

Talbot County Tourism Board
Meeting Minutes
April 10, 2024
Via Zoom

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairwoman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:31 a.m.

Members Present: Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Angela Eade, Ian Fleming, Kristen Greenaway, Harold Klinger, Amy Kreiner, Mark Salter

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Tad duPont, Keasha Haythe, Jeff Schneider

Guests: Sarah Kilmon, Sammie Moon

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. Special Guest

Talbot County Communications Manager Sarah Kilmon shared information about the upcoming Talbot Day festivities. The actual celebration will occur on April 25 on the Courthouse Lawn. The rain location is the Avalon Theatre. The event will feature music, poetry, and the announcement of the Talbot County Citizen of the Year award. Ms. Kilmon also noted that she has developed Talbot County bingo and Talbot County Trivia that are free and available to the public at both Talbot County Free Library locations.

III. Approval of Minutes – February 14, 2024, and March 13, 2024

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the February 14, 2024, meeting as there was not a quorum at the March meeting. Mr. Klinger made a motion to approve the minutes with corrections, and Ms. Bellis seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously. As a second item, Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the March 13, 2024, meeting. Mr. Fleming made a motion to approve the minutes with corrections, and Ms. Bellis seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously.

IV. Director's Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser wished the board a happy spring, noting that she predicts that the warm weather is upon us to stay.

Talbot Works Business Academy: Ms. Vanhooser reported that Talbot County graduated its first cohort of small businesses from the Talbot Works Business Academy at the Talbot County Council meeting on April 9. The 8-week entrepreneurship training program was funded with Maryland Rural Economic Development Funds through the Mid-Shore Regional Council. A number of participants own tourism-related businesses. Ms. Vanhooser asked that board members help recruit the next cohort, which starts in September.

Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan: Ms. Vanhooser said the department is about to begin the process of creating a new strategic plan for economic development and tourism in the county. She will send out a request asking for those who want to participate as a member of the steering committee. Dr. Cliff Coppersmith and Jackie Wilson from Provident State Bank will be the co-chairs of the steering committee. This is an important process as it will inform the county's comprehensive plan, which is about to undergo its once-in-a-decade update. If you want a voice in the process, please get involved with our strategic plan.

Biking in Talbot County: Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller attended a meeting with MDOT and SHA about grant funding for bike trails. There is historic funding for these projects right now. Ms. Vanhooser noted three projects that are priorities for the department at this time: 1) the Frederick Douglass Rail Trail; 2) a master plan for bike trails and multimodal transportation for the county; and, 3) redesigning the Talbot County bike maps. She is requesting volunteers for working on these projects.

Open Positions on the Tourism Board: There are several positions on the Tourism Board. Ms. Bixler and Ms. Vanhooser identified several people who have been asked to participate. None has said yes at this time. Ms. Vanhooser asked the board if they would consider allowing a vote by email if candidates emerge. They agreed without a vote.

This led to a discussion about meeting frequency. Ms. Eade made a motion to change to quarterly meetings. The group discussed the pros and cons of such a change. Ms. Bellis amended Ms. Eade's motion to request that Tourism Board meetings take place, at a minimum, in February, May, September, and November. Other meeting may be called for special events or important issues. Ms. Eade seconded the motion, which the group dubbed The Angela Accord. The motion passed unanimously. There will be a May meeting in 2024.

On the economic front: Ms. Vanhooser noted that she read that travel could be one of the things that people cut as a result of inflation. She quoted the article as saying that the overall cost of travel is down 1% from February 2023, but it's up 12% compared with February 2020. This is consistent with what she is hearing from businesses.

V. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Meet & Greet Meetings: Ms. Goller has continued to meet with stakeholders. This past month, she participated in the grant review committee for the Stories of the Chesapeake for the Maryland Heritage Area Authority submitted grants as well as the County's public information officer communications committee. We met with the new Executive Director for the Waterfowl Festival. She has also represented the department on statewide calls to discuss the Maryland 250 and attended a workshop hosted by the State's Office of Tourism Development on the Great Chesapeake Bay Loop. Later today, she'll be touring Hog Neck Golf Course. She'll be reaching out to schedule individual meetings with any board members that would like to sit down.

Projects: In cooperation with the Stories of the Chesapeake and the Town of Trappe, we've continued work to amend the boundaries of the heritage area to include Trappe. A hearing with the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority is set for this Thursday to review the request. Working in partnership with fellow Eastern Shore Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) and heritage areas, a grant application has been submitted, which would allow for implementation work to continue for the Chesapeake Country All-American Road interpretive plan. Looking ahead National Travel and Travel Week is scheduled for May 19-25, 2024. We are brainstorming potential opportunities to celebrate locally, and suggestions are welcome.

Online & Print Collateral Review: An in-depth review of the department's printed and online presence has continued. Since we last met, a new Talbot County hotel guide has been drafted and is in the review phase.

A Talbot County map, for which we partnered with the Talbot County Chamber of Commerce, is at the printer. Plans are on track for a re-print of the Talbot County restaurant guide prior to summer. The RFP for the next Talbot County Travel Guide will close on April 18 for advertising sales and printing. In the meantime, we've been working on content development and photography, as the goal is to have the printed guide in hand by early summer.

We've continued to review our online presence as well and are still in the process of reviewing all business listings for accuracy. We have started the process to assume TilghmanIsland.com.

Media Exposure: In late March, we had a quick visit by an up-and-coming Instagram influencer, Virginia Adventure Family, who stayed in St. Michaels. The maritime museum provided passes for the family, and we're starting to see some coverage. We are continuing to assist Victor and Fyllis Hockman, who will be visiting in May and staying at the Robert Morris Inn. Andrea Poe is writing a piece for the Eastern Shore, which is scheduled to be printed in the Washingtonian in May as well.

MDMO and Legislative Update: As you know, the legislative session has officially ended. We received a final report via MDMO and the group's lobbyists. SB0014 Economic Development Tourism Zones – Designation of Benefits, which we mentioned at previous meetings, has been sent to the Governor for signature. As was HB1032, which establishes a Tourist Area and Corridor Signage Program. This program previously existed, but it has been renewed and now includes the Department of Commerce as an overseer. We'll be working with them in the coming months to gain an understanding of the program. HB0186 passed for Eastern Shore Code Counties, which includes Worcester, Caroline, Queen Anne's and Kent Counties. This is enabling legislation, which allows the maximum hotel rental tax rate to increase from 5% to 6%.

VI. Town Reports

Town representatives reported on news and events taking place in their jurisdictions. The spring, summer, and fall feature many events for residents and visitors to attend.

VII. Comments from Board Members

Board members shared insights on happenings in their businesses, nonprofits, or industries. Mr. Klinger noted that he thinks it is time to pursue an accommodations tax increase.

VIII. Comments from the Public

There were no comments from the public.

IX. Upcoming Meetings

- Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit, May 2
- Tourism Board Meeting, May 8
- National Travel and Tourism Week, May 19-25
- Tourism Board Meeting, September 11
- Tourism Board Meeting, November 13

X. Adjournment

Ms. Greenaway made the motion to adjourn. Ms. Bellis seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 9:31 a.m.