, but we want to promote the Shore as it is.

- Larua suggested to get the residents on board to be sure to always state that it is not the community character that tourism wants to change.

- **Logo/Brand**

Sabbatini remarked that TC has been working on important items. The Strategic Plan is close to being finished. Now the discussion is moving to logo/brand which is equally important. Sabbatini has had a meeting with Consociate Media and is trying to pin down a date were all the Commissioners can attend.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini presented the schedule for the summit for everyone to look over. If there are any suggestions that a change needs to be made, please let TC know. A change up from last year will be introducing the VTC help desk advisors to summit attendees before the keynote speaker begins. Last year the common response, from the survey turned in at the end of summit, partners did not realize the services being offered by VTC. Also, customer care training for business employees to learn conflict resolution skills is being added. Customers can be unruly and rude back to employees who become overwhelmed when situations arise. We may, in partnership with the Chamber, do something bigger around customer service. Something for the whole Shore a Lunch and Learn is a thought.

- Shotwell asked if the ESVA Chamber puts together a training session, Chincoteague Chamber would like to be involved.
- Coker asked, what sharing your shore story does for our partners.
- Sabbatini responded; for partners to realize that placing an emphasis on keeping the Shore as close to possible to its' culture and traditions. Partners sharing their stories to both counties and on their websites, if they have a website, or when folks come into their businesses. Those efforts are ways to not lose sight of what sets us apart from other regions. Steve Chandler will do an excellent job of describing the benefits of sharing your story. Sabbatini stated that having our partners telling their story will be a big part of Sabbatini welcome address to partners.

- MacGarvey added sharing stories helps the Shore define who we are and what we want to preserve.

Sabbatini continued, the wrap up of the summit will conclude with Sabbatini and Coker giving final comments and inviting the attendees to networking opportunities with wine, beer, light snacks while socializing.

- Laura added that Hampton Roads Small Business Development Executive Director will also be attending with VTC staff at the help desk.
 - Ace Seybolt asked if Rob Bloxom, Jen Kiggans, and Bill DeSteph had been invited.
- Sabbatini responded he would reach out to them.

- **Visitor Guide Cover Photo**

Sabbatini has sent out cover photos for the visitor guide to all commissioners. The sunset photo was captivating and was the choice of the commissioners.

6. Matters by Commissioner


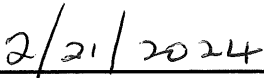
- MacGarvey shared Christmas events in Exmore had more people than expected attend town events. The grant from Tourism and Northampton Co gave the town an opportunity to do things that could not have been done before. There is a self-guided walking tour in Exmore that ties into VA250 celebration. During this slow time of year, the businesses of Exmore have still been busy.

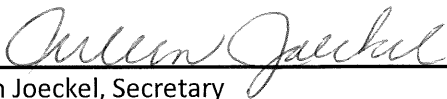

- Shotwell shared Chincoteague has been quiet. Calls have been coming in inquiry about Pony Swim, some boat cruises are already booked. VA250 is starting to get traction, ESVA Chamber has been assisting. March 12–14 Chincoteague will be hosting the VTC Visitor Center Seminar. It has been 9 years since the last one was held. There will be a press release with all the details soon. Search for Shamrocks event will be in March. Death by Chocolate in February, Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce Annual General Membership meeting is February 15. Dave Pierce from NASA will be the speaker.
 - Cherron Davis, from New Church Welcome Center, added regarding the VTC Visitor Center Seminar. There were several applicants for hosting the seminar, Chincoteague rose to the top and was awarded to host.
 - Coker commented he was happy to hear NASA would be speaking at the membership meeting. Rocket launches have a great synergy tourism needs to find a way to capitalize them.
- Jay Abella shared what is happening with Cape Charles Main Street. Decoy Show February 3, Love Your Locals February 8-14, Main Street Connect meeting February 5, VTC Drive 2.0 meeting February 12, Love Run April 20, Tall Ships will be coming back. A riverboat will be coming to Cape Charles offering dinner cruises.
- Coker will not be at the next meeting, but he will be attending the summit.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:38 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

	
_____ Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson	_____ Date

	
_____ Aileen Joeckel, Secretary	_____ Date