

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

December 2, 2025

Theodore J. Elder, president
Eric J. Fiori, outgoing vice president
Caryn G. Abbott
Anthony W. Bertino, Jr.
Madison J. Bunting, Jr. incoming vice president
Joseph M. Mitrecic
Diana Purnell

Following a motion by Commissioner Fiori, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, with Commissioner Bunting temporarily 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, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton and Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: a personnel update, hiring Joe Pembridge as a liquor license inspector within Development Review and Permitting, Phil Anthony as a master HVAC mechanic within the Maintenance Division, and Edward Welch as the procurement officer within County Administration; promoting Corporal Devon Scott to sergeant within the County Jail; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:52 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 Davida Washington and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session.

The commissioners elected officers for the coming year through December 1, 2026. Upon a nomination by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 5-2, with Commissioners Fiori and Mitrecic voting in opposition, to re-elect Commissioner Elder as president of the Board of County Commissioners.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to elect Commissioner Bunting as vice president of the Board of County Commissioners.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their November 18, 2025 meeting as presented.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comments.

Hugh Cropper urged the commissioners to support an approved private road within the proposed Crepe Myrtle Court Residential Planned Community.

Gray Reeves, owner of South Gate Grill in Ocean Pines, distributed his written testimony outlining the impacts to his business based on the drastic water rate increases. He reviewed those rates and urged the commissioners to fully review the information he provided to them and to make immediate adjustments.

Susan Age of Newark stated that she would welcome a quarterly bill similar to Ocean Pines' \$245 rate, as her bill runs \$377 before turning on the faucet. She reported that unimproved lots are billed an accessibility fee of \$320 and characterized the increases as approximately 400 percent. She stated that her small community, which accounts for only 144 equivalent dwelling units cannot sustain such costs. Therefore, she requested assistance from the County.

Kerry Bunting, speaking on behalf of Coastal Hospice in Ocean Pines, noted that although the property used 500 fewer gallons in 2025, the bill still increased by 300 percent. She emphasized that the steep and unexpected rate increases place additional strain on nonprofits serving the community.

Stephen Boyd of Deer Point Circle in Berlin voiced concern that ratepayers received little notice regarding the recent rate increases, and like many other Mystic Harbour residents, he has not yet received his water bill. He questioned why there has been a 25% rate increase within one year.

In response to questions raised by Commissioner Bertino, Enterprise Fund Controller Quinn Dittrich said that the quarterly bills to Mystic Harbour were mailed on Friday, and that penalties, which kick in 30 days after bills are issued, would be imposed at the end of December. Commissioner Bertino said that, as it is already December 2, consideration should be given to slide the time in which penalties are assessed. Commissioner Bertino acknowledged the points made by Mr. Boyd, recognized that this is a unique situation, and the County should have had a much more robust public relations and informational aspect to this, which may have cleared up some of the concerns ahead of time.

Joe Gahm of Indian Trail Drive stated that he has not received his bill yet, but was informed it will be approximately \$700. He expressed frustration upon learning that rate adjustments relate to past under-funding dating back to 2012 and that communities are now responsible for the difference. He stated that the County should have included notices of the impending increases with the third-quarter bills.

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

Upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 1-8 as follows: approving the Christmas Tree Amnesty Event; awarding the Cove Landing Road culvert rehabilitation project to Stratified for \$144,900; approving the Ocean City Mutual Aid Agreement; approving out-of-state travel for four County staff to attend the Tyler Connect Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada April 6-10, 2026; approving the Pocomoke Branch Library porch funding and change order; approving the purchase of vehicle uplifting equipment for Emergency Services; approving the FY26 Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund Grant Agreement; and approving forward funding for FY26 federal grants for WorCOA.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the purchase of nine new vehicles for the Sheriff's Office and one new vehicle for Emergency Services as approved in the FY26 County Operating Budget.

In anticipation of a submittal to the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) for a proposed monopole telecommunications tower to be installed on the Ocean Pines golf course, Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener met with the commissioners to discuss the required public notifications. She proposed waiving the requirement to send notices via certified mail to all 290 adjoining properties at a cost of \$2,581, which would exceed DRP's postage and freight budget, and to instead reduce the scope of the certified mailing to only the 37 properties located within a 750-foot radius of the tower. Commissioner Bertino said that anyone affected in Ocean Pines needs to be notified.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Mitrecic voting in opposition, to approve the over-expenditure and directed staff to send notices to all 290 adjoining properties.

Pursuant to the request of Ms. Keener and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-30 approving private roads and a certain road construction standard within Crepe Myrtle Court Residential Planned Community (RPC), located on the southerly side of MD Rt. 707, east of U.S. Rt. 50.

Ms. Keener and consultants for Arena Gadwall Solar, LLC met with the commissioners for a pre-application consultation to seek local zoning consistency for a proposed utility-scale solar energy system (2.064 MW AC) on a parcel of land zoned E-1 Estate District on property located at the intersection of St. Martin's Neck Road and Godfrey Bunting Road in Bishopville and more specifically identified on Tax Map 10 as Parcel 24.

A motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to approve the project failed 2-5, with Commissioners Mitrecic and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, and Fiori voting in opposition.

Pursuant to the request of Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners agreed to move forward with declaring County property located at 10641 Bishopville Road in Bishopville to be surplus property and to begin the public bidding process.

Pursuant to the request of Ms. Savage and upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved the Commissioners' Meeting, Budget, and Holiday Schedules for 2026.

Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young stated that the Hotel Rental Tax Update has been postponed until the commissioners meeting on December 16.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously confirmed the nomination of John W. Simms as chair of the Police Accountability Board.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon nominations by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Kerrie Bunting to the Tourism Advisory Board, and Carl Smith to the Board of Electrical Examiners; and appointed Hunter Ludlam, John Taylor, and Brooks Clayville to the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, and Dawn Gears and Ann Fletcher to the Commission for Women.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) FY27-FY31. Senior Budget Accountant Lynn Wright stated that, since the last meeting on November 4, 2025, the Buckingham Elementary School Project, the Built to Learn Funding amount of \$5,237,541 in the FY27 column, was moved from the “State Match” funding source to “Other - Built to Learn State Funding.” This adjustment was made to properly align this County document with the IAC document contained in the Worcester County Public Schools FY2027 CIP. She then reviewed the CIP, which includes projects totaling \$345,351,060 over the five-year period. Of these projects, \$63,935,892 or 18% is proposed to come from the Assigned Funds and \$143,256,855 or 37% from General Bond Funds. The remaining portion would come from grant funds, state matching funds, state loans, user fees and enterprise bonds. She concluded that a project’s inclusion in the CIP does not constitute a guarantee of future approval or of funding from the County.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comment.

There being no public comment, Commissioner Elder closed the floor.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-31 adopting the FY27-FY31 Capital Improvement Plan.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing to consider applications filed by Hugh Cropper, on behalf of multiple property owners for a proposed expansion of the West Ocean City (WOC) Sanitary Service Area (SSA). The subject properties are located on the west side of Maryland Route 611 (Stephen Decatur Highway). They are more specifically identified on Worcester County Tax Map 26, as Parcels 274 – Par 2, 274-Par 3B, 274-Par 1A, 274-Par 1BB, 274 – Par 1C, 274-Par 1-C, 424, 291, 365, 292, 290, 208 – Lot 1, 208 – Lot 2. Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell reviewed the application and summarized the reasons that County staff support the proposed expansion.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comment.

Attorney Hugh Cropper reviewed the project and noted that the proposed expansion will allow continued development, as well as a possible expansion of these properties that would not otherwise be available. He noted that this change should relieve pressure on the Mystic Harbour SSA and urged the commissioners to approve the project.

There being no further public comment, Commissioner Elder closed the floor.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-32 expanding the WOC SSA.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on the proposed FY26 General Fund Operating Budget Amendment. Budget Officer Kim Reynolds reviewed the changes, which include reducing the FY26 Core Funding Match Requirement for the Health Department from

\$11,254,986 to \$6,220,843 and the one-time Transfer in of Funds, which was designated to cover the CORE funding should be decreased by \$1,888,490 since it is no longer needed. She then reviewed several projects and over expenditures, along with associated encumbrance expenses, totaling \$7,073,310, which are proposed to be funded using the County's Fund Balance.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comment.

There being no public comment, Commissioner Elder closed the floor.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 25-33.

The commissioners conducted an informational meeting on water and wastewater rates. Mr. Mitchell and Enterprise Fund Controller Quinn Dittrich reviewed a presentation on the 11 Sanitary Service Areas (SSAs) that covered the history of the SSAs; why rates have increased; impacts to capital infrastructure caused by deferred maintenance; water and wastewater net income (loss); and efforts to save money by finding ways to lower the cost of capital projects. Commissioner Mitrecic noted that the County implemented a number of outreach measures to inform and educate the public of pending water and wastewater rate increases. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young concurred and confirmed that the County hosted three public listening sessions to educate public water and sewer users about issues involving their individual SSAs and the options available to address them.

In response to comments made by Commissioner Fiori, Mr. Young stated that County staff reached out to the various SSAs to discuss the issues, the options being considered to fully fund maintenance costs as well as future capital expenses in each of the sanitary service areas (SSAs), and to answer questions.

In response to questions from Commissioner Elder, Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Baker discussed the history of the water and wastewater plants and efforts by the commissioners and staff to maintain and/or replace aging infrastructure, including securing over \$30 million in grants to help reduce capital project costs.

In response to questions by Commissioner Fiori, Mr. Mitchell discussed recommendations made by Gene Holloway, SERCAP's Delaware and Maryland manager, on these topics: rates; keeping up with inflation due to rising chemical, electrical, and construction rates; debt financing; and recommendations for tiered systems and how to design rates. Commissioner Fiori stated that the presentation really opened his eyes to the detrimental impact to the systems by not imposing the necessary rate increases over the last 12 years. He also recognized the benefit of the recent agreement with Ocean City to treat additional flows from the County.

In response to questions from Commissioner Bertino regarding accessibility fees and the appeal process for individuals questioning usage charges, Mr. Mitchell reviewed the purpose of the fees, which assure that undeveloped properties that are holding EDUs and benefit from guaranteed future access to a public water and/or wastewater system contribute proportionally to the costs to build and maintain that infrastructure. He also confirmed that any owner of an undeveloped property that has been allotted an EDU may be able to return the EDU without compensation. However, due to capacity limitations and development demands, EDUs may not be available if a property owner decides later to develop the land. Furthermore, the property owner would be required to buy the EDU back at the cost assessed at the time of purchase.

With regard to usage questions, Mr. Dittrich stated that individuals concerned about usage charges should contact Public Works or the Treasurer's Office to assure their meters are working correctly and to determine if leaks have occurred either on their own property or on County-maintained property. He then reviewed the appeal process. Mr. Baker cautioned those with leaks to contact the County to determine the origin of the leak: if on County property, Water and Wastewater staff will repair the leak at no cost to the homeowner; if on private property, repair costs are the responsibility of the property owner. Mr. Mitchell reviewed the history of legislative efforts by the commissioners and staff to help keep regulatory costs down. Following much discussion, the commissioners thanked staff for their presentation.

In response to concerns raised by Commissioner Mitrecic, Mr. Mitchell said that County staff have been working with the Ocean Pines Association (OPA) to address concerns raised by Laura Cooper on behalf of Marlene Crook, whose Ocean Pines property abuts and appears to be threatened by erosion conditions on an adjacent property owned by the OPA.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on December 16, 2025.