

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

February 20, 2024

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

Following a motion by Commissioner Elder, seconded by Commissioner Abbott, with Commissioner Bunting temporarily 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, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage, County Attorney Roscoe Leslie, Public Information Officer Kim Moses, Human Resources Director Stacey Norton and Deputy Director Pat Walls, Finance Officer Phil Thompson, and Deputy Finance Officer Jessica Wilson. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: a personnel update, transferring Office Assistant V Janet Stephenson from the Jail to Tourism and Economic Development, hiring Kristi Sanderson as an accounts payable specialist, Connie Watson as a tax sale specialist, and Quinn Dittrich as the enterprise fund controller within the Treasurer's Office, along with certain other personnel matters; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, seconded by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:54 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 Reverend Mary Boyd of First Corinthians Holiness Church 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 February 6, 2024 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a years-of-service commendation to Plant Operator III Charles "Ridge" Harman who is retiring following 28 years of service to the Water and Wastewater Division.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-9 as follows: bid specifications for the purchase and installation

of an incinerator for Animal Control; purchasing a new circulation desk for the Ocean Pines Branch Library for \$28,186.37 from Liberty Systems; a Memorandum of Understanding between the County and the Maryland Judiciary Administration Office for a Courthouse Security Grant of \$110,715.52; out-of-state travel for one staff member to attend the annual Tyler Technology Conference in Indiana from May 19-22, 2024; updating the 1998 Ocean City, Maryland and vicinity Water Resources Study; renewing the Transient Non-Community Water Systems Delegation Agreement; contracting with RealAuction.com for online tax sale services; a letter accepting the Hazardous Mitigation Plan Renewal Grant match of up to \$4,000.

Pursuant to the request of Sheriff Matt Crisafulli and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously approved adding one additional captain's position and converting one of two part-time deputy sheriff positions to full-time.

Pursuant to the request of Procurement Officer Nick Rice and Warden Tim Mulligan and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to update and renew the County's contract with Securus to include grievance devices accessible to the inmate population.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Rice and Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously accepted the proposal from EA Engineering, Science, and Technology of \$126,550 to design the Central Landfill active gas collection system. Mr. Baker explained that the Maryland Department of the Environment has implemented new regulations requiring landfills to conduct surface emission monitoring to determine how much methane is being generated by these types of facilities. He advised that funds are available within Solid Waste for this expense.

The commissioners met with Emergency Services Deputy Director James Hamilton to discuss entering into a contract with L3Harris to design and procure a refresh of IT hardware components for the P25 Radio System. Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to table discussions until March 5, 2024 on this proposal and a second proposal from L3Harris (amendment number nine) for \$924,082.13 to change the antenna patterns at the Central Landfill and a new transmitter site in Snow Hill to provide them with the additional time needed to gain more information about these services.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved the Agreement of Sale for the purchase of a Rural Legacy Area (RLA) easement between Robert D. Rose and Freddie Ray Fair, Jr. (Sellers) and the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland (Buyer), with FY22 Coastal Bays RLA funds to cover the cost of an easement on approximately 58.68 acres of land located north of Bill Millpond Road and west of Steelpond Road in Stockton and identified on Tax Map 93 as Parcel 49. This property is to be purchased at a cost of \$173,000 or \$2,948 per acre.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed several bills being considered by the Maryland General Assembly that could impact Worcester County.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to send a letter opposing HB785/SB738 Freedom to Read Act, which as written would hold harmless those attempting to circumvent federal laws restricting the transfer of obscene materials to minors. This legislation would also strip boards of education, governing bodies, parents and community members from having reasonable input into the materials that minors may access in certain libraries, specifically public-school libraries.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously agreed to oppose SB565 – Expansion of Commercial Gaming – Internet Gaming Referendum, which would threaten existing brick-and-mortar institutions, fuel gambling addictions, and result in lost revenues to jurisdictions in Worcester County. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young noted that in states that have approved online gaming foot traffic to brick and mortar casinos has dropped. He stressed that local impact grant funds from the Casino at Ocean Downs help pay for public safety improvements and other projects that benefit the community, such as the new Worcester Technical High School

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to send a letter of support for HB899/SB691 Higher Education – Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention – Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance, which would expand the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Fund to allow for grants that would cover up to 100% of tuition costs at a two-year institution or 50% of tuition costs at a four-year institution for those pursuing fire and emergency medical service (EMS) careers. The commissioners noted that this would be a valuable tool in assisting fire and ambulance companies attract, train, and retain fire and EMS personnel.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to send a letter opposing SB784 – Comprehensive Community Safety Funding Act, which if passed would apply an 11% excise tax on firearms dealers to be derived from the sale of firearms, firearms accessories, and ammunition in Maryland. Commissioner Abbott stressed that passage of this bill would be detrimental to residents and businesses in Worcester County to include Benelli USA, a world-renown maker of firearms that employs 100 area residents in Pocomoke City. She stated that the economic hardships this loss would place on the Pocomoke City community would be lasting if Benelli either closes its doors or relocates to another state.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Michael Patchett to the Board of Electrical Examiners.

The commissioners recessed until 11:00 a.m.

The commissioners and Board of Education (BOE) members conducted a virtual meeting with State Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) Chairman Ike Leggett, Vice Chairman Dr. Britt Kirwan , and Executive Director Rachel Hise who gave a brief overview and then outlined local responsibilities for implementing Maryland’s Blueprint for Education (Blueprint) in Worcester County Public Schools (WCPS)¹. Mr. Leggett advised that the

¹ To view the AIB meeting, visit <https://worcestercountymd.new.swagit.com/videos/297753> and click the video index link, “AIB joining the Commissioners’ meeting virtually to discuss Blueprint implementation.”

Blueprint was not conceived to be an easy transition, it was designed to improve the performance of Maryland schools, which rank fortieth in the nation in literacy at the third grade level and forty-third in math at the fourth grade level, which are just not sustainable. Dr. Kirwan concurred, stating that it is necessary for Maryland schools to perform at the level of the best performing schools in the world to properly prepare young people for good career opportunities and to assure the State has a strong economy. He stated that the Blueprint is a once in a generation opportunity to address the education issues in Maryland and put kids and the State on a very positive path to a bright future. However, this change will require the BOE and county to do things differently and will require a massive change that demands a tremendous amount of partnership and collaboration, which will require both openness and BOE funding transparency for everyone to get to where they need to be. AIB members stressed that BOE funding transparency and collaboration between the BOE and county government is essential to chart a path forward according to the AIB members.

Mr. Leggett stated that the Blueprint is not easy, and it was not conceived to be an easy transition, but rather it is necessary to improve the quality of education in Maryland. Dr. Kirwan, who led the state effort to develop the Blueprint, concurred with Mr. Leggett's assessment of the Blueprint's challenge, stating that with Kirwan the State would have to do things differently than have been done it in the past and would require massive change. He reiterated that implementation would require a tremendous amount of cooperation, collaboration, and partnerships in ways that, perhaps, have not been undertaken in the past.

Commissioner Bertino stated that the commissioners are committed to working together with the BOE to make the hard decisions necessary to ensure that our students, teachers, and community are best served by the objectives of the Blueprint.

Ms. Hise outlined the five pillars of the Blueprint and how they are to be funded. It was noted that the commissioners allocated \$100 million in Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funding for education. The per pupil MOE funding will not decrease in FY25, though the new local share for the Blueprint is only \$73 million. Under the Blueprint, local jurisdictions must fund the local share or MOE, whichever amount is greater. In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Hise advised that the local share amount of \$73 million was derived by the State as the funding needed to implement the five pillars of the Blueprint in FY25, which includes funding for teachers' salaries, but does not include services or programs outside the Blueprint, like band or athletic activities. In response to further questions by Commissioner Bertino regarding how the County would know from a financial standpoint if the BOE is meeting the Blueprint mandates, Mr. Leggett expressed surprise that the County does not have that transparency currently. He stressed that transparency is imperative in this process, as public education is funded with taxpayer dollars. With regard to questions by Commissioner Bertino regarding zero-based budgeting, Mr. Leggett stated that the process would start from ground zero, not with the prior year's budget, to determine the most important priorities and allocate adequate funding at the local level. He stressed that there would not be enough funding for everything on the list.

BOE member Dr. Andes, who formerly served as the superintendent of schools, expressed alarm that the new Blueprint continues to base State funding for education on the old wealth formula, meaning WCPS will only receive state aid of \$1.4 million, the equivalent of \$200 per pupil, to implement the Blueprint. He stated that rural school systems have a different

set of needs than urban schools, and the BOE believes in community-based schools. For example, enrollment at Snow Hill and Pocomoke High Schools is much lower than at Stephen Decatur High School. He stressed the need for the AIB to advocate for the County, noting that to implement the Blueprint locally the County would need state funding of more than \$200 per pupil. BOE President Todd Ferrante stated that one size funding across the counties does not fit all. In response to questions by Mr. Ferrante, Ms. Hise reviewed funding calculations, which are based on how much resources are needed to meet requirements on a per-student basis in addition to the wealth formula determining the State and local shares for education funding.

Dr. Kirwan stated that, though Blueprint standards were implemented in schools in FY23, certain aspects of the program are still in flux. Most notably, he advised that AIB officials are still developing accountability measures to identify how taxpayer dollars allocated to education are being spent and how successfully jurisdictions are meeting the pillars of the Blueprint. AIB members advised that a Technical Assistance Grant is available to the County through the AIB for a strategic facilitator to assist them in identifying priorities, allocating funding for programs and initiatives, and making the hard decisions to develop a transparent budget. Mr. Leggett reiterated that difficult discussions and hard decisions will be required by school systems and county governments to ensure the success of Blueprint implementation, noting that school systems need to rethink how they prioritize and allocate funds. County and BOE officials agreed to apply for the Technical Assistance Grant. Mr. Leggett then cautioned that funding and the Blueprint will not do everything people want it to do at the local level.

Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young pointed out that the County has some of the highest test scores in the State. He asked how implementing Kirwan will compare with what the BOE is doing now. Mr. Leggett stated that the Blueprint is a comprehensive plan built to fill in educational gaps, and this plan will require funding, cultural, education, employment, and many other changes to be wrapped up into one comprehensive plan. He stated this plan will require adjustments. He stated that there are many who will want to continue to do things as they have done in the past, but they cannot if the State is to change the current performance numbers. He then reviewed changes made by Mississippi, which transformed its education system and went from being the lowest performing education system in the country to the middle of the pack ahead of Maryland. He stated there are going to be disagreements, but the AIB is going to be as transparent as possible. He concluded that if a county is doing so well that they don't need this plan, and the AIB will follow some of the things they are doing; however, he has not seen any indication that is occurring. In regard to further questions from Mr. Young regarding Blueprint funding, which does not include categories for activities like band and sports, Ms. Hise advised that the Blueprint is not all things, but provides for a well-rounded curriculum for art and music experiences that are part of curriculum requirements in Maryland. Because many counties are not providing the funding needed for certain curriculum requirements, those school systems will be receiving more local funding to address those disparities. Mr. Leggett advised that the Blueprint is not designed to fund everything at the local level, that Kirwan implementation will not be business as usual. He stressed that the County and BOE are not going to be able to fund all of the things people have traditionally wanted to fund. He concluded that hard decisions will have to be made either by a reallocation of funds, doing less, or finding some other resources.

Following much discussion, County and BOE officials thanked the AIB members for meeting with them and for their guidance.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on March 5, 2024.