

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

March 18, 2025

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

Following a motion by Commissioner Abbott, seconded by Commissioner Purnell, 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, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton and Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: personnel updates; hiring James Blades, Jeff Bradley, David Waters and Randy Hammer as seasonal roads workers within the Roads Division; hiring Latoya Ennis as a certified correctional officer and Samuel Foreman, Dashon Nuttall, Joshua Freeman, and Jacob Shourds as correctional officer trainees in the County Jail; transferring Angela Russel from communications specialist to communications supervisor backup/trainer and promoting Wade Taylor from supervisor to quality assurance and quality insurance specialist within Emergency Services; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including the contents of a proposal; Jail staffing; and potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 10:03 a.m.

After the closed session, the commissioners reconvened in open session. Commissioner Elder called the meeting to order, and following a morning prayer by Reverend Eugene Nichols of Elsey United Methodist Church and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their March 4, 2024 meeting as presented.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 1-11 as follows: an FY25 State Opioid Response – IV grant of \$18,704 for the County Jail; signing the 2021 State Homeland Security Program Grant

Adjustment Notice Award of \$92,170.14; executing the security instrument for the Department of Housing and Community Development Dockside Restaurant Grant Lien; in-county hotel rental for Elections staff to take part in the Maryland Association of Election Officials Conference May 4-9; eliminating the Snug Harbor sewer debt service fee following the recent repayment of the loan; waving stormwater and critical area bond requirements for the resiliency project at Eagle's Landing Golf Course in West Ocean City; an over expenditure for a clarifier rake gear box for the River Run Wastewater Treatment Plant; contracting with Alpha Space Control for FY25 road line striping at a cost of \$0.11 per foot; the proposed CY25 Mosquito Control Budget, including County funding of \$151,040 and an \$85 homeowner participation fee; utilizing the City of Salisbury's contract with Davis, Bowen & Friedel for preliminary architectural and engineering services at a total cost of \$71,850 for the new Pocomoke Service Facility; and scheduling a public hearing on surplus County property immediately abutting Bank Street.

Pursuant to the request of Brian Roberts, chair of the Diakonia Board of Directors, and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously agreed to support Diakonia's application for a passthrough grant of \$862,000 from the Community Development Block Grant.

Pursuant to the request of Matthew Laick, deputy director of Development Review and Permitting, and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-06 repealing Resolution No. 13-6 Geographic Information System (GIS) Policies and Procedures and Fee Schedule.

Pursuant to the request of Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously authorized Covington Machine & Welding, Inc. to utilize a portion of the West Ocean City harbor parking lot to set up a crane, dunk and platforms from April 28 to May 2 or from May 5 to May 9. This vendor was hired by the Maryland State Highway Administration to repair the Harry W. Kelly (U.S. Rt. 50) drawbridge.

Public Works Director Dallas Baker requested approval from the commissioners to contract with George, Miles, and Buhr (GMB) to complete a regional utilities study to evaluate the extension of water and sewer utilities from the Ocean Pines Sanitary Service Area (SSA) to parcels located along MD Rt. 589 south of Pennington Commons at a cost of \$23,700.

Commissioner Bertino stated that he supports the study, but that they should wait until two upcoming hearings to rezone properties on MD Rt. 589 are complete, as the parameters of the study could be enhanced by the feedback from the public at those hearings.

Commissioner Fiori stated that the study is necessary to be proactive, as it will help them to correctly size the water and sewer infrastructure, noting that without a proper plan in place the costs to the County for these services could be doubled.

In response to questions by the commissioners, Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener confirmed that one of the two rezoning applications recently submitted is for a high-density residential development and may impact the study. She confirmed that the

public hearing on that application will likely be scheduled for this April. Mr. Baker stated that the study is needed to allow the County to provide input for developers.

In response to a question from Commissioner Bertino, Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell confirmed that the area has a lot of pending development that needs significant infrastructure, and the study is needed now to help staff implement a sufficient plan to serve those properties.

A motion by Commissioner Bertino to table this request until the County rules on applications to rezone certain properties within the subject area failed 2-5, with Commissioners Bertino and Bunting voting in favor of the motion and Commissioners Abbott, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition.

Following further discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners voted 5-2, with Commissioners Abbott, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Bertino and Bunting voting in opposition, to accept the GMB contract to complete the requested study, with funding to be provided as an approved over-expenditure.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to a rate of 250 gallons per day (gpd) for residential equivalent dwelling units (EDUs) across all eleven County owned water and sewer districts. Previously the residential gpd per EDU varied across the districts, ranging from 110 gpd to 300 gpd.

Pursuant to the request of Warden Tim Mulligan and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously agreed to modify the qualifications for the position of sergeant within the County Jail from five to three years.

The commissioners met with Human Resources Officer Stacey Norton to review and discuss FY26 benefits recommendations. Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the following FY26 benefits recommendations: CareFirst medical and pharmacy renewal for active employees and retirees under 65 at an increase of 12.24% or \$3,960,251, plus a \$100,000 medical loyalty credit and a \$100,000 pharmacy loyalty credit, adding hearing aid coverage for adults up to \$3,000 and adding additional coverage for prostheses, and adding the Rx Cost Saver program at no additional cost; CareFirst Dental – no plan changes and an 8.8% increase or \$135,724 (fully funded by employees); VSP Vision – no increase; Guardian Life and Disability – no plan or rate changes; and utilize \$888,801 from the Rate Stabilization Reserve Fund to buy down the medical and pharmacy rate increase for FY26. This will take the premium rate increase down to 7.99% or an increase of \$2,583,970.

The commissioners met with Budget Officer Kim Reynolds to review the FY26 Requested Operating Budget, which includes estimated revenues of \$284,579,909 and requested expenditures of \$286,835,734. Ms. Reynolds explained that this leaves a shortfall of \$2,260,825, which must be reconciled either with reductions in expenditures, additional revenues, or a combination of the two. She then discussed anticipated State cuts and the transfer of funding responsibilities, which could impact the County. Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the

commissioners unanimously agreed to schedule a public hearing on the FY26 Requested Operated Budget on May 6, 2025 at 6 p.m. at the Worcester County Government Center.

The commissioners met with Enterprise Fund Controller Quinn Dittrich to review the FY26 Requested Enterprise Funds Operating Budgets. Commissioner Bertino stated that the Water and Wastewater (WWW) budget includes considerable rate increases within the 11 Sanitary Service Areas (SSAs). He stated that each service area contributed a different amount to the current \$2.2 million deficit, with Ocean Pines contributing approximately \$186,000 of that deficit, but all 11 SSAs are equally being held accountable for that deficit, and Ocean Pines is being asked to pay more than its fair share. He concluded that every SSA should pay its fair share, but none should pay more than its fair share, and the commissioners need to send a notice to all ratepayers explaining the debt, along with its causes and how it will be repaid, and what the new user rates will be. In response to comments from Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Dittrich confirmed that there are roughly 18,000 ratepayers overall, and he agreed to provide information on how each of the SSAs contributed to the current \$2.2 million deficit, as well as the \$9.2 million loan last year from the General Fund that the SSAs will begin repaying in FY27.

Commissioner Mitrecic stated that the County would decimate smaller SSAs, like the Newark, Bridgetown, and Landings, if they do not spread the cost among all users. Commissioner Elder stated that the commissioners are in the early stages of combining the SSAs. In response to questions from Commissioner Elder, Mr. Dittrich stated that there are roughly 120 users in the Newark SSA. He pointed out that Frederick County combined all its service areas recently and did so very successfully. He explained that in the past the County used revenues from EDU sales instead of raising user rates to repair water and sewer plants.

Commissioner Bunting stated that the proposed WWW budget has nothing to do with the consolidation of the districts, but rather the committee had a deadline to meet, and this is their recommendation. He stated that a letter to the ratepayers would ensure that everyone is aware of the changes and can attend the public hearing.

Following much discussion, a motion by Commissioner Bertino to mail a letter to each rate payer to include a detailed explanation of the proposed rate increases in the 11 service areas, to include the reason for the increases, the outstanding debt, and the percentage for each service area, failed 3-4, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, and Bunting voting in favor and Commissioners Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Dittrich and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to schedule public hearings on the FY26 Enterprise Funds Budget for May 6, 2025 at 6 p.m. at the Worcester County Government Center.

Pursuant to MD Code, General Provisions, § 3-211(b)(1) and in compliance with the findings of a recent Open Meetings Compliance Board opinion, Commissioner Elder read a statement indicating that at the December 3, 2024 meeting the commissioners were required to have a prior announcement included as an agenda item rather than just in the commissioners comments.

Commissioner Bertino expressed concerns that the commissioners voted against sending a letter to each water and sewer ratepayer in the County advising them that their water and sewer

rates will be increasing and why, as well as what impact their individual service area impacted the debt. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that the commissioners are not trying to keep anyone in the dark, and he encouraged all interested ratepayers to attend and participate in the public hearing on the Enterprise Fund budget on May 6.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners voted unanimously to post a detailed explanation of proposed rate changes in the FY26 Requested Water and Wastewater Enterprise Funds Operating Budget on the County website that includes the following: proposed per household rate increases and percentages; what the increases are going to be; an explanation of the deficit (both the \$2.2 million deficit this year and the \$9.2 million deficit last year); how each service area contributed to the debts; and how this situation occurred.

Commissioner Mitrecic thanked Legislative Analyst Charlene Sharpe for providing legislative updates to keep the commissioners informed of what is happening in Annapolis. I

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on April 1, 2025.