

## **Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland**

October 21, 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 Purnell, seconded by Commissioner Fiori, with Commissioner Bertino momentarily out of the room and Commissioner Bunting temporarily 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 and Deputy Director Pat Walls; and Assistant Finance Officer Ondrea Starzhevskiy. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: hiring Zach Edwards as a part-time landfill operator I within the Solid Waste Division; promoting Vehicle and Equipment Mechanic II Ronald White to vehicle and equipment mechanic III within the Roads Division and Ms. Starzhevskiy to finance officer; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Abbott, seconded by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 10:04 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 Tara Handy 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 regularly scheduled meeting on October 7, 2025.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to table Item 12 - Private School SRD Program Request. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that, based upon legal advice, the commissioners have concurred that the following issues need to be addressed before they consider this request. These include developing criteria identifying what qualifies as a private school; seeking input from Local Government Insurance Trust regarding any potential County liability; having representatives from the Sheriff's Office speak with the

Attorney General's Office; and identifying if similar programs already exist in other jurisdictions and how those programs are handled.

Commissioner Abbott stated that those who came to speak on this topic today are still welcome to come forward during the public comment period.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing October 20-24, 2025 as Economic Development Week to Tourism and Economic Development Director Melanie Pursel and other economic development professionals.

The commissioners presented a commendation to Parks Worker Steve Byrde who rendered aid to a resident injured in a fall at Herring Creek Nature Park.

The commissioners presented commendations to Emergency Services D Shift Lieutenant Taylor Kitching and Specialists Da'Nesha Cousar, Stacey McManus, and Jordan Taylor, all of whom demonstrated extraordinary dedication and professionalism, when the 911 Center faced a historic and unprecedented surge of 700 calls on July 4, 2025 from 9-10 p.m. The calls were generated by an incident in Ocean City.

The commissioners presented commendations to Ocean City Fire Department (OCFD) Fireboat crew Connor Lawrence, Christina Jones, and Jeffery Aperance who responded to the Ocean City Inlet to provide life-saving assistance to a juvenile male who was drowning on August 2, 2025.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments:

Attorney Hugh Cropper spoke on Item 10 – a petition to expand the West Ocean City Sanitary Service Area and connect certain properties to the sewer system. Mr. Cropper discussed the history of the request and asked the commissioners to schedule this item for a public hearing.

Katie Addis urged the commissioners to vote yes to provide school resource deputies (SRD) to the private schools and to fully fund the request rather than entering into a cost share with the schools for this service.

Brian Murphy of Ocean Pines urged the commissioners to vote to provide SROs at Most Blessed Sacrament (MBS) and the other private schools.

Christy Murphy stated that 45% of MBS families receive financial assistance and 53% of the kids live in the County. She stated that these children need to be protected, and right now faith-based schools are being targeted.

Brook Pirotte of Ocean City urged the commissioners to vote yes to provide SROs in the private schools, and she noted that private schools and schools of faith are being targeted.

Pat Barbely of Newark asked the commissioners to support the request to provide SROs in private schools to provide for these children's safety.

Vince Gisriel, Jr. of Ocean City urged the commissioners to be bold and to vote yes to place SROs in the private schools.

Mary Grace of Blue Heron Court asked the commissioners to fund three SRO positions for the private schools to protect the children.

Michelle Clemente of West Ocean City urged the commissioners to vote yes to place SROs in the private schools. She noted that the Sheriff's Department is on board with this

request, and there is no reason that all of the children of the County should not be afforded that right.

Trey of Berlin spoke in favor of the request to fund SROs in private schools. In response to comments by Trey, Commissioner Bertino stated that he plans to seek answers at the end of the meeting that address questions he asked in an email to all of the commissioners earlier that week.

Edward Lee of Snow Hill spoke in support of Item 24 – Destination Assessment/Main Street Snow Hill Grant Request.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-11 as follows: scheduling the next Worcester County Fair for August 7-9, 2026; out-of-state travel for four STAR Team members in the Sheriff's Office to attend Leadership training in Reading, PA; granting 100% County tax credits totaling \$12,553.18 for the three Ocean City Chamber of Commerce properties; an extra work order of \$3,500 for Mead & Hunt for work on the Strategic Highway Safety Plan; \$56,879.28 to purchase two replacement lagoon aerators for the Assateague Point Wastewater Treatment Plant from Aqua-Aerobics Systems; an over-expenditure of \$2,000 to clean and paint the exterior of the Newark Water Plant; a change order of \$23,500 for the KCI contract for the design of the Riddle Farm emergency force main bypass; waiving the stormwater bonding requirements for the Runway 14-32 RSA Runway Rehab Program; scheduling a public hearing to consider a request to expand the West Ocean City SSA and connect certain properties identified on Tax Map 26 to the sewer system; and increasing the Sheriff's salary to \$117,392 effective November 2026.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on Rezoning Case No. 451, which was filed by Attorney Hugh Cropper on behalf of Richard and Elizabeth Smithson, property owners, for an amendment to the Official Zoning Maps to change approximately 150 acres of land located on the north side of Public Landing Road (MD Route 365), west of Outten Road, Snow Hill, in the Second Tax District of Worcester County, Maryland, from E-1 Estate District to A-1 Agricultural District. County Attorney Roscoe Leslie swore in those individuals who planned to give testimony during the hearing. Development Review and Permitting (DRP) Director Jennifer Keener reviewed the application, which received a favorable recommendation from the County Planning Commission.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comment.

Mr. Cropper reviewed the request, which was based on a mistake. He concurred with the Planning Commission's findings and asked the commissioners to accept the findings and Ms. Keener's testimony as his testimony as well.

Chris McCabe of Coastal Compliance reviewed the terms of the easement on the property and concurred that it had been a mistake for the property to be zoned E-1 District, as it has historically been used for agriculture, is designated for agriculture in the Comprehensive Plan's Land Use Map, and should be similarly zoned.

There being no further public comment, Commissioner Elder closed the floor.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners conceptually adopted the Planning Commission's Findings of Fact as their own and approved the rezoning from E-1 to A-1.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on Bill 25-05 (Taxation – Homestead Property Tax Credit), which was introduced by Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell on September 2, 2025. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young stated that this bill, if approved, would reduce the Homestead Property Tax Credit from three percent to zero percent effective July 1, 2026.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

Vince Gisriel of Ocean City applauded the commissioners for considering this action, stating that he would be hard pressed to imagine a better action that they could take to help County residents.

There being no further public comment, Commissioner Elder closed the floor.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously adopted Bill 25-05 as presented.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing to obtain the views of citizens on community, economic development, and housing needs to be considered for submission of an application to the Maryland Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG). Housing Program Coordinator Davida Washington reviewed the application for a \$300,000 grant to support the Countywide housing rehabilitation program. To date 338 County homeowners have received assistance through the County's program, and the requested funds will be leveraged with the Maryland Affordable Trust Indoor Outdoor Plumbing Grant, State Special Loans Program, Shore Up, and the Bay Restoration Fund to improve seven or more owner-occupied homes.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

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

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-24 authorizing the filing of a CDBG application to fund the County's housing rehabilitation program in SFY26.

Pursuant to the request of Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously accepted the proposal from Gripe Associates for mechanical and electrical engineering services for the HVAC systems located at the Worcester County Recreation Center.

Pursuant to the request of Fire Marshal Matt Owens and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously awarded the best responsive bid for the Fire Training Center vehicle storage construction project to Whayland Company for \$3,361,500.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously awarded design, permitting, construction administration, and inspection services for Cells 6 and 7 at the Central Landfill to EA Engineering, Science & Technology for \$899,404.

Legislative Analyst Charlene Sharpe updated the commissioners on the Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund Cannabis Grant (CRRF), stating that the County has slightly more than \$1 million in CRRF funds and received 23 grant applications totaling more than \$3

million; however, new State regulations require the County to develop a spending plan, get stakeholder input, and hold a public hearing before the County can release any funding. She reviewed two options to move forward and sought direction from the commissioners on how to proceed. These options include the County continuing to oversee the grant and move forward with the new State requirements as outlined or move the funding to the Local Management Board (LMB) and have that organization handle the grant distribution. Mr. Young stated that the LMB is geared to handle these types of grants, and he advised that if the commissioners approve this option, County staff will share the existing applications with the LMB. Commissioner Abbott stated that she would like to be more involved in the decision making process rather than turning it over to the LMB. Commissioner Fiori concurred.

In response to comments from Commissioner Abbott, Mr. Young stated that the State tightened the restricted uses of the funds, noting that they cannot be used for anything related to law enforcement.

Commissioner Bertino made a motion to move the funding to the LMB to handle grant distribution and momentarily left the meeting. In his absence, the vote failed 3-3, with Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bunting, and Fiori voting in opposition.

Upon his return, Commissioner Bertino made a second motion to move the funding to the LMB to handle grant distribution, which passed 5-2, with Commissioners Abbott and Fiori voting in opposition.

Following up on directives given by the commissioners on October 7, 2025, Mr. Young reviewed a draft emergency bill to amend the Hotel Rental Tax provision in the County Code. If adopted, this emergency bill would increase the maximum allowable rate of the Hotel Rental Tax from five percent to six percent and would take effect prior to January 1, 2026 as requested by the Town of Ocean City.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned text amendment as an emergency bill and agreed to schedule a public hearing .

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Commissioner Bertino to serve as the primary and Commissioner Bunting to serve as the alternate representative on the Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) Legislative Committee.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Bob Gilmore to the Local Development Council for the Ocean Downs Casino.

Upon nominations by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Brian Scarborough to the Solid Waste Advisory Committee, Robert Bo Duke to the Lower Shore Workforce Development Board, Ashley Harrison to the Economic Development Board, and Lauren Taylor to the Tourism Advisory Committee.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Larry Fykes to the Board of Zoning Appeals.

Upon nominations by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Debbie Hielman to the Housing Review Board and William Gabeler to the Recreation Advisory Board.

Pursuant to a request from Downtown Snow Hill, Inc. and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved a one-time grant of \$16,000 to Downtown Snow Hill, Inc. for a destination assessment.

The commissioners recessed for 10 minutes.

The commissioners conducted a third work session with Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and Consultant Michael Bayer on updates to the Comprehensive Plan. Michael Bear presented a general overview of the Water Resources Element.

In response to questions from Commissioner Bertino asking why electricians are the only service professionals required to pay a registration fee, Ms. Keener stated that electricians were licensed locally until 2021 when the State overhauled the licensing regulations to ensure consistency, but allowed local jurisdictions to continue registering.

In response to questions by Commissioner Elder, Ms. Keener stated that registration fees generate about \$36,000 in year one and \$3,000 in year two for two-year revenues of \$39,000, and these funds cover program costs. In response to a question by Commissioner Mitrecic, Ms. Keener stated that the registration fee is \$100 for a Master Electrician and \$40 for unlimited. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that licensing fees are a cost of doing business, this registration fee is very minimal, and he opposed eliminating the fees.

Commissioner Mitrecic discussed emails sent to the commissioners concerning the issuance of a proclamation on October 7, 2025 to members of the Turning Point USA chapter at Stephen Decatur High School. He stated that all clubs have the right to be recognized.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on November 4, 2025.