

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
October 18, 2023, 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
Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Guest Present

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

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

- At 12:28 p.m. Tarr called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella reported there is good news bad-news split on the economy. Inflation rates may be coming down, gas prices are going down and the unemployment rate is low. The wildcard is tension in the Middle East making things uncertain in the future. The trend for tourism right now is unpredictable.
- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center introduced her assistant Lindsay Alms. Cherron thanked the whole ESVA Tourism Commission for hosting the VTC FAM Tour on the Eastern Shore. The tour traveled from east to west, north to south traveled by van, golf carts, boat, and kayak. The tour group enjoyed food, history, and the arts. It was a great learning experience for all to absorb knowledge about the Shore and share it with their staff to inform the traveling public what the Eastern Shore has to offer.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:35 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura did not attend the FAM Tour. Laura attended the governor's summit on rural prosperity. In Blackstone, VA. Laura sent out the economic impact data after the September BOC meeting. As an overview the Eastern Shore region had a total visitor expenditure of \$232.4 million in 2022. Fourteen percent of all the jobs on the Shore are sustained by tourism. 14.8 M in state and local taxes have been generated. Laura had a meeting with the Rail Trail and will be working with this group on marketing the trail with VTC. The strategic planning session will be November 1, from 1-5 pm. The agenda will be finished for the strategic plan by the end of next week. The second strategic planning meeting will be on December 6, from 1-5 pm.
 - Holloway asked for status update on the Rail Trail and strategic planning questions to help with preparing for the workshop.

Laura answered that a position for an executive director for the Rail Trail has been posted. There will be meetings with Mayors along the Rail Trail line that Supervisor Wolf will be setting up. A notice will be given to the public on what sections have been funded and the start dates of the trail sections. Laura continued she will be sending out an agenda for the strategic planning session which will have questions that will help everyone prepare for the workshop.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the Welcome Center visitation is still up 4-5%. The current visitor now is an older crowd staying two – three days on the shore. A few new partners have been added. Sally and HH enjoyed being a part of the FAM Tour. HH and Sally were with the FAM Tour the entire time. Thank you notes have been sent to everyone.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported the travel guide sales are beginning to wrap up. Several full-page advertorials ads have been sold. Storyline promotion has been added to ad sales as an upgrade sales package. As for what that entails, additional sales pitch verbiage will be added to promote the regular size ad which is a traditional picture ad. The thought is the travel guide will have fluidity with more description of businesses that promotions the Shore.

- Sabbatini added the storyline and advertorial are new tweaks added to the visitor guide this year. Williamson has reached the budget for sale of ads for the visitor guide. The Tourism Commission is excited about where we are right now including the new products that have been sold. The 2024 Visitor Guide should be here before the summit.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported the digital marketing has had a drop in reach. There is a good engagement rate and increase in followers. This is a good indicator that followers continue to have interest in the Shore which can turn into visits. Machen shared a brochure put out by Coastal Virginia Tourism Alliance. Coastal Virginia Tourism Alliance have started a joint initiative to share all regional different coastal areas to traveling public.

- Laura added that ARPA funding was contributed by coastal regions to make this initiative happen.

- **FAM Tour Recap**

Sabbatini wanted to thank everyone publicly for their hard work on the FAM Tour, Cherron, Lindsey, Joeckel, Sally, HH, Shotwell, Holloway, Williamson, Machen. There has been nothing but positive responses on the FAM Tour. The folks from the FAM Tour were thrilled to be here. They saw things, experienced our history, nature, beaches sunsets, and sunrises. The Eastern Shore's

greatest assets are the people and storytelling. Sabbatini thanked everyone that work on putting everything together. Machen put together a u-tube video of the tour and played it for the BOC.

- **Audit**

Sabbatini reported the audit went well. Sabbatini thanked Joeckel for providing all requested documents needed for the audit. The audit should be back soon and most importantly both counties will have the reports on time and there will be no delay in funding.

- **Strategic Planning**

Sabbatini announced earlier the schedule for the strategic plan; first meeting will be November 1, 1-5 pm. The second meeting will be December 6, 1-5 pm.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini announced February 26, 2024, will be our next summit. A save the date will be going out once we have secured a location for the summit. The keynote speaker for the summit may be Steve Chandler of Chandlerthinks. Sabbatini will provide a sample of his work for the BOC. Steve does marketing, branding, and storytelling promotion.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Coker apologizes for being late, he was attending another meeting. Coker was pleased to hear that the FAM Tour went well. The Decoy Show being held at the Oyster Farm in February is having an organizational meeting. Coker would like to have someone from the Tourism Commission attend the meeting. There are over two hundred vendors committed to attend. The hope is that the decoy show would turn into a two-day event. Decoy shows generate tens of thousands of dollars if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is a big event for the Shore to host the show.
- MacGarvey reported Exmore had a successful fall festival very well attended. Vendors from across the bay attended as well as from Maryland. Exmore Auto Show will be this coming Saturday. The rest of the town activities will be in December. Willis Wharf had their first event which was a concert by the water. The bike tour will be in Exmore next weekend and the social hall will be putting together a mini-October fest for the 1,200 bikers.
- Spuck shared Onancock is slowing down a little. The Onancock Welcome Center is going out to bid. Christmas home tour and Christmas event planning are underway.
- Holloway shared Cape Charles has many events planned for Halloween. Dock Dogs will be the weekend of November 11-12. It is a new event for Cape Charles it is very entertaining watching Dogs dive into a pool of water set up in the park this event is free. Cape Charles is gearing up for Festive Fridays and all the holidays events that follow. Inns and hotel bookings were full, especially during the holidays. The Hampton Hotel stays open during December and is sold out every weekend during Festive Fridays.
- Shotwell reported Chincoteague had a good Oyster Festival. The weather was great, there were no complaints for the first time in over 20 years. Shotwell is proofing the travel guide and plans to have the travel guide at the printers by early November. Chincoteague has many activities planned for Halloween. Then the tree lighting and Christmas festivities begin. Everything will be on the website. Visitors are still coming to Chincoteague with everyone looking for the flamingos. There are two resident flamingos that are still on the island. Boat captains are doing well scheduling flamingo tours.
- Tarr stated that it does not take much to get people to visit Chincoteague and Assateague Island. People come from Japan to see the ponies and know more about the ponies than folks from Virginia Beach. Once people go home and tell their friends what we have on the islands they keep


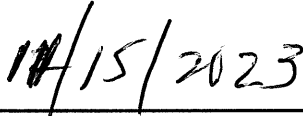
coming back. There are two crowns on the Shore: Cape Charles and Chincoteague. Growing the middle of the Shore to keep people here longer is the development that is happening.

- Ace Seybolt asked about the parking lots on Assateague if there is movement on moving them north.
 - Tarr stated he was told it will begin in 2025 by the Core of Engineers. A small group of people do not want the parking lots to move. What Assateague currently has is only a storm away from having no parking at all. Twenty-seven percent of Accomack tax base is from Chincoteague and Assateague Island no beach access would have a drastic effect on businesses.

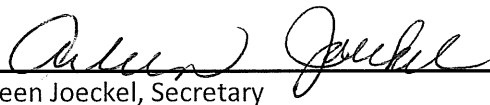
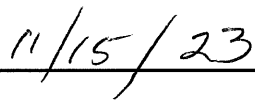
7. Adjournment

- At 1:25 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Spuck, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date