

**Washington Tourism Development Authority
Board of Directors Meeting
Wednesday, Feb 11th, 2026
Washington Civic Center Conference Room
*Minutes***

ATTENDEES

Andrew Kuhn	Paula McCullough*
Blanche Gibbs Tillis* (Secretary)	Shont'e Mason* (Treasurer)
Debra Torrence	Stacy Jesso* (Chair)
Erin Ruyle	Susan Strickland*
Harbor Peoples	Tom Stroud
Jayne Minsel	Wanda Geisen (Vice Chair)

* WTDA Board Members

Absent: *Mayor Pro Tem Fritz*

CALL TO ORDER:

WTDA Chair Stacy Jesso called the meeting to order at 1:06 pm.

Susan made the motion to amend the agenda to add discussion and possible action regarding the resignation or next steps to remove Wanda Geisen from the WTDA Board of Directors at the end of the agenda. Paula seconded the motion, and all voted in favor except for Wanda. The amended agenda was adopted.

Shont'e motioned to approve the amended January meeting minutes; Susan seconded, and the minutes were approved.

GRANT PRESENTATIONS:

Beaufort County Arts Council:

Debra Torrence, Executive Director of the Beaufort County Arts Council, presented the organization's grant request to the WTDA Board. The Arts Council requested \$5,000 to support an overall event budget of \$11,750. The application focused on marketing and outreach for several events hosted throughout the year, including four Art Walks, the Cowboy Ramble Run & Rhythm 5K, and the Second Verse/Pamlico Writers programs.

The requested funds would be used for printed advertisements (brochures and flyers), as well as social media and radio advertising for these events. (Vote on Page 4)

NC Estuarium Seafood School:

Harbor Peoples of the NC Estuarium presented a grant application to support the NC Estuarium Seafood School, requesting \$5,000. The total project cost is approximately \$800,000. The requested funds would be used to purchase kitchen equipment to help complete the furnishing of the Seafood School.

This project represents the Estuarium's largest renovation since opening in 1998. The Seafood School renovation includes two primary components: a large educational exhibit highlighting the ecology of the Albemarle-Pamlico Estuary and its role in supporting marine life, and the creation of a modern educational kitchen designed to host innovative programs focused on cooking and food preparation. (Vote on Page 4)

REPORTS:

Civic Report:

The Civic Center Manager, Charlotte Stubbs, presented her report to the board. Her report included venue availability for the 2026 and 2027 seasons, upcoming nonprofit events scheduled at the venue, and social media metrics.

Shont'e made a motion to approve the Civic Center report, and Susan seconded the motion. The Civic Center report was approved.

Director's Report:

The WTDA Executive Director, Erin Ruyle, presented her report to the board, reviewing key metrics and statistics from recent marketing efforts. She highlighted recent collaborations with Pirate Radio and Our State magazine. Staff also attended a Coast Host meeting featuring other destinations in eastern North Carolina.

Shont'e made a motion to approve the Director's report, and Paula seconded the motion. The Director's report was approved.

OLD BUSINESS:**Placer A.I Contract: Vote**

Placer.ai returned with a proposed contract totaling \$10,000. The WTDA Board was not comfortable committing to the full amount on their own. One option discussed was determining whether the City of Washington would join the NC East Alliance and provide Placer data for both the City and the WTDA. Another option was for the WTDA to split the cost with the Chamber and the City.

The WTDA Board decided to table the decision until the next meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:**Basys: Vote**

Basys is the credit card processor used by the Civic Center to process payments. Currently, former WTDA Executive Director Paula Stephenson is listed as the authorized signer on the account. Current WTDA Executive Director Erin Ruyle requested that the board remove Paula Stephenson and designate Erin Ruyle as the authorized signer. Shont'e made a motion to add Erin Ruyle as the authorized signer on the Basys account. Susan seconded the motion. The motion was approved.

Grant Request - Arts of the Pamlico: Vote

The original funding request from the Beaufort County Arts Council was \$5,000. After discussion, the Board determined that the full amount was not necessary based on the details of the application. Shont'e made a motion to reduce the award to \$1,500, and Paula seconded the motion. All voted in favor. The grant application was approved in the amount of \$1,500.

Grant Request - NC Estuarium Seafood School: Vote

Susan made a motion to approve the \$5,000 grant request for the NC Estuarium Seafood School. Shont'e seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. The grant request was approved.

Increase of Civic Center Rates:

Charlotte and Erin reported that staff are researching potential rate increases for the Civic Center for the upcoming fiscal year.

Staff to Attend Visit NC Conference in Asheville: Vote

Erin Ruyle requested approval from the WTDA Board for staff to attend the Visit NC Conference in Asheville, NC, in mid-March. She noted that registration fees are expensive and do not include hotel accommodations. Erin recommended that only Andrew attend this year to represent the WTDA.

Wanda made a motion to approve Andrew's attendance at the Visit NC Conference in Asheville. Blanche seconded the motion, and all voted in favor.

Wanda Giesen Resignation & Next Steps for Removal: Vote

Wanda recused herself from the discussion of the item and left the meeting.

The WTDA board went over their determination of just cause, which includes, but is not limited to, the following concerns:

- Engaging legal counsel without full board authorization, resulting in approximately \$20,000 in legal expenses
- Organizing private meetings to discuss actions against the City and encouraging board members and staff to separate from the City
- Inappropriate and misleading social media activity while representing the WTDA, including statements that the board considers defamatory or inaccurate. Concerns were addressed, and the behavior continued.
- Repeated disparaging statements regarding City management and the City during WTDA Board meetings
- Disclosure of confidential employee information during WTDA Board meetings

Paula made a motion to ask for a written resignation letter from Wanda for just cause by the end of the business day on February 12th. Shont'e seconded the motion, and all voted in favor.

Shont'e made a motion that if Wanda refuses her resignation, the WTDA board will seek a formal request to the City Council to remove Wanda from the board. Paula seconded the motion, and all voted in favor.

INFORMAL DISCUSSION & PUBLIC COMMENT

None

ADJOURN

Shont'e motioned to adjourn the meeting; Susan seconded, and the meeting was adjourned.

The next board meeting is scheduled for 1:00 pm on March 19th, 2026, at the Washington Civic Center Conference Room.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Kuhn

Marketing & Outreach Coordinator

Washington Tourism Development Authority