

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

May 21, 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 Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Elder, 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: \_; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:56 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 Father John Solomon 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 7, 2024 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a commendation to Stephen Decatur High School senior Abigail Vadella for serving as Worcester County's Page to the 2024 Maryland General Assembly.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing May 19-25 as Travel and Tourism Week to Tourism and Economic Development Director Melanie Pursel and other area tourism partners.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-9 as follows: an FY25 Police Recruitment and Retention Grant application for funds of \$65,835 to provide retention incentives to current sworn personnel; letter supporting the Town of Berlin's Community Development Block Grant application for funds for

demolition and site work for a new community center; bid specifications for the Lewis Road gravity sewer system and pump station; bid specifications for Central Landfill Cell 1 pump station and leachate forcemain upgrades; awarding the lowest responsive bid to repave the South Point boat ramp to HCE, LLC at a cost of \$51,252.28; awarding the highest scoring proposal for the Mental Health Management Care Coordination for Children and Youth to Wraparound Maryland; a proposal from Absolute Security Group, Inc. for fire alarm system upgrades at the Courthouse; and a change order for the Snow Hill communications shelter project to eliminate the removal of the existing shelter and decrease the contract cost by \$6,000.

Pursuant to the request of Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously authorized Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young to sign a letter of no objection on the County's behalf for the dredging of the West Ocean City harbor channel, with is funded by a Tri-County Council grant, and the dredging of a private marina adjacent to a commercial marine supply property that sits on the northernmost edge of the harbor bulkhead and east of the County boat ramp.

The commissioners met with Mr. Mitchell to review draft legislation comprehensively updating and combining the Atlantic Coastal Bays and Chesapeake Bay Critical Area codes into a single code. Mr. Mitchell advised that this legislation was prepared to update the code to reflect changes in the State law.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned draft legislation and agreed to schedule a public hearing on the bill.

The commissioners met with Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados to review and discuss six applications for the naming of the basketball and park project at Pocomoke Middle School. Names included Stephen Handy Long Memorial Recreation Park, Warrior Courts at Stephen H. Long Memorial Park, Pocomoke Proud Park, Sunshine Park, Friendship Park, and Warrior Park. Commissioner Abbott stated that the purpose of developing the park was to create someplace special for the children, whom they view as warriors, and the community to come together as a whole.

Following some discussion, a motion by Commissioner Abbott to approve the name Warrior Park failed 3-3-1, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, and Bunting voting in favor, Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, and Commissioner Fiori abstaining.

Commissioner Purnell disagreed with that choice, stating that the name Stephen Handy Long Memorial Recreation Park meets the geographical, historical, and cultural criteria for naming a park. She reviewed a brief history of Mr. Long, an African American teacher, and school supervisor who was killed for his advocacy efforts. Commissioner Mitrecic concurred. Commissioner Elder proposed a compromise with the Warrior Courts at Stephen H. Long Memorial Park.

The commissioners recognized Marvin Jones of Salisbury who reviewed the history of Mr. Long, and he urged the commissioners not to deviate from naming the park in his honor.

Following some discussion, a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to name the park Warrior Courts at Stephen H. Long Memorial Park failed 2-4-1, with Commissioners Elder and

Mitrecic voting in favor, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Purnell voting in opposition, and Commissioner Fiori abstaining.

After further discussion, the commissioners agreed to temporarily table the matter to work through the concerns expressed during the discussion.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing to receive public comments on the filing of an FY25 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) application for funding of \$600,000 to support the Countywide Housing Rehabilitation Program. Housing Program Coordinator Davida Washington reviewed the purpose of the program and advised that funds would be used to rehabilitate 16 to 20 owner-occupied homes.

Commissioner Bertino opened the floor to receive public comments.

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

Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved the filing of the CDBG Housing Rehabilitation Program application.

The commissioners met with Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young to review draft legislation to implement Md. Code, Alcoholic Beverages and Cannabis 1-322 to establish the purpose for which money received from the State of Maryland's Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund may be used. The fund receives money from one-time cannabis license conversion fees and 35% of cannabis sales and use tax. Maryland counties receiving cannabis funding under the Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund are required to adopt a law establishing the purpose for which money received from the Fund may be used. Funds are distributed to counties proportionately based on the total cannabis possession charges within each jurisdiction between July 1, 2002, and January 1, 2023. Worcester County receives 1.22% of the total funding. The first distribution of conversion fees to Worcester County was \$369,473.96 for the period of January 2023 –December 2023.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the draft legislation and agreed to schedule a public hearing on the proposed bill.

Pursuant to the request of State's Attorney Kris Heiser and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously authorized the State's Attorney's Office to enter into a 10-year contract for an Axon Unlimited Storage Bundle at a total cost of \$270,152 to store digital evidence.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Susan Ostrowski to the Commission for Women.

The commissioners conducted a budget work session on the FY25 General Fund Budget. Following adjustments made at the commissioners' April 14 budget work session, the budget reflects a deficit of \$3,238,275. Budget Officer Kim Reynolds advised that May 14 adjustments include a reduction in personnel salaries and fringe of \$4,685, a reduction to the requested Board of Education Budget of \$1 million, and \$22,241 from a Non-Profit Grant. She then reviewed FY25 additional options and budget work session adjustments, which include options to reduce

funding of \$2 million for the Riddle Farm Bypass, an increase of \$1,003,868 for a 6% County Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) to match the BOE, and \$233,214 increase to Reserve Funds, and \$22,500 for the AXON contract for FY25 for a total deficit of (\$2,497,857).

Commissioner Abbott stated that she did not make the right decision for the County during the budget work session last Tuesday. She further stated that the commissioners need to stay within budget and not spend money that the County does not have. She stated that she does not do so with her own home finances and does not want to do so with the County's. Therefore, Commissioner Abbott made a motion to approve an FY25 County Operating Budget that includes a 4% COLA and Step for Board of Education (BOE) and County employees for \$3,386,552 and to move OPEB of \$1,587,052 to the BOE for a total of \$4,973,604.

Commissioner Mitrecic stated that this is wrong, that this reduction would cause County and BOE employees' salaries to go backward. He stated that the County could possibly have \$24 million in a slush fund, taxpayer money that the County is holding in a fund. He stated that if the commissioners are so worried about the taxpayers, they should reduce the tax rate and give this money back.

Commissioner Fiori concurred. He stated that the County has the money, and noted that many educators and County employees are struggling to run single-parent households. He noted that the commissioners have already penalized the BOE by \$1 million and made their point that education leaders need to do a better job and be accountable for the use of taxpayer dollars. He stated that the commissioners cannot penalize the teachers. Commissioner Fiori asked what additional revenue the County received after adopting the budget each year for the past three years. Commissioner Mitrecic stated and Mr. Thompson confirmed that the County recognized additional funding of roughly \$11 million in FY24, \$9.5 million in FY23, \$12 million in FY22, and \$14 million in FY21. He stated that the County still has the lowest starting teachers' salaries, and the salary increases proposed in this budget will not meet the State-mandated starting salary rate they will be required to implement by FY27. Commissioner Abbott noted that it is the BOE, not the commissioners, that set the starting salary for teachers, and the BOE should have adequate funding within this approved budget to increase that rate if they so choose.

Commissioner Bertino noted that a step is 2.5%, so BOE and County employees would receive a 6.5% salary increase. Furthermore, he noted that the commissioners collectively agreed to buy down \$2.1 million in the healthcare increase, so BOE and County employees would not bear the brunt of the full 10% increase. He concluded that the commissioners have been very sensitive to increasing costs. Commissioner Bunting stated that he supports Commissioner Abbott's motion, noting that through all the hard work done by staff and Commissioner Fiori the commissioners were able to determine that the requested salary package could have been funded through an MOE budget, but that would have been wrong. He stated that Commissioner Abbott's motion is the fairest option for the BOE and the residents of Worcester County. He concluded that it is vital to keep the Budget Stabilization Fund in place for unexpected emergencies, noting that the County could never have expected the State to require the County to fund an additional \$5 million for the Health Department in FY25.

Commissioner Elder concurred with Commissioner Abbott's motion, noting that with it the average teacher salary would increase by \$4,500 in FY25, which he felt was reasonable considering that the County is already facing a deficit with this budget. He stated that the commissioners need to take care of the employees and to build up their salaries as the funding

becomes available to do so. However, he does not believe in deficit spending and would not support spending tomorrow's money today.

Commissioner Purnell objected to the motion, noting that the BOE's proposal is necessary to increase teacher salaries to competitive levels. She stated that too many County and BOE employees live below the poverty level and cannot afford to shoulder rapidly increasing inflation rates. She urged her fellow commissioners to help make these salaries competitive with surrounding areas by approving the requested 6% COLA and Step.

In response to a question by Commissioner Fiori, Finance Officer Phil Thompson discussed the projected, three-year revenue increases, which are projected to result in significant revenue increases over the period.

Following much discussion, the commissioners revisited Commissioner Abbott's motion to approve an FY25 County Operating Budget that includes a 4% COLA and Step for Board of Education (BOE) and County employees for \$3,386,552 and to move OPEB of \$1,587,052 to the BOE for a total of \$4,973,604. The commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in favor and Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition to approve the motion as presented.

Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage stated that the requested FY25 County Operating Budget still reflects a deficit of \$350,000.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in favor and Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to eliminate funding of \$350,000 for the Riddle Farm bypass project for a balanced FY25 County Operating Budget.

Commissioner Abbott asked the commissioners to revisit their earlier discussion on the naming of the new park at PMS. Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Elder voting in favor and Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition to name the park the Warrior Courts at Stephen H. Long Memorial Park.

A motion by Commissioner Abbott to approve requested funding of \$30,000 to the Delmarva Discovery Museum failed 3-3-1, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, and Bunting voting in favor, Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, and Commissioner Fiori abstaining. Commissioner Mitrecic clarified that the commissioners have not cut funding to the DDM, rather they have kept it flat.

In response to concerns raised by Commissioners Mitrecic and Bunting, Public Works Director Dallas Baker advised that County staff will repair a sink hole developing near Captain's Hill Road and clear foliage from the ditches on Cathell Road.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on June 4, 2024.