

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
July 16, 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
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Heather Williamson, DDD
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Cent
HH Scott, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee
Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street-Z
Bill Stramm, Cape Charles Main Street
Karen Zamorski, 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 12:31 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella commented that the recession that never comes still has not arrived. The Eastern Shore has a strong tourism pull which helps keep a downturn outlook pushed further way.

3. Consent Agenda

Coker asked why the revenue was higher than it normally is at the end of year.

- Joeckel answered that 2024 visitor guide ads have been sold in FY 2023 but will be moved to FY 2024.
- Sabbatini reported that Williamson has done an outstanding job at bringing in ad sales which include one \$10K ad for the 2024 visitor guide. There are innovative ideas to change the look of the 2024 visitor guide, which is extremely exciting. As the visitor guide comes together its progress will be shared.
- At 12:38 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Holloway and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura announced Exmore has become a designated DMO. Laura met with the Mini Golf owner about the Micro Business Marketing Leverage program. This new grant opportunity opens August 22nd and closes September 28th. Economic Impact data numbers for 2020-2022 will be released soon with the county breakout numbers being released in September.

5. Commission Updates

- Coker started a discussion on the upcoming Decoy Show put on by Tommy O'Conner in Cape Charles at the Oyster Farm. Coker believes ESVA TC needs to figure out how to help O'Conner promote the Decoy Show. Local carvers have benefited from the event. People came to the event from all over. If there are grants available to get the word out around the state and to other states to bring awareness that this is happening on the Shore, it would be great.
 - Holloway asked if the TC could help with a rack card at the welcome center. The Decoy Show is a personal passion not a business. Grants may not be available. There is not a profit that comes from the show. There is no charge to participate or attend the event. There are sponsorships that cover the cost of the venue.
 - Shotwell stated that we cannot support a personal event for profit.

Coker added Tommy O'Conner does not do the show for profit the motivation is to support local carvers and the love of the carving craft.

- Karen Zamorski added that Tommy O'Conner might be looking at expanding the event to two days. The Oyster Farm has relayed this to Karen.
- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported that it has been busy at the welcome center. There have been days that the visitor count has reached seven hundred.

- Sabbatini read a letter received from a truck driver from Pennsylvania. The letter was highly complementary on cleanness and welcoming staff at the Southern Welcome Center. The driver's experience has never been matched to any other rest stop experience.
- Holloway suggested posting the letter on social media.
- Coker asked Williams what is going on at the Wildlife Refuge.

The Wildlife Refuge has a new manager coming on board soon and staff to help. The display at the welcome center will be fixed in the next few weeks. The Wildlife Refuge facility is now open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10am-4pm.

- **Director of Destination Development Introduction**

Williamson reported The Welcome Center is doing fabulously and all staff working extremely hard. Last week a meeting was held with the Wildlife Refuge management concerning the corner of the welcome center that is dedicated to the Wildlife Refuge. For far too long the area has not been loved and needs updating. Out of order signs on the display unit is not a good look. What has been decided, in the next 5 weeks, plaques will be put up describing the wildlife of the Shore. Within a year the display will be renewed.

- Coker suggested Northampton County infrastructure funds can be added to the Wildlife Refuge funding for the display to be updated.

Williamson thanked Coker for that support. Williamson continued; the travel guide numbers show the work being put into sales of ads. There is an emphasis on innovating the look of the guide. Part of the change will be the sale of advertorial stories which will give our visitors more of feel for the Shore as a lifestyle and a culture that ESVA TC want to share. Virginia Living will be working with Cape Charles in the future.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported the Local Choice Winners have been shared with ESVA TC industry partners. Digital marketing is performing well. ESVA TC is benchmarking above our competition with engagement and reach. VisitESVA.com has transitioned over to G4 analytics. Which will help us with mapping out the user journey on our website. We will learn what led visitors to our website and what they did with the information they gained. We have started a paid search campaign with Advance Travel. What that does for us is push people out to our small towns and merchants,

giving higher visibility to them. There was also a great Virginia Living article on Onancock. We are hoping Virginia Living will be coming back to the Shore again soon.

- Sabbatini answered a question on WHRO seen traveling around the Shore. WHRO is doing a story on the multipurpose trail that is being developed on the Shore. It should be a nice series about the Rail Trail.

- **FAM Tour**

Sabbatini discussed the FAM tour that has an arrival date of October 10th with a check out October 13th. A FAM tour is when employees of Virginia state welcome centers go to another region that hosts the group and gives the group a travel experience of their area. The whole ESVA TC is working on this along with the Cherron Davis and Lindsey from the New Church Welcome Center. Right now, we have thirty welcome center staff coming. We have put together an excellent schedule. The event begins at the Southern Gateway Welcome Center. All get on a bus and head to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel for a behind the scenes tour. Next stop, travel to Kiptopeke, then onto Wachapreague have a tour and dinner at the Island House. Overnight reservations are with Exmore Hampton Inn & Suites. It would be nice if the Chamber of Commerce could sponsor that first night's stay, Sabbatini stated. Wednesday head to Onancock, Corner Bakery, Historic Onancock School with picture at the LOVE sign and Ker Place. Head out to Parksley see the Railroad Museum, Jaxon, picture at the LOVE sign. Head to Saxis, the mayor of Saxis will feed us lunch, visit the museum see the sights of Saxis. Head to Chincoteague Island, three choices of cruises: Bottoms Up Tiki Cruise, The Cowboy Cruise and Assateague Explorer. Dinner at Bill's Seafood, Island Creamer at 8:30. Key West Cottages have donated the night stay for the group. Get up Thursday head to Channel Bass In for breakfast, museum, Wildlife Refuge, Wallops Visitor Center. Lunch at Rays Shanty. This afternoon ESVA TC will be finalizing the rest of the stay. There is lodging for Thursday night that is completely covered at Sunset properties. Much of the FAM tour is taken on by ESVA TC partners covering the cost. ESVA TC is incredibly grateful that we can give these travel advisors from around the state an experience that they can take back and share with their coworkers. Thursday afternoon and Friday will be dedicated to Cape Charles.

- **Virginia Economic Development Partnership**

Sabbatini spoke about the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. Sabbatini had a discussion with Eric Futterman managing director for Virginia Talent Accelerator program. Eric originally reached out to Accomack County which then was forward to Sabbatini and Shotwell. Eric is assisting with projects that are moving people out to the Eastern Shore, specifically for Rocket Lab. But this program will be for everyone relocating to the Shore. Eric is scheduled to be here July 23rd to do a shoot the following days. He will be in Chincoteague but also all over the Shore. Eric will be interviewing a diverse group of people to give folks an understanding of what the Eastern Shore is all about.

- Coker stated that Northampton County is 90% fiber. This needs to be added to the sales pitch for this area.

- **Draft 2023-2024 Budget**

Sabbatini presented the draft budget for FY 2024 which is balanced.

- At 1:14 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the FY 2024 Draft Budget, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- MacGarvey shared that Exmore has three new businesses coming to town. Hotels on the weekends are filled with transient traffic. The traffic is so heavy that on the weekend there was not a vacant slot for charging electric cars including lines at gas stations all day. Once the sewer comes in there are businesses waiting in the wings to move into Exmore.
 - Holloway asked what the timeline is on sewers. MacGarvey reported 18 months to 2 years.

MacGarvey thanked VTC for helping with the DMO status. The Fall Festival will be on September 30th. Exmore will be hosting CBES Between the Waters Bike Tour again.

- Shotwell shared; Misty birthday party will be tomorrow in the Chincoteague Chamber courtyard. Misty's birthday is July 20th. Misty would be seventy-seven years old if alive today. Blueberry Festive starts this weekend Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The herd roundups start this weekend with the Beach walk on Monday to the pony corrals. The pony swim is on Wednesday July 26th. WESR has partnered with TKR giving a wider opportunity for news about the Shore to be shared. Digital kiosk will be coming in a month. A new lighted sign for the Chincoteague Visitor Center has been ordered. There are many new food trucks in Chincoteague now. Chincoteague Museum now owns Beebe Ranch. The ranch's remaining ten acres of land will be preserved as a cultural icon to Chincoteague Island.
- Holloway shared the news that Watson Hardware sale was finalized. Danny Meyer purchased the building. Danny also has the Parsons building. He will be restoring the Watson Hardware building and leasing it to the Distillery. There is talk of a roof top bar. The distillery store front will be open for something new to move in. The building next to Watson only has standing walls, no roof, it will be worked on at the same time. It will be renovated to accommodate a restaurant but no other news on that. The building across the street from Rayfield's has begun restoration work again. The group is from Park City Utah. The upper floor will be housing for workers. The site is planned to be a steak and sushi restaurant. Cape Charles Mini Golf has opened and is doing well. They have a good food and beverage menu; private birthday parties can be held there. CCMG also plans Thursday night mini golf leagues for businesses during the fall. February 3rd is the Decoy Show. A wellness weekend for the spring 2024 is being worked out. The new Cape Charles Visitor Center and bathroom plans are coming along. Once the plans are completed the project will go out for bid. The Cape Charles Welcome Center will look like a train station and sit beside the train car that is being renovated. A new monthly event is coming together called "Meet Her." Ten to twelve women artisans gathering ones a month on Sunday. The Discovery map is out. If anyone needs any, please let Cape Charles know.
- Coker reported on the Rail to Trail. The first grant was obtained through Elaine Luria for 2.5 million dollars. These funds have been received for the Cape Charles portion of the Rail Trail. VDOT is engineering that portion of the trail. Next funding was a million-dollar grant from the state of Virginia. That grant was for VDOT to engineer the whole forty-nine miles of the trail from Cape Charles to Hallwood. This project is in process with VDOT hoping to have it done by the end of the year. The engineering process is like designing a superhighway. It is not just surfacing a path. Recently a twenty-three plus million dollar Raise Grant, (Rebuild America Infrastructure with Sustainability & Equity) of Federally funds was awarded. These funds are dedicated for sixteen point eight miles from Nassawadox to Onley. Those funds will flow through ANPDC. There is another eight million that was awarded for Melfa to Onley which will be an overlay of the twenty-three million. The plan is to redirect those funds to another section of the trail. Thirty million dollars in trail funding for the Eastern Shore has been granted. The Nature Conservancy is collaborating with farmers who own land from behind Sting Ray Restaurant to connection to Cape Charles. That portion of the proposed trail is all private land. The Nature Conservancy is working

out a possibility of a land swap between private land and The Nature Conservancy property. It has been in the works for a few years now. When an agreement can be made it will be turned over to the Rail Trails foundation. The Rail Trails foundation will have to get grant funding to finish that section of the trail. Whatever town has a trail head, which includes a bathroom, the town will have to maintain the bathroom.

7. Adjournment

- At 2:00 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by MacGarvey, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 8/16/2023
Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 8/16/23
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date

