

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
June 19, 2024, at 12:30 PM
19056 Parkway Melfa, Virginia 23417**

Commissioners in Attendance

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

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Heather Williamson, DDD
Emily Machen, Marketing Director-Absent
Aileen Joeckel, Executive assistant
HH Scott, Southern Welcome Center

Commissioners – Absent

Matt, Spuck, Accomack County Appointee

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt-Absent

Guest Present

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

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Absent

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Karen Zamorski, Main Street Cape Charles, shared there are two walking tours launched in Cape Charles. The first walking tour is Mason Avenue tour, the other Sears kit homes in the historic district. Rack Cards will be printed this week for both tours. Love and Canna Co. are now open in their new location. Bill Parr has moved into his new location at Sea Glass Floral. Chessies Toys Cape Charles had a ribbon cutting.
- Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome Center, reported on the Love Letters outside the welcome center. The letters will be rubber coated to protect from rust that keeps recurring. Mays numbers were off 4 %. Chincoteague year to date travel numbers is up 9 %. The strength of the shore is that we are in a 300-mile radius of major metropolitan areas. People are being very cautious with their spending.
- Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street, added it is a tale of two economies, very cautious the other end very well off. Jay attended the National Heritage Area symposium which would be a great opportunity for the Shore. The tourism tent at Chamberfest offered great hospitality during the rain to let Jay in.
- Jenny Gehman, Onancock Main Street, the new welcome center, bathroom, and main street office are all still under construction. The new amphitheater is under construction. There is a new antique store, M&M Antiques, at 39 Market Street were Crockett gallery.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:44 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Tarr and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported that everyone that applied for grants had been notified. National Travel and Tourism Day is next Monday grant winners will be announced publicly at that time. Laura attended a Rail Trail meeting and is very pleased with the progress they are making. VTC work has begun on Economic Impact for 2023.
 - Sabbatini attended the Cape Charles Main Street meeting last night and wanted to congratulate everyone including Laura on comments that multiple people made about Laura, VTC and the ESVA Tourism Commission and Chamber of Commerce who are all working together to better the Eastern Shore.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported the southern welcome center is down about 13% and it has been like that since February. People are coming in but not as many as had in the past. Over the past 15 years we would have had 35K people by now this year it is only 24K. There are new partners that have come in with rack cards.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported a new system is in place for business owners to join the welcome center by submitting online to have a rack card placed at the welcome center. Today we have a travel guide committee meeting at 2. The Shoe Box Festival is coming. It is being put together by Gerald Boyd who is the director of the Samuel D Outlaw Blacksmith Shop Memorial Museum. The Shoe Box Lunch Festive will be August 24th Williamson is a part of the committee to help promote the new event. It will be held in Onancock at the Blacksmith Shop from 10am to 3 pm.

Digital Marketing Analytics

Machen reported tourism had a solid month of May Facebook was a little down Instagram was up significantly. These two platforms balance each other out, website visits are up. Great results from Advance Travel in paid ads, social ads and paid search. There were two paid campaigns with Stellar this spring bringing in two influencers. John Parks also did content for us. The three different campaigns did extremely well for us with a higher reach than we expected.

- Coker questioned; visitors on the shore are down but online web visits are up. Machen added that the CBBT down 11% Machen took it a step further to see what the numbers were for HRBT tunnel down 11.23% and Monitor Merrimac down 12.25. Traffic is down for the Tidewater. People are still prioritizing travel with international travel up this year.
- Sally Williams stated that visitors are down but stays in lodging are still up.
- Holloway added figures for Cape Charles: TOT tax is up 7% in May as well as Meals tax up 7%. Looking ahead to June, with June not closed out yet, STR are close to last year's numbers. Reservations come at the last minute; the advance bookings are not happening. The meals tax and TOT tax for the whole shore should be reported to one place so that we see the big picture. There are many STR from NHC and Accomack that feed into the Cape Charles helping the sales tax and TOT tax numbers.
- Karen Zamorski stated there are a lot of day trippers, sales tax numbers are up, and meals tax is up.

- Coker would like to get a handle on the data which tells us a lot from across the Shore that will help us see that big picture of what is happening. If Sabbatini and Machen can think of ways to manage the data numbers that are right here on the shore that would be great in letting us know what is working. Asking Laura Messer to help put all the stats together would be a big help.
- Sabbatini added Cherron has a good idea to gather all this information and give it to VTC researchers for their analysis would be the answer for professional statisticians to sort it all out and assist us. If the data could be given to VTC by locality so that it does not come out as bulk county information which is too large to see the flow of travel.
- **Strategic Plan**
Sabbatini reported in the board google docs in your packet you will see the strategic plan boiled down. What Sabbatini would like to see is have a section assigned to a commissioner to review and give us feedback for the next meeting. If the commissioners are okay with that, we need everyone's eyes on the plan to make sure there is not something that was missed so we can go over your comments at the July meeting.
- **ARPA-Updates**
Sabbatini reported June 30th next week is the last day to submit expenses for VTC ARPA reimbursement. Everything is in from the ESVA Tourism Commission, and we have received reimbursements with more still coming in. The financials will look a little more normal. Joeckel and Sabbatini have worked with the towns to make sure they have spent and have submitted receipts for reimbursement. Mike Mason and John Chandler have been great with their assistance in getting to the close of this program.
- **Logo/Brand**
Sabbatini reported at the last meeting Consociate Media gave a very nice presentation on logo/branding. The staff discussed slowing down the process but continuing to have discussions on this topic during the year.
 - Coker was impressed by the presentation and felt Consociate Media understood who we are.
 - Holloway believes the group can get a consensus from the stakeholders on what is needed.
 - Coker believes slower is better it will be a pain full process to get all stakeholders on board. The logo needs to be done, I believe, but at a pace that brings everyone along and not rushed.
 - Holloway believes it needs to be done and use the strategic plan as a guide.
 - Tarr is on board but there will be a lot of criticism about changing the logo. Take it slow.
 - Shotwell said wait until 2025 when she is retired.
 - MacGarvey stated slower is faster, MacGarvey experience with culture changes in corporations is a process with one company taking three years. You must get all your messages in place.
 - Cherron Davis stated when this logo came about there were three logos' that everyone voted on up and down the Shore. Then a community meeting was held, and a final vote was taken then.
 - Coker asked the staff for their opinions on the logo issue.
 - Machen stated it was telling in the strategic planning meeting to relay the identity of the Shore. We do not have a strong Shore identity yet. Everyone wants to be a part of it but at this point not to push it until we know who we are. The Natural Heritage Area will be a strong factor in uniting and helping the Shore identify who we are and find our regional strengths.

- Coker asked do we need help in finding out who the Shore is. Coker is fine with getting help to answer that question of Shore identity.
 - Joeckel stated she agrees with Machen and her thoughts on the Heritage Area which would unit everyone with an emphasis on who we are. We all agree we need a logo and brand, but we are jumping ahead without locals believing or knowing what we are/have.
 - Coker stated he has been hearing Heritage for a year now and Heritage means history and history is boring. You must find exciting historical stuff to get people excited.
 - Joeckel added, heritage is our culture what has made us different from everyone else is we have not exploited everything and changed it to be all shining and new. Wachapreague has a working waterfront. How can that be kept and improved so that the culture exists, and we do not have condominiums on our waterfront. Onley was a railroad town we will now have a bike trail on the old railroad tracks going through Onley how do we share that experience of the past.
 - Coker added how can we make history exciting it does not happen on its own.
 - Holloway explained what we need to do is the hub and spoke process. Heritage and history are the spokes none are more important than the other but what is the center hub that is important. We must produce the center that leads to all the spokes, which is how our brand will be developed for us.
 - Coker stated he is very serious that if we need help, we should get it.
 - Sabbatini shares that he agrees we should get someone in to help assist us with our identity. The identity of the Eastern Shore in 2024 is different than before Covid? The Natural Heritage Area will show some of our culture; history is a part of what has brought us to this point in 2024. What is our identity now? Once we tie all that together we will know where we are going.
 - Coker stated Laura Messer might be able to point us to someone with VTC that could be the person to help us.
- **Visitor Guide**
Sabbatini stated the group will meet today at 2pm to get things going. We will be working on content and new ideas. The meeting will be recurring.
 - **National Heritage Area**
Sabbatini shared there was a nice community for the National Heritage Area with great support from many folks on the Shore. Cara Burton assists in finding what is distinctive to the Eastern Shore. Sabbatini has already begun a draft budget on Seven hundred thousand dollars. If tourism is going to lead the charge in conjunction with the Chamber, we can make it look right for the Eastern Shore. Knowing that there will be changes as we clarify what defines us.
 - **Draft 2025 Budget**
Sabbatini pulled up the budget on the screen for everyone to view. From our last BOC meeting not much has changed. Sabbatini had a conversation with Matt Spuck from Onancock, the town will not be able to give the funding that is normally given to ESVA TC this year. It could change next year. There was an increase in funding from Accomack County and Northampton County. It was a record year from Accomack County in collection of TOT tax revenue a portion of the tax was passed to ESVA TC. There will be no major changes in operations or maintenance from last month. There will be salary increases for welcome center and staff. As of today, there is no mandated minimum wage increase in January but there will be an increase for our WC Staff. A final budget will be in Google Docs. The surplus in the budget will go into savings as discussed in the last budget meeting.
 - Coker requested that upgrades start on the building in 2025.

- Sabbatini answered Chamber and ESVA TC both put in funding every year for improvements to the building.
- At 1:37 p.m. Coker made the first motion to approve the FY 25 Budget, seconded by Tarr and passed unanimously.
- **Miscellaneous**
Sabbatini made further comments on passed agenda items. The Chamberfest was a success Sabbatini thanked ESVA Tourism Commission for their sponsorship support as well as the town of Cape Charles, and Cape Charles Main Street. Folks came from all over the country to visit the Eastern Shore. It has been nothing but all positive remarks and reviews on this year Chamberfest. Le Tour de Shore is this weekend in Onancock, another Chamber event with three hundred riders coming to the Shore from all over the country.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Holloway shared the town of Cape Charles wanted to congratulate the Chamber on Chamberfest. It was a well-run event. The old Watson building is coming along nicely and will be the new home of the Distillery. The summer concert series starts this weekend.
- Shotwell shared the Chincoteague Carnival starts next weekend. Chincoteague is busy with last minute reservations, but everyone is already making reservations for the one hundred anniversaries of Pony Penning in 2025. Chincoteague Chamber has a new hire. Membership renewals and travel guide ad sales have started. Farmers Markets have opened again on Wednesday and Saturday. Music in the park will begin soon.
- Mac Garvey shared Juneteenth was last weekend it was well attended but not as big as years in the past. The town of Exmore is about 75% finished with the new sewer. The old Coca Cola building was purchased.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:40 p.m. Tarr made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Tarr 8/21/2024
 Billy Joe Tarr, Vice Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel 8/21/24
 Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date