

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
March 20, 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

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  
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council  
Matt Spuck, Accomack County Appointee-Z

Commissioners – Absent

Chamber of Commerce - Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative

Staff Present

Robert Sabbatini, Executive Director  
Heather Williamson, DDD  
Emily Machen, Marketing Director  
Aileen Joeckel, Executive assistant  
Sally Williams, Southern Welcome Center

Guest Present

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

1. Call to Order

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

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella stated the inflation is staying the same and not going down. Businesses need to be prepared to use as much data as possible to promote businesses in the best markets that are close to home to draw desirable folks to the shore who have more disposable income.
- Cherron Davis stated that the New Church Welcome Center is busy. Cherron congratulated Shotwell on a wonderful Visitor Seminar in Chincoteague. The National 250 Conference is going on right now in Williamsburg. Virginia is positioned to have a wonderful commemoration for the 250 Anniversary of our country. A tractor trailer will be touring which will be a traveling history exhibit. More details to follow.
- Karen Zamorski, Cape Charles Main Street added that Cape Charles has committed to bring the tall ships June 19 -22 of 2026.
  - Holloway suggested creating a page that details what will be happening for VA 250 in Cape Charles. Creating a rack card to promote the tall ships coming is another idea.
  - Spuck is working on convenience Onancock Council to also commit to bringing the tall ships.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:43 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by MacGarvey and passed unanimously.
- Coker will go into a short, closed session at the end of meeting.

#### 4. VTC Updates

- Sabbatini reported updates for Laura Messer to inform everyone to please look into the packet on the lodging trends that VTC put together.
  - Holloway reported that she had just attended a national B&B Conference. Across the country bookings are down 20% year over year. However, March over March is good. It is January advance bookings for the summer that are down. We need to tap into driving to our destination because folks are now flying and our market on the shore is driving. We are a premier driving place. Focus on the 4-hour radius of driving. Set up some test FB ads to see what kind of responses we get.
  - Karen just ran a 3-day ad to book now and do not miss out. We just reached another 9,193 people. We targeted our four top areas and received another 465 click links to look at Cape Charles. Cost per link click sixteen cents.

#### 5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported Southern Gateway Welcome Center, visitation is down almost 8% the numbers are growing again with the snowbirds coming back and the spring breakers. It is not bad, just a little bit down. HH Scott has been going to Cape Charles and visiting businesses. While handing out the new brochures HH received a lot of interest in businesses wanting to do rack cards. ESVA TC is in the process of planning two FAM tours for the volunteer and paid staff at the welcome center. Several of our volunteer staff are new to the area and have never been on a FAM Tour. They may know the Cape Charles area but not the other towns. In the past restaurants would give us a meal. Now ESVA TC pays for the lunch for the volunteers. The last tour was before Covid.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported we are in the distributions process with the travel guides. There is a good fee back for the guide. The next month it will be important for distribution to happen and make the connections with the business owners and letting them know what the commission does for our local businesses. Making sure our partners know the advocacy from the commission is important work. At the end of the day, we need to go to these businesses and have their trust in us. What ESVA TC stands for and how we stand up for these businesses is every month check-in and visit.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Sabbatini announced Machen is not here she is on Tangier with a film crew doing a story on sustainable travel. A few highlights from marketing, the website had 8,852 users for February with new users being 8,696. Facebook reach was 302,00 very solid numbers. Paid advertisement reached 22,100 people. The Facebook ads are doing well for us, could we do more, we will be diving into that.

- Holloway suggested boosting posts is also a great opportunity, Sabbatini responded that we do that also. Everything can be viewed in the packet.

Sabbatini shared visuals of the ads in magazines this spring. The Local Palate, Blue Ridge Outdoors, It's a Southern Thing. ESVA TC is always looking at the next wow factor. Zinc Media, who Emily is with right now on Tangier, is doing a feature on sustainable travel. This will be our link to the next level.

- **Strategic Planning**

Sabbatini reported next Tuesday staff will meet to go over the fifty-two pages that Laura submitted to us to review as a strategic plan. Once the plan has been narrowed down it will be presented to everyone to make sure we are all on the same page. Once we develop the goals, we can pull the BOC back in so that everyone is aware of the progress that is being achieved in the development of the strategic plan.

- **Logo/Brand**

Sabbatini stated a meeting date must be arranged with Consociate Media to discuss logo and branding and hear their presentation.

- Coker stated that he will touch on that in closed session.

- **Tourism Summit Recap**

Sabbatini stated overall the summit went very well. The feedback forms from the attendees were very positive. After doing the summit for three years now there is an opportunity to kick it up a notch. Our repeat attendees need an afternoon session on a different track for those business owners that are new to the summit. Sabbatini suggested we could consider getting town leadership together to help them get to know each other. It may help towns realize that a schedule of what is happening throughout the shore needs to be considered when planning events. Having our partners be educated as to the importance of checking all calendars from the towns and to putting events on calendars is important for all towns.

- Holloway stated organizations do not look at the calendar before they plan events.
- Shotwell stated the speaker, Steve Chandler, should have known the audience and our partners in advance so that he could have engaged with the audience and interacted with stories of businesses that were represented.
- Coker commented Chandler was single threaded. He just does brand and does not come out of that box too far. ESVA TC is interested in this but 75% of the people in that room were not ready to talk about that. Chandler is a pretty impressive guy if you are in that lane. All our partners are not there. That is why his presentation could not fill the time and he was done an hour early. Who we have for our next speaker needs to have a much wider lane so that it touches more of our partners. There is an 80/20 rule. If you touch 80% of the people you are successful. He missed that mark. Chandler had good information and great stories but not enough of what our partners needed.
- Spuck suggested we need someone who can go through running a business's TC has touched on so many facets but now we need running a business. How to manage and make money with the cost of goods and rent factored into the cost of business. That would be so important to everybody, that is why we are in business.

Sabbatini stated we had Eric Terry from Virginia Restaurant Lodging and Travel Association; he was not well received at all.

- Joeckel added that what the town of Wachapreague heard is that we have to be better at telling our town's story, that is what will help Wachapreague grow.
- Shotwell added that Chandler should have known our business and the shore and brought that out with the group during his presentation. The last hour could have been about individual story telling of local businesses.
- Holloway added what could have happened is that we could have broken into groups and everyone at the table could have worked at telling their story with Chandlers help and guidance. That would have taken it to the next level with partners receiving a takeaway that would have been beneficial. Building on hand on components that would have been key take aways.

- Seybolt added it is the credit card fees that are hard to manage that cut into a business profit.
- Holloway added TC needs to survey the partners and see what it is that they would like to have the summit built around. Lunch should be a working lunch so that the time is not wasted.
- Coker the VTC section is way to loosey goosey and not well run they were very weak is my opinion. What we are talking about is making it better, we have three under our belt and we are improving.
- **Audit-Update**  
Sabbatini passed out the audit report Joeckel does a wonderful job getting everything to the CPA. The audit looked very good no comments from the auditor. There was the deferred revenue that came in from Accomack County late because the FY 22 audit was not completed in time. That was the only comment on the audit.
- **ChamberFest**  
Sabbatini went through the ESVA Chamber schedule; April 4<sup>th</sup> Eggs and Issues will be held at the Rocket Club on NASA Base. If you are interested in attending, get your reservation this week. Chamberfest Saturday May 18 in Cape Charles attendance between 1,000 and 1,500 is anticipated. Bands playing, Little River Band, Firefall, local band Irie Tree Band starting at 3 PM to 8 PM. ESVA Tourism Commission sponsored Chamberfest last year, does TC want to continue that sponsorship? Last year TC was sponsored at the top-level VIP. Sabbatini is thinking if nonprofits like Northampton VA 250 should be included. Cara Buton would love to get a table and put them under our tent.
  - Shotwell asked if you offer to one nonprofit do, they all get to come.
  - Holloway suggested that the nonprofits work with tourism.
  - Shotwell suggested Chincoteague 250 it will never ends. Once people's feelings get hurt then talk starts.

Sabbatini added that all commissioner and significant others are invited.
- **Southern Gateway Welcome Center FAM Tour**  
Sabbatini commented that Sally talked about the FAM Tour.
- **Visitor Guide**  
Sabbatini reported Williamson has talked about distribution of the visitor guides. We are in the process of setting up a schedule of meetings to discuss the visitor guide ads, creating content on how photos are selected and a list of folks that want to participate in the process.
  - Coker added there needs to be a discussion on the visitor guide at every meeting. A timeline that needs to be created by the next meeting would be my suggestion. Start to track against that timeline for the summit and visitor guide.

## 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Holloway shared lots of building projects are finishing. There is a delay on Peach Street renovation by VDOT. There was an article in Coastal living on Cape Charles coming in as one of the top ten places to live as a resident. There is a film crew in Cape Charles this week from Magnolia magazine doing a house renovation project that will take a couple of months.
- Shotwell shared Chincoteague did host the VTC Visitor Center Seminar last week with about one hundred people attending. The group toured all day Wednesday. A lot of people had never been to Chincoteague before, it was a good time for everyone. Visitation was up in February and 42% of those were people that came into the office. Death by Chocolate attendance was 787 all who

finished the event. Easter Decoy Show is next weekend the most exhibitors since Covid. Seafood Festival May 4<sup>th</sup>. Working on Chincoteague 250 events.


- MacGarvey shared that she has been working with VA 250 with Exmore and Nassawadox tie ins with Cara Burton. The sewer is almost completed and with that comes more things that will be happening. Affordable apartments will be coming with a retail complex. On April 20<sup>th</sup> Return to our Roots musical heritage in the park combined with Earth Day. Please check out Do Drop Inn on Facebook. It is the oldest African business on the shore. It has a wonderful dance floor and good bands.
- Spuck shared St. Patrick Day parade was very well attended by 1,000s but there were not as many participants. After the parade they closed the streets and people drank like fish. There will be a couple of upcoming concerts at Cokesbury Church. Town wide yard sale the day before Mother's Day. Brooms and Brushes will be happening where artists go into gardens and paint. The town is completely under construction which proves people Believe in investing in Onancock.
- Coker stated Northampton will commemorate Arthur Crudup with a plaque, but it has not been decided where it will be placed along the trail in Nassawadox.

7. Close Session

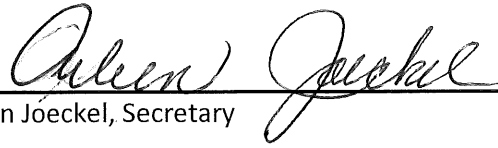
8. Adjournment

- At 1:56 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

  
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John Coker, Chairperson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

