

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
February 21, 2024, 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
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee-Z

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director
Heather Williamson, DDD-Z
Emily Machen, Marketing Director
Aileen Joeckel, Executive Assistant

Commissioners – Absent

John Coker Northampton Co. Supervisor, Chair

Guest Present

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

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella stated any data driven things that TC can do to attract people of means to the Shore is still top of his mind. During these economic times that is where the disposable income is right now.
- Cherron Davis stated that the New Church Welcome Center is busy. March is going to be a busy time with the Visitor Center Seminar in Chincoteague, 250 National Convention in Williamsburg and Easter all in one month.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:32 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Shotwell and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Laura reported responses are still needed for the 2025 Virginia Travel Guide cover photo. Having the Chincoteague Pony Swim on the cover for the one hundred Anniversary of the swim would be fantastic. Laura reminded the group that the MLP Grant program is now open it will close March 14th. VA 250 opens their marketing program on March 5th through April 11th. VTC orientation will

be held March 5th and 6th. Tourism Commission staff has received the first draft of the tourism action plan. The work sessions were held in November, December, and January. The report is fifty-two pages long, the TC staff will review and make edits and we will move forward.

- Sabbatini stated after the summit we will review and polish up and narrow it down.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported Southern Gateway Welcome Center, visitation is down almost 16% traffic is starting to pick up. The numbers are typical for this time of year.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported the travel guide is in and Commissioners have a copy of it. There will be copies of the travel guide to be handed out at the Tourism Summit on February 26th. The rest of the shipment will be sent shortly to our distributors. Machen will be placing it online and the travel guide will be part of our App. Please make comments on the travel guide so we can continue to improve upon the guide.

- Sabbatini commented that he likes the profiles and articles in the guide this year.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported a great January for all of TC social media platforms and website. Website views were down for January, which is to be expected. Facebook and Instagram had more individuals going to our pages than in December. There are more pages that are engaging with users than we have had in the past. TC must have hit the algorithm groove to experience a pickup like this. Things are going well. All media numbers can be viewed in the packet. The total website views are 8,200. Of that number 8,140 are new users.

- **Strategic Planning**

Sabbatini reported that the strategic plan received from Laura will be looked at after the summit.

- **Logo/Brand**

Sabbatini stated after the summit a date will be looked at for all the commissioners to agree on a meeting with Consociate Media to discuss logo and branding and hear their presentation.

- **Tourism Summit**

Sabbatini stated we are excited we have the Tourism Summit coming up Monday February 26. There is another full house of attendees again this year. Steve Chandler is our keynote speaker. Sabbatini ran through the schedule which begins at 8 for registration and Summit begins at 9 am. Sabbatini asked if the Commissioners could be there by 8 am to mingle with the attendees.

- Holloway asked what the plan is for the folks that cancel at the last minute to let the wait listed people take their place.

Sabbatini responded that we have already received messages from folks that have cancelled. Immediately we filled in with waitlisted folks. Reminder emails are going out. We have 120 signed up to attend with four remaining on the wait list as of today. Businesses again have stepped up with giveaways for attendees. The job of Commissioners is to make sure attendees know that the TC is a resource for their business. It is important for TC to share that the Eastern Shores' recovery after the pandemic was the fastest for the whole state of Virginia. All the businesses here on the Shore are the ones that got us there.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Holloway wanted to have a discussion to see where others on the TC board are at with lodging numbers on the ES, Cape Charles is consistently down 20% from last year. That is also consistent across the Country to be down. Usually, we hold back on our push for the summer, but it looks like right now we need to pick up the marketing for the summer. The economy is driving people to book at the last minute. Mainstreet as well could be doing the same to pick up marketing in March and April to get those bookings for the summer. Holloway knows it will fill for the summer. Prior to the pandemic booking numbers were at this level.
 - Laura stated she will reach out to VTC to see if they have an outlook on trends. There might be information that will be useful to everyone.
 - Shotwell stated it is economy driven with inflation pushing cost of everything higher it is hard for middle income people to have extra money.
 - Karen shared that her data shows more day trippers are here.

Holloway stated by this time of year summer weekends are full and they are not this year.

Holloway will be attending a lodging conference next week and will bring back any news on the outlook. Holloway is interested in what Onancock and Chincoteague were experiencing.

- Shotwell stated that Chincoteague is down 28% over last year. The lodging folks are saying the same thing December and January has not been filling up as they had in the past with reservations.
- Spuck stated rooms are even with last year, advance bookings are down 15%. That is not a fair comparison, Onancock only has twenty-three rooms available in town.

Holloway continued things are bright in Cape Charles with project hoping to be finished in time for the season. Love your Locals was last week the Love Run is coming up, Easter events are planned. Some businesses are closing, and new ones are coming. Beach Market is for sale and Buskey Cider tasing room is closing.

- Ace Seybolt asked if anyone has moved to dynamic pricing in Cape Charles. Holloway responded no although Bay Haven Inn does and Fig Street Inn. Chincoteague is up about 1% using the dynamic pricing rental dollars are up reservations are down.
- MacGarvey shared that Exmore lodging only has three large hotel chains which are also down. The only event planned in the town of Exmore will be on April 20th This will be a one-day study involving the High School music department which centers around the roots of African American music and ethnic music on the Eastern Shore.
- Shotwell shared the month of March is full. Death by Chocolate was last weekend over 780 people participated and finished. Lodging was not as full as in July, but the three-day weekend was well booked. The Visitor Center Seminar is in March 12-14. Search for Shamrock weekend follows a couple of weeks later Easter Decoy Show March 29-30. The brewery has closed in Chincoteague. The people o is a new venture, but it is not known right now. The E-bike store has new ownership, Sea Star will be opening in April now called the Lotus, Black Fin will be expanding including an ABC license.
- Spuck shared the events held: Fire and Ice, a fund raiser for the hospital went well. The St. Patrick's Day parade is coming up. There are many new projects that the town of Onancock has in the works.

7. Adjournment

- At 1:08 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

Billy Joe Jan

3/20/2024

John Coker, Chairperson

Date

Aileen Joeckel

3/20/2024

Aileen Joeckel, Secretary

Date