

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

May 2, 2023

Anthony W. Bertino, Jr., president
Madison J. Bunting, Jr., vice president
Caryn G. Abbott
Theodore J. Elder (Absent)
Eric J. Fiori
Joseph M. Mitrecic
Diana Purnell

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Purnell, with Commissioner Elder absent, the commissioners unanimously voted to meet in closed session at 9:00 a.m. in the Commissioners' Conference Room to discuss legal and personnel matters permitted under the provisions of Section 3-305(b)(1) and (7) of the General Provisions (GP) Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland and to perform administrative functions permitted under the provisions of Section GP 3-104. Also present at the closed session were Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage, County Attorney Roscoe Leslie, Public Information Officer Kim Moses, Human Resources Director Stacey Norton, Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell and Deputy Director David Bradford. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: hiring Marcus Horne-Dennis as a maintenance worker I within the Water and Wastewater Division, Thomas Ahlers as a roads worker III and William Ketterman as a roads worker II within the Roads Division, and Jessie Long as the natural resources administrator within Environmental Programs; transferring Hunter Lewis from transfer station attendant within the Solid Waste Division to roads worker II within the Roads Division; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including considering board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:55 a.m.

After the closed session, the commissioners reconvened in open session. Commissioner Bertino called the meeting to order, and following a morning prayer by Reverend George Tasker of Abundant Life Apostolic Church in Pocomoke and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session.

Commissioner Elder was absent from the meeting.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their April 18, 2023 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Social Services Deputy Director Tammy Jones and other staff members recognizing May as National Foster Care Month and thanking area foster parents for helping to restore stability and a sense of self-worth within young people

whose lives have been disrupted through no fault of their own. The commissioners also recognized Sarah Hirsh as the 2023 Foster Care Parent of the Year.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing May 7-13, 2023 as Travel and Tourism Week to Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development (WCTED) Director Melanie Pursel and Workforce Development Specialist Nancy Schwendeman, along with other tourism officials, including Ivy Wells, Ruth Waters, Lorissa McCallister, Lisa Challenger, Lauren Taylor, Ann Hillyer, Kerrie Bunting, and Amy Thompson. Ms. Pursel stated that tourism generated \$2.5 billion in visitor spending last year and has returned to 90% of pre-pandemic numbers.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-7 as follows: an FY23 Community Project Funding Grant Agreement from the Maryland Department of Housing and Urban Development awarding \$100,000 to the County for the Housing Rehabilitation Program; Jail Improvements Change Order extending the completion date from March 8 to May 29, 2024 due to major equipment shipping delays; awarding the low bid of \$55,350 for the purchase of a batting cage for use within Recreation and Parks; a special event application from Phil Houck, owner of Crab Alley, to use the West Ocean City commercial harbor parking lot and boat ramp for the Ocean City Power Boat Race from August 19-20, 2023; entering into a Memorandum of Understanding between the Maryland Department of the Environment for the Worcester County Assawoman Greys Creek Living Shoreline Project; a letter supporting the Berlin Fire Company's request for Assistance to Firefighter grant funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to replace self-contained breathing apparatus.

The commissioners met with Procurement Officer Nick Rice to review bid specifications to purchase sound attenuating panels to be placed in the front atrium of the Worcester County Government Center. Commissioner Bunting suggested placing a sign in the lobby asking for quiet, which may address the noise issues in that room. Following some discussion, the commissioners took no action on this bid request.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Mr. Rice and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved bid specifications for the addition of a storage shed at the Worcester County Recreation Center in Snow Hill.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Mr. Rice and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved bid specifications to renovate the County Roads Division building.

Pursuant to the request of Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to schedule a public hearing for an amendment application submitted by Attorney Hugh Cropper, on behalf of Ocean 8 Group, LLC to rezone approximately 3.29 acres of land on the easterly side of Stephen Decatur Highway, approximately 450 feet south of Sunset Avenue from C-2 General Commercial District to R-4 General Residential District. Ms. Keener advised that the Planning

Commission has given a favorable recommendation to the rezoning application.

The commissioners met with Ms. Keener to review a text amendment application submitted by Attorney Mark Cropper to modify the provisions of ZS 1-202(c)(42) Separation distances for commercial non-agricultural functions in agricultural structures and lands in the A-2 Agricultural District. Ms. Keener advised that the Planning Commission has given a favorable recommendation to this text amendment, which would grant the Board of Zoning Appeals the authority to review a special exception to reduce the 500-foot separation distance to an adjoining family structure, other residential structure, or the front road right-of-way.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Mitrecic and Purnell introduced the aforementioned text amendment as Bill 23-3 (Zoning – Separation distances for commercial non-agricultural functions in agricultural structures and lands in the A-2 Agricultural District) and scheduled a public hearing on the bill.

The commissioners met with County Attorney Roscoe Leslie to review a text amendment application drafted by staff that would amend the provisions of PS 3-203 (Designation of limited parking or no parking zones) to allow paid parking on County-owned public property. Mr. Leslie advised that this amendment must be made to implement the recently approved pilot program for paid parking at a County landing. He further stated that the amendment simply adds the word “paid” into provisions that already empower the County to limit or ban parking in certain areas.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori introduced the aforementioned text amendment as Bill 23-4 (Designation of limited parking or no parking zones).

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Coleen Colson and Windy Phillips to the Commission for Women.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young in response to a written, detailed spending request from Showell Volunteer Fire Company (SVFC) President David Smarte and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to award American Rescue Plan Act funds to Showell to purchase a fire truck. Mr. Young advised that this will allow the SVFC to obtain a low-interest loan, and the savings from that loan can then be used to purchase an additional ambulance to improve the fragile system.

Commissioner Mitrecic honored the service of former Ocean City Councilman Doug Cymek who passed away May 1, 2023.

Following a question by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Young advised that there is a link on the County website for those interested in viewing the public hearing on the requested FY24 County Operating Budget to take place that evening at 7:00 p.m.

In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Young advised that Board of Education (BOE) officials provided another sample breakdown on their requested FY24 budget.

Commissioner Bertino noted that it does not provide all the requested information, but that it is a good start.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they recessed until 7:00 p.m.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing at 7:00 p.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the Government Center on the requested FY24 County Operating Budget. Commissioner Elder was absent from the meeting. Commissioner Bertino called the meeting to order and welcomed those in attendance. Mr. Young presented a PowerPoint outlining the FY24 Requested Operating Budget and explained that the requested expenditures of \$241,756,064 exceed the County's estimated revenues of \$230,169,711 by \$11,586,353. He stated that this difference must be reconciled by the commissioners either through reductions in expenditures, additional revenues, or a combination of both.

Commissioner Bertino opened the floor to receive public comments.

Jennifer LaMade, executive director of the Jesse Klump Memorial Fund (JKMF), reviewed the impacts of suicide individually and on the community, and she asked the commissioners to approve a modest increase in the annual JKMF grant to help them serve a greater number of youth.

Jack Ferry, executive director of the Worcester County Developmental Center (WCDC), reviewed the programs and services that the WCDC provides to the community, thanked the commissioners for their ongoing partnership, and urged them to provide level grant funding to the WCDC in FY24.

Vince Gisriel of Ocean City urged the commissioners to examine possible cuts in the Board of Elections budget, noting that, perhaps, they could eliminate funding of \$100,000 for new voting machines, which he felt may not be needed.

Mike Valerio of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) Lodge 50 thanked the commissioners for their past support and urged them to approve the requested FY24 Sheriff's Office budget and requested salary increases.

FOP member Scott Griffin of Bishopville also asked the commissioners to support a salary increase for deputies to fairly compensate them for the jobs they do.

Carol Frazier, a Police Accountability Board member and resident of Ocean Pines, stated that the County law enforcement agencies are the best in the state, and she asked the commissioners to support the requested salary increases for the Sheriff's Office.

FOP member Keith Newton of Parsonsburg stated his appreciation for the commissioners' ongoing support and asked them to justly compensate sheriff's deputies.

Ocean City Fire Chief Richard Bower, speaking on behalf of County fire and EMS agencies, thanked the commissioners for their investment to date in fire and EMS and recognized the success of the Fire and EMS Strategic Planning Work Group. He then asked the commissioners to consider fire funding to remain flat with supplemental funding, and EMS funding to include an additional \$10,000 per ambulance and mileage and run increases, and some funding to address inequities in the salaries for fire and EMS personnel.

Superintendent Lou Taylor thanked the commissioners for their continued partnership, which is essential to prepare students for their future by continuing to invest in school funding to offer competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain the most qualified educators and

support staff available. He then urged the commissioners to support the requested FY24 BOE budget, which is designed to meet these needs.

Sheila Rivera of Snow Hill urged the commissioners to support the BOE budget to keep class sizes small, technology up to date, and to offer competitive salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff.

Mason White of Pocomoke asked the commissioners to fund the requested FY24 BOE budget to keep class sizes small and offer competitive salaries and benefits to maintain and attract the very best teachers.

Debbie Lambertson of Stockton thanked the commissioners for their continued support of quality education and asked them to support the requested FY24 BOE budget to keep class sizes small and offer competitive salaries and benefits to maintain and attract the best teachers.

Pat Barbely of Newark supported education, but asked the commissioners to also manage County tax dollars prudently. She closed by supporting the commissioners' request for a line item BOE budget, stating that more funding is not necessarily the answer.

Allen Hudson, representing the Worcester County bus contractors, stated that no one can put a price tag on safety, and he urged the commissioners to support the requested FY24 BOE budget, which includes needed increases for bus contractors.

Katie Addis, a member of the BOE and resident of Bishopville, spoke as a private citizen. She applauded the commissioners for seeking transparency from the BOE and urged them to stay the course.

Richard Addis of Bishopville stated that there are areas where the BOE and County can partner to save money, and he urged the commissioners to take a hard look at what they are funding in the requested FY24 BOE budget. He concluded that it should be possible to fund a streamlined budget that offers salary increases while also being respectful of County taxpayers.

Tammy Donoway of Berlin asked the commissioners to fully fund the FY24 BOE budget to provide needed technology and competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain highly qualified educators.

FOP President Bryn Blackburn asked the commissioners to continue funding full-time school resource officer positions at all 13 public schools in the County.

Beth Shockley Lynch, president of the Worcester County Teachers' Association, thanked the commissioners for their continued partnership and urged them to support the requested FY24 BOE budget to provide competitive salaries to attract and retain the County's amazing teachers.

Kate McCloskey of Ocean Pines urged the commissioners to fund salary increases for police and educators and to keep school resource officers in all the public schools. However, she also thanked the commissioners for requiring transparency from the BOE to determine what is and is not essential.

Mr. Young read the following submitted written comments. Joanne Roache of Ocean City supported the requested FY24 BOE, noting that high school graduates earn more, pay more taxes, and use fewer services. Terry Broam of Berlin stated that her family relocated to Worcester County because of the excellent school system, and she urged the commissioners to pass the requested FY24 BOE budget. Gail Jankowski of Berlin urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested FY24 budget to maintain small class sizes and retain excellent teachers and staff. Jackie Cutlip of Berlin fully supported the commissioners' efforts to require the BOE to provide a more detailed budget to hold them accountable and require them to be fully transparent.

There being no further comments, Commissioner Bertino closed the public hearing.

Commissioner Abbott thanked everyone for attending, noting that public input in the budget is important. She stated that transparency should be the cornerstone of any budget, but that the BOE is the largest and least transparent of all the departments and agencies the County funds. She concluded by calling for a forensic audit of the BOE for the past five years.

Commissioner Bertino thanked everyone for attending and for being respectful of the views of all in attendance. He then invited the public to attend the May 9, 2023 budget work session.

The commissioners adjourned to meet again on May 9, 2023.