

DRAFT

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

June 4, 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 Abbott, 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, Legislative Analyst Charlene Sharpe, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton and Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: a personnel update, hiring Martin Lewis as a plant operator trainee, transferring Office Assistant V Carole Hankins from Public Works to the Solid Waste Division; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:43 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 Davida Washington and pledge of allegiance, announced the topics discussed during the morning closed session.

The commissioners reviewed and approved the open and closed minutes of their May 14, 2024 work session and their May 21 regular session as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing June 2024 as Elder Abuse Awareness Month and June 15 as Elder Abuse Awareness Day to representatives from the Commission on Aging, State's Attorney's Office, and Department of Social Services.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-8 as follows: an Atlantic General Hospital grant support letter; a Department of Natural Resources Chesapeake & Coastal Services grant application for \$50,000 to update the County's nuisance flood plan; a Warrant Apprehension and Absconding grant for \$30,000 to compensate deputies for overtime related to warrant service; a Sex Offender

Compliance and Enforcement in Maryland grant for \$9,096 to compensate deputies for overtime related to sex offender compliance checks and monitoring; reassigning funding of \$119,950 from the fuel conversion project to the generator project in the County Jail; waiving the formal bid process and renewing the Patagonia Health, LLC contract for five years at \$178,100 per year, with a locked-in 3% annual increase for electronic health record management; and scheduling a public hearing to receive objections on the proposed disposal of surplus County vehicles, equipment, and miscellaneous items no longer used by the County, by auctioning these items on GovDeals.com.

The commissioners met with Budget Officer Kim Reynolds to discuss adjustments made to the FY25 Board of Education (BOE) budget from the May 14 and 21 work sessions for a total unrestricted budget of \$104,980,244.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to reallocate funds of \$413,448 within the FY25 County Operating Budget from the Riddle Farm sewer bypass project to the Board of Education, thus increasing the BOE unrestricted budget from \$104,980,244 to \$105,393,692. That is \$5,892,273 over MOE and \$5,387,052 more than FY24 funding.

Commissioner Mitrecic stated that he cannot support this budget. He stated that the budget needs to be fully funded for the students and teachers to start to meet the Blueprint mandates. He then discussed the teacher salary scale, teacher resignations during the 2023-2024 school year, and per pupil funding costs. He pointed out that it costs roughly \$10,000 more per student to educate students in the south end of the County than it does to educate northern Worcester students: \$26,000 per pupil for Pocomoke High School (PHS) students, \$26,366 per pupil for Snow Hill High School students, and \$16,725 per pupil to educate students attending Stephen Decatur High School. He stated that if the commissioners are serious about cutting costs, they should combine PHS and SHHS instead of making cuts to education funding.

Commissioner Fiori stated that he could not support this funding reduction given the dramatic increases in the cost of living, increasing tax assessments, and the importance of providing adequate funding to give needed raises to BOE employees. Commissioner Purnell concurred, noting that this budget does nothing to address future salary-related Blueprint mandates. She stated that the commissioners have to do something to get ahead of rising costs.

The commissioners met with Ms. Reynolds to discuss adjustments made to the FY25 County Operating Budget since the May 21 work session. Commissioner Mitrecic stated that the FY25 budget should include funding for a 6% COLA and Step for eligible BOE and County employees, to keep pace with the cost of living. He expressed concern that many longtime employees are no longer eligible for a Step. In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage advised that the BOE Step rate fluctuates between 0% to 11.9% based on where an employee is in the career ladder. Commissioner Abbott noted that, in addition to the COLA and Step increase included in the budget, the commissioners allocated \$3.5 million in rate stabilization funds to reduce health insurance rates from 12.65% to 4.3% for County and BOE employees.

Commissioner Elder noted that even teachers, who max out on the Step scale who earn over \$90,000 annually, will receive the COLA. Furthermore, they also receive a salary increase every five years.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to adopt Resolution No. 24-05 adopting the FY25 County Operating Budget of \$261,917,617. The FY25 budget maintains the real property tax rate of 84.5¢ per \$100 of assessed value and the County's local income tax rate of 2.25%. This is the lowest income tax rate and the third lowest real property tax rate of all Maryland counties. It also includes record funding for the BOE at \$105.4 million, a salary step plus 4% cost-of-living adjustment for BOE and County staff; \$2.67 million in grants to county fire companies and \$8.7 million in ambulance grants, which represents an increase of \$1.5 million and includes supplemental funding for 10 EMS companies to assist with run and personnel costs. Grants to towns increased by \$200,253, including unrestricted grant increases of \$35,000 each to the Towns of Berlin and Pocomoke, a recreation grant increase of \$20,000 to the Ocean Pines Association, and increases to the Town of Ocean City of \$76,037 in unrestricted grant funds and \$32,500 or 50% of the cost of the OC Bomb Squad digital x-ray system; and an increase of \$5.6 million to the Health Department to comply with the 100% increase in the State Mandated Core Funding Match. It also eliminates the Benefits account and realigns insurance and benefits costs within each county department and agency to remain consistent with the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Development Review and Permitting Deputy Director Matthew Laick and upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 24-6, authorizing the naming of a private lane off of South Point Road in Berlin, which serves nine residential lots identified on Tax Map 50 as Parcel 24, Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6; and Parcel 18, Block G, Lot 44; Parcel 34, Block F, Lots 25A and 37, as Heron Lane.

The commissioners conducted concurrent public hearings on the FY25 Solid Waste Budget of \$4,903,079 for the Central Landfill in Newark and the FY25 Water and Wastewater Budget of \$17,072,760 for the operating budgets, assessments, user charges, and other charges for each of the 11 Sanitary Service Areas and sub-areas operated by the Worcester County Department of Public Works, Water & Wastewater Division. Public Works Director Dallas Baker and Senior Accountant Barbara Hitch reviewed the proposed budgets for the County's various service areas.

Commissioner Bertino opened the floor to receive public comment.

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

The commissioners conceptually approved the FY25 Solid Waste Budget and the Water and Wastewater Budget as presented and agreed to adopt the formal resolutions for both budgets at their next meeting on June 18, 2024.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved the permanent adjustment of the Fleet Maintenance Division operating hours to a four-day, 10-hour per day work week following the completion of the three-month trial period on May 24, 2024.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Procurement Officer Nick Rice and upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously awarded the highest scoring proposal for St. Martin's by the Bay water project design services to Davis, Bowen & Friedel, Inc. of



\$73,100.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Rice and upon a motion by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners awarded the lowest responsive bid for Riddle Farm Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrades to M2 Construction, LLC in the amount of \$3,578,490.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Mr. Baker in response to a request from the African American Heritage Society of Snow Hill and the State Highway Administration (SHA) and upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously authorized the SHA to install a historic marker at the Snow Hill Branch Library. This County-owned property is located at 307 N. Washington Street in Snow Hill, and the sign will denote the site's rich African American heritage.

Pursuant to the request of Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously authorized the County's FY25 Program Open Space (POS) allocation of \$450,209 to be utilized to help cover the cost of the following projects: \$500,000 for the Showell Park playground replacement, \$200,000 for the Northern Worcester Athletic Complex restroom and concession upgrades; and \$50,000 for the Homer Gudelsky rip rap replacement/repair.

Madison Bryce, Governor Wes Moore's intergovernmental affairs liaison for the Eastern Shore, introduced herself to the commissioners and advised that she looks forward to working with them on State matters of interest to Worcester County.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on June 18, 2024.