

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

December 5, 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 Elder, 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, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: a personnel update; hiring Christopher Bragg as a plant operator trainee within the Water and Wastewater Division and Ronald Parker and Brandon Taylor as correctional officer trainees in the County Jail, and certain matters with Human Resources; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing board appointments, and receiving updates from staff on potential school construction funding options and the FY23 CareFirst benefits settlement.

Following a motion by Commissioner Abbott, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:32 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 Zachary Brown of Bates and Trinity United Methodist Churches 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 November 21, 2023 meeting as presented.

The commissioners elected officers for the coming year through December 3, 2024. Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Mitrecic voting in opposition, to re-elect Commissioner Bertino as president of the Board of County Commissioners.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in favor and Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to re-elect Commissioner Bunting as vice president of the Board of County Commissioners.

The commissioners presented years-of-service commendations to the following retiring staff members: Worcester County Jail Lieutenant Desi Bratten (28 years), State's Attorney's Office Legal Assistant Deborah Thornes (27 years), and Recreation and Parks Worker III Leonard "Dean" Stutsman (11 years).

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-7 as follows: accepting a 2023 State Homeland Security Program Grant of \$96,476.93 for emergency management projects and equipment and a 2021 Emergency Management Performance Grant – American Rescue Plan Act Grant adjustment of \$21,198.74; filing an FY25 State Aid for Police Protection Fund grant application; accepting a proposal of \$51,098 from Modern Controls for building automation system upgrades in the Circuit Court; a Memorandum of Understanding with the Maryland Department of Information Technology and Worcester County Emergency Services (WCES) to permit interoperability between County and State radio systems; and a Radio Service Agreement between WCES and Federal Engineering.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Elder voting in opposition, to accept the Findings of Fact for Rezoning Case No. 442 to rezone approximately 5.5 acres of land on the east side of U.S. Rt. 113 on Pin Oak Drive from C-1 Neighborhood Commercial District to C-2 General Commercial District. Following a public hearing relative to the above referenced rezoning on November 7, 2023, a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to approve the requested rezoning failed 3-4, with Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in opposition.

The commissioners met with Ms. Keener to review draft emergency legislation to amend the County Government Article establishing the revised County Commissioner districts and associated maps, which were developed by DRP utilizing Draft Plan A as the basis after a four-week public comment period.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned legislation as Emergency Bill 23-08 (County Government – County Commissioners) and scheduled a public hearing on the bill for December 19, 2023.

Pursuant to the request of Budget Officer Kim Reynolds and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved the requested assignment of FY23 Fund Balance of \$47,477,981 and adopted Resolution No. 23-19 increasing the Reserve Fund level from 12% to 15%, which represents a one-time increase of \$7 million. The approved fund balance includes revising the Pocomoke Library amount to \$4,222,159 (\$307,841 less) and increasing the Board of Education Other Post Employment (OPEB) benefits to \$1,839,569 (\$246,273 more), and County OPEB to \$459,892 (\$61,568 more).

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Curt Lambertson to the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, Scott Tingle to the Housing Review Board, and Kathryn Culbertson to the Library Board.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to appoint Sarah Chapman to the Lower Shore Workforce Development Board.

The commissioners adjourned until 10:30 a.m.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing on the requested five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for FY25-FY29. Senior Budget Accountant Lynn Wright informed the commissioners and the public that the CIP is strictly a planning document the County will use in preparing future operating budgets, anticipating the future financial needs of the County, and identifying possible funding resources. Therefore, a project's inclusion in the CIP does not constitute a guarantee of future approval or funding from the County. She then reviewed the CIP and advised that projects totaling \$217,769,204 are proposed over the five-year period. Of these projects, \$39.9 million or 18% is proposed to come from the Assigned Funds and \$127.7 million or 58% from general bond funds. The remaining portion would come from grant funds, State match funds, user fees, assigned funds, private donations and enterprise bonds.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in favor and Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to discuss the proposed inclusion of \$36.9 million for a new central office building to house the Board of Education (BOE) administration separately.

In response to comments by Commissioner Mitrecic regarding funding of \$5 million for broadband over the next five years, Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young advised that the commissioners are scheduled to receive an update in January 2024 from Choptank, Talkie, and Maryland Broadband Cooperative, Simple Fiber on the progress of extending broadband to unserved areas in the County. He further noted that the CIP includes up to \$1 million a year in broadband funding for the County to provide matching grants. In response to comments by Commissioner Fiori, Mr. Young confirmed that funding is available in the Assigned Funds for a feasibility study and engineering for the new public safety building and State's Attorney's Office addition.

Commissioner Bertino opened the floor to receive public comment.

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

A motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to approve the CIP as presented (to include the new central office building) failed 3-4, with Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in opposition. Commissioner Mitrecic reminded the commissioners that the CIP is only a wish list.

Following further discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners voted 4-3, with Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in favor and Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in opposition, to approve the CIP minus the new central office.

In a related matter, the commissioners discussed the proposed new central office building for the BOE. A motion by Commissioner Mitrecic to include the new central office building in the CIP failed 3-4, with Commissioners Elder, Mitrecic, and Purnell voting in favor and Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, and Fiori voting in opposition. Commissioner Elder

noted that the existing central office is older than half of the buildings in the County, and including it on the CIP is just a first step. Commissioner Abbott stated that the County is facing immense costs to replace schools in the coming years, and the existing central office building could last another 10 years with repairs and proper upkeep.

Following further discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 4-3 not to include the new central office building in the FY25-FY29 CIP.

Commissioner Mitrecic announced that the Stephen Decatur High School Seahawks Football Team won its first State championship. Commissioner Bertino advised that the commissioners are scheduled to present a commendation to the team on December 19.

Commissioner Bertino discussed his grave disappointment regarding the recent announcement that the Ocean Pines Chamber of Commerce leadership decided to rebrand itself as the Worcester County Chamber of Commerce (WCCC) to expand its services, advocacy, and community outreach. He stated that Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development (WCTED) is the only entity sanctioned to speak for, advocate, and act on behalf of Worcester County Government at the regional, state, and federal levels. He further clarified in no uncertain terms that the WCCC has no authority or franchise to speak for or act on behalf of County government, nor is it the agency best suited to work collaboratively with business and education partners and civic organizations throughout the County. Rather, that is the job best left to the experts in WCTED.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on December 19, 2023.