

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

November 4, 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 Fiori, with Commissioners Bertino and Mitrecic momentarily out of the room 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, Public Works Director Dallas Baker, Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell, Human Resources Director Stacey Norton, and Human Resources Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: contents of a bid or proposal, a personnel update, hiring Jyrus Johnson as a landfill operator I within the Solid Waste Division; hiring Chris Allen as an inventory/shop foreman, Caleb Galloway and Ryan Wunderlick as plant operator trainees, and Lee Beauchamp as the superintendent, and promoting Chief Plant Operator Shane Odegaard to supervisor within the Water and Wastewater Division; hiring Jana Ptovin as deputy director of Public Works; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Fiori, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 10:01 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 Reverend Dale Brown of the Community Church at Ocean Pines 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 October 21, 2025 meeting as presented.

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

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing November as National Adoption Month to Department of Social Services Director Roberta Baldwin and others to

highlight the ongoing need for adoptive families for children and teenagers alike.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing November as National Hospice Month to Lauren King of Coastal Hospice to commend those providing comprehensive services and support to County residents and their families who face serious, life-limiting illness, death, and grief.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-12 as follows: an American Library Association “Libraries Transforming Communities: Accessible Small and Rural Communities grant application for up to \$20,000 for a wheelchair ramp at the Snow Hill Library; a donated Pocomoke Volunteer Fire Company fire engine for training purposes at the Fire Training Center; allowing Covington Machine & Welding, Inc. to utilize a portion of the West Ocean City harbor parking lot for two projects to repair the U.S. Rt. 50 Ocean City drawbridge from December 14-31, 2025; awarding portable toilet services to Fogles Environmental Services for \$27,992; out-of-state travel for one lieutenant within the Sheriff’s Office to take part in HIDTA leadership development training in Miami, Florida from June 12-14, 2026; the Findings of Fact and Resolution for Rezoning Case No. 451; leasing a skid steer for the Mystic Harbour Service Area from Carter CAT for \$90,065, with a final buyout payment of \$26,650; scheduling a public hearing for the FY27-FY31 Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan; a Bishopville-Showell Rural Legacy Agreement of Sale of \$707,000; designating the State’s Attorney’s Office as the forfeiting authority for all civil forfeiture proceedings of assets seized by the Sheriff’s Office; and a Law Enforcement Mutual Aid Agreement between all municipalities, municipal law enforcement agencies, the Sheriff’s Office, and the Worcester County Fire Marshal’s Office and Sheriff’s Office.

Library Director Jennifer Ranck and Library Board member Carol Rose met with the commissioners to request additional construction funding of \$74,895 for a children’s porch at the new Pocomoke Branch Library. Ms. Ranck said that Keller Brothers, the project contractor, has put forward a change order for an additional \$109,895 to construct the porch, and the Library Board has already raised \$35,000 to fund a portion of those costs. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that the project cost of roughly \$266 per square feet seemed too high. Commissioner Bertino said that the Friends of the Ocean Pines Library paid the full cost for the porch at the Ocean Pines Library and suggested that the Friends of the Pocomoke Library do likewise. Commissioner Bunting stated that the commissioners had approved a set amount for project funding, and any additional costs to construct the proposed porch should be covered through private donations. The commissioners concurred. Commissioner Abbott suggested contacting Backyard Escapes, a local company, to see if they have any interest in partnering with the Friends of the Pocomoke Library to construct the porch.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on the progress of the 2025 Worcester County Housing Study, which was funded under the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program to assist governments with activities directed toward neighborhood and housing revitalization, economic development, and improved community facilities and services. The study was conducted by Matrix Design Group Senior Research Analyst Christian Carson and Planner Collin Lowe utilizing data from a Five-Year American Community Survey, Bureau

of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment & Wages, U.S. Census Bureau Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics, U.S. Census Bureau Building Permits Survey, Zillow, and Maryland Department of Planning, as well as a community survey conducted from February to June 2025. Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener reviewed the study purposes to update the 2004 Affordability Housing and Substandard Housing Studies and assess housing conditions, affordability, and needs through 2050. She concluded that no action is required. Mr. Caron discussed demographics, economic and workforce profiles; housing stock; housing markets – rental (\$2,228 typical monthly rent) vs homeownership (\$1,865 average monthly mortgage), which found that 53% of renters were spending more than 30% of their income on rent, classifying them as cost burdened; housing needs, with 2,000 units needed now and a total of 4,389 units needed by 2050; substandard housing conditions, which are concentrated within the southern end of the County, and with the following findings:

- 21% of units rely on non-standard fuels
- 15% predate 1970
- 2% are vacant and off market (typically unsuitable for use)
- 54% rated by the County assessor having lower-quality construction based on a nine-point scale to rate the quality of construction, like resident survey findings; stakeholder insights; and policy recommendations and funding sources.

In response to a question from Commissioner Mitrecic, Mr. Caron stated that non-standard fuels are considered substandard or non-standard because they typically require more maintenance, and the assessor attributed a score of four or less to 54% of the homes. In response to a question from Commissioner Elder, Mr. Caron stated that electric is considered standard fuel, and the information is based on surveys that the owners fill out. In response to a question from Commissioner Bunting, Mr. Caron said the standardized score used to determine the quality of housing takes into account the age of the home and the quality of the construction, and older homes were more likely to score lower.

Commissioner Bertino expressed alarm that half of the homes constructed over the past 25 years in newer developments, like Ocean Pines, could be construed as having been identified as substandard in a housing report for which no adequate definition of the metrics used to arrive at this conclusion are available. Mr. Caron said that the report includes a hot-spot analysis that pinpoints the location of substandard housing. Though uncertain what factors were used to determine the nine-point scoring scale for housing, Mr. Carson agreed to talk to the assessor and get back to the commissioners. Commissioner Bertino said that such a label on County housing is unreasonable, particularly given that Mr. Carson cannot even articulate what constitutes substandard housing. Yet this negative assertion on the County's stock of housing is included in a public document. Commissioner Fiori concurred and said that the information used to arrive at these findings is questionable. For example, the Census data shows that over the last 10-years the County grew by 4,000 residents, which is not a realistic number, and high home values appear to counter study claims that 54% of homes are substandard. Furthermore, the study identifies Worcester County as the poorest county in the State, while State data identifies Worcester County as the riches county in the State. He then expressed concern that, if the State considers the housing shortages reported in the study to be accurate, the County could see a heavy push to construct higher-density housing that may not fit local zoning codes. Mr. Lowe acknowledged the concerns and stated that a key policy recommendation includes increasing rehabilitation and

maintenance funding to rehabilitate existing units rather than construct new ones.

Following much discussion, Mr. Caron thanked the commissioners for their feedback, which he advised would be helpful as they finalize the document.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

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

Pursuant to the request of Information Technology Director Brian Jones and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved a sole source procurement request to expand the Countywide camera system to include additional departmental needs, at an estimated cost of \$412,358.29. In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Jones confirmed that cameras will be installed at the unmanned recycling stations.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Bunting voting in opposition, to award the best proposals to renovate the interior of the Isle of Wight building to Underwood Contracting for demolition, mechanical, plumbing, carpentry, insulation, and flooring for \$494,091, Frick Electric for electrical work for \$77,800, and Premier Coatings & Flooring for painting, moving, and storage of building contents for \$61,032.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously awarded the lease to NCL Government Capital for a combination sewer cleaner truck for \$93,976.69 per year for seven years, with the equipment to be utilized by the Water and Wastewater Division within all of the service areas.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Commissioner Mitrecic as the 1st vice chair and Commissioner Purnell as the secretary of the Tri-County Council (TCC) Executive Board and the following commissioners as voting members of the TCC: Ted Elder, Joe Mitrecic, Caryn Abbott, Diana Purnell, and Eric Fiori.

The commissioners conducted a work session with Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and Consultant Michael Bayer on updates to Comprehensive Plan chapters, including the Natural Resources Element, Agricultural Element, and Fisheries Element.

In response to questions from Commissioner Elder regarding sea level rise and climate change figures identified in the Natural Resources Section 8.3.1, Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell said that 20,000 acres of farmland across the entire Eastern Shore have been taken out of production due to saltwater intrusion. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young said that the Army Corps of Engineers has had a sea level calculator that projects different scenarios, and County lands are prone to subsidence. Commissioner Bunting concurred, stating that very little has been lost to sea level rise, and the Natural Resources section should be revised to reflect more accurate information. Mr. Bayer agreed to work with the County to address the commissioners concerns. Commissioner Elder stated that the terms “rising sea levels” and “climate change” should be removed from Section 8.3.1 to more accurately reflect the constantly changing nature of lands on the shore.

In response to comments from Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Bayer said that the Fisheries Element addresses the preservation of commercial fishing, sport fishing, and other fisheries-based elements. In response to questions from Commissioner Fiori, Ms. Keener advised that on November 18 the commissioners will review the Housing and Land Use Element Chapters and maps. Commissioner Fiori stated that these issues will be important for staff to cover information that is different from the 2006 Comprehensive Plan, including what growth areas, resources, and sewer availability areas are changing.

Commissioner Bunting expressed his dismay that a Worcester County Public Schools teacher who had posted deeply disturbing comments on social media that crossed the line into the classroom had only been suspended with pay for three weeks and then returned to the classroom where students continue to be exposed to his ideals.

Commissioner Mitrecic reminded his fellow commissioners that when speaking in public they should clarify that they are only expressing their individual opinions, unless the Board of Commissioners previously voted to allow them to speak for the board.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on November 18, 2025.