

**Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
May 15, 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

Guest Present

Karen Zamorski, Main Street Cape Charles-Z  
Cherron Davis, New Church Welcome -Z

Chamber of Commerce – Observer

Ace Seybolt

Ex-officio Non-voting Member

Laura Messer, VTC Representative - Z

1. Call to Order

- At 12:31 p.m. Coker called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comments

- Cherron Davis, from New Church Welcome Center, stated April was down from last year. Easter was in April last year this year Easter was in March. Things have picked up in May.
- Karen Zamorski stated things are gearing up for the summer. The Love Run was this month with 376 registered participants, which was up by one hundred from last year.
- Ace Seybolt asked a question that he will also bring up with the Chamber. Does the Tourism Commission ever take a position on TOT tax and increases? Coker answered no. The second question, the Commonwealth of Virginia gives a dealer discount on credit card fees that are paid by vacation rental companies. Will the county and locality be able to do that? The rental agency that Ace represents pays \$10K in fees to credit card companies. Coker answered, it is not believed that a repayment will happen from counties and localities to reimburse credit card transaction fees.

3. Consent Agenda

- Coker added that the financials have been looked at carefully. The ARPA funding and waiting for the reimbursement has made a banking reconciliation look like we are in the hole, but we are not. It was a timing issue.
- Shotwell questioned the mileage on the financials. Possibly shipping visitor guides to local businesses would be more efficient?
  - Joeckel answered that mileage also included the mileage for BOC to attend meetings. Machen also has been developing content for our photo library. Williamson introduced

herself to all partners and businesses on the Shore this year, which has added to the higher mileage.

- Holloway answered that relationship building is important, it is not just VG distribution.
- At 12:40 p.m. Holloway 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**

Sabbatini reported Williams is on vacation and Scott will report on the Welcome Center. Scott reported that April was down by 11.5 % bridge traffic is also down. May is doing better, especially the weekends. A FAM tour was held for the welcome center staff, a total of eleven staff members attended. The tour included Cape Charles, Exmore, and Onancock. Development of hosting towns and artisans at the Welcome Center for a Blitz Day is being worked on. This was a program that we did before Covid hit.

- **Destination Development Update**

Williamson reported the FAM tour was great. Getting ready now for the second half of the tour which will be in Chincoteague. Heather is looking forward to the committee getting together so that we can begin the 2025 travel guide planning.

- **Digital Marketing Analytics**

Sabbatini reported for Machen. The month of April ESVA TC website visits again came in over 10K for new users. That is the second month in a row that it has happened. This is very positive news for ESVA TC. The three influencers that we brought to the Shore have been met with a lot of positive attention. When Emily comes back next month, we will let her take a victory lap on the results from the influencers that we hosted on the Shore with data. There were concerns also heard that not everyone was able to experience certain activities that are available on the Shore. The weather was not the best when we hosted the influencers limiting the choices of activity that could be experienced.

- Holloway stated that when one place has attention with an influencer it builds us all on the Eastern Shore.

Sabbatini continued that one of the influencers met Eric Hawkins at Cape Charles Tiny Living which generated over one million views. The post went viral which led to Eric receiving ten bookings. Eight bookings came from Instagram and two from Facebook.

- **Logo/Brand -Consociate (after meeting presentation)**

- **Draft 2025 Budget**

Sabbatini did a presentation on the upcoming 2024 Budget for ESVA Tourism Commission.

- Coker commented that the trust both counties have in the work that the commission does has led to the increase in financial support. Good things can start to happen with the funding that is being received.

Sabbatini remarked that the relationship ESVA TC has between the towns and its business is important. TOT tax revenue received by Accomack County is an all-time high. That reflects everyone's hard work. This is good for the Shore. If no one knows who we are and what we do, we are ineffective. Sabbatini stated building back savings into our tourism account for a rainy day will be done as Holloway suggested.

- **Chamberfest**

Sabbatini stated Chamberfest is Saturday May 18<sup>th</sup> in Cape Charles 3-8pm. Over 1,000 tickets sold. Sabbatini is confident the weather will be good. There have been folks from all over the country purchasing tickets and most have never been to the Shore.

Sabbatini added that he is still working with Cara Burton on the National Heritage Areas (US Park Service) for the Eastern Shore to move toward.

## 6. Matters by Commissioner

- Shotwell shared Chincoteague had a very successful Seafood Festival. It was cold but everyone had a good time. Visitation for the month of April was up 15%. Year to date Chincoteague is up 7%. A new business is opening June 2<sup>nd</sup> called Drift in the Poseidon Pantry location. Run by the owners of AJ's, it will be similar to what Poseidon's Pantry offered. There is a new air stream food truck next to Raven's Nest. May has been surprisingly busy on the island.
- Holloway shared TOT numbers are down but year over year the numbers are still up. Meal tax and Tot tax are above budget. Since Love Run numbers for Cape Charles have been up. A lot of construction projects are coming to an end. The new toy store opened. Chamberfest this weekend and Rotary is having a one hundred anniversary Art Walk this weekend. The town is working on a Beach master plan. A consultant will evaluate beach use and what is needed. A bath houses, picnic area, beach accessibility, everything is being investigated. The overall management of the beach is moving forward and any work that is decided on will be done in phases. The water sewer sale closed two weeks ago.
  - Sabbatini added that the town council needs to take a victory lap on the sale of the sewer and water plant. Having debt reduced for the town residents leads to lower property tax, has many people feeling good about the direction the town has taken.


Holloway continued that the sale of the sewer and water plant has led to resources for the beach master plan. Cape Charles is facing challenges with STR rentals and visitors. Educating residents why Cape Charles choose tourism over having a prison coming and industrial businesses wanting to locate here back in the 1990's and early 2000's is the process Cape Charles is going through. A survey was done with the business owners. From Memorial Day to Labor Day 50% of business owners income is made. There are only forty-six official rooms for lodging in Cape Charles. Forty-six times two people, which is an extra one hundred people a day, keeps our businesses running. Our residents could not eat out every night to keep businesses open. Holloway would like to see the management of STR not limiting them. There is a problem with street parking in the historic district of town, which is also where the highest density of STR exists. There is much to do to educate the residents and hear and follow up on their concerns, parking, trash, and noise throughout the year. keeping a balance of both is necessary.

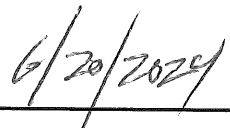
- Coker stated Northampton County will be putting in six pickleball courts in Custis park. Pickleball is the fastest growing sport in the US. A fishing pier in Oyster Northampton County will be funded.

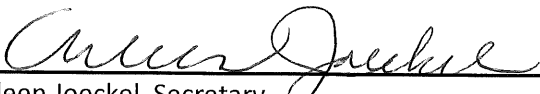
7. Adjournment

- At 1:45 p.m. Holloway made the first motion to adjourn, seconded by Tarr and the meeting was adjourned.

These minutes have been approved by:

  
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John Coker, Chairperson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date