Ocracoke Township Tourism Development Authority
Board Meeting Minutes

Friday, June 12, 2026, 9:00 am

Ocracoke Community Center

Present: Will Adams, Doreen Gaskill, Ray Murray, BJ Oelschlägel, Helena Stevens, Jeff Dippold, Ken DeBarth, Heather Johnson, Justin LeBlanc, Randal Matthews, Donnie Shumate

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:09 a.m., by Chair Will Adams.

II. Approval of April 3, 2026 Meeting Minutes

The Board reviewed the April 3, 2026, Board Meeting Minutes. No amendments were requested.

Ray Murray moved to approve the minutes. BJ Oelschlägel seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Financial Discussion / Hyde County

Jeff Dippold presented the 2% occupancy tax collections and budget-to-actual update through May 31, 2026.

May collections totaled $29,887, which was approximately $700 greater than May 2025. Year-to-date collections through May totaled approximately $510,000, which was $42,769 greater than the same eleven-month period in FY 2024/2025 and approximately 109% of the prior-year amount. Dippold noted that collections through May had already exceeded the full-year budget by approximately $9,000.

Dippold reported that April collections, related to March stays, included a significant spike because one entity remitted three months of collections at once. He stated that the year-to-date trend remained strong.

Using 90% of June 2025 collections as a conservative projection for the final month of the fiscal year, Dippold projected total FY 2025/2026 collections of approximately $551,890, or nearly $52,000 above the $500,000 budget.

Dippold stated that the stronger revenue position should help maintain accumulated reserves and provide additional flexibility for Board discretionary spending in FY 2026/2027.

Dippold also reviewed expenses through May. He stated that overall expense categories were tracking at or below budget. He identified two outliers: walking map production and distribution, which was above budget due to printing costs and replacement of the passenger-ferry pavilion tram stop sign, and computer programs used in the operation of the organization, which were above the year-to-date budget but expected to be offset by savings in other categories.

Dippold noted that year-end financials will likely be reviewed in two stages: first after June 30 once final collections are available, and again after Hyde County closes the books for the fiscal year and captures any remaining FY 2025/2026 expenses.

IV. Guest / Partner Updates

A. Ocracoke Commons / Island Inn Commons Project

Ken DeBarth provided an update on behalf of Ocracoke Preservation Society. He reported that construction remains on track, with completion anticipated in mid- to late September.

DeBarth stated that OPS expects to continue requesting support from the occupancy tax boards for the mortgage because of the financing structure used for the project. He also reported that the

new Ocracoke Commons visitor and cultural organization has received an EIN, is pursuing 501(c)(3) status, and has an active board. OPS will continue to own the property and pay the mortgage, while the new organization is expected to manage the property. A memorandum of understanding between OPS and the new organization is in its second draft.

Heather Johnson introduced herself as co-chair of the Ocracoke Commons board. She reported that the organization had recently opened a bank account and is working toward long-term self-sufficiency through weddings, rentals, events, and programming.

Johnson reported that the first rehearsal dinner held at the site in May went well and that the group has begun offering monthly free programs to test the space, evaluate how people move through the site, and provide community programming. She stated that the first program drew strong attendance.

Johnson stated that, following anticipated construction completion in September, the organization expects to spend the fall and winter furnishing the building and completing final garden installation, with the goal of opening in the spring. The Commons is expected to serve as a visitor center and to host programs highlighting Ocracoke culture, artists, artisans, history, and the garden.

Johnson reported that staffing is expected to include a paid manager, a part-time groundskeeper, and volunteers for visitor-center coverage. Debbie Wells is expected to serve as manager, and Paige Bennett is serving as groundskeeper.

Johnson and DeBarth also discussed future plans to continue fundraising, sell engraved bricks, develop an online searchable map of brick locations, explore fig-tree propagation, and possibly construct a historically compatible lath house to support plant propagation. No formal action was taken.

B. Ocracoke Access Alliance

Justin LeBlanc provided an update on the Ocracoke Access Alliance. He stated that the Alliance had sent an email update earlier in the week and asked anyone not receiving those updates to provide an email address.

LeBlanc reported on three primary areas of work: ferry tolling, the Ocracoke hotspot / NC 12 vulnerability, and ferry operations and maintenance funding.

Regarding ferry tolling, LeBlanc stated that the Alliance's tolling concept had been presented to the North Carolina General Assembly but had not yet been acted upon. He reported that preliminary information about state budget language suggested possible tolling on all ferry routes at the discretion of a state transportation body, but the exact language had not yet been released. He noted that current law already gives the Board of Transportation authority to set tolls and that the proposed language may largely restate existing authority.

LeBlanc reported that the preliminary summary referenced a low-cost commuter pass available to North Carolina residents and school-bus exemptions but did not appear to include the Alliance's request for a free annual pass for full-time Ocracoke residents.

Regarding ferry operations and maintenance, LeBlanc reported that the Ferry Division had requested an additional $3.8 million for fuel for the next fiscal year, increasing the fuel request from $6 million to $9.8 million. He stated that if the additional funding is not provided, systemwide ferry service reductions could begin around July 1 and could make current reduced-service conditions more permanent.

Regarding NC 12 and the Ocracoke hotspot, LeBlanc reported that the Alliance continues to press the Park Service and Highway Division for solutions, including a road shift or other movement of the road. He stated that both entities have expressed resistance, in part because the road is considered to be in imminent danger even if shifted.

LeBlanc reported that the Alliance is also pursuing support for a beach-nourishment feasibility or scoping study of approximately $300,000 to determine the amount of sand needed, possible sand

sources, project cost, and potential funding strategies. He stated that future funding could involve multiple sources, including NCDOT, the General Assembly, FEMA pre-disaster mitigation funding, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Randal Matthews provided additional comments regarding Hyde County's work, state and federal policy issues, Highway 12, South Dock, coastal hardening, Board of Transportation engagement, and the need for Ocracoke and Hyde County to influence transportation and coastal policy. Discussion also included the importance of coordinated communication during ferry disruptions, storms, mandatory evacuations, and post-crisis recovery messaging.

No formal action was taken.

V. Executive Director's Report

Helena Stevens provided an Executive Director's Report focused on marketing, public relations, visitor information, content development, and upcoming projects.

Stevens reported that she has hosted and coordinated familiarization trips for content creators and media. She said these efforts support content creation, reels, blog posts, advertising, and coverage of Ocracoke businesses and locations across the island. She noted that creators often make final business and location choices based on the story angle and audience.

Stevens reported that Beverly Hurley of *Triangle Gardener* was visiting Ocracoke and that the opportunity grew out of relationships developed through the International Media Marketplace in New York.

Stevens provided an update on the WAVY / Hampton Roads Show partnership. She reported that OTTDA purchased multiple segments, including interview segments and cooking segments, and noted that the Hampton Roads market remains a strong drive market for Ocracoke. She also stated that the segments are useful because they perform well in search and have strong social-media reach.

Stevens reported that walking-map distribution continues. Remaining maps are being repacked and distributed to North Carolina Welcome Centers, rest stops, hotels, and other visitor-facing locations leading to Ocracoke.

Stevens reported that the annual Ocracoke photo and video shoot with Chris Hannant is scheduled for June. The shoot will focus primarily on family travel and will include island activities such as boating, dining, oyster farming, duck carving, and other visitor experiences.

Stevens reported that she attended the Public Relations Society of America conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for professional development in media relations, creator partnerships, storytelling, and tourism communications strategy.

Stevens also reported that she is working with the Ferry Division to place an Ocracoke video on the passenger ferry for the remainder of the season; that Ocracoke has recently appeared in high-profile publications including Southern Living and Travel + Leisure; that Bellwether Media continues to assist with social media; and that Crystal Hart is providing administrative assistance.

Stevens discussed website and search trends, noting that organic website traffic is being affected by artificial-intelligence search summaries and generative search behavior. She stated that website content, keywords, organization, and search-engine optimization will become increasingly important as AI changes how travelers find destination information.

The Board discussed whether future budgets should break out certain marketing categories more specifically, such as familiarization trips, influencer hosting, content creation, and traditional media relations, to better evaluate costs and returns. No formal action was taken.

The Board also discussed walking-map quantity, possible use of QR codes, digital versions, and potential ways to evaluate future print needs. No formal action was taken.

The Board also discussed crisis communications, post-crisis communications, ferry-disruption messaging, emergency information, possible coordination with Hyde County, and the potential value of a TDA Facebook page or opt-in communication tool. No formal action was taken.

VI. New Business

A. Parking Lot Contract Renewal

Stevens reported that the parking lot contract with Jesse Spencer / Nana and Papa LLC had been updated for the new fiscal year. The renewal includes the planned 5% increase effective after June 30. The light station parking allocation of $36,470 is included in the FY 2026/2027 visitor enhancement budget. Stevens stated that no additional Board action was required at this time.

The Board discussed concerns about pedestrian traffic from the lighthouse parking lot crossing onto neighboring private property, especially when the road is flooded. Board members discussed whether additional fencing, signage, or a partnership with the property owner could reduce trespassing and improve neighbor relations.

The Board agreed to place the fencing / neighbor-impact issue on the next meeting agenda for further discussion. No formal action was taken.

B. Executive Director Employment Agreement

Stevens reported that the Executive Director employment agreement and job description need to be updated. She stated that the existing agreement still reflects the role as originally structured and does not fully reflect the current scope of responsibilities, including board administration, minutes, press tours, social media, website, photography, video, vendor coordination, and execution of approved budget items.

Stevens noted that the current employment agreement expires June 30 and that the next regular Board meeting is not scheduled until August.

A motion was made and seconded to approve an extension or new employment agreement, pending approval by the Board Chair. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Adams requested that Stevens provide an updated agreement and job description and show the difference between the original responsibilities and the current role so the Board can understand how the Executive Director position has expanded.

C. FY 2026/2027 Meeting Calendar

Stevens reviewed the proposed FY 2026/2027 meeting dates. The dates discussed were August 21, 2026; October 23, 2026; December 11, 2026; February 19, 2027; April 2, 2027; April 23, 2027; and June 11, 2027.

Stevens stated that she would send the dates to the Board. No formal vote on the meeting calendar was clearly recorded in the transcript.

VII. Public Comments

No additional public comments were clearly recorded after completion of New Business.

VIII. Adjournment

There being no further business, a motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

Prepared by:

Helena Stevens

Executive Director