

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

May 7, 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 Purnell, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, 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: a personnel update, hiring Allen Welch as a roads worker II within the Roads Division, Kenneth "Mason" Kinard as a utility mechanic I within the Solid Waste Division, Savannah Guy as an office assistant IV within Development Review and Permitting, and Darrell Liles, Emberto Alas-as, Tadeeja Al-Dwa, Matthew Bohler, and Matthew Fries as correctional officer trainees within the County Jail; transferring Stuart White from DRP specialist II within Development Review and Permitting to environmental health specialist within Environmental Programs and Jonathan Kidd from deputy sheriff within the Sheriff's Office to fire marshal within the Fire Marshal's Office; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:31 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 Mark Piedmont of Buckingham Presbyterian Church in Berlin 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 April 14, 2024 meeting and their April 9 open work session as presented.

The commissioners presented years-of-service commendations to retiring Senior Corporal Jeff Taylor (18 years) of the County Jail and Office Assistant V Faith Coleman (46 years) of County Administration.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Worcester County Department of Social Services (DSS) Director Roberta Baldwin and other staff members along with foster parent Alison Tinker recognizing May as National Foster Care Month and thanking area foster parents for their efforts to bring stability and a sense of self-worth back into the lives of young people whose lives have been disrupted through no fault of their own. Ms. Baldwin stated that it takes a community to assist children living in crisis; however, currently only six families are serving as foster parents in Worcester County.

In a related matter, the commissioners also presented a commendation to Ms. Tinker recognizing her and her husband, Terry, for being named the 2024 Worcester County Foster Parents of the Year by DSS for their willingness to serve foster children living in crisis in the community. The commissioners commended the Tinkers for their willingness to open their hearts and home to foster children whose lives are in crisis.

The commissioners presented a proclamation to Fire Marshal Matt Owens, Emergency Management Specialist Maurice VanDemark, and Emergency Preparedness Manager Katy Vieira, recognizing May 5-11 as Hurricane Preparedness Week. In advance of hurricane season, which runs June 1-Nov. 30, the commissioners encouraged individuals and families to take steps to prepare for hurricanes by determining their risks, developing an evacuation plan, assembling disaster supplies, getting an insurance checkup, strengthening their homes, crafting personalized family emergency kits, and being prepared to help their neighbors. Find info on crafting personalized emergency plans at www.co.worcester.md.us by clicking on the Department of Emergency Services.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Purnell, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-9 as follows: scheduling a public hearing for the filing of an FY25 Housing Rehabilitation Program grant; an FY25 Police Accountability, Community, and Transparency Grant application for \$167,543, an FY25 Overdose and Drug Awareness Coordinator Grant (ODAC) application for \$71,821, and an FY25 Gun Violence Reduction Grant application for \$74,784 for programs within the Sheriff's Office; a Small Project Agreement Lands of Mohamad Ramadan to extend public sewer from the Mystic Harbour Service Area for one equivalent dwelling unit to 12262 Eagles Nest Road; turnover documents for Bayside Landings multi-family parcels B, E, F, G, and H and accepting the public water utilities into the County's Landings Service Area; converting an office assistant V position to legislative analyst in County Administration; transferring a 1997 Ford F800 six-wheel dump body truck from the Roads Division to the Solid Waste Division.

Commissioner Mitrecic requested statistics on how the ODAC grant helps the County.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Tourism and Economic Development Director Melanie Pursel in response to a request from Snow Hill Economic Development Director Lorissa McAllister and upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously authorized the repurposing and transfer of \$100,000 in Tri-County Maryland Rural Economic Development grant funds from the Snow Hill Bikeways Project to the Bank Street Promenade Project.

In a related matter and upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously commissioned a workgroup to discuss modifications to Bank Street, from Green

Street to the Pocomoke River. Several county-owned properties are located on Bank Street. The workgroup is to include Commissioners Bertino, Elder, and Purnell, Ms. Pursel, Ms. McAllister, one representative from County Administration, and one representative from the town.

Pursuant to the request of Procurement Officer Nick Rice and Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously awarded the lowest responsive bid for the Pocomoke City transfer station concrete pad project to INL Construction, LLC for \$47,150.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Rice and Mr. Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Elder voting in opposition, to award the Newark effluent spray irrigation site maintenance to the lowest responsive and responsible vendor, Douglas and Hollie McCall. Commissioner Elder stated that he would like to see this project rebid, as several farmers had advised him that they were unaware of the opportunity to bid on this project. In response, Mr. Baker stated that it is urgent to move forward, as the farmer who should have maintained the property last year did not do so. He concluded that the crop is touching the sprinkler heads, and the field needs to be cut now.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Rice and Warden Tim Mulligan and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously approved the purchase of an in-stock, 350kw diesel generator from Elite Power at a cost of \$120,000 for the County Jail.

Mr. Rice reviewed the latest cost estimate for the project to build a new Pocomoke Branch Library, with 50/50 State and County matching funds of \$3.99 million and \$4 million, respectively, an anticipated project cost of \$8.1 million, with roughly \$500,000 value engineering included, and potential additional value engineer savings of \$100,000. He stated that the project is scheduled to go to bid in August or September when staff will be able to provide actual construction numbers. Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott the commissioners authorized staff to move forward with the Pocomoke Branch Library project.

Pursuant to the request of Development Review and Permitting Director Jennifer Keener and upon a motion by Commissioner Elder, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 24-4 naming three private lanes off of Old Bridge Road in West Ocean City as Salt Life Lane, Ocean Life Lane, and Beach Life Lane.

The commissioners met with Ms. Keener to review a text amendment application submitted by Mark Cropper on behalf of Bob Ewell, to add a special exception use to the A-1 Agricultural District for a slaughterhouse no larger than 600 square feet in gross floor area, provided it is on a farm where the livestock are raised or maintained. Ms. Keener advised that the Planning Commission provided a favorable recommendation on the text amendment with additional language pertaining to the additional measures that the Board of Zoning Appeals may take for the use.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Bertino, Bunting, Elder, Fiori, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned text amendment as a Bill entitled Zoning – Farm-based

slaughterhouses in the A-1 Agricultural District and agreed to schedule a public hearing on the bill.

The commissioners met with Ms. Keener to review a text amendment application submitted by Jonathan Anders to add a special exception use to the A-1 Agricultural District to allow private, noncommercial buildings for the storage of personal property. Ms. Keener advised that the Planning Commission provided a favorable recommendation on the text amendment.

Following some discussion, Commissioners Abbott, Fiori, Mitrecic, and Purnell introduced the aforementioned text amendment as a Bill entitled Zoning – Private, noncommercial storage buildings in the A-1 Agricultural District and agreed to schedule a public hearing on the bill.

The commissioners met with Ms. Keener to discuss a request from Mr. Cropper on behalf of his client to amend the 2006 Comprehensive Plan's Land Use Map. The subject property is located on MD Rt. 589 across from Ocean Downs Casino. During the 2018 sectional rezoning, this was one of sixteen parcels rezoned from E-1 Estate District to C-2 General Commercial District, and the inconsistency of the proposed zoning (commercial) with the existing Land Use Map designation (agricultural) was fully acknowledged. Ms. Keener stated that Comprehensive Plan amendments can only be initiated by the legislative body. Since the impact of this request will affect much more than one individual parcel, Ms. Keener recommended this request be considered during the planning process already underway, with the initial draft of the updated Land Use Map to be released this summer to allow for public comment.

In response to questions by Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Keener stated that just under 100 properties could be affected by the proposed amendment. She stated that the entire amendment process could take six months, and the property is impacted by the Critical Areas Law. She concluded that the Planning Commission granted an unfavorable recommendation on the rezoning at the time due to the substantial amount of residential property, abundance of traffic on MD Rt. 589, and lack of water and sewer. Commissioner Fiori noted that the County is growing quickly, and this is an issue that is better addressed now rather than once the Comprehensive Plan update is done. Commissioner Bunting asked how the County could remedy the situation for the sixteen parcels. In response, Ms. Keener stated that the request is for one, the sectional change that occurred in 2018 was for sixteen parcels, but there are approximately 100 parcels in the County that share a commercial zoning with an agricultural land use. She stated the situation could be remedied by doing the amendment now or with the Comprehensive Land Use amendment. Ms. Keener said she is not opposed to the request, but rather the timing of the request.

The commissioners recognized Mr. Cropper, who provided background on the history of the rezoning of the 16 parcels across from the casino. He stated that his client is not asking the commissioners to reopen the entire Comprehensive Plan, but rather to make all 16 properties consistent with the underlying zoning classification, which is predominantly C-2. He stated that the commissioners agreed in 2018 that there had been enough of a change in the character of the neighborhood due to the Casino at Ocean Downs to rezone the properties, one of which is now home to the Homer Gudelsky medical facility, which is located half a mile from the casino. He stated that, if this property was proven to be impacted by the casino, then clearly his client's property located directly across from the casino has also been impacted.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners voted 6-1, with Commissioner Bertino voting in opposition, to approve the request.

County Attorney Roscoe Leslie updated the commissioners on the Glen Riddle Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) expansion and status of equivalent dwelling units (EDU), including the obligation to compensate WGC EDU, LLC under the current public-private partnership agreement and the third-party request to purchase the 173 remaining EDUs of sewer capacity. Mr. Leslie noted that currently the WWTP is not operating at full capacity and needed repairs are likely to take a year to complete. Therefore, the County is unable to provide additional sewer capacity at this time.

Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to sell the remaining EDUs to the third party at a cost of \$4,071,555 and to tender the full payment owed to WGC of \$3,018,622.

The commissioners reviewed and discussed various board appointments.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to reappoint Michael Donnelly to the LDC.

Upon a nomination by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to retain Matt Gordon as the Pocomoke representative on the LDC.

Commissioner Mitrecic noted that the advertisement for the public hearing on the requested FY25 County Operating Budget states that written comments would be read into the record. However, due to the expected participation rates, he recommended accepting the letters into the record, posting them for public viewing on the County website, and having staff provide each of the commissioners with copies of the letters. Upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to accept the letters into the record, post them for public viewing as recommended, and have staff provide them with individual copies of each letter.

Commissioner Bertino discussed the need to work with the Board of Education in options to consider the recommendations of the Interagency Committee on School Construction (IAC) and any other options that may be available to construct a new Buckingham Elementary School (BES). Following some discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously agreed to convene a work group comprised of County and BOE administrative staff, Commissioners Ted Elder, Eric Fiori, and Diana Purnell, and three BOE members to identify a path forward to replace BES.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned until 6:00 p.m. for a public hearing on the FY25 Requested Operating Budget.

The commissioners conducted a public hearing at 6:00 p.m. in the Commissioners' Meeting Room in the Worcester County Government Center on the FY25 Requested County Operating Budgets. Commission President Bertino called the meeting to order and welcomed those in attendance. Chief Administrative Officer Weston Young presented a PowerPoint presentation outlining the FY25 Requested Operating Budget. The presentation included the

following graphs and information: FY25 Budget Issues; General Fund Estimated Revenues and Expenditures for FY25; Worcester County Assessable Tax Base from FY20-FY25; General Fund Major Revenues - Property Tax, Income Tax, and Recordation and Transfer Taxes from FY22-FY25; General Fund Revenue and Expenditure Comparisons from FY22-FY25; FY24 Real Property Tax Rates of counties on the Eastern Shore of Maryland of which Worcester County is 3rd lowest at \$0.845 per \$100 of assessed value; 2024 Income Tax Rates of Eastern Shore counties of which Worcester County is the lowest at 2.25%; and the Schedule of Upcoming Budget Work Sessions on May 14 and 21; and the Budget & Tax Rate Adoption on June 4. Mr. Young explained that the requested expenditures of \$270,193,052 exceed the County's estimated revenues of \$260,076,878 by (\$10,116,174). He stated that this difference must be reconciled by the commissioners either through reductions in expenditures, additional revenues or a combination of both.

Commissioner Bertino opened the floor to receive public comments on the department budget requests, proposed property tax increase, and the Board of Education (BOE) budget request, in that order.

John Adkins of Ocean City discussed the impact of higher taxes, requested the commissioners give a 20% discount on property taxes to seniors, and urged the commissioners to open their meetings to public comments.

Frederick Grant, Sr. of Snow Hill and chair of the Delmarva Discovery Museum (DDM) in Pocomoke, urged the commissioners to increase the annual grant to the DDM.

Allison Convey of Girdletree and the day program director at the Worcester County Developmental Center discussed the positive impacts on the programs and services offered by the WCDC on the 86 adults with intellectual disabilities who participate in their programs. She stated that the commissioners' annual grant support helps them maintain needed programming and urged them to continue their support.

Superintendent Lou Taylor outlined the priorities of the Worcester County Public Schools to attract and retain highly qualified teachers, support staff, and bus contractors, to maintain small class sizes, and to expand mental and behavioral health services, with no reductions in staff or programs. He concluded by asking the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

Chip Choquette of Pocomoke spoke on behalf of Pocomoke Elementary School and asked the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget to assure the continuance of high quality education programs.

Christina Hulslander of St. Luke's Road spoke on behalf of the elementary, middle, and high schools in Snow Hill and Worcester Technical High School and asked the commissioners to fully fund the BOE budget. She stated that the BOE budget should not be handled like a business because the goal is to do what is best for the children, and to do so, the commissioners must trust the education professionals.

Dr. Nancy Michelson of Ocean Pines urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

Brittany Hulme Tignor of Ocean Pines stated that schools benefit communities, noting that studies indicate that those who graduate are more likely to become active and productive citizens and commit fewer crimes. She noted that strong schools make strong communities and urged the commissioners to vote for the BOE budget.

Marie Stevenson read a statement by Megan Cater of Berlin which stated that education is not just numbers on a spreadsheet and urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget to maintain small class sizes, personalized attention, and tailor support to help children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Rose Zollinger of Berlin and mother of three children attending Buckingham Elementary School (BES) urged the commissioners to consider their legacy to the County and to fully fund the BOE budget.

Jessica Clark of Ocean Pines reviewed the real world value for every dollar spent on public education, noted that the teachers, support staff, bus drivers, and students need and deserve a fully funded BOE budget and urged the commissioners not to make educational cuts.

Dr. Melissa Reid, of Berlin and a BES art teacher, requested the commissioners fully fund the BOE budget, noting that a well-funded school system is critical to the viability of the County.

Jan Adamchak of Berlin stated that the MOE budget approved last year was a disservice to WCPS and advised that fully funding the schools is the priority of the community and should be the priority of the commissioners.

Alison Semanchik of Ocean City and a BES preschool teacher noted that of her students, 26% have an incarcerated parent, 33% have language developmental delays, 13% faced homelessness this year, and 66% are part of the free or reduced lunch program. She noted that a fully funded BOE budget is vital to provide her students with the educational resources they need to overcome these hurdles and thrive. She looked forward to collaborating with the commissioners and urged them to visit her classroom before making any changes to the BOE budget.

Jessica Andrews of Ocean Pines discussed the impact the special education team at Showell Elementary School (SES) has made on her son. She then stated that it is imperative to fully fund the BOE budget, noting that to foster an environment where teachers want to come back year after year, it is imperative to offer competitive salaries to recruit and retain the best teachers and provide them with the resources they need.

Matt Westbrook of Berlin whose son is in second grade at BES expressed concern regarding the impact of another year of MOE funding. He urged the commissioners to fully fund the WCPS budget to maintain smaller class sizes and offer competitive salary packages. He stated that the children are the future and they need the commissioners support now.

Laura Scharle of Ocean Pines discussed the impact WCPS teachers have made on her son who has special needs, setting him up for success and enabling him to thrive. She stated that some want to underfund the system that has been life changing for her family. She concluded by urging the commissioners to fully fund the BOE budget.

Mary Hathaway of Ocean Pines stated that the priority of the community is public education. She stated that WCPS are great because of funding, and another MOE budget would be detrimental. She concluded by urging the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Candace Savage advised that the County has not received answers to any of the questions posed during the budget work session.

Emily Funk of Ocean Pines and a mother of three discussed the outstanding programs and small class sizes at SES. She stated it is her priority to give her children every educational opportunity possible, and she requested the commissioners fully fund the BOE budget.

Dr. Alison Dewald of Ocean Pines advised that she chooses to live in Worcester County and commute to work in Salisbury because the schools here are so much better. She stated that an MOE budget would destroy all that makes the school system great: small class sizes, arts, and more. She concluded by urging the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

Kia Terlizzi of Berlin thanked Commissioner Purnell for her unwavering support of WCPS. She reviewed the value of highly qualified educators and small class sizes, and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested WCPS budget.

Samanth Lambertson Redden of Pocomoke City discussed the success of her child who attended Worcester Technical High School (WTHS) and Pocomoke High School (PHS), and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the WCPS budget to assure her youngest has the same opportunities.

Reagan Steers, a Stephen Decatur High School senior, stated that every student deserves an education that will help them achieve their goals. She thanked all the teachers who helped her, a now proudly registered voter, and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested WCPS budget to assure continued student success.

Brian Robertson of Berlin stated that Worcester County spends more per student than any other county, and that is to be valued. He stated that prioritizing public education results in safer communities with higher incomes, and he urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

Debra Fisher-Reynolds of Ocean Pines and a 25-year teacher reviewed best practices and urged the commissioners to fully fund the WCPS budget to ensure success for all students.

Pat Barbely of Newark stated that she wants the best for the teachers for kids, but she also wants the best for 911 dispatchers answering emergency lines and the water employees adding chemicals to the water she drinks. She stated that all county departments should be able to hire highly qualified employees and concluded that the commissioners may have to make cuts in some areas to ensure that the needs of all departments providing taxpayer services are met.

Richard Addis of Bishopville stated that schools have been fully funded every year but the last year. He noted that there should be strings attached to money given to the BOE, starting by giving raises to the teachers, support staff, and bus drivers, and policies and procedures should include the voice of the taxpayers.

Debbie Lambertson of Stockton and grandparent of Cedar Chapel Special School (CCSS) and Wor-Wic Community College WWCC students stated that her children have accomplish great things because of the dedicated staff of WCPS, and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget, to include phase two of the new CCSS playground.

Gwen Leyman of Ocean Pines stated that kids do not have a vote, but taxpayers do, and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested WCPS budget.

Shannon Bone of Willards stated her disappointment that the commissioners were not going to read the more than 80 emails submitted for the public hearing and asked the commissioners where they stood on education, noting that MOE is the absolute bare minimum for WCPS and a vote against growth and development.

Sanji Ramna Ryan of Bishopville and a senior at SDHS thanked the commissioners for their past support, which has made a difference in the lives of County students, and she asked

them to fully fund the requested WCPS budget to give the raises needed to retain, recruit, and hire the best teachers.

Mike Ewing of Berlin and Parent Teacher Association treasurer at Ocean City Elementary School asked the commissioners to prioritize education by fully funding the requested WCPS budget.

Dr. Darlene Jackson Bowen of Pocomoke stated that the commissioners and BOE share a common goal: the betterment of community through quality education. She stated that fully funding the WCPS budget is the key to maintaining educational excellence, the teacher and staff deserve the requested salary increases, and underfunding the budget would threaten the education that students receive.

Dr. April Richardson, of Ocean Pines and a 24-year teacher, stated that this budget affects over 1,200 employees, 75% of whom reside in the County. She advised that the commissioners have publicly stated that they support teachers' raises, but noted that approving an MOE budget would make it impossible to fund raises.

Lyndsay Greenan-Tyre of Berlin stated that public education is the cornerstone of democracy. She stated that she wants a fully funded public education system to assure comprehensive inclusive education system that protects kids, and she urged the commissioners to do their jobs and fully fund WCPS.

Nikki Nelson of Snow Hill and mother of two children urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested WCPS budget to keep class sizes small, salaries competitive, and schools excellent.

Joseph Freeman of Ocean City urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested WCPS budget. He stated that he is not a parent or a teacher but recognizes the necessity to preserve small class sizes and avoid job losses that may be incurred if the commissioners adopt a MOE budget.

Megan Tull Seyler of Salisbury stated her hope that the commissioners would make public comments a part of their meetings. She also urged the commissioners to fully fund the BOE budget and not let the teachers down this year.

Susan Curan of Ocean Pines supported the salary package for teachers, but also urged the commissioners not to blindly support the BOE budget. Rather, she urged them to exercise oversight of the funding, as the BOE should not have unsupervised power over a \$100 million budget.

Kate McCloskey of Ocean Pines supported whatever the WCPS needs to keep class sizes small and recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. She expressed her bafflement that the commissioners only funded MOE last year after 20 years of funding the BOE well over MOE.

Brittany Tracy, of Ocean Pines, a taxpayer and mother of three WCPS students, stated that she values education, and teachers should not have to fight for raises each year. She concluded that teachers and students deserve more than MOE.

Reverend Zachary Brown of Snow Hill stated that his wife and several congregants are teachers and his uncle is a vice principal. He stated that the reality is that teachers are hurting, and the proposed BOE salary package is necessary. Therefore, he requested the commissioners fully fund the requested WCPS budget.

Joe Schanno of Ocean Pines requested the commissioners fully fund the requested FY25 WCPS budget, as it would be a sound economic decision that benefits the whole County.

Keri Payne of Ocean Pines requested the commissioner fully fund the requested WCPS budget. She expressed concern that failure to fund the budget would result in larger class sizes, reduced educational opportunities, and fewer residents because people move to this area because of the outstanding schools.

Scott Payne of Ocean Pines and a BES teacher stated that the majority of funding in the WCPS budget is comprised of salaries for teachers who work their tails off each and every day. He stated that each and every position is important and plays a critical role and asked the commissioners to fully fund the requested budget.

Worcester County Teachers Association President Beth Shockley Lynch of Snow Hill stated that right now teachers are disappointed by last year's MOE budget. She further stated that 15 starting teachers turned down offers from WCPS due to the starting salary, which is the lowest in the State. She noted that 75% of WCPS teachers live and vote in Worcester County, and she urged the commissioners to fully fund the requested BOE budget.

Elizabeth Calabrese of Berlin spoke on behalf of BES. She requested the commissioners fully fund the requested WCPS budget to keep class sizes small and to avoid losing teachers and bus drivers to neighboring counties offering higher salaries.

Amy Fenzel Mergott of Berlin stated that if she were to graduate today she would not accept a position with WCPS due to the low starting teacher salary, and she urged the commissioners to approve the requested BOE budget.

Kate Hulme of Bishopville stated that she strongly feels public meetings should permit public comments. She also pointed out that tonight the commissioners' constituents have shown up to support the BOE budget, which prioritizes small class sizes and a salary package aimed at attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, support staff, and bus drivers.

Shaneka Nichols of Berlin, mother of six with four in WCPS, requested the commissioners give the BOE what they are asking for, noting that all parents vote.

In response to a question by Commissioner Bertino, Mr. Young stated that the BOE provide a large amount of QuickBooks data requested by Commissioner Abbot, but that the County has not received answers from the BOE regarding the roughly two dozen that were asked during the April 9 budget work session.

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

Commissioner Bertino thanked everyone for attending the public hearing on the FY25 Requested Budget and for their forthright comments and composure throughout the evening. He stated that the commissioners would consider all the suggestions presented this evening.

The commissioners adjourned to meet again at their budget work session on May 7, 2024.