

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

May 4, 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 (Absent)

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Nordstrom, with Commissioner Purnell absent, the Commissioners unanimously voted to meet in closed session at 9:01 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, Office Assistant Kristina Prout, Human Resources Director Stacey Norton; State's Attorney Kris Heiser, and Sheriff Matthew Crisafulli. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: hiring Justin Eberle as a Supervisor within Emergency Services and Dmitry "David" Drukarov as a Painter in Public Works; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments and security matters.

Following a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 10:02 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 Kenneth Elligson and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the April 20, 2021 afternoon closed session and the May 4, 2021 morning closed session.

Commissioner Purnell was absent from the meeting.

The Commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their April 20, 2021 meeting as presented.

The Commissioners welcomed incoming Budget Officer Candace Savage, who will replace Kathy Whited who will retire in September 2021.

The Commissioners presented a commendation to Mary Sigrist, a Pocomoke High School senior, in recognition of her service as Worcester County's Page to the 2021 Maryland General Assembly. Miss Sigrist recognized the level of difficulty involved in politics and thanked the Commissioners for their role in representing Worcester County and getting things done.

The Commissioners presented a proclamation to Worcester County Social Services Attorney Amy Fitzgerald and other staff members along with foster parents Shannon and Kurt Fetters recognizing May as National Foster Care Month and thanking area resource parents for their efforts to bring stability and a sense of self-worth back into the lives of young people whose lives have been disrupted through no fault of their own.

The Commissioners presented a commendation to Shannon and Kurt Fetters for being named the 2021 Worcester County Foster Parents of the Year by Social Services for their willingness to serve foster children living in crisis in the community. The Commissioners commended the Fetters for their willingness to open their hearts and homes to foster children whose lives are in crisis.

The Commissioners presented a proclamation to Brooke Manley of the Health Department and other local and state partners recognizing May 2-8, 2021 as Children's Mental Health Matters Week. Ms. Manley thanked the Commissioners and others for their partnerships to reduce the stigma associated with childhood mental health issues, to provide in-school wellness programs that include being able to meet with counselors during school hours, and to provide them with the resiliency tools they need to face adversities.

The Commissioners presented a proclamation to Emergency Services Director Billy Birch recognizing May 9-15, 2021 as **Hurricane Preparedness Week** in Worcester County and urging residents to be storm ready by identifying their personal hurricane risks, determining whether they live in a hurricane evacuation zone, and crafting a personalized family emergency kit at [www.co.worcester.md.us](http://www.co.worcester.md.us) by clicking on the Department of Emergency Services and by visiting [www.weather.gov/stormready/](http://www.weather.gov/stormready/).

The Commissioners presented a proclamation to Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development (WCTED) Director Melanie Pursel and other tourism officials recognizing the week of May 2-8, 2021 as Travel and Tourism Week in Worcester County to celebrate this year's theme, the "Power of Travel," and the dynamic role of WCTED and its partners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to drive the tourism industry toward recovery, to reignite the economy, to shore up small businesses, and to reconnect the local workforce. Tourism officials from agencies throughout the County who joined Ms. Pursel for the presentation included Susan Jones, Jere Johnson, Nancy Schwendeman, Ann Hillyer, Debbie Shay, Kerrie Bunting, and Lisa Challenger.

The Commissioners issued a proclamation reaffirming their oath and proclaiming Worcester County to be a Sanctuary for the Constitution of the United States and the entire Bill of Rights. On November 6, 2018, each of the seven members of the Board of County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland, executed the oath of office. On that solemn date, they swore to bear true allegiance to the State of Maryland and support the Constitution of the United States and laws thereof, and to the best of their skills and judgements, diligently and faithfully, without partiality or prejudice, execute the office of Worcester County Commissioner, according to the Constitution and laws of this State.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously approved as a consent agenda item numbers 2-5 as follows: approving the filing of a grant application for funds of \$50,615 for the position of Heroin Coordinator in the Sheriff's Office; scheduling three public hearings on June 1, 2021 to receive public comment for the Solid Waste Enterprise Fund, the Water and Wastewater Enterprise Fund, and to receive objections and other public comments on the proposed disposal of surplus vehicles, equipment, and miscellaneous items online at [www.govdeals.com](http://www.govdeals.com).

The Commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Judy Griffin to the Ethics Board for the remainder of a four-year term expiring December 31, 2024 to replace Jeff Knepper who passed away.

Pursuant to the request of Chief Administrative Officer Harold Higgins and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously approved the use of \$314,426 in a Capital Equipment account in Other General Government to purchase nine replacement vehicles at an estimated cost of \$286,620 and other equipment at an estimated cost of \$27,806 in FY21.

Pursuant to the written request of Public Information Officer Kim Moses and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners voted 5-1, with Commissioner Mitrecic voting in opposition, to authorize a pilot program to test the potential effectiveness of a permanent surveillance program at the Homeowner Convenience Centers at the Berlin WalMart, Bishopville, and Whaleyville.

Pursuant to the request of Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell in response to a written request from Maryland Coastal Bays Program (MCBP) Executive Director Kevin Smith and upon a motion by Bertino, the Commissioners voted 5-1, with Commissioner Elder voting in opposition, to approve an in-kind match of approximately \$700,000 for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) National Estuary Program (NEP) grant for the period October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022. Mr. Mitchell explained that the County will provide an equivalent match using non-federal Rural Legacy Program funds of \$500,000 and remaining Bay Restoration Fund (BRF) grant funds of \$200,000 from the above-stated time period for this match, so there will be no direct cost to the County.

The Commissioners met with Mr. Mitchell to discuss a follow up request from Paul Carlotta to grant him an additional 120-day extension to complete conditions 2-11, which were contingent upon the County's approval of his request to allocate six equivalent dwelling units (EDUs) of sewer service from the Mystic Harbour Sanitary Service Area (SSA) for an existing roadside stand and proposed restaurant on the property of Assateague Farms, LLC and identified on Tax Map 33 as Parcel 29. Mr. Mitchell explained that the Commissioners originally granted a 120-day extension on January 5, 2021 to the required December 31, 2020 completion date for Paul Carlotta. In response to questions by Commissioner Bunting, Mr. Mitchell stated that Mr. Carlotta has completed all items with the exception of the engineering report for connection of

waste to the County system, and Assistant Finance Officer Jessica Wilson stated that the County policy has been to deposit the check for the EDUs only after the property owner has met all of the required conditions. In response to concerns raised by Commissioner Bertino, Public Works Deputy Director John Ross stated that Mr. Carlotta is responsible for completing the engineering report. Furthermore, Mr. Ross stated that he has requested but never received the following general information from Mr. Carlotta that would be included in the engineering report: how much flow will be generated in gallons per day; number of acres of land available for spray irrigation; and the size of the holding tank, as it must be large enough to store the effluent during periods of rain when spraying is not permitted. He explained that the effluent from a brewery would adversely impact the Mystic Harbour Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP). He stated that the potential exists for the property owner to shift the effluent from the brewery to the adjoining connection that will pump the effluent to the WWTP during periods when spraying is not an option. He stated that this situation is occurring in the Town of Berlin with Burley Oak Brewery. Mr. Higgins stated that, until the owner provides the requested details, County staff will not know if the tank is large enough to hold the effluent until it can be hauled. Commissioners Church, Elder, and Mitrecic supported eliminating the required engineering report. Commissioner Nordstrom stated that he could support the extension, but that he could not support eliminating the required engineering report. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that the County has stifled economic development for Mr. Carlotta whose backup plan includes the use of pump and haul services during periods when the use of spray irrigation is not an option.

Mr. Carlotta stated that an engineering report does not say anything about brewery waste water, and the Maryland Department of the Environment, Maryland Department of Agriculture, and Worcester County Environmental Programs already have all of the requested information, have approved his plan, and he does not have an additional \$20,000 to complete an engineering report. Mr. Mitchell stated that the State has approved his spray irrigation request, but that the County does not have the information that an engineering report would provide. In response to a question by Commissioner Bunting, Mr. Ross stated that the WWTP has the capacity to accept domestic wastewater to be generated from the restrooms, but does not have the ability to dispose of the brewery waste.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the Commissioners voted unanimously to remove item nine from the list of required conditions, to connect the Assateague, LLC property to the Mystic Harbour Sanitary Service Area, and to require the owner to pay repair costs for any WWTP malfunctions caused by brewery waste from the Assateague Island, LLC.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Ross and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously approved the following change orders from Bunting and Murray for the Newark spray irrigation project, which will result in a total project construction cost increase of \$17,186.30: Change Order No. 4 at a cost of \$22,509.60 for additional stone to stabilize the ground for the center pivot unit tracks; and Change Order No. 5 at a decrease in the contract price of \$71,314.80 to reflect the reconciliation of quantities for the unit price items included in the contract.

The Commissioners conducted a public hearing to receive comments regarding an application for grant funds of \$126,975 from the Maryland Transit Authority Statewide Special

Transportation Assistance Program (SSTAP) Senior Transportation for the Commission on Aging to continue to operate public and specialized transportation services.

Commissioner Mitrecic opened the floor to receive public comment.

There being no public comment, Commissioner Mitrecic closed the public hearing.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to apply for the SSTAP Senior Transportation Funding Grant.

The Commissioners conducted a public hearing on the expansion of the Ocean Pines Sanitary Service Area (SSA) for Wave Holdings, LLC, on behalf of the owner, Margaret Bunting, to expand the sewer planning area for the Ocean Pines Sanitary Service Area (SSA) to include an entire 11.5-acre property located on the east side of MD Rt. 589, north of the intersection with Gum Point Road and more specifically identified on Tax Map 21 as Parcel 72, and to reclassify the sewer and water planning areas from S-6/W-6 (no planned service) to S-1/W-1 (present to two years) to serve the proposed 78,800 square-foot commercial mixed-use development, which will consist of a restaurant, car wash, office, retail, and contractors' shops. Mr. Mitchell reviewed the project and advised that County staff determined that the project is both feasible from an engineering and economic standpoint and desirable for the health, safety, and welfare of the property owners and their customers in the expanded SSA. Furthermore, the Planning Commission found the project to be consistent with the County's Comprehensive Development Plan and granted the application a favorable recommendation.

Commissioner Mitrecic opened the floor to receive public comment.

Attorney Hugh Cropper, representing Wave Holdings, LLC and the owner, Ms. Bunting, concurred with County staff's findings and asked the Commissioners to approve the requested expansion.

Project Engineer John Salm of Berlin concurred with County staff's findings, advised that the proposed project will pay for itself, resulting in no cost increases to the existing Ocean Pines SSA ratepayers, and reviewed the planned expansion of water and sewer.

There being no further public comment, Commissioner Mitrecic closed the public hearing.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the Commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 21-8 expanding the Ocean Pines SSA for Wave Holdings, LLC.

The Commissioners conducted a second public hearing to provide information on the progress of the CDBG COVID Round 2 Grant of \$336,000, which was funded through the Maryland Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. Ms. Reynolds reviewed the progress of the grant, which is being used by Diakonia, Inc. for emergency rental assistance for up to six months for County residents negatively impacted by the loss of employment or reduction in hours resulting from the current pandemic, as well as the grant term, which is scheduled to end on December 31, 2021.

Commissioner Mitrecic opened the floor to receive public comment.

There being no public comment, Commissioner Mitrecic closed the public hearing.

The Commissioners conducted a work session on the text amendment presented at their April 20, 2021 meeting to facilitate value-added agriculture and agritourism on agriculturally-zoned properties consisting of a minimum of 10 acres. County staff in attendance included

Development Review and Permitting Director Ed Tudor, Recreation, Parks, Tourism, and Economic Development Director Tom Perlozzo, and Tourism and Economic Development Director Melanie Pursel. Mr. Perlozzo stated that the purpose of the draft bill is to create economic opportunities and added value to rural parts of the County to create a more simplified code for the 334 family-owned farms in Worcester County that could benefit from this legislation. For example, it would open additional opportunities that could help breweries and wineries compete with neighboring counties. Ms. Pursel reviewed a PowerPoint and a video outlining the potential opportunities for the agricultural sector to expand and diversify to encourage second and third generation family members to continue farming operations.

Commissioner Bunting stated that several farmers informed him that they oppose this legislation, and his top priority is to protect the farming operations taking place on agricultural lands that may be adjacent to properties that may host any number of the uses proposed in the draft bill. For example, no one should be required to stop farming his or her property on a certain time or date because a wedding or concert is scheduled to take place on an adjoining property. In response to questions by Commissioner Bunting, Ms. Pursel advised that in this legislation certain events, such as live entertainment, would only be permitted up until 10:00 p.m. However, this draft is only a starting point, and the Commissioners could choose to further restrict such parameters. For example, they could choose to set capacity restrictions. In response to a question by Commissioner Mitrecic, Mr. Perlozzo confirmed that there are a ton of projects proposed for use on agricultural lands that are never heard by the Commissioners due to existing zoning restrictions, and these farming families cannot move forward with projects until the County addresses the road blocks stopping them from moving forward. Furthermore, these types of uses could generate tourism for the County and much-needed economic opportunities for farmers.

In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Perlozzo stated that this bill is a starting point, and staff can continue working together to address the Commissioners' concerns and develop the necessary code requirements. Mr. Tudor explained that the draft legislation was crafted based on the initiatives proposed during staff discussions. He advised that the draft legislation only addresses the zoning. It does not address health and safety, and he is not an advocate for the draft legislation as written, but it provides for a start to discussions. In response to questions by Commissioner Church, he stated that the draft legislation as written allows camping and glamping as well as farm restaurants, which circumvent the permitting processes required in other zoning districts. Therefore, he urged the Commissioners to exercise caution when approving the proposed uses. Commissioner Bunting concurred, noting that the Commissioners should take their time to assure that any legislation they approve is done right.

Commissioner Mitrecic stated that this is a huge economic driver that the County is missing out on, and the Commissioners need to make this work for economic development and for zoning. For example, he pointed out that one property owner erected a beautiful barn on his property to host weddings, anniversaries, and similar activities, but under the current zoning code he would be required to erect a tent to host such events. He noted this individual and others are being denied business opportunities that are being enjoyed by farming families in neighboring Wicomico County. He stated that no one is proposing to host a Wood Stock on a County farm, and staff must work together to develop a reasonable bill that permits farmers to pursue added activities on their own properties that will create additional economic opportunities for them. Commissioner Bunting asked what obstacles must be addressed before the barn in question may host events. In response, Mr. Tudor advised that weddings, which are considered an assembly

use, are not included in the State definition of agritourism. However, even if it was included, given that the barn is over 17,000 square feet, the property owner would be required to retrofit the building with fire walls and potentially sprinklers. He concluded that the most efficient method to move forward in this instance would be to have the Eastern Shore delegation introduce State legislation to amend the definition of agritourism and also include Worcester County in the Public Safety article that permits an increase in the occupancy limits for up to 200 people.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the Commissioners unanimously directed County Administration, DRP, and Economic Development to work together to draft an agritourism bill that the Commissioners could introduce at their next meeting.

The Commissioners conducted a work session to discuss the broadband proposals presented on April 6, 2021 by Talkie, a privately-owned entity, to install underground fiber and Choptank Fiber, a for-profit cooperative, to install a mix of aerial and underground fiber within three years (proposal details are outlined in the April 6 minutes). Information Technology Director Brian Jones advised that, while the Commissioners previously chose Talkie as the County's broadband vendor, neither Talkie nor Choptank Fiber have requested County funding to move forward with their respective projects to provide broadband to the underserved and unserved areas in the County with longer term projects.

Commissioner Elder supported accepting the proposal from Talkie, which presented a no-cost proposal to install fiber underground within 10 years when no one else was interested in the project. In response to concerns raised by Commissioner Nordstrom, Mr. Jones stated that Talkie's proposal includes beginning project construction in the south end of the County. Commissioner Bertino stated that the County would be better able to exercise control over the proposed accelerated project timeline if they provide a loan to the successful vendor. He noted that accelerating the project would meet the rural needs and stimulate economic development far more quickly than the longer, no-cost timelines. However, he stressed that the County should be repaid for any investment of taxpayer dollars, regardless of whether the project costs \$37 million for above-ground fiber through Choptank or \$52 million for below-ground fiber through Talkie.

Commissioner Bunting supported allocating a small portion of the \$10 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to the fire companies and the remainder of those funds to broadband, but he is not willing to accept a proposal from either entity until they provide the Commissioners with total proposed cost projections and timelines. Commissioner Mitrecic opposed allocating ARPA funds for a broadband project; however, he could support bonding the project and requiring the successful vendor to repay the County within 20 years, provided that the vendors submit proposals that identify concrete costs and project deadlines and agree to enter into a franchise agreement with the County. In response to comments by Commissioner Mitrecic, Chief Administrative Officer Harold Higgins stated that the County can only spend ARPA funding on COVID-19 related expenses, and daily operating costs are not permitted uses.

Mr. Jones cautioned that the County had named Talkie as the County broadband vendor, so both the County and Talkie have already applied for grants to install broadband in rural areas, and the County could lose those grants, which are currently on hold until the Commissioners finalize their broadband plans. Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young suggested any additional requests for information from the vendors include requesting that Talkie submit a

proposal for aerial fiber and for Choptank Fiber to submit a proposal for underground fiber to give the County scalable options.

Following much discussion, the Commissioners directed County staff to solicit additional proposals, one from Talkie for aerial fiber and one from Choptank Fiber for underground fiber.

The Commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they recessed until 7:00 p.m. to host the public hearing in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the Government Center on the Constant Yield Tax Rate and the Requested FY22 County Operating Budget. Due to concerns regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, members of the public were invited to participate by either attending in person, via Zoom, or by submitting written comments on or before 4:00 p.m. Monday, May 3, 2021 by email to [wchearing@co.worcester.md.us](mailto:wchearing@co.worcester.md.us) or by standard mail to the County Commissioners Office at Room 1103 Government Center, One West Market Street, Snow Hill, MD 21863.

The Commissioners conducted a public hearing at 7:00 p.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the Government Center on the FY22 Requested County Operating Budgets. Commissioner Purnell was absent from the meeting. Commission President Mitrecic called the meeting to order and welcomed those in attendance. Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young presented a PowerPoint outlining the FY22 Requested Operating Budget. The presentation included the following graphs and information: FY22 Budget Issues; General Fund Estimated Revenues and Expenditures for FY22; Worcester County Assessable Tax Base from FY19-FY22; General Fund Major Revenues - Property Tax, Income Tax, and Recordation and Transfer Taxes from FY16-FY19; General Fund Revenue and Expenditure Comparisons from FY19-FY22; FY21 Real Property Tax Rates of counties on the Eastern Shore of Maryland of which Worcester County is 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest at \$0.845 per \$100 of assessed value; 2021 Income Tax Rates of Eastern Shore counties of which Worcester County is the lowest at 2.25%; the Worcester County Constant Yield Tax Rate of \$0.845 per \$100 of assessed value to yield the current rate of revenue; and the Schedule of Upcoming Budget Work Sessions on May 11, 18, and 25, 2021; and the Budget & Tax Rate Adoption on June 1, 2021.

Mr. Young explained that the requested expenditures of \$218,604,720 exceed the County's estimated revenues of \$210,591,207 by \$8,013,513. He stated that this difference must be reconciled by the Commissioners either through reductions in expenditures, additional revenues, or a combination of both. Mr. Young further explained that the Constant Yield Tax Rate (CYTR) represents the property tax rate that would generate the same amount of revenues the County received in the current fiscal year. He noted that in February the State informed Worcester County that, to fully offset the effect of increasing assessments, the real property tax rate would need to be decreased from the current tax rate of \$0.845 per \$100 of assessed value to the CYTR of \$0.8374 to remain constant with the current year, FY21. He stated that the CYTR would create no additional revenue above the current year's total, but explained that the County Commissioners are considering not reducing its real property tax rate enough to fully offset increasing assessments and instead proposes to adopt a real property tax rate of \$0.845 per \$100 of assessed value to fully fund budget requests. This tax rate is .9% higher than the CYTR and would generate an additional \$1,242,733 in real property tax revenues.

Commissioner Mitrecic opened the floor to receive public comment on the department budget requests, proposed property tax increase, and the Board of Education budget request, in that order.

Ed Tinus of Whaleyville requested an opportunity to meet with the Commissioners at a future date to be determined to discuss his nonprofit organization.

Chief Administrative Officer Harold Higgins read written comments submitted by Paul St. Andre of Ocean City, which states that now is not the time to raise taxes and requested the Commissioners consider a tax decrease to help residents and business owners recover from the economic struggles resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Melissa Mather of Berlin requested funding priority be given to public safety agencies, including police and fire, and to adopt a budget that protects the citizens and their rural way of life.

Caryn Abbot, of Pocomoke City and a member of Worcester Backs the Blue, requested funding priority be given to the requested FY22 Sheriff's Office budget to protect citizens and assure law enforcement officers have the resources they need to police the county. She further requested the Commissioners meet with her organization on May 22 to discuss the Commissioners' proclamation on the Constitution.

Chris Larmore, of the Sheriff's Office and President of FOP Lodge 50, urged the Commissioners to support the FY22 Sheriff's Office budget as submitted, which includes converting seven part-time positions to full-time positions and adding three new positions to assure public safety for the law enforcement officers, residents, and visitors.

Ocean City Fire Chief Richard Bowers, representing the Fire Chiefs Committee, stated that their services were stretched beyond their limits last weekend during two horrific incidents, a critical vehicle collision in Berlin and a mass casualty vehicle collision on the MD Rt. 90 Bridge. He urged the Commissioners to fully fund the proposed FY22 fire and EMS budget to increase their response capabilities and response times.

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 FY21.

Mr. Higgins read written comments submitted by Heather Iliff, President and Chief Executive Officer of Maryland Nonprofits, urging the Commissioners to fully-fund the FY22 budget request of the Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore, noting that nonprofits employ more than 12% of Maryland's workforce and are able to address a wide-range of issues by maximizing local government grants for the maximum impact on County constituents

Superintendent of Schools Lou Taylor thanked the Commissioners for supporting the Board of Education (BOE) and recognized how much the BOE values their collaborative relationship with the Commissioners, which has made all the difference in helping Worcester schools address the challenges resulting from the pandemic. Mr. Taylor advised that the BOE's top priorities are to maintain an exceptional school system, maintain small class sizes, materials for instruction, after school and summer programs, school safety, and a competitive salary and benefits package to attract and retain highly qualified staff. Because kids are at the heart of every decision the BOE makes, he asked the Commissioners to fully fund the requested FY22 BOE budget, which includes a 1.87% increase from FY21 to allow them to offer competitive salaries and benefits, keep class sizes small, provide up-to-date technology, quality after school programs

to close learning gaps resulting from the pandemic, ensure safe schools, and to continue their partnership to meet their common goals.

Josaline Brittingham, of the School Improvement Advisory Committee (SIAC) at Pocomoke Elementary School (PES), thanked the Commissioners for funding the food program at PES and the new technology needed to help students continue learning during the pandemic. She urged the Commissioners to adopt the FY22 BOE budget as presented to offer competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain the best teachers, maintain funding for materials of instruction, and maintain current staffing, noting that 70% of students at PES live below the poverty level and depend on the existing programs and services to succeed.

Amanda Harper of Snow Hill thanked the Commissioners for their ongoing support of the schools, for their food program, and for fully funding the technology plan which made it possible for students to achieve during the pandemic. She urged them to fully fund the FY22 BOE budget to maintain quality teachers, provide necessary support for learning, and to continue performing as a top school system.

Nancy Schwendeman, speaking on behalf of all of the public schools located in northern Worcester County, asked the Commissioners to fully fund the FY22 BOE budget to provide a step and pay raise to attract and retain teachers, maintain current level of funding for materials of instruction, support one-on-one iPad initiatives, and continue supporting the capital projects, including the Stephen Decatur Middle School addition project to begin in fall 2021. She thanked the Commissioners for purchasing the necessary technology for students to continue learning throughout the pandemic.

Marie Wells-Suznavick, representing the Worcester County Teachers Association, thanked the Commissioners for their support during the pandemic. She requested the Commissioners support the requested FY22 BOE budget.

There being no further public comment, Commissioner Mitrecic closed the public hearing.

Commissioner Mitrecic thanked everyone for participating in the public hearing on the FY22 requested budget. He then invited the public to attend the budget work sessions scheduled for May 11, 18, and 25, 2021 and concluded that the Commissioners will adopt a balanced FY22 County Operating Budget on June 1, 2021.

The Commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on May 11, 2021 to conduct a budget work session.