

**REPORT OF THE
VIRGINIA TOURISM AUTHORITY**

**Report on Standards for
Inclusion of Non-State-Owned
Visitor Centers in the State's
Network of Welcome Center**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



HOUSE DOCUMENT NO. 84

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
2006**

***Report On Standards for Inclusion of Non-State-Owned
Visitor Centers in the State's Network of Welcome Centers***

**By the Virginia Tourism Authority
November 30, 2006**

This report is in response to a requirement in the Appropriations Act, Chapter 3, Item 125. O. for the Virginia Tourism Authority to report “...on the location, staffing, programming, capital, maintenance and operating cost requirements and standards for the Commonwealth to include public, nonstate owned and operated visitor centers in the state’s network of Welcome Centers.” The Commonwealth is very fortunate to have a wealth of tourism attractions throughout the state from which the state and local governments receive significant tax revenues. Indeed, the tourism industry in the Commonwealth is vital to the continued growth and prosperity of the state. In 2005, travelers to Virginia spent \$16.5 billion generating almost \$1.2 billion in state and local taxes while employing more than 206,500 citizens. A key element to maximizing tourist expenditures are the state’s Welcome Centers and the local/regional visitor centers. These “welcome maps” to tourism economies are vital to the traveling public. To sustain industry growth, it is key that state, local and regional visitor centers market the Commonwealth as a whole while promoting local and regional tourism product.

There exists in Virginia a large number of visitor information facilities with somewhat differing purposes and varying in the kind and quality of the services to the public. Most local visitor information centers are organized and operated by cities, counties, towns, chambers of commerce, convention and visitor bureaus or regional consortiums. The primary purpose of the centers is to promote destinations, historic and natural attractions/areas, eating establishments, shopping establishments and accommodations within the regions they represent. The centers are generally located in downtown areas, shopping centers and along major highways in rural areas. They are primarily funded by the localities and local jurisdictions for which they were established and are housed in varying facilities. For example, some are housed in stand-alone buildings while others are contained within other office space in a mall setting. This is of importance when assessing the capital needs for maintenance and expansion.

To ensure that the traveling public’s expectations of visitor center services are met, the Virginia Tourism Authority provides a certification program. Those centers which voluntarily enter the program become “certified” after having met certain operational requirements, thus ensuring a high level of quality of the services provided. (See appendix A for Certification requirements.) Certified centers also promote destinations and attractions statewide, both within and outside their areas and are provided with customer service training on an ongoing basis from the Virginia Tourism Authority. Currently, there are 52 certified visitor centers and many more non-certified centers throughout the Commonwealth.

Each local or regional visitor center is operated, staffed and funded by the local organizations that established them. Most have a minimal number of full or part-time staff with supporting volunteers while some are all paid staff. In some areas, the localities provide support services such as security and buildings and grounds maintenance. Some centers have small retail

operations such as gifts shops and vending machine operations as well as donation boxes which provide minimal operational revenue. In almost all instances, public funding is needed for the maintenance and operational costs required. For many of the centers, funding is not sufficient to maintain operations seven days a week and year-round.

In 1999, a Visitor Service Facilities Task Force was formed to examine the state of visitor information centers in the Commonwealth and to make recommendations regarding state, local and regional visitor center funding, operations and minimal facility requirements. The study was filed with the Secretary of Commerce and Trade and the Chairman of the Senate Finance and House Appropriation Committees on November 3, 1999. The study examined the different types of centers in the Commonwealth as well as other states and the means by which they were operated and funded. The recommendation of the Task Force was to create regional visitor centers through public-private sector partnerships to establish “*..distinctive and innovative regional visitor centers around Virginia that will serve to complement..*” the state welcome centers. The Task Force further recommended minimal facility and operational requirements for such centers and encouraged public-private partnerships for operational and funding sources. The operational concepts put forth by the Task Force could be applied to any visitor facility that may be considered for takeover by the Commonwealth. In today’s fiscal environment of limited dollars to meet growing financial requirements, it is important to examine the public-private partnership scenario for operational funding and construction needs. Through partnerships with the private sector and cooperation of the local jurisdictions, opportunities may be available that could provide a mechanism to assure a constant funding stream with minimal Commonwealth investment. A properly crafted partnership among the jurisdictions, private companies and the Commonwealth could provide such financial, capital and operational resources. Such partnerships would foster relationships among the group and focus efforts on the common cause of economic development and employment through growth in tourism.

Currently, the Commonwealth through the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Virginia Tourism Authority (VTA), maintains and operates 10 welcome centers along the interstate highways’ entry points into the state. Unlike local/regional centers, VTA staff promotes all of the Commonwealth’s destinations and not specific areas or regions in particular. The welcome center staff works in cooperation with local/regional entities to promote those events and attractions surrounding the centers. VDOT maintains the buildings and grounds while the VTA manages the visitor information center function. The management of the visitor information centers is primarily funded by general funds of the Commonwealth and supplemental revenues generated from the sale of brochure space and advertising panels, vending machines commissions. The funding currently derived from the General Assembly appropriation and the sale of marketing services still does not meet the financial needs of the Authority.

The staff at the state welcome centers provides the traveler with information about Virginia attractions (including historic and natural attractions), eating establishments, and overnight accommodations and the centers are open seven days a week, 363 days a year. Annually, the staff at the centers assists more than two million visitors. Each staff member serves about 23 visitors per hour on average. The staff not only provides informational services

but free reservation assistance. Since the inception of the reservation services program, more than 18,500 reservations have been made.

The expectations of the visitor have changed somewhat over the years in terms of the need for current information and access to different experiences while traveling. In addition to traditional information sources such as brochures, advertising panels and personal assistance, today's traveler also uses technology to do research and find things to do. To accommodate these needs, the VTA has begun a program using the technologies of the internet, wide-screen television and digital video displays to provide travel information as a supplement to the traditional methods. Finally, the centers provide interactive experiences for the public on site such as interaction with Civil War re-enactors, restaurant food sampling, naturalist interpretation and musical venue entertainment. The total annual VTA operational cost for the information center portions of the centers including full and part-time staff for the Welcome Centers is about \$2 million. Currently, about \$380,000 is raised annually from the sale of advertising space and brochure placements; and \$1 million is received from VDOT from vending machines revenues and the remaining \$620,000 is derived from general funds, which would otherwise be dedicated to marketing Virginia as a premier travel destination.

The Commonwealth's welcome centers are located on the interstate highway system at entry points to the state. Because these are located on the federal highway system, these centers are prohibited from developing enterprise operations with the private sector. The only enterprise activity must be through vending operations through the Bureau of the Blind. As such, there is no opportunity to seek private operations and/or revenue development unless the federal laws change. However, such opportunities could be available to those centers not on the federal highway system. Such partnership opportunities could provide the necessary resources to fund and operate local/regional centers that are absorbed into the state system of welcome centers. It should be noted, that such opportunities would be long term and would necessitate an initial investment by the Commonwealth for the procurement and initial operations of the centers.

While great progress has been made in recent years to upgrade not only the state welcome centers, but also the state's rest areas (un-staffed visitor facilities), the Commonwealth (VDOT) is behind in its long-term capital improvement plan for these centers. This was primarily due to budgetary restrictions and compounded by the fact that the centers and rest areas were not built for the current capacity of travelers.

Recommendations:

It is vital that local/regional visitor centers continue to exist to promote Virginia as a travel destination. They provide the local flavor of the areas they represent and a valuable resource to the traveler of local attractions and events which could be lost in a more state-wide approach. Localities should be encouraged to support their visitor centers and be educated upon the importance such centers play in the local economic development and betterment. However, there may be instances in which it would be in the best interest of the Commonwealth to take over the ownership and operation of a local/regional center. In such instances, it is the recommendation that the centers meet certain minimum requirements for take-over consideration

to assure the continued effective marketing of the area and the Commonwealth as a whole. Following are the recommendations:

- The facility should be located at a major entry point to the Commonwealth to attract the maximum number of travelers to the center.
- Center must be capable of meeting the minimal operational requirements of a “Certified” visitor center established by the VTA.
- Structure must comply with state building codes, ADA and other building rules and regulations.
- Center must be of sufficient size to be able to accommodate the display of approximately 500 brochures, walls to display advertising panels, a special display area, and storage for brochures and supplies.
- Structure must be of sufficient size to provide two office areas and a visitor counter that may accommodate equipment for computers, telephones, and other display needs.
- Sufficient parking for staff and visitors is necessary to provide a safe and restful environment.
- Plan needs to incorporate the ability of the communities to continue participation in the center for support, which may include services such as police protection, trash collection, janitorial services, ice/snow removal, etc.
- Structure needs sufficient land or facility access to be able to expand or renovate should the need arise.
- Structure needs sufficient land or facility access to be able to enter into a public/private partnership for operations and/or revenue generation.
- Facility should have properly functioning electrical and mechanical systems and adequate water and sewer to accommodate the visiting public and staff.

Funding Requirements:

A constant source of funding and community and state participation are vital to the continued success and to assure they are able to provide ongoing information, visitor guidance and appropriate amenities. As discussed earlier, funding can be derived from a variety of sources such as Commonwealth general funds, local funding assistance, localities’ assistance as service providers and partners, earned revenue sources, and public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships should be a vital component in the funding and operations of these centers. Through such partnerships, a long-term relationship could be developed with a private concern(s) that could both generate funding for visitor services operations and provide visitor amenities through retail operation such as WAWA, McDonalds, Taco Bell, etc. Partnerships could not only offer a stable funding source and minimize the need for Commonwealth investment but would also provide local employment and economic benefit for the communities in which they are located. To accomplish this there needs to be a commitment on the part of the Commonwealth, localities and private concerns to assure the success of such ventures. The Commonwealth must commit sufficient resources to begin such efforts through initial capital investment and basic and ongoing visitor center operational needs; sufficient space must be available at the visitor center site to be able to accommodate private concern(s) needs and the visitor center functions; and a long-term commitment by all parties to assure the success of the center(s) programs.

As was stated earlier, each local/regional visitor center differs in size, location and community involvement. Some are older structures while others are located within existing retail or service environments such as shopping malls, chambers of commerce or convention and visitor bureaus. Estimated funding requirements of such facilities was determined by the experience of the VTA in operating the state's welcome centers and information derived from two local/regional centers meeting the certification standards. Working under the assumption that any center brought into the Commonwealth's welcome center program would also be operated as are all the other state centers including hours of operation (seven days a week 363 days a year, closed only on Christmas and New Years days), the following were determined to be the approximate annual operational funding needs of a center.

Staffing (Full and Part-time)	\$ 141,000
Materials, supplies, travel, janitorial, telephone, etc.	10,000
Utilities (Water, sewer, electrical, gas, etc)	16,000
Janitorial, cleaning supplies, etc.	15,300
Buildings and grounds maintenance	21,000
Insurance	3,500
Security	<u>2,500</u>
Total	<u>\$ 209,300</u>

In addition to annual operational needs, capital costs to bring some centers up to the state standards and to market to a broader audience may be necessary. These costs would typically be non-recurring in nature and would provide the basic equipment and display needs for the center. It is estimated that approximately \$44,000 would be required to provide computer equipment, brochure display cases, storage shelves and office furniture in a center. Depending upon the center, facility improvements may be necessary and would need to be determined at the time of acquisition through a property assessment.

Appendix A: Visitor Center Certification Criteria and Benefits

These criteria provide for the recognition and support of the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) to local/regional visitor centers in the state.

VISITOR CENTER REQUIREMENTS

- Visitor center should be open year-round a minimum of five (5) 8-hour days per week, two of which **MUST** be Saturday and Sunday. If open **LESS** than seven days, hours must be posted on interstate/highway signage. Failure to comply with posted hours will result in loss of certification. When closed, the certified center will post a map of Virginia Welcome Centers or nearest information center that is open so that travelers can locate an alternate source of travel information.
- Visitor center must be located in a convenient and accessible location for the ease of travelers. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the local government must erect appropriate blue and white interstate and/or other highway signing. Similar trailblazing signs must clearly lead to the facility, and facility must have a clearly visible exterior sign. All signing is to be paid for by the organization operating the facility.
- There must be a variety of brochures displaying information on attractions, localities, events, shopping and accommodations across the state. This display would include at least one brochure from all other state-certified local/regional visitor centers.
- Visitor Center organization must work in cooperation with a local Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), a local Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB), local chamber of commerce, or local government office.
- Adequate free parking areas must be designated for visitors.
- There must be adequate restroom facilities to accommodate visitors.
- Visitor Center manager and appropriate staff must attend a VTC orientation session.

SERVICES PROVIDED BY VTC

- Certified centers will receive free annual distribution of one 4"x9" brochure at all 10 state welcome centers and the Richmond sales office (an \$850 value). The brochure must represent the visitor center's community and/or region.
- When available, VTC will provide limited bulk quantities of:
 - Virginia is for Lovers Travel Guide
 - The Heritage and Culture of African Americans in Virginia: A Guide to the Sites
 - Virginia Golf Guide
 - Virginia Civil War Newspaper
- When available, VDOT will provide annual bulk supply of state highway maps. All certified local/regional visitor centers are marked on the official state highway map.
- Certified centers will receive a prominent listing as a primary contact in the Virginia Travel Guide.
- An annual visitor center seminar and familiarization tour designed by the VTC will be provided for both visitor center managers and travel counselors.
- VTC will offer recommendations and assistance with hospitality training for the travel counseling staff.

Certified centers will be provided the opportunity to participate in any future VTC quality control programs, such as a Secret Shopper Program, and would be provided a copy of any reports generated by such programs.