

Stephanie B. Nixon, *Chair*
John F. Tanner, Jr., *Vice Chair*
Bette Brand
Gillian Gordon-Moore
Stuart C. Siegel

Waqas Ahmed
Executive Secretary



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Minutes of the Commission Meeting Held December 3, 2024 at 10:00 a.m.

Location: Patrick Henry Building, West Reading Room, 1111 East Broad Street,
Richmond, Virginia

In Attendance

Commission Members Stephanie B. Nixon, Chair
John F. Tanner, Jr., Vice Chair (attending remotely due to distance)
Bette Brand
Gillian Gordon-Moore
Stuart C. Siegel

Commission Staff Waqas Ahmed, Executive Secretary
Andy Conway, General Admin Manager
Elizabeth B. Myers, Counsel
Israel Saavedra, Compliance Officer

The December 3, 2024, meeting of the Virginia Racing Commission (VRC) was called to order by Chair Stephanie B. Nixon at 10:00 a.m. A roll call confirmed the presence of Vice Chair John F. Tanner, Jr. (participating remotely due to distance), Commissioner Bette Brand, Commissioner Gillian Gordon Moore, and Commissioner Stuart C. Siegel. With a quorum established, Chair Nixon began the meeting.

Chair Nixon acknowledged Israel Saavedra for taking on expanded responsibilities, including overseeing licensing operations and pari-mutuel functions alongside his role as the Commission's investigator. She also welcomed Robert "Andy" Conway to the VRC, highlighting his expertise in pari-mutuel regulation, compliance, and financial oversight, and noting how his skills would strengthen the Commission's operations.

There were no public comments during the initial comment period.

The VRC reviewed the minutes from the October 15, 2024, meeting without amendment. A motion to approve the minutes was made and unanimously carried.

Representatives from the Virginia Equine Alliance (VEA) and the Virginia Harness Horse Association (VHHA), including Darrell Wood, Debbie Warnick, and Aidan Turnage-Barney, provided a detailed summary of the Shenandoah Downs 2024 Fall Meet. The meet featured 14 race days, 188 pari-mutuel races, an average of seven starters per race, and \$1.5 million in overnight purses. The Virginia Breeders Championship Day was

highlighted, showcasing Virginia-bred pacers and trotters competing for over \$700,000 in purses. Additional promotions, such as "Own a Horse for a Day" and non-pari-mutuel dog races, contributed to increased community engagement and simulcast handle growth. Commissioners commended the report for its thoroughness and recognized the strides made in promoting harness racing in Virginia.

The VEA team, including Jill Byrne, Darrell Wood, and Aidan Turnage-Barney, presented the results of the 2024 marketing campaign and plans for 2025. Supported by a \$655,000 grant from the VRC, the 2024 campaign utilized various platforms to highlight the economic impact of Virginia's horse industry, generating 247 million impressions and earning a Telly Award for tourism promotion. Key initiatives included new ads featuring the First Lady of Virginia and the launch of a user-friendly industry website. For 2025, the VEA proposed maintaining the \$655,000 budget, with adjustments prioritizing content creation and outreach to younger audiences. Commissioners praised the campaign's effectiveness but also pointed out challenges in measuring its impact on attendance and public awareness.

The VRC reviewed Colonial Downs Group, LLC's application for a limited license to conduct race meetings in 2025. Executive Secretary Waqas Ahmed and Frank Hopf, Senior Director of Racing Operations, detailed a proposed schedule including a three-day March meet and a summer meet running Wednesday through Saturday, with twilight races on select Fridays. Facility improvements, such as dorm construction, paddock improvements, and turf course use, were also highlighted. Several commissioners expressed support for twilight racing but raised logistical concerns for horse shippers and paddock coverage. There were also concerns raised regarding measuring attendance in future meets to better understand the public's response to twilight racing. The application was approved with modifications to adopt a 4:00 p.m. post time for all Friday summer meet races and required updates to safety and facility plans.

The VRC addressed Colonial Downs Group, LLC's application to renew its license for historical horse racing (HHR) wagering in 2025. Compliance Officer Israel Saavedra confirmed compliance with operational standards. A report from the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau emphasized integrity measures in place for pari-mutuel wagering on live and historical horse racing. Jack Sauers, Vice President of Operations for Churchill Downs, Inc., outlined ongoing projects, including a \$38 million Richmond facility upgrade. Commissioners approved the license renewal unanimously, contingent upon addressing outstanding compliance requirements.

The VRC reviewed renewal applications from four entities—Churchill Downs Technology Initiatives Company d/b/a TwinSpires, NYRAbets, LLC, ODS Technologies, L.P. d/b/a TVG Network, and Xpressbet, LLC—to offer advance deposit account wagering (ADW) in 2025. Staff confirmed that all applications were submitted in accordance with regulatory requirements and reviewed ownership structures, internal controls, background information, and financial audits. The following were listed as conditions of licensure: operators must submit a surety bond, provide weekly wagering activity reports, and designate contacts for tax and fee submissions. VRC staff requested additional information from applicants and will update the Commission as necessary. The Commission approved the license renewals, contingent upon compliance with all conditions.

The HBPA requested approval to withdraw \$380,000 from the Horsemen's account to cover administrative costs for the 2025 race meets, approximately two percent of the 2024 purse payments. The VHHA requested approval to withdraw \$21,000 from its benevolence account. Commissioners discussed the absence of budget-to-actual comparisons for previous expenditures and requested such data be included in future submissions. The motion to approve the requests was carried unanimously, with the understanding that the requested comparisons would be provided retroactively and for future budgets.



The VRC appointed the 2025 Virginia Breeders Fund Advisory Committee as recommended by Executive Secretary Ahmed. Members include:

- Virginia Thoroughbred Association: Amy Moore and Debbie Easter
- Virginia Harness Horse Association: Scott Woogen and Debbie Warnick
- NSA-Sanctioned Meets: Sean Clancy
- Owner/Operator Representative: Frank Hopf

The motion to approve the appointments was unanimously carried.

During the second public comment period, Tad Berman voiced concerns about the absence of the VEA operating budget from the agenda, emphasizing the importance of transparency and public access. Executive Secretary Ahmed clarified that the VEA's budget is not required by statute or regulation to be reviewed by the VRC and may be exempt from FOIA due to proprietary information.

With no further business, Chair Nixon entertained a motion to adjourn. The motion was unanimously approved, and the meeting concluded at 1:20 p.m.

