

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

June 3, 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 Bertino, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, 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: a personnel update, promoting Emergency Communications Specialist IIs Angela Johnson and Kallie Speta to emergency communications supervisors; hiring Kevin Bull as a correctional officer trainee; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:23 a.m.

After the closed session, the commissioners reconvened in open session. Commissioner Elder called the meeting to order. Bishop Mary Boyd of First Corinthians Holiness Church of Pocomoke delivered the morning prayer, which was followed by the pledge of allegiance.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their regularly scheduled meeting on May 20, 2025 and their budget work sessions on May 13, 20, and 28 as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing June 2025 as Elder Abuse Awareness Month to representatives from the Commission on Aging, Department of Social Services, and State's Attorney's Office.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-5 as follows: out-of-state travel for up to five deputies to pick up an ARV from the factory in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and for one deputy to take part in the FBI Leadership Academy from June 28-September 4, 2025 in Quantico, Virginia; the Findings of Fact and Resolution No. 25-13 establishing the Crepe Myrtle Court Residential Planned

Community Floating Zone on 4.82 acres of land shown on Tax Map 26 as Parcel 157; an FY26 grant award of \$459,959.14 from the Maryland Judiciary Administrative Office of the Courts to the support Circuit Court Family Services Program; and a letter confirming the County's in-kind match of approximately \$800,000 for the Maryland Coastal Bays Program (MCBP) to administer the Environmental Protection Agency National Estuary Program from October 1, 2025 through September 20, 2026.

The commissioners met with MCBP Executive Director Kevin Smith to review the 2025-2035 Coastal Bays Comprehensive Conservation & Management Plan (CCMP). Mr. Smith said that the CCMP addresses the following four priorities: Water Quality; Protect Fish, Wildlife and Their Habitat; Create Resilient Communities and Ecosystems; and Develop Public Engagements and Partnerships. Mr. Smith then informed the commissioners that the next Maryland Coastal Bays Foundation Policy Committee meeting will take place at Harrison's Harbor Watch in Ocean City on June 24, 2025 from 10:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Pursuant to the request of Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously accepted the County's FY26 Program Open Space (POS) allocation of \$359,744. Ms. Rados advised that at their next meeting, she will submit a formalized plan for their approval to use POS funds to help cover the cost of the following projects: \$150,000 for the Showell Park parking area addition, \$150,000 for the Northern Worcester Athletic Complex restroom and concession upgrades; \$50,000 for the Stockton pavilion replacement; \$100,000 for the John Walter Smith (JWS) Park and Newtown Park concession stand roof replacement projects; \$75,000 for the Berlin parking lot lighting project; and \$125,000 for the JWS Park dugout replacement.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously authorized staff to reduce the speed limit on Mason Road from 40 mph to 30 mph. This request was made in response to the findings of a speed study conducted on Mason Road May 15-22 at the request of a concerned citizen.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Bunting voting in opposition, for staff to draft a report acknowledging that the proposed utility-scale solar energy system (five MW AC) under the Community Solar Program is consistent with local zoning and the comprehensive plan. This project is to be located on a parcel of land zoned A-1 Agricultural District on Woodside Lane in Snow Hill and more specifically identified on Tax Map 71 as Parcel 35.

The commissioners conducted a pre-application consultation with representatives from New Leaf Energy on May 20; however, they postponed consideration of the findings pending Governor Wes Moore's signing of the Renewable Energy Certainty Act (SB 931/HB 1036), which would apply to any new project that applies to the Maryland Public Service Commission for a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity after July 1. Ms. Keener confirmed that Governor Moore signed the Act.

New Leaf Energy Project Developer True Funk and BL Companies Project Engineer

Matt Kravitz met with the commissioners for a pre-application consultation and sought local zoning consistency for a proposed utility-scale solar energy system (five MW AC) under the Community Solar Program on a parcel of land zoned A-1 Agricultural District on Queponco Road in Newark and more specifically identified on Tax Map 39 as Parcel 29.

In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Funk confirmed that they have not yet submitted a landscape plan or a viewshed analysis. Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously agreed to postpone any action on the request until the applicant submits the required landscape plan and viewshed analysis.

Mr. Baker met with the commissioners to request their approval to accept the USDA's additional funding offer for the Lewis Road sewer project, which includes a grant of \$1,855,000 and a loan of \$618,000. These funds are in addition to an approved 2021 USDA grant of \$1,518,000 and an approved 2021 ARPA grant of \$507,000 (County match) for total available funding of \$4,498,000, which represents the cost of the project. Mr. Baker explained that this additional funding provides the County with sufficient money to cover project expenses, with the loan repayments proposed to be split between the 60 equivalent dwelling units (EDUs) at a cost of approximately \$105 per EDU per quarter for 40 years.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to schedule a hearing to receive public comment on the levying of this debt service charge against the residents in this service area.

Finance Officer Kim Reynolds met with the commissioners to discuss issues pertaining to the proposed FY26 County Operating Budget. Ms. Reynolds stated that, following actions taken by the commissioners during their May 28 budget work session, expenditures total \$281,029,496 and revenues total \$283,840,947, leaving a surplus of \$2,811,451. She stated that this surplus resulted when Administration learned that the State set the minimum income tax rate that a county may charge at 2.25%. Therefore, the reduction in Income Tax has been added back into the budget. She then reviewed options for balancing the budget, including options to implement additional Property Tax reductions as follows: a half cent reduction, which would decrease revenue by \$1,222,465 and leave a remaining balance of \$1,588,986; or a one cent reduction, which would decrease revenue by \$2,444,930 and leave a remaining balance of \$366,521.

Commissioner Mitrecic requested the commissioners reconsider awarding grants to towns at the requested levels, including a one-time request from Ocean City for additional police aid and seed money for Snow Hill, given that the County has a nearly \$3 million surplus. He also voiced frustration that the budget does not fund the Board of Education and the County salary packages at the levels needed to survive.

Following some discussion, a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to fully fund the FY26 General Fund Operating Budget as proposed failed 3-4, with Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in opposition.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in favor and Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition to adopt the County portion of the FY26 General Fund County Operating Budget as conceptually approved at their May 28 work session, with the Property Tax Rate to be decreased to three cents and the remaining surplus to be allocated to

Other Post Employment Benefits.

Upon a subsequent motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in favor and Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition to adopt the Board of Education (BOE) portion of the FY26 General Fund Operating Budget as conceptually approved at their May 28 work session plus an additional \$151,123 to fund after school programs, as requested by the BOE.

The commissioners conducted a hearing to receive public comments on activities to be submitted to the Maryland Community Development Block Grant Program for funds awarded through the federal CARES Act. Senior Budget Accountant Lynn Wright reviewed details regarding the grant amendment totaling \$55,079, with funding of \$30,401 for Diakonia and \$24,678 for Samaritan Ministries.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

There being no public comments, Commissioner Elder closed the public hearing.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the grant amendment.

Commissioner Elder announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session. Details of that statement appear on page one of this document, the June 3, 2025 open session meeting minutes.

Commissioner Mitrecic discussed a bill introduced in the Delaware General Assembly that if adopted would supersede the Sussex County Council's denial of a US Wind permit to connect high-voltage cables to a new substation adjacent to the Indian River Power Plant to serve a proposed windfarm off the coast of Ocean City.

The commissioners discussed their individual positions on the adopted FY26 County Operating Budget. Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell communicated that the original budget reflected the actual needs of the towns, Board of Education, and County staff, and the revenues needed to fund those requests were available. However, they expressed serious concerns that the amended budget would undermine those needs and require a far greater County funding contribution next year to raise starting teacher salaries to \$60,000 by FY27, as required in the Maryland Blueprint for Education. Commissioners Abbott, Bunting, and Elder communicated that the amended budget treats everyone fairly, including the towns, BOE, County staff, and taxpayers. Commissioner Abbott encouraged resident property owners to visit the Maryland State Department of Assessment and Taxation website to apply for the Maryland Homestead Property Tax Credit. She stated that the process is simple and will equate to a huge savings for homeowners.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on June 17, 2025.