

**RICHMOND REGION TOURISM  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS' MEETING MINUTES  
MAY 15, 2025  
SPORTS BACKERS  
12:00 P.M.**

**I. CALL TO ORDER & WELCOME**

- A. Chair-Elect Ms. Bridgette Bywater called the meeting to order at 12:17 P.M.

Welcome Remarks: Ms. Bywater welcomed board members to the Sports Backers office in Henrico County, noting that Board Chair Ms. Lisa Sims was unable to attend due to a meeting at City Hall.

Ms. Bywater introduced new Board Member Mr. Brian Bald, Vice President of Product Management at Capital One, who will assume the corporate seat.

Mr. Dennis Bickmeier, Executive Director of the Henrico Sports and Entertainment Authority, shared remarks following his recent Tourism Leadership Award recognition. He expressed appreciation for the honor and emphasized the power of regional collaboration.

Mr. Dan Schmitt of the Henrico County Board of Supervisors welcomed the Board and underscored the importance of regional unity in shaping the visitor experience.

- B. Roundtable Announcements: Ms. Bywater invited board members to share important updates.
- Mr. Steve Trivett (Town of Ashland): The Strawberry Faire will be held Saturday, June 7, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in downtown Ashland.
  - Mr. John Cario (Embassy Suites): Announced that Shamin Hotels and Center of the Universe Brewing Company have teamed up to launch two exclusive craft beers.
  - Ms. Martha Miller (Town of Ashland): Announced that Ms. Kelly Franke has been hired as the town's new tourism and marketing lead and, moving forward, will attend the Board meetings in Ms. Miller's place as the Ashland tourism liaison.
  - Mr. Paulin Cheatham (Dominion Energy): Shared that Dominion Energy Riverrock takes place this weekend and that Dominion has renewed its title sponsorship for three more years.
  - Mr. Dan Schmitt (Henrico County): Announced that the A10 Women's NCAA Basketball Championship will return to Richmond in 2027, 2028, and 2029.
  - Ms. Jennifer Wakefield (Greater Richmond Partnership): Recognized Economic Development Week and thanked RRT for its collaboration, noting that a recent joint recruitment trip to Kansas City secured a client leadership council event for the region next year.
  - Ms. Jerrine Lee (RRT): Invited board members to attend two events tied to the WorldPride FAM Tour: a reception at the Quirk Hotel on May 29 and a Pride Ride send-off at Main Street Station. Details will be shared by email.

- Ms. Nancy Thomas (InUnison): Reminded the group that May is National Small Business Month and encouraged continued support of local businesses.

Board Member Recognition: Mr. Jon Lugbill, Executive Director of Sports Backers, was recognized for his upcoming retirement in June and his decades of service to the Board. He reflected on his tenure, expressed gratitude for receiving the Jack Berry Community Impact Award, and introduced Mr. Will Dixon as his successor. Mr. Dixon will assume the *ex officio* seat representing Sports Backers in July.

- C. Tourism Travel Trends: Mr. Steve Halasz, Founder and CEO of Blue Room Research and Mr. Dan Roberts, VP of Research at Virginia Tourism Corporation, presented an overview of current tourism trends. While national data points to some economic headwinds, Richmond's performance remains strong. Regional lodging occupancy is up each month in 2025, and sports tourism, short-term rentals, and weekend events are driving room night demand. The region continues to benefit from its affordability, connectivity, and positioning as a drive-market destination.

## II. New Business

- A. **MOTION** Ms. Jennifer Wakefield motioned to approve the March 20, 2025, Meeting Minutes, to which Mr. Paulin Cheatham seconded. The Board unanimously approved the minutes as presented.
- B. President's Report: President & CEO, Ms. Katherine O'Donnell, announced the launch of a formal strategic planning process in July, to be completed by November. She also addressed Chesterfield County's FY26 contribution, which includes 1.75% confirmed funding from the lodging tax share and an additional 0.25% pending an additional level of accountability and roles to be further defined between RRT and Chesterfield County. A Special RRT Executive Committee meeting with Class A jurisdictions is scheduled for May 20 to further discuss the funding formula.

Mission Moment: VP of Administration, Ms. Michelle Lovatt, announced that Richmond Region Tourism was named one of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* Top Workplaces for the second consecutive year. The organization achieved a 94% staff satisfaction score and a Net Promoter Score of 91, with high marks in meaningfulness and direction.

- C. Financial Update: Director of Finance, Mr. Mike Kerr, provided an update on FY25 financials and presented the proposed FY26 Budget. Revenue is currently at 98% of plan and expenses are tracking as expected. Two new CDs were opened to lock in a four-percent return. The FY26 Budget includes funding for strategic planning, staffing placeholders, and enhanced investment in marketing and group travel incentives.

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

- D. Governance Committee Report: Ms. Bywater reported that the Governance Committee is working with legal counsel on a full rewrite of the Board's bylaws to modernize and clarify them. A suggestion was raised regarding the voting structure for rotating B-members; this will be included in the review process.
- E. Tourism Improvement District Update: TID Committee Chair, Mr. Neil Amin, presented highlights from the FY26 TID Work Plan and Budget, which had been approved by the TID Governance Committee on April 22. The plan reflects the committee's most strategic year to date, with investments across marketing, sales, and workforce development.

Key highlights include:

- Black Traveler Campaign: \$300,000 investment for year-round engagement to better serve a \$100B market segment.
- I-95 Billboard Expansion: New 12-month placements increasing visibility along the corridor.
- VA 250 Campaign: Digital marketing, FAM tour, and social activation across all seven localities promoting Revolutionary War heritage.
- Group Sales and Trade Shows: Presence at 14+ national shows with a custom booth; new incentive programs and ready-to-book itineraries.
- Targeted FAM Tours: Focused outreach to Black, LGBTQ+, luxury, and accessible travel segments.
- Hotel Workforce Support: New Spanish-language training modules and credentialing reimbursements for hospitality employees.
- Event Grants: \$92,000 allocated to support local events that bring in overnight visitation.

**MOTION** The FY26 TID Work Plan and Budget was brought forward as a motion by the TID Governance Committee. Ms. Rita McClenny seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the FY26 TID Work Plan and Budget as presented.

### III. OLD BUSINESS & WRAP-UP

- A. Other Business: A question was raised regarding the rotating B-member vote structure and the potential for unrepresented voting at meetings. Ms. Bywater acknowledged the concern and confirmed that the Governance Committee will review this as part of the Bylaws update.

The next Board Meeting will be held in Chesterfield County at the Economic Development offices on July 17 at Noon.

- B. Adjournment: With no further business to discuss, Ms. Bywater adjourned the meeting at 1:30 P.M.

Board Present:

Neil Amin, Shamin Hotels  
Brian Bald, Capital One  
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  
Greg Kochuba, Colonial Heights  
Jon Lugbill, Sports Backers  
Rita McClenny, Virginia Tourism Corp  
Mayush Mehta, JP Hospitality  
Perry Miller, Capital Region Airport Commission  
Danielle Ripperton, Children's Museum of Richmond  
Dan Schmitt, Henrico County  
Nancy Thomas, InUnison  
Steve Trivett, Town of Ashland  
Jennifer Wakefield, Greater Richmond Partnership  
Lori Waran, Richmond Raceway

Guests Present:

Dennis Bickmeier, Henrico Sports & Entertainment Authority  
Leonard Caballero, City of Colonial Heights  
Will Dixon, Sports Backers  
Steve Halasz, Blue Room Research  
Martha Miller, Town of Ashland  
J.C. Poma, Chesterfield County  
Dan Roberts, Virginia Tourism Corp  
Angela Wright, Hanover County

Staff Present:

Katherine O'Donnell  
Mike Kerr  
Jerrine Lee  
Tom Loftus  
Michelle Lovatt  
Grantland Steele

Board Absent:

Brian Anderson, ChamberRVA  
Michael Lindsey, Lindsey Food Group  
Mark Miller, Chesterfield County  
Todd "Parney" Parnell, Richmond Flying Squirrels  
Ellen Robertson, City of Richmond  
Jordan Stewart, New Kent County  
Lisa Sims, Venture Richmond