

**RICHMOND REGION TOURISM
BOARD OF DIRECTORS' MEETING MINUTES
MARCH 20, 2025
HANOVER VEGETABLE GARDEN
12:00 P.M.**

I. CALL TO ORDER & WELCOME

- A. Chair-Elect, Ms. Bridgette Bywater, called the meeting to order at 12:27 P.M.

Welcome Remarks: Ms. Bywater introduced Mr. John Budesky, Hanover County Administrator, Mr. Robert Hess, CEO of Event Pour and co-founder Mr. Danny Crumpler, who shared opening remarks.

Mr. Budesky welcomed the Board to Hanover Vegetable Farm, highlighting the significance of the venue's community impact through partnerships such as the Five-O's Tiki Foundation. He noted Hanover's growing role in tourism, including the development of a new Department of Tourism and the upcoming completion of the Fall Line Trail's leg through Hanover and the Town of Ashland. He also praised regional collaboration, referencing Ashland's Secretariat monument and new developments drawing visitors.

Mr. Hess and Mr. Crumpler welcomed the group on behalf of the farm and outlined significant venue upgrades, including ADA improvements, expanded canopies, VIP decks, and major concert partnerships. They detailed upcoming events such as the K95 Country Jam Festival, Strawberry Wine Festival, and Taco Derby. The Five-O's Tiki Foundation, founded by the former Hanover County deputies, was highlighted as a nonprofit partner benefiting public safety officers and families. Mr. Crumpler encouraged collaboration with other nonprofits seeking fundraising opportunities.

- B. Roundtable Announcements & Board Member Update: Ms. Bywater invited Board Members to share any important updates:

Ms. Martha Miller, Town of Ashland

- The town will host the 46th annual RailRoad Run 5K & 10K on Saturday, March 22.
- The second annual Secretariat Day will be held on Sunday, March 30, preceded by a fundraising dinner "The Red Bash" at Oakdale on Saturday, March 29, from 5:00 – 8:00 PM.
- The 21st annual Ashland Train Day street festival and railroad extravanza is set for Saturday, April 26 from 11:00 AM – 4:00 PM.

Ms. Danielle Ripperton, Children's Museum of Richmond

- The Children's Museum will host Pretend Again: A Grown-Up Night at the Museum, a party for adults only on Friday, March 21, 2025, from 7:00 – 10:00 PM.
- The annual *I See Me Play in RVA!*, a free event for families to promote accessible play will be held on Sunday, April 27 from 9:30 AM – 1:30 PM at Dogwood Dell.

Mr. Jon Lugbill, Sports Backers

- The 26th annual Ukrop's Monument Avenue 10K is set for Saturday, April 12. Mr. Lugbill will be running the race for the first time.

Mr. Brian Andreson, ChamberRVA

- RVA will host city leaders from around the country including St Louis, Cincinnati, Akron, and Birmingham to collaborate on regional mobility and growth. Community leaders are welcome to attend the dinners on May 21 and 22 with more details to follow.

Mr. Perry Miller, RIC

- A new direct route from RIC to LaGuardia (NYC) starts May 2, and a new route to Bermuda begins June 7

Ms. Bridgette Bywater, Kings Dominion

- Kings Dominion will open to the public on Saturday, March 29, including the launch of the brand-new coaster, Rapterra.

Board Member Recognition: Ms. Bywater recognized Mr. Jim Holland of Chesterfield County for his 17 years of service on the Board, including as Chair from 2011 to 2013. Mr. Holland offered brief remarks, expressing gratitude and pride in the region's collaborative spirit and tourism success.

Election of 1st Vice Chair – Mark Miller, Chesterfield County: Ms. Bywater welcomed Dr. Mark Miller as the newly appointed Chesterfield County representative. Dr. Miller shared remarks, thanking Mr. Holland for his mentorship and leadership. He expressed enthusiasm for stepping into the role and continuing to support regional collaboration.

MOTION Ms. Bywater motioned to approve Dr. Miller's appointment as 1st Vice Chair, to which Mr. Brian Anderson seconded. The Board unanimously approved.

- C. Impact of Arts and Culture on Tourism: Mr. Scott Garka, President of CultureWorks, presented on the economic and tourism impacts of the region's arts and culture sector. He emphasized that arts bring communities together and have wide-ranging effects, including youth development, education, and social cohesion.

Key points included:

- CultureWorks' mission to support artists and arts organizations by increasing accessibility and visibility.
- Annual distribution of over \$130,000 in grants to individual artists and small to mid-sized organizations.
- A \$329.9 million economic impact from nonprofit arts and culture in the Richmond and Tri-Cities region (data from 2022), including 6,700 full-time jobs and \$82.7M in tax revenue.
- 13% of the event attendees surveyed were from out of market, with 82% citing arts and culture as their primary reason for visiting.
- Opportunities exist to partner with hotels to boost overnight stays connected to cultural events.

II. NEW BUSINESS

- A. **MOTION** Ms. Bywater requested a motion to approve the January 16, 2025, Meeting Minutes. Ms. Sue Dibble made a motion to approve the minutes, seconded by Ms. Nancy Thomas. The minutes passed. Dr. Mark Miller abstained.
- B. Mission Moment: Mr. Tom Loftus, Vice President of Marketing, shared that his team remains focused on raising awareness of the Richmond Region, driving visitation, and increasing hotel room nights through strategic use of TID funds. By producing over 90% of creative work in-house, the team maximizes ROI and reinvests savings into paid media. Mr. Loftus highlighted the success of RRT's first-ever partner Marketing Summit, which drew nearly 150 engaged attendees—far surpassing initial expectations—and underscored the appetite among regional partners to better promote their organizations. He emphasized that, alongside RRT's national marketing efforts, thousands of local businesses are now helping carry the message and expand the region's visibility.

President's Report: Ms. Katherine O'Donnell, President & CEO, provided organizational updates highlighting:

- Strong visitation in February and March, with notable events including GalaxyCon, Jefferson Cup, and the AKA Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference.
- Collaboration with partners across the region to drive visitation and hotel room nights.
- Acknowledgment of potential economic headwinds and early signs of softening in meetings and group business.

Board member, Ms. Renee Haltom of the Federal Reserve provided context on economic uncertainty, noting that while fundamentals remain strong, policy-related unpredictability may affect travel and investment decisions. The Fed will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates.

Regional Funding Update: Ms. O'Donnell invited newly appointed board member, Dr. Mark Miller, to provide an update on regional funding efforts since the January meeting.

Dr. Miller shared insights into discussions with Chesterfield County leadership, affirming a shift toward regional cooperation. Chesterfield is expected to contribute lodging tax funds at the full 2% level in FY26 with 1.75% confirmed in the budget and the remaining 0.25% to be decided upon as a region together. Any decisions will be made collaboratively with the RRT Executive Committee, and a meeting is being planned for May 20th to further discuss.

Financial Update: Mr. Mike Kerr, Director of Finance, provided an overview of the financials as of February 28, 2025, and presented the proposed FY26 budget.

Mr. Kerr noted that while the broader economic outlook is showing signs of slowing growth—with projected GDP falling from 2.1% to 1.7%. RRT remains in a solid financial position. As of the reporting period, total revenue was approximately \$9.4 million and has since increased slightly. TID revenue, initially trailing, has rebounded to about \$419,000.

The timing lag in TID transfers due to jurisdictional reporting schedules and affirmed that the 10% administrative transfer is applied once contributions are fully collected.

Expenses are tracking at around \$6.4 million, or 60% of the annual plan—consistent with the fiscal year’s progression. Net revenue has decreased from \$3.3 million to just under \$3 million as forward-funded expenses accrue. RRT currently maintains \$3.1 million in reserves, exceeding its 20% reserve threshold and representing about 29% of the current budget, positioning the organization well for continued financial stability. Mr. Kerr also noted a current return of 3.47% on cash holdings, though this is expected to decline slightly as federal interest rates fall over the next 18 months.

FY26 Budget: The proposed FY26 budget, totaling \$11,250,237, reflects a 3.1% year-over-year increase. Lodging tax revenue from Class A jurisdictions, including a full 2% from Chesterfield, remains the primary funding source. The budget also includes GRCC incentive funding, program service revenue, and the TID administrative fee. Highlights of the proposed budget include:

- Increased life insurance benefit for staff (from \$50,000 to 2x salary, capped at \$100,000) to align with standard Class A jurisdiction practices.
- Two new FT positions: one in Sales and one for IT. The IT hire will support implementation of outsourced AI tools to enhance data-driven strategy, particularly in sales and marketing ROI planning.
- Inclusion of six months' funding for a potential Executive Vice President role.
- \$1.3 million in incentive funds to support sales and marketing initiatives.
- Preparation to develop a strategic plan for Richmond Region Tourism beginning in the next fiscal year.

MOTION The Executive Committee advanced the proposed FY26 budget to the Board as a motion for approval. Needing no second, the motion carried unanimously.

- C. **Governance Committee Report:** Ms. Bywater, Chair of the RRT Governance Committee, presented the Governance Committee report. The committee recommended that the Board's vacant corporate seat, previously held by Mr. Pat Collins of TowneBank, be filled by Capital One. Capital One has named Mr. Brian Bald, Vice President of Product Management, as its representative.

MOTION Ms. Jennifer Wakefield motioned to approve Mr. Bald's Board appointment, to which Ms. Nancy Thomas seconded. The motion carried unanimously. Mr. Bald is expected to join the Board at the May meeting.

Ms. Bywater noted that the committee is reviewing legal counsel guidance related to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) procedures and is working to clean up and clarify Board bylaws accordingly.

- D. Tourism Improvement District Update: Ms. O'Donnell provided an update on Tourism Improvement District (TID) activity and results since the January board meeting, highlighting several significant wins made possible through TID funding.

Recent successes include:

- North American Travel Journalists Association (NATJA) selected Richmond as a host site for 2027, bringing national media coverage and top-tier travel writers to the region.
- Men's Collegiate Lacrosse Association Championships secured for 2026 and 2027 at River City Sportsplex in Chesterfield.
- The Virginia Commonwealth Games will move from Lynchburg to the Richmond region starting in 2026, through a partnership between Chesterfield, Henrico, and RRT.

Ms. O'Donnell noted increased investment in trade show participation, which has resulted in more impactful booth activations, up to 40% higher traffic, and increased bookings. This elevated presence has garnered attention from competitors.

On the marketing side, TID funds are supporting a major Station Domination campaign at Union Station in Washington, D.C., running May through July to coincide with WorldPride. The campaign includes exclusive Visit Richmond branding throughout the station, paired with a familiarization tour for event planners. Additional placements in New York Penn Station and Baltimore Penn Station are also underway.

TID funding continues to drive strong ROI on marketing campaigns—up to three to four times return in some channels—and has expanded reach into the group tour market. A new incentive program for motorcoach group tours is underway to support tracking and engagement.

Lastly, Ms. O'Donnell noted the pilot Special Events Incubation Grant Program still has \$47,000 available for events in their first three years. Grants up to \$5,000 are available for events that align with regional goals and promote vendor growth and collaboration. Additionally, the TID-supported Hotel Workforce Intern Housing Grant is helping hotels offer housing for interns, addressing a known workforce barrier.

III. Adjourn

- A. Adjourn: With no further business to discuss, Ms. Bywater adjourned the meeting at 1:30 p.m.

Board Present:

Brian Anderson, ChamberRVA
Bridgette Bywater, King's Dominion
John Cario, Embassy Suites Hotel
Paulin Cheatham, Dominion Energy
Susan Dibble, Hanover County
Renee Haltom, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond
Jon Luginbill, Sports Backers
Perry Miller, Capital Region Airport Commission
Danielle Ripperton, Children's Museum of Richmond
Jordan Stewart, New Kent County
Nancy Thomas, InUnison
Steve Trivett, Town of Ashland
Jennifer Wakefield, Greater Richmond Partnership
Lori Waran, Richmond Raceway

Guests Present:

Jim Holland, Chesterfield County
Asif Bhavnagri, City of Richmond
John Budesky, Hanover County
Leonard Caballero, City of Colonial Heights
Danny Crumpler, Event Pour
Scott Garka, CultureWorks
Robert Hess, Event Pour
Martha Miller, Town of Ashland
Dawn Miller, Henrico Sports & Entertainment Authority
J.C. Poma, Chesterfield County
Angela Wright, Hanover County

Staff Present:

Katherine O'Donnell
Danielle Fitz-Hugh
Tom Loftus
Michelle Lovatt
Mike Kerr
Grantland Steele

Board Absent:

Neil Amin, Shamin Hotels
Greg Kochuba, Colonial Heights
Michael Lindsey, Lindsey Food Group
Rita McClenny, Virginia Tourism Corp
Todd "Parney" Parnell, Richmond Flying Squirrels
Mayush Mehta, JP Hospitality
Ellen Robertson, City of Richmond
Dan Schmitt, Henrico County
Lisa Sims, Venture Richmond