

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
August 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

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

John Coker, Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street  
Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street-Z  
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center  
Christy Spriggins, Oyster Farm Event Planning-Z

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella, Investment Partners Asset Management, commented on the financial outlook that could impact tourism on the Shore. Currently there is a robust summer season. The future could change with rising interest rates for homes, credit cards utilization has never been higher including rising gasoline prices. Hotel bookings are being made closer to on the spot rather than booking months in advance. Shoulder season could remain strong but further out there could be pull back in the tourism industry on the Shore.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:33 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Spuck and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura congratulated Cape Charles for being a recipient of the Drive Outdoor grant. The Mirco Business Marketing Leverage program opens August 22 closes September 28<sup>th</sup>. Businesses with 20 or less employees are eligible for \$5K grants. DMO's, Chambers, and Main Street organizations are eligible for \$10K grants. This is the second year for this program. Laura would be happy to do a presentation for businesses or organizations that are interested in finding out more about these programs. The governor has released state economic impact numbers which have increased

sharply from last year. County and locality numbers will be released in September. Cape Charles received a one-million-dollar grant for restoration of the Rosenwald school to complete their structural and interior restoration. The Rosenwald school will create an event center including a finished auditorium and workforce development center. This is a win for Cape Charles. The Rosenwald school is one of five schools remaining in the country.

## 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the welcome center numbers are above last year by 8%. New partners are still signing up for rack card placement in the welcome center. Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel gives a Christmas present each year and hosts a picnic in the fall for staff at the welcome center. This year the CBBT has invited welcome center staff to a Tidewater baseball game at Harbor Park Stadium with box seats.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported the Wildlife Refuge corner at the welcome center will have the new plaques in place in the next two weeks. Williamson met with David Burden from Southeast Expedition. Southeast Expedition will be part of the eco-tourism advertorial spot in the visitor guide. Visitations are going well with our partners. Williamson has been explaining different VTC grant opportunities for businesses. Local Choice decals have arrived and are being handed out.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported a solid month on social media and website. Reach is down on our social platforms, but our page visits are up. More interaction on our website with longer visits leads to more likelihood of trip visits. A full transition to G4 analytics is shown in the report. The new format is easier to read. A new report on current initiatives has been provided to BOC. The email newsletter open rate has a benchmark higher than average.

- **FAM Tour**

Sabbatini stated FAM Tour preparation is going well. The team is doing an excellent job of planning. Holloway has provided good input toward FAM planning. Shotwell will be joining FAM tour meeting today. Today's meeting will finalize the schedule of events for the 4 days that the group will be here.

- Cherron Davis added It has been 7 years since the welcome centers from across the state have been to the Eastern Shore. Much of the staff has changed. This new group of travel advisors will experience all the gems the Shore. A powerful story about the Shore will be shared when they return to their regions.
- Williamson stated Cherron and Lindsey, who are both from the New Church Welcome Center, have done a phenomenal job bringing each of the communities together.
- Sally Williams added thirty-seven businesses are participating in the FAM tour to date.

- **Widget**

Machen spoke about the widget that is being developed and ready to launch before Labor Day. The company ESVA TC has hired is Visit Widget. Visit Widget also worked with Chincoteague on their app. The app will feature a database of what is on VISITESVA.com website. In addition, tours, and challenges for users to experience will also be on the Widget. The challenge data is trackable to where visitors are spending money. This information is useful as a tracking and reporting tool that can be shared with businesses. A later feature will be developed on historical walking tours of towns. You will be able to point your phone at a location where a historical building used to be. A picture will pop up showing the historical site. Another company ESVA TC

will be working with is called Zartico. This company gathers data on how travelers find us, what they do when they are here, and where they spend their money.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini discussed the upcoming summit. The tentative date for the summit will be February 26, 2024. ESVA TC has some speaker names we are considering. If any Commissioners or Laura have any suggestions, please let us know.

- Laura suggested Stuckey's foundering granddaughter gave an impactful story.

Sabbatini added we would like to make the summit attendance larger. A larger venue will be needed if the attendance is more than 120 people.

- Spuck suggested Onancock Baptist Church can seat three hundred people, has a sound system, and break out rooms.
- Holloway suggested the summit could be held in Chincoteague one year and Cape Charles the next year.


## 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Spuck shared Onancock is up 5% from last year in restaurant and lodging tax. Onancock is working hard on the projects involved in with VTC, ARPA grant, Drive grant, apps, and website interactivity. Spending money with companies to publish social media posts and boosting content.
- MacGarvey shared that Exmore has made a commitment to the new sewer. Fall festival will be September 30<sup>th</sup>, Bike tour is October 30<sup>th</sup> in Exmore.
- Holloway shared things are going well in Cape Charles. Cape Charles has gone back to the pre pandemic model. After August 15, a light switched reservations are made at the last minute. Cape Charles is hoping businesses are full. TOT tax came in for the fiscal year end up 50%, meals tax is up 14.5% from prior year. Love Fest is September 5<sup>th</sup>, Crabby Blues is September 16<sup>th</sup> with a lot of fall activities filling in. Festive Friday planning has begun. Bathroom and visitor center project will begin this fall. The train project is coming along very well. The story boards for the train will not be installed until the construction of the bathroom is completed.
- Shotwell shared it has not slowed down in Chincoteague. August has been the busiest month for the last 22 years. The governor visited several times in July and signed the bill to officially have Chincoteague pony become the state pony for the commonwealth. The governor also awarded the Spirit of Virginia award to Space Flight Academy. Chincoteague numbers are up. Widget software is on the website and will be on the kiosk August 28<sup>th</sup>. There have been over one thousand downloads for the app, 3751 for the widget and 57K pages have been used on the widget. 5M reaches on Facebook, visitation in the office up 53%. People are calling for the 100-anniversary pony swim. Shotwell asked Laura if a picture of the pony swim could be on the cover of the state travel guide. Oyster festival tickets are selling now that the pony swim is over. This will be the 50<sup>th</sup> year for Oyster Festival. Chincoteague is working on the travel guide and selling ads. Chamber membership renewals are going on now also.
- Tarr shared not much going on other than catching up from Pony Penning in July. The Chincoteague Fire Company makes all the money to run the department for a year in one week.
- Ace Seybold shared that it has been a good summer but covid has been around since July 4<sup>th</sup>.

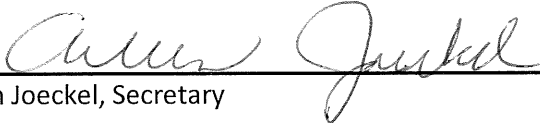
7. Adjournment

- At 1:15 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Spuck, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

  
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John Coker, Chairperson

9/20/2023  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

9/20/23  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date