

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

May 20, 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 Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Abbott, 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; hiring Dennis Mohorovic as a plant operator trainee within the Water and Wastewater Division; promoting Lieutenant Latoya Everett to assistant warden within the County Jail; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments

Following a motion by Commissioner Bertino, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:32 a.m.

After the closed session, the commissioners reconvened in open session. Commissioner Bertino called the meeting to order, and following a morning prayer by Pastor Lyonell Purnell, Sr. of God's Leading Church Transformation Ministry of Berlin 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 May 6, 2025 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Tourism and Economic Development (WCTED) Director Melanie Pursel and other tourism partners reflecting on National Travel and Tourism Week, which took place May 4-10, 2025, and which champions the role of WCTED and its partnerships with the towns, chambers of commerce, and attraction partners to stimulate economic growth, cultivate vibrant communities, create quality job opportunities, inspire new businesses, and elevate the quality of life locally. Learn more at www.visitmarylandscoast.org and on social media at @marylandscoast.

The commissioners presented a commendation recognizing Worcester County as a Stroke

Smart County to TidalHealth Stroke Coordinator Lauren Hitchens, MSN, RN. Because approximately 100 County residents die each year of strokes, TidalHealth is helping to educate County businesses, civic organizations, senior communities, faith-based organizations, schools, and residents and encouraging them to participate in the Stroke Smart: Spot-a-Stroke, Stop-a-Stroke, Save-a-Life training campaign.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-11 as follows: a Homeland Security Grant extension; an application for a \$300,000 Plumbing Poverty Program Grant through the Maryland Affordable Housing Trust, with a 10% County match; seeking an opinion from the Maryland Attorney General's Office on allowing trailers as mobile food units; out-of-state travel for two staff to attend the 33rd annual Southeast Tourism Society's Marketing College in Georgia from June 1-6, 2025; sending a letter to the State to request to adjust the local share match requirement for the Health Department; a letter requesting the US Army Corp of Engineers complete maintenance dredging of the Ocean City Inlet before the White Marlin Tournament in August 2025; a franchise agreement with Mediacom for cable television service in the County; a request from Crab Alley owner Phil Houck to use the West Ocean City commercial harbor parking lot and boat ramp for the Ocean City Power Boat Race October 16-19, 2025; building automation system upgrades at the Commission on Aging in Berlin by Modern Controls, Inc. totaling \$29,281; and scheduling a public hearing on Rezoning Case No. 449 seeking to rezone approximately 18.67 acres of land on the easterly side of Greenridge Lane Road from R-2 Suburban Residential District to R-4 General Residential District.

Paul Ellington of State and Local Advisors briefly recapped actions taken during the 2025 Maryland General Assembly legislative session. Mr. Ellington advised that the FY26 State Operating Budget includes the largest single tax increase in the history of the State. The State budget also includes a significant increase in the local cost share for teacher pensions, an increase in the local cost from 50% to 90% for State Department of Assessment and Taxation, and requires counties to pay half of all settlements for wrongful incarceration compensation. He also reviewed legislative bond initiatives that resulted in State funding of \$150,000 for Animal Control shelter upgrades and \$250,000 for the Fire Training Center replacement project. In closing, he thanked Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell, Legislative Analyst Charlene Sharpe, Tourism and Economic Development Director Melanie Pursel, Public Works Director Dallas Baker, and other County staff for working closely with him throughout the legislative session.

In response to comments by Commissioner Mitrecic, Mr. Ellington stated that the General Assembly Session scheduled for October 2025 is likely related to new taxes. Following a brief discussion regarding General Assembly actions involving housing rehabilitation and energy costs and projects, to include solar and wind farms, the commissioners thanked Mr. Ellington for the update.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on Bill 25-02 (County Government – County Real and Personal Property and County Buildings), which was introduced by Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell on April 1, 2025. County Attorney Roscoe Leslie reviewed the bill, which amends existing language in the County Code

that prohibits camping and sleeping on County property, refining restrictions from a violation to a criminal misdemeanor punishable by up to 30 days in jail or a fine, and clarifying the process for removing unauthorized personal property that is stored or abandoned on County property. Mr. Leslie stated that this ordinance was developed based on input from the interested parties who took part in a recent work session.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

Sheriff Matthew Crisafulli supported Bill 25-2, which provides an additional tool for law enforcement to provide layers of safety for tourists and residents. He stated that the Sheriff's Office works very closely with Diakonia to provide resources to this population, but when those resources fail, this tool is needed.

Department of Social Services Director Roberta Baldwin supported the ordinance, but urged the commissioners to consider efforts other than criminalization, such as finding public housing options.

Diakonia Executive Director Ken Argot stated that Diakonia assembled a mobile outreach team that identifies homeless individuals with substance or mental health issues who may lack the resources to get help. He advised that Bill 25-2 would give the County the ability to intervene when all other efforts fail, so that they can help these individuals get the help that they don't think they want. He stated that the intent of this law is not jail, but treatment.

Diakonia Rapid Response Team Program Coordinator Stephanie VanGasbeck also supported the bill, noting that a formerly homeless individual who had been incarcerated at the Eastern Correctional told her that being jailed saved his life.

Snow Hill Councilman Edward Lee reluctantly supported most aspects of the bill, but he did not support criminalizing the behavior.

Health Officer Becky Jones asked the commissioners to make the proposed penalties a last resort in order to afford these individuals with every opportunity to change their situations.

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

In response to a question from Commissioner Mitrecic regarding whether this legislation mirrors legislation being implemented in Ocean City, Mr. Leslie confirmed that both are based on the same concepts.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously adopted Bill 25-02 as presented.

The commissioners met with Mr. Baker to review the results of a speed study on Snug Harbor Road, which was conducted from May 17-23, 2025 at the request of area residents to address safety concerns and speeding vehicles. Based on the findings and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners concurred with staff's recommendation to reduce the posted speed limit from 30 mph to 25 mph throughout the community.

The commissioners met with Mr. Baker to review the results of a speed study on Blueberry Road, a currently unposted road. The study was conducted from May 5-11, 2025 at the request of a concerned citizen to address safety concerns and speeding vehicles. Based on the findings and upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners concurred with staff's recommendation to reduce the speed limit from 50 mph to 45 mph and to post the new speed limit on the road.

In response to the passage of Senate Bill 931/House Bill 1036 – the Renewable Energy Certainty Act, Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener presented policy recommendations pertaining to solar energy projects over one megawatt and battery energy storage projects. She stated that SB 931/HB 1036, which Governor Moore is expected to sign today, has been revised dramatically to address siting and bonding concerns raised by the County and the Maryland Association of Counties, and it is much more restrictive than the County's current restrictions. She concluded that this bill gives the County far greater control over providing local control over siting standards, including setbacks, landscaping, and fencing requirements.

In response to a question from Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Keener stated that only projects submitted after the bill takes effect July 1 would be subject to the proposed County requirements, that under the new requirements, the County could issue citations at \$100 a day if plantings fail, and that the County would have preemption to make an argument regarding why a project may not be appropriate in a certain location. She confirmed that the utility-scale solar energy system proposed for Woodside Lane in Snow Hill, which is next on the commissioners' meeting agenda, adheres to all of the standards contained in the County's policy, and it will be submitted to the State for approval after SB 931/HB 1036 takes effect on July 1. In response to a question from Commissioner Bunting, Ms. Keener stated that the Public Service Commission would hold the decommissioning bond for a project.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously approved the recommended Solar Energy System and Energy Storage System Policy.

New Leaf Energy Project Developer True Funk and AMR Group consultants Dylan Ellinger and Charles Walker met with the commissioners for a pre-application consultation and were seeking 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 Woodside Lane in Snow Hill and more specifically identified on Tax Map 71 as Parcel 35. Mr. Funk reviewed the project, noting that they would keep the topsoil on the site, as requested by the property owners, Jack and Laura Shockley, and sent letters to all surrounding property holders informing them about the project. He concluded that they will be required to conduct two public meetings to receive feedback about the project, and the DP&L study for this project should be complete in late 2025. In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Funk confirmed that the lease includes decommissioning and other protections for the property owners. In response to questions from Commissioner Elder, Mr. Funk confirmed that New Leaf Energy will sell all of the energy that is generated from the project to DP&L, and while there are no subsidies, the company will receive income tax reductions for constructing a community solar project. Given that Governor Moore has not yet signed SB931/HB 1036, Commissioners Bertino and Bunting stated that they would be abstaining from any vote to approve the project today.

A motion made by Commissioner Mitrecic failed for lack of a second.

The commissioners answered questions from the press. Then they recessed for 10 minutes before readjourning to conduct a work session on the requested FY25 General Fund and Enterprise Fund Operating Budgets. After the budget work session, they adjourned to meet again on June 3, 2025.