

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
Meeting Minutes
April 17, 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
Matt Spuck, Accomack County appointee-Z
Evelyn Shotwell, Chincoteague C of C
Clarice MacGarvey, Northampton County Appointee
Tammy Holloway, Cape Charles Town Council-Z

Staff Present

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

Commissioners – Absent

Billy Joe Tarr, Accomack Co. Supervisor, Vice Chair

Guest Present

Jay Abella, Cape Charles Main Street
Cara Burton
Janet Fosque

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Absent

1. Call to Order

- At 12:35 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Jay Abella stated inflation is going up and interest rates will be staying the same. People with more disposable income will be in demand from all marketing outlets. ESVA TC needs to leverage their marketing strategies to focus on the right group to visit the shore.
 - Coker stated the market is so poor that people may just not be spending a lot of money right now which will affect travel. The upside is people on fixed income older people that are invested will still be traveling but taking closer to home vacation.

3. Consent Agenda

- At 12:43 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to approve the consent agenda, seconded by Coker and passed unanimously.

4. VTC Updates

- Sabbatini reported updates for Laura Messer. The ARPA funding due date is June 30th. Sabbatini has been working with both County Administrators if there is not any movement on the towns that we have not heard from Sabbatini will visit those towns. If anyone is aware of any towns that need assistance with their spending plans let Sabbatini know.

- Coker has reached out to Exmore, Cheriton, Nassawadox, Eastville has a new town manager Coker will figure out who needs to be contacted in that town.

5. Heritage Area

- Cara Buton discussed Natural Heritage Areas and what it takes to be designated as one. The discussion has come up during the strategic plan on how to save the soul of the shore a Natural Heritage Area is one way. Instead of the park service buying up a bunch of property the program has the locally decide what is the best way to preserve its heritage. It is a community driven program that gets congressional allocations. There are sixty-two funded areas right now. The Northern Neck was just approved. A lot of the heritage areas have themes. This is all funded through federal dollars.

- Coker asked what kind of projects could be funded?

Cara continued the support is for sustainable economic development, healthy environment & people engagement, and pride. The community decides what represents that for a community. A nonprofit entity manages the program. What normally happens is that funding goes to a staff person that writes grants and works on the program to move it forward. A feasibility study is done to decide who will be the management partner of the program. The allocation from Congress is usually at the \$150K mark for the first three years but the dollar amount can vary. The money is for the feasibility study that is done every year for three years. The funds go towards writing the management plan. Once the funds are allocated by Congress it flows through the park service to the managing entity that drafts the management plan. That is what the money is intended to be used for. It usually takes three years to write the management plan which requires many public hearings and studies. The next step, once the heritage area is approved, the entity receives \$300 - \$700 per year which needs matching funds. You do have to have buy in from our congressional and senators to support getting the funding. What is this money used for? In West Virginia, the money was used for job programs AmeriCorps youth training is an example. Also, small town revitalization programs, crab shacks which are on waterfronts, Chamberfest, self-guided driving tours, documentaries, and multiple other programs. Once a community is approved there are other federal programs they are eligible for. The program is a 50/50 match but also in-kind match works. What Cara does not know is if a town donates land to be developed would land value be the match portion. An extensive list of assets would be listed as part of the feasibility study. The Chamber building could be upgraded with the building being the in-kind match could be an example. Every 10-15 years the heritage area is revalued for continued appropriations. Steps going forward: consensus, feasibility study (take about a year), consultant to administer, grant (Cara Burton), Identify sources for matching funds, send to park service, congression approval, funds appropriated. The heritage area must secure matching funds. Create a management plan which needs to be approved by the secretary of interior. We can invite Park Services management to do a presentation if we feel that this would be an entity that we want to create. Invite regional stakeholders and supervisors to the presentation.

- Coker stated that there are 62 Heritage areas in the country let us see how they are put together under what heading seems to work best.

5. Commission Updates

- **Welcome Center Updates**

Sally Williams reported Southern Gateway Welcome Center, is down for the year about 3%. Numbers since the beginning of the year have gone up a lot since Easter there have been about 250 – 300 people a day. Two local FAM Tours are being planned for May 1 Onancock to the lower shore. May 22nd upper shore to Chincoteague.
- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported there has been a lot of work done on the Familiarization Tour development for the Welcome Center staff for their education. Getting ready for sales to start on the travel guide, looking forward to travelling guide committee meeting. Excited for the summer season to begin.
- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Machen reported great numbers on our digital marketing. Good increase of our website users. Many of them are first time website users. Lots of great engagement on Facebook and Instagram. We are still doing paid search and paid social with Advance Travel, accommodation rose to the top in our paid search with bed and breakfast being our most popular typed search. Zartico search shows that outdoor recreation is our top visitation category. Food is our top visitor spending category. VTC data shows that daytrips are the most popular trip type followed by 2-night stays and Friday is the most popular travel day.
- **Strategic Planning**

Sabbatini reported he and the staff went over the strategic plan document and narrowed it down. Sabbatini is refining what has been gathered and will take his time to get it put together so that it is right. It was good to get the first draft out of the way and dial it down before Sabbatini shared the document with the commissioners.
- **Logo/Brand**

Sabbatini has set a meeting date of May 15 after the BOC meeting to meet with Consociate Media to discuss logo and branding.

 - Coker asked that everyone plan to attend that meeting.
- **Tourism Summit and Visitor Guide Timelines**

Sabbatini has sent the tourism summit and visitor guide timelines to all the commissioners. There has been some feedback returned. If you get a chance, please review the documents. We are looking to form two committees, one for the summit the other for the visitor guide 2025. Sabbatini would like the commissioners to be on the committees. Also, if there is anyone in your towns that would like to be on the committee that would provide valuable input, please let us know.
- **In House Fam Tour**

Sabbatini referred to Sally, Heather, and Emily on the FAM Tour progress. Sally stated that there are about a dozen staff people that can go to the first FAM Tour on May 1st. The tour will start in Onancock then onto Exmore and Cape Charles in the afternoon. Williamson continued it is important that staff experiences the upper Shore because most are from the lower shore. Sabbatini shared that these events make us much stronger when as a team we can express the experiences visitors will have on the shore.
- **2025 Budget**

Sabbatini stated it is budget time Coker and Spuck will work with Sabbatini on the draft budget. There will be a draft budget for everyone to review in May. Sabbatini reported that it was a record year 2023 in Accomack Co on collection of TOT tax. The Tourism Commission will receive

an additional \$82K which is a percentage of the tax received. These funds will be put back into the budget with plans to do something special.

- Holloway shared that the level of number of stays may not be the same in the future. We need to be careful how we plan so that there is work done to keep those numbers up but also have cushion if the numbers do not materialize. Holloway sees things leveling back during the economy we are experiencing. The Tourism Commission does not want to be dependent on that money if it does not materialize. Many commissioners agreed. Coker stating, he does not see continued growth as there has been over the past 5 years. Being conservative is a good strategy,

Sabbatini stated building back savings into our tourism account for a rainy day will be done.

- **Chamberfest**

Sabbatini stated Chamberfest is Saturday May 18th Cape Charles 3-8pm. Three bands two of the bands will be major national bands Firefall, Little River Band. Irie Tree band is a local band. Cape Charles is ready and has been great to work with as we move forward on preparations for Chamberfest. There are tickets for the commissioners to attend. If commissioners do not want tickets, please let us know so that our partners can be invited.

6. Matters by Commissioner

- Shotwell shared the Easter Decoy Art festival was very successful it was the highest attendance since 2019. Right now, we are getting ready for the Seafood festival, there are about six hundred tickets left. Chincoteague numbers are not down but only a tad bit above in visitation to Chincoteague. Everything is open for the season.
- Holloway shared next weekend is the Garden Tour with a lot of homes showing in the lower shore. Wedding season has kicked in early this year and things are picking up. About all the businesses that have moved to new locations have been completed. There is a shrimp boil next weekend and Blessing of the Fleet kicks off. This weekend will be Love Run.
- Spuck shared Onancock has a group of volunteers that do street clean up before the Garden Tour to make sure Onancock has its best face forward. Early June Brushes and Blooms take place when artist paint in beautiful gardens around the town. TOT is going down year after year, but meals tax is up. The wharf is open, the welcome center renovations are all on time and on budget. Volunteers for VA 250 team are starting to form.
- MacGarvey shared the only thing coming up in Exmore this month is on Saturday a music festival featuring five bands and one gospel group. Master Naturalist celebrating Earth Day also celebrating National Parks Day Exmore will be hoping. The day begins at 10 am – 3 pm, the music festival starts after that down in Bayford Road at the Do Drop Inn and it starts at 7 pm.

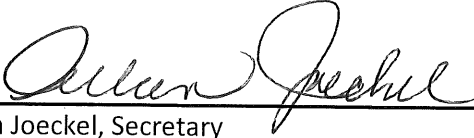
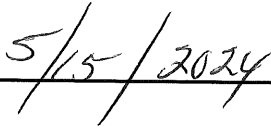
7. Adjournment

- At 2:03 p.m. MacGarvey made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Shotwell, and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

John Coker, Chairperson Date

Aileen Joeckel, Secretary Date