

City of Virginia Beach
Human Rights Commission “Beach Weekend” Observer Team
Recap of Observations at the Oceanfront (16-25th Streets)
April 24-26, 2015

Since the early 1990’s, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) has been observing the Oceanfront activities during major holiday weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day. In 2014, the Virginia Beach Police Department requested that the HRC observe the “College Beach Weekend.” Last year the HRC observed along with citizens and submitted a recap of this observation to the Police Department and City Leadership. Again in 2015, the Police Department inquired if the HRC would be willing to observe the College Beach Weekend event. The HRC accepted and welcomed the observation request and then offered citizens an opportunity to participate in this civic engagement event. The HRC reached out to approximately thirty-five people to serve as observers. The final group consisted of four citizens and four HRC members with diverse backgrounds, experiences, ages, gender and race.

The mission of this team was to serve as ‘welcoming’ ambassadors for the citizens and visitors to the Oceanfront during Beach Weekend. They were also tasked with providing general information, observing City services, and assessing the atmosphere with regards to safety and friendliness. They were also sensitive to any signs of discrimination. The observations were submitted in both written and verbal form and this report reflects the compiled information to include recommendations.

It is the opinion of the observers that the media coverage leading up to this weekend projected a positive message. The City provided information entitled “Visiting the Virginia Beach Oceanfront? Everything You Need to Know to Enjoy Yourself” which provided a link to the **VB Insider**, a source for basic information one would need for visiting the Oceanfront. This document is an excellent resource for all of our visitors.

On Friday (4/26) evening at 9:30 pm, four observers gathered at the 19th Street South Parking Lot for a briefing. The observers wore white t-shirts, donated by the Convention Visitor Bureau, as well as an ID card and a lime green backpack, prior to taking to the streets at 9:45 pm. The weather was cool but no rain as the observers went to greet our visitors. The streets and parking lots were heavily congested and remained so throughout the evening. In comparison to last year, the observers noted more retail stores and restaurants were open for business. Atlantic and Pacific Avenues were busy with foot and vehicular traffic without issues due to the excellent planning of traffic and street controls. Some people appeared to be intoxicated but most were just having fun in a peaceful manner. The observers visited a couple of hotels and were told by hotel personnel that they were 100% occupied and were satisfied with the conduct of the visitors. The observers noticed some portable banks of restrooms on the Boardwalk but noted there was no signage to direct our guests to these facilities. The Public Works Department did an excellent job ensuring the streets were kept clean. The police presence appeared to be appropriate for the

number of people at the Oceanfront on this night. The observers noted that officers were friendly and did not obstruct the fun guests were having while walking the streets. By 11 pm, the clubs on Atlantic Avenue were filled to capacity which resulted in people having to wait on the sidewalk until someone left before the security/bouncer would allow another person in the club. This caused a bottleneck on the sidewalks requiring police officer interaction to keep the pedestrian flow moving. Observers were happy to see that the security/bouncers for the clubs were being safe and perhaps following Fire Code. Around 11:00 p.m., people thought they heard 'shots fired' but it ended up being fireworks. However, some of the observers moved quickly around a scene involving a gun but no shots fired. The second shift of observers began at Midnight and reported that the crowds were increasing and noticed an increase of female population compared to last year. They actually witnessed an arrest and commended the Police Department for doing an excellent job handling the situation. One observer did have physical contact with an aggressive person on the street but nothing escalated from it and no injuries.

On Saturday (4/27) afternoon we were sad to learn of a homicide which took place at 3:00 am after the observation period ended for the HRC. Due to the inclement weather, the observers transferred to their contingency plan which limited on-foot patrol. During Saturday evening, HRC Chairman Cliff Rice and Community Relations Specialist Bonnie Beni drove along the oceanfront to observe and Commissioner Parke observed for a short time. The number of people walking the streets was a dramatic decrease compared to Friday night. However, businesses were still open and we noticed people walking with pizza boxes to their hotels. Hotel personnel said the guests were mainly staying in the hotels; without major incidents. The Police presence was still strong but appropriate. Officers were mainly located on street corners and at almost every entrance of hotels. We were told that some hotels had wrist bands for registered guests to enter and if you were not registered you had to pay a fee to enter the hotel. We did not confirm if this was authentic or just a rumor.

On Sunday, (4/28) Community Relations Specialist Bonnie Beni and Commissioner Jim Parke visited the Oceanfront during the morning. Again, due to the inclement weather the streets were sparsely populated. There was some Police presence, mainly by vehicle. We spoke with personnel of three hotels and they concurred that everything was pretty normal with the exception of one hotel that indicated that they had about six evictions. They reported they gave every chance to comply but the guests did not so they were forced to evict their guests from the hotel. Hotel personnel did not say if they needed police interaction for these evictions. The Public Works Department was out cleaning the streets and private companies were cleaning their parking lots.

The Virginia Beach Police Department was well represented and led by Police Chief James Cervera and Deputy Chief Tony Zucaro. They are to be commended for their excellent leadership on the weekend's well-crafted security plan, for walking the streets themselves to see the whole picture, and for welcoming our visitors to the City. Observers witnessed a group of

police chaplains who were actively engaging visitors on Atlantic Avenue and Emergency Medical Services staff members on bicycles.

Most observers agreed that the large police presence made a difference to people, especially young people who needed to feel safe. To have such protection and presence can deter some inappropriate behaviors. The lime green vests worn by the VBPD allowed everyone to see how many police officers were available and made it easy to locate them. The officers' body language and vocal directions demonstrated they were in public safety mode versus a crowd control mode. For most of the observers, this was excellent visual presence and a very positive message. There was very limited siren noise; officers used mostly flashing lights for safety concerns and traffic control. They only heard the VBPD Helicopter a few times but were satisfied with the orbit height.

The VBPD Mounted Police were visible and very interactive while engaging with the crowd. Many of the visitors stopped to look at the horses and converse with the police officers.

Overall, the atmosphere on Atlantic Avenue (April 24-26, 2015) was generally very good. People were having a fun time as they were walking Atlantic Avenue and there appeared to be no concern or tension on the streets. One observer reported they had one interaction with a guest who physically touched them, but stated that they did not feel frightened or threatened by the encounter.

The observers were happy that some of their recommendations made last year were implemented this year. However, it is still noted that the biggest observation and concern was that the college visitors had no schedule of events/activities during the evening hours which resulted in visitors basically walking the streets; primarily on Atlantic Avenue. The observers highly recommend that the City (CVB & Beach Events) work with colleges and/or promoters to determine the types of activities their students would be interested in attending during their visit and develop a schedule of events, especially for the evening hours. We are hopeful that this will be addressed in the upcoming years.

The strategy to have a recruitment table for public safety and military careers was an excellent idea and we are hopeful there was some interest from our guests. It was also a good idea to incorporate more college students to serve as Goodwill Ambassadors. The HRC observers did not notice many of them but was hopeful their role was well received.

Overall, the team of observers was very satisfied with their findings for the entire weekend and commends the City for public relations improvement element by providing more 'welcoming' public relations to Beach Weekend College students. The team gives many thanks to business owners for opening their establishments and to the hotels who provided hospitality areas for public safety and observers. The observers were very happy that they were asked to serve in this civic engagement opportunity. They provided positive feedback that the process was well organized by Bonnie Beni and welcomed being called upon again for other observations or civic

engagement opportunities. The team of observers volunteered approximately 28 hours this weekend. It was agreed that it will take ‘all’ of us, not just the Police Department, to ensure that all visitors and residents feel welcome and safe in our City with extra emphasis at the Oceanfront during the summertime or special events.

We need to continually educate and engage the public by improving and increasing ways for involvement. Working with citizens to generate buy-in will increase their trust in government and help the City make better decisions to ensure policies and programs have longevity as well as break down the dialogue barriers on who should be visiting our City. We must seek citizen and business owners input and understanding regarding their responsibility in this important role and just as important, allocate resources to address the needs.

The HRC Observers congratulate ‘all’ of the stakeholders for a job well done during this special event. The observers were very satisfied with the behavior they witnessed and did not see any signs of mistreatment or discrimination. Additionally, they complement the college students who, overall, were well-behaved in public.

In closing, we are hopeful this year’s event served to shift perception of this event and will continue to bridge a gap for our citizens, business owners, and visitors to foster stronger relationships and understanding. Additionally, we hope this provides support to the efforts being made to ensure this great City is a ‘Community for Lifetime’ for citizens and visitors.

Respectfully,

William “Cliff” Rice
HRC Chairman

HRC Beach Weekend Observer Team