

City of Virginia Beach  
Human Rights Commission “Beach Weekend” Observer Team  
Recap of Observations at the Oceanfront (16-25<sup>th</sup> Streets)  
April 22-24, 2016

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) has been observing the Oceanfront activities during major holiday weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day since the early 1990’s. In years past, the HRC, at the request of the Virginia Beach Police Department (VBPD), has served as both welcoming ambassador and observer during what has traditionally been known as “College Beach Weekend”. The VBPD inquired if the HRC would be willing to observe the College Beach Weekend activities again this year. The HRC welcomed the observation request and solicited community groups and citizens to participate in this civic engagement opportunity. Five diverse observer teams, including seven (7) citizens and five (5) HRC members, served as welcoming ambassadors and observers for the 2016 College Beach Weekend (April 22-24).

The mission of these teams was to provide general information, observe city services, and assess the atmosphere with regards to safety and friendliness, while being attentive to any signs of discrimination. The observations were submitted both in written and verbal form and this report reflects a compilation of those reports to include recommendations.

It is the opinion of the observers that the media coverage leading up to this weekend projected a slightly cautionary and negative impression of College Beach Weekend. The VBPD took several positive steps to ensure the public that the Virginia Beach Oceanfront would be an inviting, safe and fun environment for citizens and visitors. In addition to television and radio interviews and meeting with local businesses before College Beach Weekend, the VBPD organized student “Goodwill Ambassadors”. Prior to College Beach Weekend, the VBPD visited several local colleges and universities to ask students to serve as Goodwill Ambassadors. The VBPD partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service to provide training to the Goodwill Ambassadors in regards to public interactions and safety. The Goodwill Ambassadors, clad in brightly colored T-Shirts, were a welcoming site to all visitors and their peer to peer interactions provided additional encouragement for safe, respectful behavior. The VBPD also reached out to a local hotel, the Comfort Inn and Suites, to organize a Student Outreach Center in their lobby, which remained active throughout the weekend. The additional strategy to have a recruitment table for public safety and military careers in the student outreach center was an excellent idea and we are hopeful there was some interest from our guests.

On Friday (4/22) evening, there were two teams of HRC observers, one group of four, who observed from 10:00 pm until midnight and the other group of three, went from midnight until 2:30 am. Both teams gathered at the Comfort Inn and Suites, Student Outreach Center, to check in. HRC observers wore bright yellow T-Shirts, donated by the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, as well as an ID card. The weather was muggy and it sprinkled off and on all

night. The streets and parking lots were fairly empty and remained so throughout the evening. In comparison to last year, the observers noted more retail stores and restaurants were closed for business. Atlantic and Pacific Avenues had more foot and vehicular traffic than the boardwalk, which was almost completely devoid of people, but neither street was particularly crowded. Traffic flowed without issue due to the excellent planning of traffic and street controls. As the night wore on the crowd did increase on Atlantic and Pacific Avenues. The observers noted that the crowd was, for the most part, well behaved. The observers were pleased at the lack of “cat calling”, foul language or disrespectful behavior from those on the streets. They did, however, hear a lot of comments regarding the lack of places open to eat. With the exception of the 19th Street Grill, the only options appeared to be a couple of pizza restaurants. The observers stopped by two pizzerias (one on Atlantic and one across from Abbey Road) who both reported no incidents on Friday evening. One was staying open until 4:00 am and the other said their closing time would be dictated by foot traffic. The observers thanked them for being open to serve the crowd. They also spoke to the staff at Abbey Road, who commented that there was very little foot traffic and added that this was a common occurrence for 2 reasons: 1. Abbey Road is located off of Atlantic Avenue and 2. The college students look for cheap, quick food and do not typically want a sit down, casual dining restaurant. The observers noted that Repeal and Luna Sea across the street were closed as was Flipper McCoy, who had a notice on their front doors which stated: “Closed - August 22-24 for bathroom renovations.” The observers repeated the concerns about the lack of open restaurants and businesses that could have provided options to the visitors and help minimize the street crowds.

The observers felt that the visual of police presence seemed overwhelming at times, as there were small groups of police every ½ block. They noted, however, that this was likely due to the fact that there was little to no foot traffic on the Boardwalk and the officers who were originally posted on the Boardwalk were moved over to Atlantic. They witnessed two instances where the Mounted Patrol had to intervene at one of the nightclubs. The crowd appeared respectful and complied with the police officers’ instructions. Backup arrived quickly and once the situation was under control, the police dispersed from the scene. During another intervention witnessed by the observers, an officer was overheard speaking to an agitated male individual in a calming voice explaining that they were trying to work things out so the individual could make it to his room safely and continue to enjoy the weekend. The observers noted that over all the VBPD Officers appeared at ease and relaxed when they interacted with young people. The observers were very proud of all levels of City personnel over the observation period. However, they did comment on how many hotels had full trash cans on the street, noting that any escalation in crowd activity could have resulted in the contents or cans being used for something other than their intended purpose. This observation was attributed to the individual hotels and not City Personnel. The end of the night bar closings were uneventful, crowds dispersed quickly and efficiently.

Friday evening, the boardwalk was practically empty of people. Conversely, the hotel balconies

that lined the boardwalk were full, as many guests appeared to stay inside due to the weather. The observers noticed the odor of marijuana multiple times while walking the boardwalk. The smell appeared to be more pungent the closer you walked towards small groups of people on the beach or the hotel balconies which overlooked the boardwalk. The observers also noticed some portable restrooms on the Boardwalk but noted there was no signage to direct people to these facilities.

On Saturday (4/23) the observer shift times were the same as the night before, with two teams, each comprised of two observers. The streets were considerably more crowded than the previous evening and the weather was warm and comfortable. The streets and walkways were basically orderly, albeit crowded on Atlantic Avenue. Police presence was very good and they kept the crowd moving. There seemed to be more groups of young women compared to last year, and one observer commented this may be due to the VBPD and the City promoting the area as a fun and safe place to visit. The observers also commented that the VBPD did an excellent job, especially under stressful conditions. They appreciated that officers clearly chose to dress in a manner that was welcoming and disarming, and felt the bright yellow reflective vests were perfect for the event.

Once again, the observers heard comments that there could have been much more activity to welcome and attract visitors. The observers spoke to hotel personnel where there were college guests staying, they had experienced no major problems. However, several of the hotels instituted a minimum three night stay, which limited the number of college students and groups at their establishments. Also like the evening before, the observers were disappointed to find most of the stores and restaurants closed. They felt the hotel policies and closed establishments were not an accurate or hospitable reflection of the resort area. The observers stopped to speak with the bouncers at some of the clubs, who stated that things were calm and under control. On Saturday evening around 1:30am the police started to stagger the bar closures, which helped both foot traffic and vehicular traffic flow to run smoothly. There were plenty of extra garbage containers available, and there were extra portable bathrooms on the Boardwalk. However, like Friday evening, there was very little traffic on the boardwalk. The HRC observers commented that they were encouraged to see Mayor Sessoms, Chief Cervera and City Manager Hansen walking the area as well. The observers noted that their presence was indicative of the commitment that the City of Virginia Beach has made to make the resort area welcoming and available to all visitors and citizens.

On Sunday, (4/24) there was one shift from 9:00 am until noon. It was a very bright and sunny day but breezy and cool. The observer found the streets and the beach itself were amazingly clean. The observer visited with staff at the Comfort Inn and some out of town visitors. The staff was very helpful and friendly. One visitor was waiting with his group to return on their bus to a small town in Maryland. He and others were very positive about their weekend stay in Virginia Beach. The observer noticed very few people on the streets or on the Boardwalk and

hardly any vehicle traffic. Beginning about 10:15 am, there were a few more people out and by 11:30, the increase in foot and vehicular traffic was noticeable. There were numerous police officers, usually 4-5 on every other corner and on the Board Walk; all officers were responsive and friendly. The observer noticed several football "teams" playing on the Beach; young men with matching shirts and names on them. It was thought they might be part of the visiting college beach weekend crowd, but the observer soon learned that they were local groups that come every Sunday to the oceanfront to play football. The observer mentioned this to a group of police officers on Boardwalk and the officers commented that it would be a good idea to offer a football competition or something similar for the College Beach Weekend next year.

City Services were adequate; as mentioned previously, including clean streets. There was a concern expressed regarding the restrooms. Specifically, there were two street signs on Atlantic Avenue. pointing toward the boardwalk that read "restroom". However, once on the Boardwalk, there were no more signs providing direction, which made the observer unclear as to where the restrooms were located. Unlike during the evening shifts, there seemed to be a variety of businesses and restaurants open to patrons. The overall atmosphere and experience Sunday morning at the oceanfront was positive and inviting.

Most observers agreed that the large police presence made a difference to people, especially young people, in regards to their safety. The bright yellow vests worn by the VBPD made them easily identifiable. The officers' body language and vocal directions demonstrated they were in public safety mode versus an authoritative or criminal investigatory mode. For most of the observers, this was an excellent visual presence and sent a very positive message. There was very limited siren noise; officers used mostly flashing lights for safety concerns and traffic control. Observers also noticed the VBPD Helicopter a few times but were satisfied with the orbit height and minimal noise disturbance. 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.

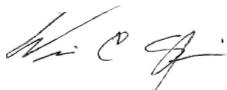
Overall, College Beach Weekend (April 22-24, 2016) was positive. People were enjoying themselves as they walked Atlantic Avenue and there appeared to be no concern or tension on the streets. As evidenced by a small, impromptu dance party which went on for several minutes on Friday night and was not disruptive to traffic flow, nor did it lead to any negative behavior. The observers were happy that some of the recommendations made last year, such as, increasing the Goodwill Ambassador program, and continuing the recruitment areas, 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 or 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.

The HRC observers volunteered approximately 27 hours in total, and were pleased that they were asked to serve in this civic engagement opportunity. Overall, the team of observers was very satisfied with their findings for the entire weekend and they commend the City for their efforts to provide a safe, welcoming environment for all visitors and guests. The observers would like to thank the business owners who kept their establishments open and the hotels that opened their lobbies and hospitality areas to the Goodwill Ambassadors, public safety officers and the HRC observers.

It is our sincere hope that the following recommendations will be considered for future College Beach Weekends: coordinate a schedule of events or activities for the evening hours, encourage additional local business involvement to promote this weekend as a potential jumpstart to the regular tourist season and continue to foster community interaction through programs such as the Goodwill Ambassadors and HRC observers.

In closing, the HRC observers congratulate all of the stakeholders for a job well done during College Beach Weekend. They were exceptionally satisfied with the behavior they witnessed by both city employees and visitors and did not see any signs of mistreatment or discrimination. The HRC would like to especially thank the VBPD for their continued partnership and support. The VBPD's efforts prove their commitment to the protection of human rights for all citizens and visitors. The HRC will continue to assist in bridging the gap for our citizens, business owners, and visitors to foster stronger relationships and understanding. Additionally, we hope this report provides support to the efforts being made to ensure that we remain the "greatest city in the world".

Respectfully,



William "Cliff" Rice  
HRC Chairman

On behalf of the HRC Beach Weekend Observer Teams