Ocracoke Township Tourism Development Authority
Board Meeting Minutes

Friday, August 21, 2026, 9:00 am
Ocracoke Community Center

Board Members Present: Will Adams, Doreen Gaskill, Ray Murray, BJ Oelschlägel, Roger Garrish
Supporting Staff: Helena Stevens; Jeff Dippold; Kayla Nardiello
Presenters / Guests: Ken DeBarth, Martin Armes, Justin LeBlanc

I. Call to Order

Chair Will Adams called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m.

II. Approval of Minutes

The Board reviewed the June 12, 2026 Board Meeting Minutes. No amendments were requested.

MOTION: Doreen Gaskill moved to approve the minutes. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Financial Discussion - Hyde County - Jeff Dippold

FY 2026-27 occupancy tax collections (first month).

Jeff Dippold reported that July collections, representing June overnight stays, totaled $93,000 — approximately $14,000 below the same month in the prior year, or roughly 86–87% of the prior-year amount. Hyde County Finance confirmed that all expected remitters remitted. Projecting the year at 85% of prior-year collections yields approximately $485,000–$486,000, or about $29,000 under the adopted budget. Mr. Dippold recommended that the Board allow another month of data before concluding, as the variance may be due to timing.

He noted that if collections come in approximately $30,000 short and spending remains at full budgeted levels, the shortfall would draw down accumulated excess reserves by that amount.

FY 2025–26 year-end results:

Revenues came in at $569,000, about $69,000 above the $500,000 budget. Although the budget included $46,000 in accumulated excess reserves, none were needed.

Expenses were about $37,000 under budget, primarily due to Ocracoke events and visitor improvements (tram stops, parking), with ~$20,000 from unspent funds for seafood marketing, Starlink, and the Worrell Race (~$4,000). Crisis communication, budgeted at $10,000, went unused; the remaining $7,000 was reallocated to other categories, and computer programs ran slightly over budget. Net income is approximately $60,000, adding to excess reserves. As of June 30, 2025, the audited balance was $179,586; adding FY 2025–26 net revenue of $60,000 brought the June 30, 2026 balance to $239,000. After a $100,000 cushion, $139,000 remains; subtracting $65,400 for the FY 2026–27 budget leaves about $74,000. If revenues fall short by $30,000, the cushion reduces to $44,000. Dippold noted that July figures are pending from the County, which is completing the audit, and that Board reports are cash-based, while the County uses accruals.

Members discussed the absence of an island-wide occupancy rate metric. STR (Smith Travel Research) was identified as an option for hotel properties (a minimum property threshold applies; requires property management system access), while AirDNA and similar services cover vacation rentals. Martin (Media One) offered to help the Executive Director research requirements and vendor options.

Members raised concerns that platforms like Expedia, Booking.com, Airbnb, and VRBO remit local occupancy taxes inconsistently, sometimes leaving properties responsible. Martin Armes said North Carolina requires companies to remit taxes statewide. Invite Hyde County Finance to explain collection and verification. The Chair proposed either increasing the reserve above $100,000 or exploring an occupancy tax audit with Chris Cavanaugh. The OPS representative noted the issue also involves the 3% Occupancy Tax Board and recommended coordination.

IV. Media One Digital Campaign Report - Martin, Media One

Martin presented the results of the four-month digital media campaign (February–May), which had previously been distributed by email. Five tactics were deployed:
Paid search (Google): had about a 73% one-minute session rate; 3:42 average session duration; top terms included things to do, relaxing beach getaways, OBX vacation spots; audience skewed female, 55+.
Content activation (native ads): 44% one-minute session rate; about 3:00 average session duration; top landing pages: slower pace of travel, first-timer's guide, and trip ideas.
Paid social (Facebook/Instagram): 2:00+ average session duration; sunset creative led with around 1.4 million impressions; oyster creative also performed well.
Display retargeting: 1M+ impressions; 1:20 average session duration.
YouTube: 65%+ completion rate (industry benchmark ~40%); ran April–May.
Year-over-year: Time on site increased 33.6%; average session duration rose to 3:19; Google Analytics engagement rate grew over 52%.
Recommendations: Shift a larger share of budget to paid search (vacation and "things to do" keywords); shift display retargeting dollars to paid social; expand "slower pace of travel" content.
Top landing pages for the year were the homepage, first-timer's guide, trip ideas, getting here, and slower pace. Organic search remains the primary traffic driver, with strong direct traffic reflecting PR, social, and influencer activity.
No formal action was taken.

V. Ocracoke Commons / OPS Report - Ken DeBarth

The Ocracoke Preservation Society representative provided an update: the certificate of occupancy is anticipated by the end of September. Interior painting is complete, and second-floor flooring is in progress. Electricity is operational, and the lighting wiring is complete. The people lift has been installed, and the brick walkway has been framed, with bricks expected to be installed late September. The Ocracoke Commons Visitor and Cultural Center (OCVCC) is now an independent 501(c)(3). A lease between OPS, which retains ownership due to a mortgage, and OCVCC, which will manage and operate the center, is nearing finalization. A key delay involves installing a lift station pump for septic conveyance; contractor availability is the main obstacle. Water service will activate only after this installation. Connectivity plans include restoring Starlink internet, with Brightspeed as a backup (waiting on fiber installation per Brightspeed). The system will feature separate, secure, and public channels. No official grand opening is scheduled, but the board plans a ribbon-cutting and the "Evening at the Commons" event in October. Board members are invited for a walkthrough. The Executive Director read the OCVCC letter into the record, which reports thriving gardens and strong visitor traffic. Recent summer activities included a local wedding, Music in the Garden series, and the Fourth of July fish fry. Upcoming events feature October’s "Evening at the Commons" and December’s holiday illumination with garden decorations by Trudy Austin. Bookings for 2027 are underway, including an artist retreat and wedding inquiries. TDA board members are welcome to visit. Furthermore, the OPS representative mentioned that Tom Delgado, a New York-based content creator, spent two days filming and interviewing for YouTube but has not contacted the TDA; contact details will be provided. The Executive Director

stressed that advance notice of such visits enhances exposure and offered the Patch platform as a free space for listing OCVCC events.

VI. Ocracoke Island Video

The Board viewed the new Ocracoke Island destination video, filmed in July and now published on YouTube and used across social media channels.

VII. Ferry Tolling Update - Justin LeBlanc, Ocracoke Access Alliance

Tolling on the Hatteras–Ocracoke route is expected to start on January 1, 2027. The Ferry Division believes it can meet this deadline, but only through a phased, temporary approach—possibly using trailer-based collection points at Hatteras and Ocracoke, or on Ocracoke alone. In September, there will be statewide public meetings, including one on Ocracoke on September 9, and an online NC Ferry Toll survey is open. In October, the Ferry Division will present a tolling concept and proposed rates to the Board of Transportation, which will set the final tolls in November.

Plans include ending residential priority passes, as they have never been authorized by law; vendor priority passes will continue as they are lawfully permitted. The Ferry Division has proposed technical corrections to the General Assembly, likely to include authorization for residential priority passes and expanded toll exemptions. Under current law, only school buses are exempt; county vehicles, ambulances, sheriff's vehicles, and NCDOT vehicles must pay.

Four advocacy options are being considered: (1) pushing for a one-year delay; (2) pursuing technical corrections; (3) a combination of both; or (4) challenging the Ferry Division's interpretation—though the Alliance considers the fourth unlikely to succeed. A small workgroup will meet tomorrow, with a trip to Raleigh planned for September and outreach to legislative candidates. The Alliance will prepare talking points for the September 9 meeting and encourages community participation.

Additional updates include: annual passes priced at $150 per year, valid on all ferry routes, available only to residents of 22 coastal counties—raising concerns about property values and repeat visits; the Hatteras–Ocracoke route will continue on a first-come, first-served basis, as reservations are logistically challenging at current traffic levels; tolls are legally restricted to vessel replacement costs, not operation and maintenance, and the exact share to be covered remains unclear; pedestrians and bicycles will remain free as the law only authorizes vehicle tolls; tolls can be waived during emergencies; safety concerns involve vehicle stacking on NC-12 during peak times. The Alliance’s current funding lasts through September, after which additional fundraising, including a TDA request, is planned. The Executive Director recommended the December NCTIA conference at Pinehurst for legislative engagement and offered to share more details.

VIII. Executive Director's Report - Helena Stevens

Chris Hannant is adapting the destination video into multiple formats, including long- and short-form edits and still images for marketing. Social media updates (Bellwether Media, with Kathryn): Over the past three months, there were 1,345,500 reel views, 35,000 likes, and over 1,300 new followers. A Blackbeard reel alone reached 760,000 views, 16,000 likes, and 1,200 shares. "Discover the Carolinas" posts garnered 91,000 and 130,000 views, boosted by the agency's QC Exclusive (Charlotte) audience.

The New Bern airport column wrap needs to be replaced after about five years. Media One provided five sample images, and four will be selected. The estimated cost is about $6,000, including removal and reinstallation by a local graphics vendor. Some creative costs are covered by the existing media budget.

Public relations efforts include features in Southern Living, The Sun (UK), ongoing WAVY TV Hampton Roads Show segments (most recently with Maria from Moonraker Tea Shop), a Triangle

Gardener June visit resulting in a July feature on island gardens, the Island Inn gardens, and figs, along with coverage of the Ocracoke Island Fig Festival by WCTI on August 6.

Follow-up meetings with TBEX content creators are ongoing. Website and AI search (GEO): Search trends have shifted from traditional SEO to generative engine optimization. With help from the Authority's SEO consultant, we added schema markup, including descriptive alt tags for images and reformatting content based on typical user queries from Media One's search data. The process continues.

Walking map: About 15–20 boxes remain in storage, plus one in Manteo. Emails for the 2027 walking map solicitation will be sent in early September.

Tram stops: New tram operators Mitzi and Lynn requested updated signage and decals reflecting new rules and age limits, including stop-specific signage, no-parking zones, stop numbering, and signage inside the trams (see details in the packet). Jason Daniels, who made the existing signs, recommends a full replacement at the start of the season rather than overlays but has not yet provided a quote. Helena will check with Hyde County, which owns the trams and contracts their operation, while the TDA funded decals, stop maps, and signage for the ferry pavilion. The Executive Director will seek guidance from the County and report back. No further steps have been taken.

Office lease: The lease extension runs through July 2027.

Staffing: Helena introduced Kayla, her new assistant, who manages TDA-related tasks and has assisted with the video shoot, creator interviews, and administrative, creative, and marketing duties.

Job description: The Executive Director distributed a comparison sheet showing differences between the previous and updated job descriptions for review.

IX. Crisis Communication - Ferry Tolling Response

Will Adams proposed allocating $5,000 from the Authority's FY 2026–27 crisis communication budget to address ferry tolling and priority pass issues, as these directly affect tourism and island occupancy.
Discussions involved working with Media One and the Ocracoke Access Alliance on approved talking points, leveraging regional broadcast contacts for earned media, launching a grassroots video campaign with local business owners (initially created during COVID), engaging visiting content creators, coordinating with communities such as Knotts Island, Minnesott Beach, and Aurora/Bayview, and increasing awareness for the public meeting on September 9.
Ray advised against reallocating funds without detailed deliverables and costs, noting this line is the Authority's crisis reserve and warning about public perception. The Chair clarified the funds were to be directed within the crisis communication line, not moved. Members agreed messaging should be guided by the Ocracoke Access Alliance to inform visitors, not alarm them.
The Board decided not to allocate funding at this time.

MOTION: Will Adams proposed that the Executive Director gather information and cost estimates related to communications about ferry tolling and the priority pass. These options should then be circulated by email for review and feedback before any funds are allocated. BJ Oelschlagel seconded the motion.

X. Board Strategic Planning Workshop - Chris Cavanaugh Proposal

The Executive Director presented Chris Cavanaugh's proposal for a half-day Board working session: $1,500 for a virtual session or $2,500 plus travel expenses for an in-person session. The proposal is not a formal strategic plan but a facilitated session covering objectives, an external assessment (destination needs and initiatives), an internal assessment (programs, finances, staffing, systems, policies and bylaws, crisis management, and the DMO's role), a SOAR exercise

(strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results/restraints), and the identification of actionable imperatives with assigned responsibilities and timelines. Anticipated duration is two to three hours.

MOTION: Will Adams moved that the Authority engage Chris Cavanaugh to conduct a virtual strategic planning workshop at a date and time to be determined through Board coordination. Ray Murray seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

XI. Lighthouse Parking Lot - Neighbor Impact

The Chair reported on a request to build a privacy fence along the west boundary of the lighthouse parking lot, leased from Jesse Spencer. Mr. Spencer opposes the fence because of maintenance concerns, possible property tax impacts, and aesthetic fit, but is open to signage and wants to be involved in its design and wording. The Executive Director confirmed her and the Chair's on-site meeting with Mr. Spencer.

Discussions centered on how residents might be affected, including pedestrians crossing through, climbing fences into yards during floods, noise, and use of private property. One member emphasized the need for the Authority to address these impacts. Others pointed out that the lot was created to alleviate parking and congestion, is private property leased by the owner, and using public funds for private improvements could set a negative precedent. There could also be zoning, planning, or law enforcement issues.

The Board agreed that installing clear, appropriately sized no-trespassing or private property signs is a reasonable temporary measure. These signs should be developed with Mr. Spencer's input, through the appropriate committee, with mockups from Jason Daniels, and then presented to the Board.

Doreen Gaskill moved that the Authority proceed with obtaining signage to prevent trespassing on the neighboring private property adjacent to the lighthouse parking lot. BJ Oelschlägel seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

XII. Committee Appointments

The Chair appointed members to the same committees as last year, with one addition:
- Marketing Committee: the Chair, Roger, and Doreen
- Budget Committee: BJ and Ray

XIII. Meeting Schedule

The packet included the FY 2026-27 meeting calendar. The next regular meeting is October 23. The April 2027 meeting is scheduled for April 16, 2027, a Friday. The Board discussed using email between meetings to circulate time-sensitive items for review.

XIV. Public Comment

No one made public comments in person or through the Facebook livestream.

XV. Adjournment

Will Adams moved to adjourn. The motion was seconded and approved unanimously. The meeting ended at approximately 11:45 a.m.