

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

March 2, 2021

Joseph M. Mitrecic, President  
Theodore J. Elder, Vice President  
Anthony W. Bertino, Jr.  
Madison J. Bunting, Jr.  
James C. Church  
Joshua C. Nordstrom  
Diana Purnell

Following a motion by Commissioner Bertino, seconded by Commissioner Church, the Commissioners unanimously voted to meet in closed session at 9:00 a.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting 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 Harold L. Higgins, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young, County Attorney Roscoe Leslie, Public Information Officer Kim Moses, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: promoting Trudy Gebhardt from part-time Recreation Program Monitor to full-time Recreation Program Manager II and Nikki Powell from Scale Operator II to Office Assistant III within the Solid Waste Division; hiring Johnathan Glenn, Jr. as a Plant Operator Trainee within the Water and Wastewater Division; advertising for a Budget Officer within County Administration; and other personnel matters; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing FY22 health benefits, considering attendance at the 2021 Hurricane Conference, and discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, seconded by Commissioner Elder, 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 Mitrecic called the meeting to order, and following a morning prayer by Pastor Sean Davis of Ocean City Baptist 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 February 16, 2021 meeting as presented.

The Commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing March as Women's History Month to Commission for Women (CFW) Co-Chair Liz Mumford and other CFW members, honoring the contributions of these and other exemplary women to the economic, cultural, and social well-being of Worcester County.

The Commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing March as Professional Social

Work Month to Mike Trader and Sandy Kerrigan of the Health Department and Tammy Jones, Acting Assistant Director of Services for the Department of Social Services (DSS) and other DSS staff members to honor social workers for striving to improve lives locally.

Pursuant to the request of Senior Budget Accountant Kim Reynolds and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to schedule a second public hearing on March 16, 2021 regarding the progress of a \$64,265 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) that was awarded to the County and sub-awarded to Diakonia, Inc. (\$32,865) for staff costs and COVID testing supplies for homeless persons due to increased need caused by the pandemic, and to the Worcester County Developmental Center (\$31,400) to provide virtual day programs and services to developmentally disabled adults who are isolated due to the COVID-19 crisis. The grant period began on August 27, 2020 and will close on July 31, 2022.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously accepted the bid from Beach Construction Company for \$8,600, with an additional \$1,000 contingency fund for any unanticipated work, at a not-to-exceed cost of \$9,600 for railings, ramp, and stairs for the Diakonia shelter renovation project. This project will be funded by CDBG funds.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 4-5 as follows: approved bid specifications for the general rehabilitation of a single-family home in the Snow Hill area, which is to be funded through the State Special Loans Program; and approved the 2021 Mosquito Control Program budget, as outlined in a letter to the County from Brian Prendergast, Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) Mosquito Control Program Manager, for County funding of \$83,940 for the Mosquito Control Program in Worcester County, with State funding of \$82,260 and community funding of \$240,300 for a total budget of \$406,500, with area residents who participate in the program to pay the \$65 fee per residential household up front to cover a portion of the cost of spraying.

The Commissioners met with Public Schools Superintendent Louis H. Taylor to discuss funding requests to replace the 27-year-old roof at Pocumoke Middle School (PMS) at a cost of \$2,600,442 and the Stephen Decatur Middle School (SDMS) addition project. Also in attendance were Board of Education (BOE) member Dr. Jon Andes, Chief Financial Officer Vince Tolbert, and Facilities Planner Joe Price.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously awarded County funds of \$1,452,942 for the PMS roof replacement project. Mr. Taylor advised that County funds coupled with State funding of \$1,275,000 will fully fund the project, which will be completed during summer 2021.

Following further discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously awarded funds of \$108,825 for the preconstruction and bidding phase for the SDMS addition project. Mr. Taylor advised that the Interagency on School Construction has recommended approving \$3.7 million of the \$4.8 million of the BOE's FY22 capital project request, with funds to be formally awarded this May. He further advised that project bids will be awarded on August 18, with construction to begin this November.

The Commissioners reviewed a memo from Budget Officer Kathy Whited regarding the

FY22 Municipal Tax Rates and Constant Yield Tax Rates for Berlin, Ocean City, Pocomoke City, and Snow Hill. They then met with representatives from the towns of Pocomoke City, Snow Hill, and Berlin, as well as the Ocean Pines Association (OPA) regarding their FY22 grant requests from the County. The Commissioners will meet with Ocean City representatives on March 16, 2021.

The Commissioners met with Pocomoke City Manager Jeremy Mason who thanked the Commissioners for providing relief to the town in the form of CARES Act funding. He advised that town officials are requesting that the County maintain funding to Pocomoke City in all categories for FY22, including categorical funding and pass-through grants, as well as new funding of \$32,490 or 10% of the Ocean Downs Casino table games revenues, for a total of \$1,666,936 to help maintain the General Fund to support public works, police, emergency medical services, water and wastewater facilities, and economic development.

The Commissioners met with Snow Hill Mayor Tammy Simpson and Town Manager Gary Weber. Mr. Weber thanked the Commissioners for their prior support and stated that the town is seeking funding for FY22, including an unrestricted grant of \$500,000 (a \$35,000 increase); \$235,000 payment in lieu of taxes; \$35,000 for a new aerator; a grant request for \$200,000 to help cover the cost of a \$475,000 project to replace a failing wastewater inflow and infiltration line; \$32,490 or 10% of the Ocean Downs Casino table games revenues; \$73,000 restricted fire grant; and other shared revenues and State aid pass throughs for a total of \$2,100,830 for FY22.

Berlin Mayor Zack Tyndall thanked the Commissioners for their prior support to help offset a portion of public safety costs for police, fire, and emergency medical services. He asked the Commissioners to increase grant funding to include a \$517,375 grant, an 11.26% increase from the prior year, which includes an unrestricted grant of \$465,000, funds of \$39,875 toward Rails-to-Trials, a \$7,500 grant toward the Berlin Community Center feasibility study, a \$5,000 grant toward Berlin Independence Day fireworks; and a \$214,000 restricted fire grant; and other shared revenues and State aid pass throughs for a total of \$2,314,368.

The Commissioners met with Ocean Pines Association (OPA) President Larry Perrone to discuss their FY22 grant requests from the County. Mr. Perrone stated that the OPA is seeking funding in the following areas: a public safety grant of \$525,000 for police services (a \$50,000 increase); a County street grant of \$122,943; a grant of \$150,000 for the restoration of roads and bridges; a grant of \$25,000 for tourism (a \$15,000 increase); and \$40,000 for Recreation and Parks programs. In total, including fire and ambulance funding, the OPA requests \$1,697,051 in funding from the County in FY22.

The Commissioners thanked officials from the towns and OPA for taking time to meet with them to review their FY22 grant requests.

The Commissioners met with Salisbury Airport Assistant Manager Chris Davidson to discuss the status of the regional airport and to review the PowerPoint “SBY Airport – Your Economic Multiplier,” which included the following: the \$1.1 billion total economic activity; 10,000 jobs in Maryland aviation, and 2014 economic impact of \$25 million versus the 2019 economic impact of \$28 million; Face – Lift projects; Ongoing Projects, including the \$3.2 million Maintenance/SRE building, \$726,000 ARFF vehicle, \$1.8 million ARFF building, \$5.3 million Taxiway A rehabilitation, \$1.4 million Piedmont improvements, \$31 million Runway extension; Regional Impact, including metropolitan statistical area, regional drone impacts,

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) challenges, and educational partnerships; and future planned growth.

Commissioner Church thanked Mr. Davidson for meeting with the Commissioners, noting that the Salisbury Airport is one of the largest assets on the Eastern Shore. In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Davidson stated that the runway extension is needed to better accommodate new and existing aircraft, such as Piedmont, which must leave four to five seats vacant on each flight due to weight restrictions imposed by the runway length. He further stated that, once the runway extension is complete, aircraft will be able to carry enough fuel to fly from Salisbury to California.

The Commissioners met with Information Technology Director Brian Jones and Chief Executive Officer Andrew DeMattia and Chief Operating Officer Andre DeMattia for Talkie Communications, the County's broadband vendor, to discuss the timeline and funding options to extend broadband in the County. The DeMattias reviewed a PowerPoint outlining Talkie Communications business overview; history as a local company located in Chestertown, Maryland; products and services pertaining to a 100% fiber optic network, live streaming television, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and home security; support from Queen Anne's County Commissioners to expand broadband in their area; and the partnership with ADTRAN, Talkie's software and hardware vendor, to build an all-fiber 10G communications backbone along the Eastern Shore to connect underserved communities and drive overall economic development to the region.

Andre DeMattia stated that Talkie has been awarded a \$3 million federal grant to be released over the next 10 years, and he thanked the Commissioners for completing a broadband study, which his staff utilizes to apply for state and federal grants for this project, which is estimated to cost \$52 million. In response to questions by Commissioner Elder, Mr. DeMattia stated that they anticipate grant funds will be released in August and hope to complete the project in Worcester County within the next six years. This would allow them to begin installing fiber in the south end and work northward, but he stressed that this work is contingent upon the availability of funding. He further explained that Talkie has used \$8 million in grant funds and their own funds to install fiber in Kent County and Queen Anne's County. He stated that in Worcester County they will complete higher-density areas first due to the significant return on investment in those areas, as those funds are needed to cover the costs of continuing to install fiber in low-density areas.

Commissioner Bunting stated that Bishopville residents in his area are located in dead spots and cannot wait six years for fiber. In response to questions and concerns raised by Commissioner Bunting, Mr. DeMattia stated that grant funds may be used to install fiber optics only, not wireless. He further noted that, the project in Worcester County could be completed more quickly if additional funding was available. Commissioner Bertino stated that broadband is a needed infrastructure project. In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Andre DeMattia stated that wireless is significantly more expensive than broadband, with higher installation costs, and works at slower speeds because it is line-of-sight dependent. He further confirmed that Talkie could develop a plan and a cost estimate to complete this project in two years for the Commissioners' consideration within the next month. Commissioner Mitrecic noted that the towns are already being served by broadband providers, such as Mediacom, Verizon, and Comcast. In response to questions by Commissioner Mitrecic, Andrew DeMattia stated that

Talkie offers three different broadband packages: \$69 for 100 megabits per second (Mbps), \$79 for 400 Mbps; and \$89 for gigabits, uncapped. He stated that no one is required to sign a contract, and Talkie offers a three-year rate guarantee.

Following much discussion, the Commissioners requested Talkie develop a proposal for a two-year project to install fiber throughout the County for the Commissioners to consider at their April 6, 2021 meeting.

The Commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Elder, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Robert Clarke to the Economic Development Advisory Board for the remainder of a four-year term expiring December 31, 2021, to replace Ralph Shockley who passed away.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Development Review and Permitting Director Ed Tudor and upon a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, the Commissioners unanimously adopted the Findings of Fact and Zoning Resolution No. 21-1 for Rezoning Case No. 431, rezoning approximately 1.25 acres of land consisting of three separate segments on an overall parcel totaling 5.46 acres, located to the northerly side of U.S. Rt. 50, east of MD Rt. 707 in West Ocean City, and more specifically identified on Tax Map 26 as part of Parcel 158, from R-2 Suburban Residential District and RP Resource Protection District to C-2 General Commercial District.

Pursuant to the request of Emergency Services Director Billy Birch and upon a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to increase the 911 phone line fee from \$0.75 per phone line to \$1.50 per phone line effective July 1, 2021 to cover the cost of 911 expenses. Mr. Birch stated that in 2020 the 911 fees were \$618,996, while expenses were \$3,805,732, leaving \$3,186,736 in unreimbursed costs. He further stated that the County will advise the 911 Board of this change prior to the April 1, 2021 deadline, and noted that even with this fee increase, the County will still recognize a revenue shortfall of \$2,568,671.50 in the coming fiscal year.

In follow up to January 5, 2021 discussions, Public Works Deputy Director John Ross updated the Commissioners on steps taken to reconfigure the farm lease for the Newark spray irrigation project and to identify area farmers who may meet the qualifications to bid on a project to harvest crops and thus remove nutrients from the spray field. Mr. Ross stated that County staff met with several farmers to discuss the requirements to manage the site to include the following: the need to be local, as moving equipment to the site would be difficult; work with the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) to develop a nutrient management plan; experience with effluent spraying beneficial; and the work should be revenue neutral, with no large expenses and no windfall revenues. Mr. Ross stated that to date the County has received one proposal from Robert and Rod Ewell to manage the site at no cost to the service area. He explained that the Ewells are experienced in managing an effluent disposal site.

In response to a question by Commissioner Elder, Mr. Ross stated that the farmers who spoke with County staff about this project explained that they could not meet all of the conditions, and it would be cost prohibitive to transport their equipment to and from Newark to manage 40 acres. Mr. Bunting stated that the proposal from the Ewells is cost neutral, making it

the best option for everyone.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, the Commissioners unanimously accepted the proposal from Robert and Rod Ewell to manage the Newark spray irrigation site.

Health Officer Becky Jones and Mr. Birch updated the Commissioners on COVID-19 vaccination efforts in Worcester County. Ms. Jones stated that between the Worcester County Health Department (WCHD), Atlantic General Hospital (AGH), and area pharmacies, the County has collectively administered over 11,000 first doses, which represents 21% of the population, and 6,800 second doses, which represents 13% of the population, ranking them second in the State for first doses and first for second doses. She stated that the WCHD is primarily receiving the Moderna vaccine and should receive a small allocation of the Johnson & Johnson single-dose Janssen vaccine. She thanked the Commissioners for reaching out to State officials concerning the limited distribution of the vaccine to the County. She also advised that the County has tremendous local partnerships, which have resulted in multiple vaccine sites throughout the County, along with a mobile unit that can go into harder-to-reach communities, giving them the capability to administer 3,000 doses per week. However, collectively the County is only receiving about 300 doses per week. She stated that this distribution is based on a population of 52,000 year-round residents as identified in the Census. However, there are currently over 6,400 people on the wait list to be vaccinated. Because a large number of second-home owners are coming to Worcester County to be vaccinated, the WCHD has asked State officials to base distribution on larger Census data that identifies the population at about 200,000 full-time and part-time residents.

Ms. Jones advised that the County has been able to bring people in to replace no-shows, so that no vaccine doses have been wasted. In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Jones stated that the doses to be allocated to the proposed mass vaccination site in Wicomico should not impact the number of doses to be issued to the County. In response to a question by Commissioner Elder, Ms. Jones stated that the County prioritizes doses for those ages 65 and older, and individuals are guaranteed to receive a second dose for every first dose that has been given. Commissioner Mitrecic praised the partnership between the County and Ocean City to run a vaccination site at Northside Park in Ocean City. In response to a question by Commissioner Mitrecic, Ms. Jones agreed to find out the number of vaccine doses were administered at a mass vaccination site in Dover recently. Commissioner Purnell praised the partnerships between AGH and several community churches to administer 156 doses of the vaccine last Saturday to those ages 65 and older in the African American community, and the dates for the second doses have already been locked in.

Mr. Birch expressed concern that the Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) has received approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for a 150-day program to operate mobile vaccination clinics in underserved areas in 10 jurisdictions, including Worcester County, to administer 250 vaccines per day beginning April 1. He expressed concern that this is a duplication of efforts, as the clinics in the County cannot operate at capacity due to the limited availability of the vaccine, and it would be difficult for those who receive the first vaccine from the MEMA mobile site to set up appointments to receive the needed second doses.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the

Commissioners unanimously agreed to send a letter to Governor Larry Hogan and MEMA, explaining that the County does not need MEMA mobile destination points, but does need increased doses.

The Commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet in closed session.

Following a motion by Commissioner MB, seconded by Commissioner TE, the Commissioners unanimously voted to meet in closed session at 12:05 p.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting 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. Topics discussed and actions taken included employee evaluations.

Following a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, seconded by Commissioner Elder, the Commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session to meet again on March 16, 2020.