

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

May 13, 2025

Budget Work Session

Theodore J. Elder, president
Eric J. Fiori, vice president
Caryn G. Abbott
Anthony W. Bertino, Jr.
Madison J. Bunting, Jr.
Joseph M. Mitrecic (Absent)
Diana Purnell
May 13, 2025

The commissioners, with Commissioner Mitrecic absent, conducted a work session to review and discuss issues pertaining to the Committee Reviewed and Recommended FY26 Solid Waste and Water and Wastewater (WWW) Operating Budgets and the FY26 General Fund Operating Budget.

Enterprise Fund Controller Quinn Dittrich reviewed the FY26 Solid Waste Operating Budget, with revenues and expenditures totaling \$5,383,068, and the FY26 WWW Operating Budget, with revenues and expenditures totaling \$21,651,259.

In response to questions from Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Dittrich stated that the WWW budget is based on Option 1, which makes modest increases in the service areas, with a proposed subsidy from the General Fund to cover those operating at budget deficits. He confirmed that County staff are developing options for the commissioners' consideration to help the service areas become more self-sustainable over the next five to 10 years. In response to a question from Commissioner Elder, Mr. Dittrich stated that the commissioners should determine whether to cover shortfalls through a loan or grant from the General Fund. Commissioner Bertino supported a grant for FY26, with future General Fund support to be provided in the form of a loan. Commissioner Fiori suggested any grant funding come from Budget Stabilization funds.

In response to a recommendation by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners agreed by consensus to support Option 1 as a grant within the WWW Operating Budget for FY26.

Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young and Budget Officer Kim Reynolds reviewed the Committee Reviewed and Recommended FY26 General Fund Operating Budget of \$288,730,807 and requested expenditures of \$287,562,251, leaving a surplus of \$1,168,556.

The commissioners reviewed proposed expenditures for each department and agency within the requested operating budget.

Ms. Reynolds reviewed several revised requests from the Board of Education (BOE) outlining the FY26 decrease for the Donnie Williams grant and shift in teacher pensions to be funded by the County, as well as a revised FY26 Jail request to include a new camera system for transport vans totaling \$13,718.68. She also reviewed the detailed analysis of the projected

impact of decreasing the income rate by 0.25% on the towns and County for FY26, assuming an effective date of January 1, 2026. In response to questions by Commissioner Fiori, Mr. Young stated that an individual making \$50,000 per year will save \$500 if the County decreases the income tax rate by 1% or a quarter of that would equate to a savings of \$125. In response to a question from Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Reynolds stated that the median property value of \$388,000 would equate to a savings of \$38.80 if the county reduces the property tax by a penny. She concurred that all residents would benefit from a reduction in the income tax rate.

The commissioners reviewed the FY26 Worcester County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) budget of \$20,694,337. In response to a question from Commissioner Bunting, Ms. Reynolds advised that this budget includes a salary increase for all sworn officers and capital requests for new vehicles. Sheriff Matthew Crisafulli stated that this request is based on the fair market value. He stated that the average starting salary for sworn law enforcement is \$64,632 annually across the region, while the starting salary for a WCSO deputy is just \$55,000. This budget includes salary increases that will help the WCSO attract and retain highly qualified officers.

Chief Deputy Nate Passwaters stated that after five years on the job, a deputy has gained a great understanding of the community, making that institutional knowledge invaluable, so this budget includes salary adjustments designed to keep these individuals from leaving for higher paying positions across the region. Commissioner Bunting noted that this is a huge increase and suggested that they can still get to their desired starting salary range by adding the COLA to be granted this year to the starting salaries and by gradually increasing those salaries over the next three to four years. He concluded that before approving large salary increases, he would like to see the results of the upcoming salary study being undertaken by Human Resources. In response to questions from Commissioner Bertino, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage stated that offering a Step increase only affects positions that are currently held, and it would not increase starting salaries.

The commissioners concurred with the Committee Reviewed FY26 operating budgets as follows: County Administration budget of \$2,070,081; Circuit Court budget of \$2,331,790; Orphan's Court budget of \$82,237.58; State's Attorney's Office budget of \$4,684,134.07; Treasurer's Office budget of \$1,954,362; Elections Office budget of \$1,607,264; Human Resources budget of \$920,914.06; Development Review and Permitting budget of \$3,327,702; Environmental Programs budget of \$2,959,499; Information Technology budget of \$1,742,560; Other General Government budget of \$6,338,740; Sheriff's Office budget of \$20,694,337; Emergency Services budget of \$6,118,948; Jail budget of \$16,021,943; Fire Marshal's Office budget of \$1,482,302; Volunteer Fire Departments budget of \$13,731,465; Maintenance Division budget of \$3,073,455; Roads Division budget of \$7,673,463; Public Works budget of \$1,520,539.90; Boat Landings budget of \$406,513; Homeowner Convenience Centers budget of \$995,519; Recycling budget of \$1,261,218; Health Department budget of \$11,995,585; Mosquito Control budget of \$297,162.20; Commission on Aging budget of \$2,018,692; and Wor-Wic Community College budget of \$2,707,168.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners agreed by consensus to maintain flat funding to each of the nonprofits that received funding in FY25 and to deny any new grant requests. This would result in a decrease in grant expenditures of \$336,572 based on a reduced grant request from Atlantic General Hospital.

The commissioners reviewed the committee reviewed county appropriation for the FY26 Board of Education (BOE) budget totaling \$116,562,998. This budget includes a \$4,000 COLA for all certified teachers and a \$2,000 COLA for support staff.

Commissioner Bunting stated that the request would result in a huge increase in the required Maintenance of Effort (MOE), and he sought consensus to reduce the BOE budget by reducing the proposed Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) from \$4,000 to \$2,000 for all BOE staff, certified and non-certified alike, and by striking the itemized line titled Restored Cuts totaling \$1,940,759. He also stated that he would later seek a consensus to reduce the proposed COLA for County employees from \$4,000 to \$2,000. He explained that with a \$2,000 COLA plus the Step, there would be very few teachers making less than \$60,000, and starting teacher salaries would be \$54,789 annually. In response to questions by Mr. Tolbert, Commissioner Bunting stated that if they can't raise the salary to \$60,000 for starting teachers by FY27 they could go to the state to request another year.

Commissioner Fiori stated that the proposed budget restores funding for key components needed to meet the Blueprint mandates. He stated that the BOE has created a transparent budget that identifies the needs of the education system, and he could not support blanket cuts that would place them \$20-\$40 million behind on funding mandates, like starting teacher salaries. In response to his concerns BOE Superintendent of Schools Louis H. Taylor strenuously urged the commissioners to support the requested budget. With regard to the proposed reduced COLA, he stated that it would be like a slap in the face not to pay a certified, degreed teacher more, as the federal and state requirements they must meet result in a much greater workload. He noted that the BOE did exactly what several of the commissioners asked them to do regarding salary negotiations, which is to offer a flat rate across the board. He confirmed that salaries are negotiated, and the BOE approves the negotiations. He discussed increased costs across the board and pointed out that, while the County is the highest performing school system in the state, they have the twenty-second lowest starting salary. To meet the Blueprint mandate to raise starting teacher salaries to \$60,000 by FY27, the BOE must raise the starting salaries by \$4,000 this year and \$4,000 next year. However, he also confirmed that the BOE would not be back asking for an additional increase of \$10 million in FY27.

In response to a question from Commissioner Elder, Chief Financial Officer Vince Tolbert stated that nurses are considered support staff and would receive a \$2,000 COLA in the proposed budget. He also confirmed that the requested BOE budget restores funds that were cut in prior MOE budget years. In response to a question from Commissioner Elder, Ms. Savage confirmed that the BOE budget reflects a \$200,000 reduction in expenditures. In response to a question from Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Tolbert stated that the starting teacher salary is \$52,789 annually, with no step increase until a teacher has completed three years of teaching. In response to questions by Commissioner Fiori, Mr. Taylor confirmed that roughly three to four positions were cut at Ocean City Elementary School last year alone due to budget cuts. Commissioner Purnell opposed reducing the requested BOE budget, noting that the requested funds cover needs.

Following much discussion and a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-2, with Commissioners Fiori and Purnell opposed, to conceptually approve reducing the proposed Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) to \$2,000 for all BOE staff, certified and non-certified alike, and by striking funding for Restored Cuts totaling \$1,940,759 from the budget.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners conceptually agreed to increase the grant to the CRICKET Center by \$15,000, contingent upon a \$15,000 match from the Town of Ocean City.

The commissioners concurred with the Committee Reviewed FY26 operating budgets as follows: Recreation budget of \$3,355,960; Parks budget of \$1,766,330; Library budget of \$4,888,091; Other Recreation and Culture budget of \$95,000; Extension Services budget of \$282,741; Other Natural Resources budget of \$615,800; Economic Development budget of \$636,483.82; Tourism budget of \$1,724,552.32; Taxes Shared with Towns budget of \$4,068,096; Debt Service budget of \$10,080,635; and Interfund Budget of \$6,452,984.

In response to a question by Commissioner Bunting, Ms. Reynolds confirmed that any change the commissioners make to the income tax rate will impact the towns.

The commissioners agreed to postpone any discussions regarding the Grants to Towns budget of \$8,627,048 until their May 20 budget work session.

Ms. Reynolds reviewed capital requests totaling \$1,201,000 for public safety vehicles for the Sheriff's Office, Emergency Services, and Fire Marshal's Office, which are to be funded with Video Lottery Terminal revenues; and capital requests totaling \$1,8254,000, which are to be funded through the General Fund.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously approved the requested FY26 Enterprise Fund Personnel Career Ladder Changes for 13 employees within the Water and Wastewater Division totaling \$38,939. These include reclassifications of employees who obtain certifications and/or licenses the County needs to operate, passing probationary periods, meeting service record requirements, or are tied to a designated time in a position.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the requested FY26 General Fund promotions for 50 employees totaling \$21,176 within the Sheriff's Office, \$25,208 within Emergency Services, \$102,834 within the County Jail, \$10,816 within Environmental Programs, \$7,530 within the Maintenance Division, \$8,735 within the Roads Division, and \$3,723 within County Parks totaling \$180,023. These include reclassifications of employees who obtain certifications and/or licenses the County needs to operate, passing probationary periods, meeting service record requirements, or are tied to a designated time in a position.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved the FY26 General Fund personnel job reclassifications for 25 employees totaling \$81,728.

At the request of Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners agreed to postpone discussing requested grade reclassifications in the Sheriff's Office totaling \$1,160,051 until May 20.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the FY26 General Fund requests for new positions, conversions, conversions from part-time to full-time, and additional hours requested totaling \$1,243,401.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-2, with Commissioners Fiori and Purnell voting in opposition, to conceptually approve reducing the COLA for WC employees from \$4,000 to \$2,000 per person for full-time employees to match that of the COLA to be provided to BOE employees.

In response to questions from Commissioner Elder, Ms. Savage advised that actions taken by the commissioners during their open budget work session today have resulted in a County surplus of \$6.8 million.

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Abbott, with Commissioner Mitrecic absent, the commissioners unanimously voted to meet in closed session at 12:25 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. 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 discussing FY26 requested budget promotions, reclassifications, and adjustments for General Fund Employees.