

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

May 3, 2022

Joseph M. Mitrecic, President  
Theodore J. Elder, Vice President  
Anthony W. Bertino, Jr.  
Madison J. Bunting, Jr.  
James C. Church (Absent)  
Joshua C. Nordstrom  
Diana Purnell (Absent)

Following a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, with Commissioners Church and Purnell absent, 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, Public Information Officer Kim Moses, Human Resources Director Stacey Norton, and Finance Officer Phil Thompson. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: hiring William Benjamin Kirk as a recreation superintendent and other personnel matters; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including reviewing bid proposals for lobbying services.

Following a motion by Commissioner Nordstrom, seconded by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:35 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 Davida Washington, housing program coordinator within Development Review and Permitting, and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session.

Commissioners Church and Purnell were absent from the meeting.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed session minutes of their April 19, 2022 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing May 1-7, 2022 as Children's Mental Health Matters Week to Dina Thorne of the Health Department, Jamie Manning of Life Crisis, Christen Barbierrri of the Local Management Board and other staff members. Ms. Manning thanked the commissioners for their partnership to reduce the stigma associated with childhood mental health issues, explaining that over sixty percent of individuals struggling with mental health issues will not seek assistance because of the stigmas surrounding such issues.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Kari Mason of Social Services and other staff members recognizing May as National Foster Care Month and thanking area foster parents

for helping to restore stability and a sense of self-worth back within young people whose lives have been disrupted through no fault of their own. The commissioners also recognized Dustin and Lauren Walker as the 2022 Foster Care Parents of the Year. Ms. Mason received the commendation on behalf of the Walkers who were not able to attend the meeting.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Emergency Services Director Billy Birch and Emergency Planner Laraine Buck recognizing May 1-7, 2022 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, Nancy Schwendeman, and Brianna Dix and other tourism officials recognizing the week of May 1-7, 2022 as Travel and Tourism Week in Worcester County to celebrate this year's theme, the "Future of Travel," and the dynamic role of WCTED and its partners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to foster a faster recovery, create a more sustainable, seamless, and secure traveler experience, and rebuild Worcester County's workforce. Tourism officials from agencies throughout the County who joined Ms. Pursel for the presentation included Greater Ocean City Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Lachelle Scarlatto, Ocean Pines Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kerri Bunting.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-10 as follows: awarding a two-year contract to the sole bidder, Scarborough Oil Co., Inc., for petroleum products at the markup per gallon from the company's prior contract; accepting the contract from Home Paramount Pest Control for 2022 pest control services for \$29,990.40; awarding a two-year contract to Bennett Companies for refuse collection services for \$77,684; purchasing two, 20-cubic yard bins for use within the Solid Waste Division for \$27,824 under the Sourcewell contract through Mid-Atlantic Waste Systems; entering into a Memorandum of Understanding between the County and the Town of Ocean City for the State's Attorney's Office to operate a satellite office within the Ocean City District Court building; approving a \$700,000 in-kind County match for the annual grant to the Maryland Coastal Bays Program from the Environmental Protection Agency's National Estuary Program; scheduling concurrent public hearings for an amendment to the Water and Sewerage Plan to expand the Mystic Harbor Sanitary Service Area (SSA) for a single property; approving a Housing Rehabilitation Program bid package to rehabilitate a house in the Snow Hill area; and scheduling a public hearing on the proposed allocation of American Rescue Plan Act funds.

Ocean City Development Corporation (OCDC) Executive Director Glenn Irwin and OCDC Board of Directors President Kevin Gibbs updated the commissioners about the OCDC's revitalization efforts, which included the following: Facade Program, which includes having renovated 256 buildings to date, eight projects underway, \$8.2 million in private-sector investment, and 6:1 leveraging of private to public funds; Green Building Initiatives

Program, with 92 projects completed and one underway, and \$1.5 million in private sector investment;

Business Assistance Program; other OCDC grant programs; Public Art Program; Special Events; and Upcoming OCDC Items.

Commissioner Mitrecic thanked OCDC officials for their hard work to improve downtown Ocean City and its impact on the County's tax base.

The commissioners met with Information Technology Director Brian Jones and Chief Executive Officer Andrew DeMattia and Chief Operating Officer Andre DeMattia for Talkie Communications, the County's broadband vendor, to discuss current and upcoming projects to extend broadband to unserved and underserved areas in the County. They also reviewed the status of federal and state grants to help fund these projects. The DeMattias advised that they applied for an \$18 million National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Reconnect Grant for broadband projects in Bishopville and other areas of Worcester County; however they were not awarded this grant. In fact, no Maryland entities were awarded NTIA grants. Approved grants include a \$3 million Rural Digital Opportunity Fund grant to be distributed over 10 years and a Department and Community Housing Development Grant for \$3.6 million, which will help to cover the cost of ongoing broadband projects in the Pocomoke area. Grants applied for include a \$2 million Neighborhood Grant and a \$20 million infrastructure grant. They then reviewed financial challenges, noting that Talkie paid \$1.8 million in out-of-pocket costs for projects taking place in Pocomoke, with only 18 homes signed up for service so far. They noted that the return on investment for this area is about 250 years, which is reduced to 130 years or \$80,000 per hookup, after factoring in grant reimbursements. These costs do not include estimates to replace equipment. They also discussed the status of projects in downtown Snow Hill, the upcoming project on Sheephouse Road, which is partially funded through ARDOF, and the \$2.34 million Bishopville project to install 30 miles of fiber optics (a cost of \$70,000 per mile) to serve over 400 customers, unfunded project to extend broadband through Bishopville. They reviewed the Bishopville project, which is underway now, with the remote central cabinet in place. Next steps in the Bishopville project include building the infrastructure back to U.S. Rt. 113 to connect to Maryland Broadband. The DeMattias advised that they will be requesting a 50/50 County match to help fund this project, and they invited those in attendance to join them for a ribbon cutting at the Bishopville Park this afternoon at 2 p.m. to celebrate the installation of the cabinet. Upon completion of this portion of the project, Talkie will continue installing fiber to serve a total of 1,200 customers in unfunded project areas east of Bishopville.

Commissioner Bunting thanked the DeMattias for aggressively pursuing grant funds for these projects. Commissioner Nordstrom urged them to prioritize a project to extend broadband in Stockton, due to the economic benefits the County would realize due to its proximity to Wallops Island. In response to comments by Commissioner Nordstrom that homeowners in Buck Harbor are clamoring for service, the DeMattias explained that the State considers this underserved area to be a served area. They noted that grant funds can only be used to extend broadband to unserved areas, and they are applying for four additional grants to finish all of Pocomoke, minus the city, which the State considers to be a served area.

In response to questions by Commissioner Elder, the DeMattias advised that Talkie is completing projects in territories being funded by grants, like Bishopville, which has the largest

population of any unserved area in Worcester County. Furthermore, they will be seeking input from the commissioners to determine other areas of greatest need. Following some discussion, the commissioners thanked the DeMattias for meeting with them and for the work they are doing to extend broadband to unserved areas.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the use of \$187,900 from the Ocean Pines SSA reserve fund to cover the following two unbudgeted repairs to the Ocean Pines Wastewater Treatment Plant; \$132,400 for a damaged surface skimming rake, and \$55,500 for a non-operational pump in the flow equalization tank.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Deputy Director Chris Clasing and upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously approved the use of \$67,776.28 from the Ocean Pines Water and Wastewater Collections Capital Equipment Other budget to purchase a compact track loader from Atlantic Tractor, the John Deere-authorized distributor in Maryland, and which reflects a 32 percent savings through the competitively bid Sourcewell contract.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Clasing and upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously approved the use of \$126,404.07 from the Assigned Fund Balance for a turnkey purchase of a Kohler generator and appurtenances from Fidelity Power Systems, the Maryland Kohler-authorized dealer, for the Public Works Administration building. This quote reflects a \$38,001.60 pricing discount through the competitively bid Sourcewell contract.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Nordstrom, the commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Alicia Warren to the Lower Shore Workforce Development Board.

Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young outlined six bids for lobbying services that were opened on Monday, April 25, 2022. Upon a recommendation by Mr. Young and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously accepted the proposal from State and Local Advisors for a one-year contract at a cost of \$24,000 per year, which includes options for two, one-year contract renewals.

Commissioner Bertino expressed several concerns regarding the proposed sports complex. He noted that there is a petition to go to referendum on the proposal to use bond funds for the sports complex project. He asked how that referendum may impact plans to purchase a 95.521-acre property identified on Tax Map 25 as Parcel 89 for \$7.15 million as the proposed site of a future sports complex. Mr. Young clarified that the referendum would not be on the purchase of the property, but rather on the use of bond funds for this purpose. He noted that, if the referendum goes forward, an injunction would likely be placed on the spending of those funds. He concurred that other funding sources could be used for the project with approval by the commissioners. He confirmed that the County will include Berlin and Ocean City officials in discussions once a concept plan is developed.

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 FY23 County Operating Budget.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing at 7:00 p.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the Government Center on the FY23 Requested County Operating Budgets. Commissioners Church and Purnell were absent from the meeting. Commissioner Mitreic called the meeting to order and welcomed those in attendance. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young presented a PowerPoint outlining the FY23 Requested Operating Budget. The presentation included the following graphs and information: FY23 Budget Issues; General Fund Estimated Revenues and Expenditures for FY23; Worcester County Assessable Tax Base from FY19-FY23; General Fund Major Revenues - Property Tax, Income Tax, and Recordation and Transfer Taxes; General Fund Revenue and Expenditure Comparisons from FY20-FY23; FY22 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; 2022 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 \$0.8294 per \$100 of assessed value to yield the current rate of revenue; and the Schedule of Upcoming Budget Work Sessions on May 10 and 17, and the Budget & Tax Rate Adoption on June 7.

Mr. Young explained that the requested expenditures of \$229,577,983 exceed the County's estimated revenues of \$218,290,579 by \$11,287,404. He stated that this difference must be reconciled by the Commissioners either through reductions in expenditures, additional revenues, or a combination of both.

Commissioner Mitreic opened the floor to receive public comments.

Superintendent Lou Taylor thanked the commissioners for partnering with the Board of Education (BOE) to meet the needs of students and for their sound investment in public schools. He requested the commissioners adopt the requested BOE budget, which includes funding to provide competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain outstanding educators, maintain small class sizes, purchase needed materials of instruction, maintain safe spaces for young people, and continue to offer quality after school programs.

Harry Wimbrow of Whaleyville urged the commissioners to approve salary and mileage increases for bus contractors in addition to the proposed BOE budget to cover cost of living and fuel increases. He noted that the circle of education in a blue ribbon school system begins with blue ribbon bus contractors, all of whom provide safe and efficient transportation services.

Debbie Lambertson of Stockton, who spoke on behalf of Snow Hill Elementary, Middle, High, and Cedar Chapel Special Schools, asked the commissioners to fund the requested FY23 BOE budget to keep staff salaries a priority, class sizes small, and technology current.

Michael Franklin, of Chesapeake Housing Mission (CHM), reviewed CHM healthy homes initiatives to help senior citizens and those living below the poverty line in Worcester County. He asked the commissioners to support the CHM's FY23 County grant request.

Rachel Geiger of West Ocean City urged the commissioners to support the requested FY23 BOE budget to hire and retain the best faculty and staff and fund technology initiatives.

Pat Barbely of Newark expressed concerns regarding water costs and whether the County has allocated adequate funding to account for fuel and other increasing costs.

Ronald Smith of Pocomoke thanked Commissioner Nordstrom for his support for the food pantry at Pocomoke Middle School, and he urged the commissioners to adopt the requested

FY23 BOE budget to maintain student success, offer competitive salaries and benefits, and maintain small class sizes.

Beth Shockley Lynch, president of the Worcester County Teachers Association, asked the commissioners to approve the requested FY23 BOE budget, noting that there is more to teaching than opening a book. Rather, it takes dedicated teachers, and the requested FY23 BOE budget will help to attract and retain highly-qualified staff.

John Van Faussen of Ocean City urged the commissioners to include additional funding in the FY23 BOE budget to provide needed additional salary and fuel increases for bus contractors.

Ocean City Fire Chief Richard Bowers, speaking on behalf of the Worcester County Volunteer Firemen's Association, urged the commissioners to consider the funding needs of County fire and ambulance agencies in FY23 and the years to come.

Kimberly Jackson of Whaleyville thanked the commissioners for their continued support of schools and urged them to fully fund the requested FY23 BOE budget.

Lori Thompson, speaking on behalf of the Worcester County Bus Contractors, reviewed escalating fuel and bus repair costs. She stressed that the average bus contractor's salary has decreased by \$400 per month due to these increased costs. Therefore, she urged the commissioners to allocate additional funding in the FY23 BOE budget for salary increases and to cover the hike in fuel costs.

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

Commissioner Mitrecic thanked everyone for participating in the public hearing on the FY23 requested budget. He concluded that the Commissioners will adopt a balanced FY23 County Operating Budget on June 3, 2021.

The commissioners adjourned to meet again on May 10, 2022 to conduct a budget work session.