

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
May 17, 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-Z  
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C  
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

Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street  
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center  
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street- Z

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. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella commented economic conditions remain unknown if a recession will ever materialize. The economy is beginning to show signs that retail sales have slowed down. It is not known if the Eastern Shore will be insulated by outside economic events.
  - Shotwell shared the Seafood Festival May 6<sup>th</sup> t-shirts did not sell out as has happened in the past ten years.

Jay added that at the Main Street Connect meeting 2 weeks ago all retailers and hotels reported flat to single digit growth or robust growth in bookings and receipts. It is unclear what that means right now.

- Cherron Davis stated traffic at the New Church Welcome Center is fantastic. More buses are traveling. The New Church WC is planning a September 9th event, it is also the same day as ESVA Chamber Fest. The WC numbers are up over 2019 numbers which is very encouraging. April numbers are up 14% over 2019 numbers. 2019 numbers, in April, were the highest numbers across the state of Virginia, ever.

3. Consent Agenda

Coker has issues with financials regarding the joint purchase of the chamber building not being reflected correctly in the financials. Sabbatini will consult with auditor/ accountant to make sure financials are correctly reflected. Sabbatini replied that the chamber is going through the same questions to make sure the lease that is now paid by both companies is in the financial statement.

- At 12:39 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

#### 4. VTC Updates

- Laura announced the Spring grant round Eastern Shore received \$156,168. These funds went to twelve different businesses. Grant funding opens next week for VA250. Cara Burton and Laura have been working in Northampton County to promote the VA250 Anniversary of our country. Machen and Williamson are included on the emails in hopes that Accomack County would like to participate. Messer attended Onancock Main Street entrepreneurial eco-system planning session last month. The VTC Orientation will be June 13 -15, a great way to learn about VTC resources. Messer will not be able to attend the meeting in June because she will be on vacation.

- Sabbatini asked if a resolution to participate in VA250 needs to go through the Accomack Co Board of Supervisors and Messer stated yes. ESVA Tourism Commission can be the point of contact if Accomack has no staff resources for planning.

Williamson will be attending the VTC Orientation by zoom.

#### 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams stated the Southern Welcome Center is also up. More buses and more people are coming through. HH and Sally attended the FAM tour in Newport News last week. A lot is packed into one day. It was very informative.

- Sabbatini thanked HH and Sally for managing the WC and reaching out to industry partners, delivering visitor guides, and collecting rack space fees. A plan coordinated to get Williamson out and introduced to partners is in the works.

- **Director of Destination Development Introduction**

Coker welcomed Heather Williamson to the Eastern Shore Tourism Commission.

Williamson thanked everyone and reported on the increasing numbers at the Welcome Center and the peanuts being a hit from Qual Cove that are handed out daily. Williamson is getting up to speed on the rack cards and thanked HH and Sally for assisting with those duties before she arrived. The travel guide is being looked at in terms of the layout and design including all aspects of content. Williamson has meetings with all groups that have been a part of the tourism and identifying her as the connector to outside groups. Travel writers are also an emphasis that is being worked on. Sunshine sol is a gal from the DC area that has 283K Instagram followers that Williamson is working with. Pushing eco-tourism to young people is what this Instagram is great at doing.

- **Local's Choice**

Machen reported the Local Choice survey is up and running and there are already four hundred responses looking forward to more coming in. Survey runs through the end of this month. Machen is trying to get the survey out to local groups so that it is a local survey rather than consumer. The thought is to tailor the survey to locals. The BOC had not seen the survey posted anywhere.

- Holloway suggested a Cape Charles Cheriton chat group that is very active.

- **LOVE Sign**

Sabbatini stated if you missed last month's meeting Holloway, Machen, Joeckel and Sabbatini met to discuss the LOVE sign. Williamson will be joining the group. ESVA Tourism would like to place a LOVE sign in front of the Chamber building. The big question was the budget to fund the sign. Sabbatini entered \$8k for the sign into FY 2024 budget. A LOVE sign grant will be added to that amount.

- **Visitor Guide Distribution**

Sabbatini gave a shout out to Joeckel on visitor guide distribution. Joeckel reached out to several different papers for pricing to use the ESVA visitor guide as an insert into a Sunday paper. Raleigh, North Carolina, News and Observer, came back with a great quote for a Memorial Day weekend Sunday paper. We also reached out to a Delaware paper and the Philadelphia Inquirer. The Delaware paper never came back with a quote. The Philadelphia paper requested fifteen copies of the VG to practice as an insert with their machines. Raleigh came in with a price much lower than what we paid to the Virginia Pilot and the Richmond Dispatch in years past. A positive phone call was received by Joeckel from a man in Connecticut who was so impressed with the VG he requests to have several mailed to him for his siblings to plan a trip. The hope is that TC will have an overwhelming response from the Raleigh area with 25K visitor guides inserted into their paper.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported visits to our website have decreased. Time spent on our website has increased. That seems to be a trend on our social media. The overall reach is down but the time spent on the different platform's engagement is up. This shift relates to quality over quantity from the viewers that we reach. Machen showed the Food and Travel magazine that featured the ES and Chincoteague in the last eight pages of the magazine. Co VA magazine came out with the winners of the best of the Eastern Shore competition. Machen went to the airport on "Visitor Day" to hand out materials on the Shore.

- **Draft 2023-2024 Budget**

Sabbatini reviewed the draft budget for FY 23-24. ARPA Funding came up during budget discussion. BOC suggested updating the strategic plan then moving forward to look at ESVA logo as part of the spending plan for ARPA Funding.

- Messer offered to facilitate the strategic plan updating.

All the changes suggested by Sabbatini will be funded by the current proposed budget. If any changes to the budget happen it will again be presented to the BOC at the June meeting.

## 6. Matters by Commissioner

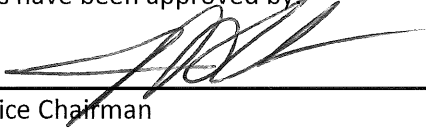
- MacGarve reported the upcoming Juneteenth celebration will be held in Exmore June 17<sup>th</sup> it has taken place for the past 24 years. It will be held at the town park with a parade down the main street.
- Holloway shared that the numbers reported at the Main Street Connect group are unsettled. There are some reports that businesses are up, but not all businesses. The first quarter was up but May is unpredictable right now. The visitor center and bathroom are moving along well. Northampton County has been a supporter of that project. By Festive Fridays, the hope is that the project will be completed. This includes five visitor restrooms ADA accessible, and a visitor center attached that looks like a train station. 60K copies of the Cape Charles map have been printed. Cape Charles on one side with Eastern Shore of Virginia on the other side.
- Shotwell shared visitation is up on Chincoteague by 11%. Facebook reach is up 64%. The outdoor digital kiosk may be up and running in June. Apps are up and running on android and apple phones. The Seafood Festival was a success, a sold-out event with perfect weather. Chincoteague award luncheon is next week. Several new businesses are opening. Etta has closed and will be opening as The Pearl. Antares launch is scheduled for July 7<sup>th</sup>. There are a lot of bus tours on the island this spring. May and April have been very busy. There has been a lot of media interest in pony swimming. The Chincoteague pony now as the state pony is pulling in a lot of attention.
- Tarr reported ponies are still dropping it will be a good year.

- Coker reposted he spent a couple of days in Chincoteague last week on his way back he stopped in Saxis and ran into a filming crew from WHRO. Saxis will be part of a program that is being put together telling stories from six different locations on the Shore. Another event that was experienced by Coker was in Nassawadox the Sawmill. The Sawmill had a demonstration of making boards from logs and cedar shingles. Many antique tractors were on display, it was an event needing to be promoted more. Machen and Williamson already have a contact to help with promoting the event in the future. The Decoy show during the month of February held at the Oyster Farm is another event that needs to be promoted. The Mary Poppins play was another event that brought folks from across the bay. The play was as good as a Broadway show. There is a lot going on here on the Shore, this is an exciting place to live. The job of the TC is to let both counties know what is going on.

7. Adjournment

- At 2:00 p.m. Closed Session called by Coker

These minutes have been approved by:

 \_\_\_\_\_ Date 7/19/2023

John Coker, Vice Chairman

Date

 \_\_\_\_\_ Date 7/19/23

Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

Date