

WILLIAMSBURG TOURISM COUNCIL MEETING
Williamsburg, Virginia
September 16, 2025
Meeting Minutes

The Williamsburg Tourism Council (“WTC”) meeting was convened at 1 p.m. on September 16, 2025, at the Yorktown Library, where a quorum was present.

Tourism Council Members Present:

Ruth Larson, James City County Board of Supervisors, Chair
Cliff Fleet, Colonial Williamsburg, Vice Chair
Mayor Doug Pons, City of Williamsburg, Treasurer
Ron Kirkland, Williamsburg Hotel and Motel Association
Christy Coleman, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation (JYF)
Denise Kellogg, Jamestown Rediscovery Historic Jamestowne
Kevin Lembke, Busch Gardens/Water Country USA
Sheila Noll, York County Board of Supervisors
Adria Vanhoozier, Greater Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce

Staff Members Present

Edward Harris, CEO
Brittany Alger, Senior Sales Manager
Josue Ayala, Community Relations and Logistics Specialist
Elisa Hernandez Campana, Destination Development Director
Morgan Cordle, Sports Sales Manager
Greg Kavanagh, Vice President, Business Development
Jackie Lavan, Executive Assistant
David Turner, Finance Director
Sandra Vazquez, Talent and Culture Manager

I. Call to Order

Chair Ruth Larson called the meeting to order. Sheila Noll offered tours of the renovated Yorktown Library facility showcasing integration of original brick arches with new construction.

II. Public Comment

- No public comment

III. Roundtable Discussion

Ms. Larson introduced the roundtable discussion.

Sheila Noll:

- Expanded the Wine & Oyster Festival to two days (October 4–5), adding complementary events including a vintage market, maritime festival, and harvest celebrations.

Denise Kellogg:

- Managing potential high-tide flooding while developing 250th anniversary programming and Bacon’s Rebellion weekend events.
- Visitation remains slightly below last year’s levels.

Michael Claar:

- Restaurant Association reports August was somewhat soft, though no current data available.
- WARA Golf Tournament (September 22, 2025) is sold out.
- Planning a spring Cornhole Tournament to benefit the House of Mercy.

Christy Coleman:

- Experiencing a softer August but anticipating strong fall visitation with upcoming exhibits: *Fresh Views of the American Revolution* (October 18) and *Following the Dragon* (November 15).

Cliff Fleet:

- Visitation remains flat; spending per guest has decreased.
- Labor market stable with no job growth or major layoffs.
- Consumer fatigue from high prices is impacting business growth and spending.
- Strategic focus shifting toward more price-conscious offerings.

Kevin Lembke:

- Consumer spending remains soft.
- *Howl-O-Scream* underway; *Jingle Fest* preparations in progress.
- Performance indicators flat to slightly up; minimal weather impacts.

Ruth Larson:

- Continuing Wednesday night concerts at New Town.
- Groundbreaking for new pre-kindergarten facility scheduled for next week.
- Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Walmart Distribution Center.

Mayor Doug Pons:

- City spending is up amid ongoing construction of the new police station and sports centers.
- Revenues remain flat.

Ron Kirkland:

- Business conditions are steady, though consumer spending shows slight softness.

Adria Vanhoozier:

- Chamber operations are strong.
- *Business After Hours* scheduled for September 17.
- *Christmas Parade* (December 7) is already sold out.

IV. Minutes

Ms. Larson opened the floor for discussion of the August 19, 2025, meeting minutes, which were included in the meeting packet. With no comments offered, she called for a motion to approve the minutes.

Motion

Mr. Kirkland moved to approve the minutes of the August 19, 2025, meeting. Ms. Coleman seconded the motion and was unanimously approved by the Board.

V. Chair Report

The next meeting will be held on November 18th.

VI. Treasurer's Report
Financials

- July 2024 financial results exceeded budget projections across multiple revenue streams.
 - Total revenues reached \$1.5 million, surpassing budget by \$31,000 with sales tax contributing \$1.3 million (over budget by \$13,000)
 - Transient occupancy tax generated \$138,000, exceeding budget by \$60,000 indicating strong visitor accommodation demand
 - Operational expenses totaled \$1.1 million, coming in \$312,000 under budget due to transitioning marketing activities from summer to fall programming
 - Cash reserves maintained at \$8 million for operations with \$5.8 million free cash available after accounting for \$2.3 million in payable liabilities
- Tax revenue trends demonstrated positive year-over-year growth patterns
 - June sales tax increased \$51,000 representing 3.7% growth with three-month moving average showing \$162,000 increase (4.1% growth)
 - May transient tax posted exceptional performance at \$205,000 versus \$127,000 previous year, representing 61.3% increase potentially including delayed municipal payments

- Year-to-date performance showing consistent positive trends across both sales and occupancy tax collections

VII. CEO report

President and CEO, Ed Harris provided the CEO report.

Marketing Campaign Evolution & Performance

- New brand creative campaign launch featuring comprehensive multimedia approach
 - 60-second video presented featuring Christy Coleman voiceover with powerful messaging "This is Williamsburg, where America's journey begins" requiring final color correction and sound engineering
 - Display advertising through Miles Partnership exceeding industry benchmarks across premium platforms including TripAdvisor, Afar, Kayak with strong conversion tracking
 - Connected TV strategy deployed across Apple TV, Roku, Netflix, Hulu platforms showing above-average video completion rates indicating audience engagement
 - Website performance analytics revealing consumer value-seeking behavior with cool summer savings pass ranking as top viewed page after homepage
- Digital marketing performance metrics demonstrating campaign effectiveness
 - Audio advertising on Spotify and Pandora platforms exceeding industry engagement benchmarks
 - Email marketing campaigns by Eileen's team successfully driving website traffic with strong trackable impressions and conversion rates
 - Social media advertising on Facebook and Instagram showing increased engagement numbers above previous performance levels
 - Google search keyword buying ensuring high search engine results page placement for destination-related queries
- Traditional and partnership marketing maintaining diverse channel approach
 - New York Times print advertisement scheduled for upcoming publication with new creative photography
 - Philadelphia Magazine partnership featuring rotating imagery and updated creative assets
 - AARP partnership integration showcasing destination appeal to target demographic segments

250th Anniversary Strategic Initiatives

- Market research insights revealing strong opportunity for anniversary-focused tourism
 - 67% awareness of 250th anniversary among target audiences with 57% expressing travel interest for anniversary commemoration
 - Williamsburg positioned as highest interest destination among 250th anniversary competitors based on Smarn research findings

- Boston market observation showing extensive 250th promotional presence at airport arrival areas indicating competitive market activity
- Great American Birthday Quilt project gaining national momentum and participation
 - Steve Prince partnership featured prominently on website with instructional video demonstrating quilt square creation techniques
 - National submission reception with quilt squares arriving from across country for planned 250-foot display during summer 2025
 - Workshop and activation events scheduled to increase quilt square submissions and community participation
 - Committee establishment coordinating Historic Triangle events to prevent overlap and maximize collaborative impact
- Business community engagement planned through comprehensive outreach initiative
 - October 21st event at Jamestown Settlement designed to rally business community support for 250th anniversary
 - Window decals and marketing materials to be distributed in 250th branded bags for storefront display and promotion
 - Priority messaging emphasizing need for Historic Triangle to match promotional intensity of larger cities like Boston

Event Development & Programming Strategy

- Pancake Festival success demonstrates authentic content marketing effectiveness
 - September 26-27 dates confirmed with exceptional social media engagement including 500+ interactions, 140+ comments, 258 shares on WAVY 10 post
 - National media pickup including Travel + Leisure feature highlighting Williamsburg's authentic pancake house concentration
 - Celebrity endorsement through Fox 5 DC to promote festival
 - Authenticity factor resonating with audiences due to genuine concentration of pancake establishments rather than manufactured attraction
- International Fireworks Championship under development as potential signature event
- Sports marketing evolution with comprehensive video campaign completion
 - Final sports video capturing "Undeclared since 1781" theme positioning Historic Triangle as legendary sports destination
 - 200,000 square foot sports center prominently featured as 2026 crown jewel facility for competitive events
 - Geographic advantages highlighted including proximity to DC, Richmond, Virginia Beach, and three airports plus train access .

- NBC Today Show
 - Date selection poll to be distributed to board members after NBC feedback with options including May 16th and spring break timing
 - Major promotional opportunity representing significant national exposure for destination marketing during 250th anniversary build-up period

VIII. Live Performance Venue Analysis & Strategic Considerations

- Victus Advisors comprehensive study presented by Brian Connelly analyzing multi-day event potential for proposed venue
 - Indoor capacity designed for 800-1,200 flexible seating with ability to accommodate 1,700 general admission configuration
 - Outdoor amphitheater capacity ranging 3,000 seated to 6,000-7,000 festival standing arrangement for larger events
 - Total facility encompassing 68,000 square feet with estimated construction budget \$70-80 million requiring comprehensive public-private partnership
- Economic impact projections based on multi-day event programming scenarios
 - Four annual events scenario generating 7,500 additional room nights with \$988,000 new incremental tax revenue across municipalities
 - Six annual events model producing 9,500 room nights with \$1.1 million tax generation distributed among City of Williamsburg (\$230,000), James City County (\$380,000), York County (\$380,000)
 - Twelve annual events optimal scenario creating 18,000+ room nights with \$1.5 million municipal tax revenue potential
- Programming strategy recommendations emphasizing authentic destination integration
 - Campus model approach leveraging multiple venue types including indoor/outdoor performance spaces, hospitality options, and parking infrastructure
 - Multi-day festival concepts featuring 20-25 acts per day over 2-3 day periods encouraging overnight stays rather than drive-in/drive-out attendance patterns
 - Conference-performance hybrids combining educational daytime programming with evening entertainment, particularly authentic to Williamsburg's historical and academic foundation
 - Resident tenant anchors such as Virginia Arts Festival providing consistent programming foundation similar to Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood residency model
- Implementation challenges and collaboration requirements identified for successful execution
 - Public-private partnership necessity with shared infrastructure investment, operational support, and event grant funding across multiple stakeholder organizations

- Venue coordination complexity with Sports Center weekends requiring strategic calendar management to prevent conflicts and maximize hotel inventory utilization
- Community collaboration imperative involving venue operators, event promoters, HRTA, municipalities, Colonial Williamsburg, and tourism organizations in coordinated planning and execution

Strategic Decision Framework & Next Steps

- Board direction establishment for venue feasibility advancement
 - HTRFA funding discussion requested for November meeting to analyze payment mechanisms involving three municipal partners
 - Additional stakeholder questions to be collected through Ed and answered by Victus Advisors team for comprehensive board consideration
 - November 2024 decision timeline allowing thorough evaluation of financial commitments, operational models, and partnership structures before final direction

IX. New Business

- None

X. Old Business

- None

XI. Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 2:35 p.m.