

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

October 3, 2023

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 Purnell, 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 Human Resources Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: hiring Kyle Brown as a plant operator trainee within the Water and Wastewater Division, Aaron Hooks as a landfill operator I within the Solid Waste Division, and Christopher Layton and Tyler Hunter as correctional officer trainees within the County Jail; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Bunting, seconded by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:33 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 of St. Mary's Star of the Sea in Ocean City 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 September 19, 2023 meeting as presented.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Life Crisis Center Executive Director Jamie Manning and others to recognize October as Domestic Violence Awareness and Prevention Month and to commend Life Crisis professionals for the array of services they provide to those impacted by domestic violence.

The commissioners joined with representatives from the Eastern Shore Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland to proclaim October 15, 2023 as White Caine

Awareness Day in Worcester County and to encourage area residents and employers to value the white cane as a tool of independence for the blind in both public spaces and businesses.

The commissioners joined with Fire Marshal Matt Owens to proclaim October 8-14, 2023 as Worcester County Fire Prevention Week and October as Fire Prevention Month.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-10 as follows: FY24 Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund Grant Agreement through the Tri-County Council awarding \$100,000 to Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development for the Skilled Trades, Agriculture, Tourism, and Technology (STATT) Summer Internship and Camps; scheduling a public hearing on a project to provide 54 equivalent dwelling units (EDUs) of water service from the Ocean Pines Sanitary Service Area to the St. Martin's by the Bay community; support letter for the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development's application to HUD's PRO Housing grant program; support letter for approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for the Eastern Shore Natural Gas Company to construct the Worcester Resiliency Upgrade Project; concurring with a the State Highway Administration's proposal to dispose of three surplus properties on US Rt. 113 in Newark; FY23 Recycling budget over expenditure of \$26,076; waiving tipping fees for debris collected during the Maryland Coastal Bays Foundation's Coastal Cleanup Day on October 22; purchasing OneMeeting Agenda Automation software from Granicus at a one-year subscription cost of \$11,705; and over expenditures of \$15,000 for Development Review and Permitting and \$5,000 for Environmental Programs to continue development of DocuWare workflows to improve efficiencies.

CRICKET Center Executive Director Lauren Cooper and Board Treasurer Stefanie Franklin updated the commissioners on current organization programs and requested to reallocate \$190,000 in FY22 County grant funds awarded to construct a new facility to support general operating expenses associated with the development of a satellite child advocacy center in Pocomoke. In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Cooper advised that the CRICKET Center is an unfunded State mandate. She explained that grants, contributions from fundraising, and the support of private donors cover program services and operating expenses (including the director's salary) totaling roughly \$287,000 annually.

Commissioner Mitrecic commended the CRICKET Center staff for the good work they do in the community and recognized the need to assure these services are available to the children of Pocomoke. Commissioner Abbott concurred, noting that she is thrilled to have the new satellite office in Pocomoke.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously authorized the reallocation of \$190,000 in FY22 County grant funds within the CRICKET Center budget to cover operating costs for the new satellite office in Pocomoke as requested.

Pursuant to the request of Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved a Transfer of Agreement of Grant to Choptank Fiber. Mr. Young reiterated that in 2022 the County voted to distribute certain American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to three internet service providers

(ISPs), Bay Country Communications, Choptank Fiber, and Talkie Communications, to install high-speed fiber broadband throughout the County. However, since then Choptank Fiber has begun the process of acquiring the fiber portion of Bay Country Communications and has agreed to finish the portion of the project allocated to Bay Country Communications. In response to a request by Commissioner Mitrecic for the ISPs to meet with the commissioners, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Owens stated that the three service providers will be submitting project update reports by December 31, 2023, and they could schedule to meet with the providers after that time.

Pursuant to the request of Budget Officer Kim Reynolds and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved FY23 year-end budget transfers totaling \$450,232.

Pursuant to the request of Ms. Reynolds and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved FY23 Reserve for Assigned Encumbrances totaling \$1,473,706.

The commissioners met with Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener to review a text amendment application drafted by staff that would prohibit on-site consumption establishments and enhance the separation distances for new licensed dispensaries to schools, certain childcare facilities, recreational facilities, and other licensed dispensaries.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned text amendment as an emergency bill - (Public Health – Cannabis establishments) and agreed to schedule a public hearing on this bill.

Commissioner Bertino stated that the commissioners were made aware this morning that the Board of Education (BOE) funds the salary, benefits, and Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB) for the director of the Worcester County Education Foundation, a non-profit board with over \$1 million in reserves. He stated that it seems incongruent to use taxpayer dollars to fund this nonprofit position. He stated that, by comparison, the State-mandated CRICKET Center relies on grants, fundraising initiatives, and private donor contributions to cover the director's salary.

Commissioner Abbott expressed concern that the Pocomoke City Council has not yet scheduled a public hearing to receive public comment on plans to reallocate \$300,000 paid by the Royal Farms in Virginia to hook into sewer service from the Pocomoke City Wastewater Treatment Plant to cover the cost of demolishing a building on Willow Street.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on October 17, 2023.