

Minutes of the County Commissioners of Worcester County, Maryland

June 2, 2026

Theodore J. Elder, president
Madison J. Bunting, Jr., vice president
Caryn G. Abbott
Anthony W. Bertino, Jr.
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, and Human Resources Director Stacey Norton and Deputy Director Pat Walls. Topics discussed and actions taken included the following: a personnel update, promoting Parks Worker IV Chaz Singer to parks crew leader; hiring Chris Richardson as a grounds worker II and Mike Gruscynski as a master HVAC mechanic within the Maintenance Division, and Betsy Jackson as zoning administrator within Development Review and Permitting, and other matters with Human Resources; receiving legal advice from counsel; and performing administrative functions, including discussing potential board appointments.

Following a motion by Commissioner Abbott, seconded by Commissioner Bunting, the commissioners unanimously voted to adjourn their closed session at 9:20 a.m.

After the closed session, the commissioners reconvened in open session. Commissioner Elder called the meeting to order, and following a morning prayer by Christopher Lonsdale of Spence Baptist Church in Snow Hill 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 budget work session on May 12, 2026 and their regularly scheduled meeting and budget work session on May 19.

The commissioners presented a proclamation recognizing June as Elder Abuse Awareness and Prevention Month to representatives from the Commission on Aging and Department of Social Services.

Commissioner Elder opened the floor to receive public comment.

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

Upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously approved by consent agenda item numbers 2-9 as follows: accepting a \$464,012 Family Services Program grant award from the Maryland Judiciary for the Circuit Court and a \$4,600 Maryland Agricultural Fair Board grant for the 2026 Worcester County Fair; approving out-of-state travel for one forensic crime technician within the Sheriff's Office to attend crime scene photography training in Washington State; awarding a sole-source purchase of a forensic evidence imaging system for the Sheriff's Office; awarding a contract to develop water supply capacity management plans for the Ocean Pines Sanitary Service Area and the MD Rt. 611 Corridor; awarding a contract for design and survey services to replace an Edgewater Acres pump station; awarding a contract for security systems associated with the Snow Hill Library renovation; and scheduling a public hearing for Rezoning Case No. 453 seeking to rezone property identified on Tax Map 15 as Parcels 130 and 191 near Ocean Pines from R-2 Suburban Residential to R-3 Multi-Family Residential.

Budget Officer Kim Reynolds presented a summary of the adjustments made by the commissioners at their May 19 budget work session for FY2027. Revenues total \$300,172,146 and expenditures total \$300,424,872, leaving a deficit of \$252,726.10.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, 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 increase the Board of Education (BOE) budget by \$8,963,136 to cover cost of the salary and bus contractor rate increases, substitute pay increase, health insurance increase (a fixed charge), the shift in teacher pensions (a fixed charge), the employee retirement, as well as \$284,944 for the bus assistants that have been requested. Commissioner Bertino said this increase assures that the teachers, support staff, and bus drivers should receive their negotiated increases: a \$4,000 Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) plus a Step for teachers and support staff, as well as negotiated increases for the bus contractors.

Commissioner Mitrecic said this budget still leaves the BOE woefully underfunded, noting that eliminating \$300,000 in funds budgeted for preschool will result in the loss of a State match of \$800,000. He said if the BOE has to find money for these necessities then they will have to cut the money someplace else in their budget to support this and other necessary programs.

Legislative Analyst Charlene Sharpe was joined by Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio and Ryan Snow of R&R Solutions, the County's lobbying firm, to provide the commissioners with a recap of the 2026 legislative session.

Pursuant to the request of Recreation and Parks Director Kelly Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously approved a \$25,694.24 budget transfer within the Recreation and Parks budget to sprig and rehabilitate multipurpose Fields 1, 2, 3, and 5 at the Northern Worcester Athletic Complex.

Pursuant to the request of Ms. Rados and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved acceptance of the FY2027 Program Open Space

allocation of \$703,754 and authorized Recreation and Parks staff to prepare and submit to the commissioners the FY2027 Annual Program, including proposed funding for the Herring Creek Nature Park bathroom replacement, Newtown Park multipurpose field renovation, Isle of Wight Nature Park pavilion addition, and Northern Worcester Athletic Complex concessions, bathroom, and pavilion upgrades.

Pursuant to the recommendation of Procurement Officer Ed Welch and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously declined to adopt a local vendor preference policy for use with future invitations to bid and to instead consider local options on a case-by-case basis.

Pursuant to the request of Public Works Director Dallas Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously Adopted Resolution No. 26-13 Adopting Policies and Procedures for Adjustments to Water Bills, superseding the 2010 policy and establishing a uniform process for water and sewer bill adjustments related to leaks, billing errors, unexplained high-water use, and other qualifying events while safeguarding the financial integrity of the County's water and wastewater enterprise fund.

Enterprise Fund Controller Quinn Dittrich updated the commissioners on the financial impact of potential refunds to customers affected by the adopted FY26 Usage Fee Structure, specifically related to customers with multiple equivalent dwelling units (EDUs). Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously authorized Public Works staff to issue estimated fourth-quarter billing credits totaling \$446,415 to 139 affected multi-EDU customers in the Mystic Harbour, Newark, Ocean Pines, Riddle Farm, and River Run service areas, reflecting the application of EDU-adjusted usage tiers consistent with the proposed Fiscal Year 2027 rate structure.

Pursuant to the request of Environmental Programs Director Bob Mitchell and upon a motion by Commissioner Mitrecic, the commissioners unanimously agreed to make all commercial EDUs a consistent 250 gallons per day across all service areas, as included in the FY27 Water and Wastewater Enterprise Fund budget.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 26-14 adopting Sanitary Service Area budgets, assessments, and charges and establishing classifications for July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Dittrich and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution No. 26-15 adopting the Solid Waste Enterprise Fund Budget and Fees for July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027.

Pursuant to the request of Mr. Baker and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, the commissioners unanimously approved the purchase of a 2026 Ford Transit 250 Cargo vehicle from Preston Auto Group for \$52,053 for use within the Animal Control Division of the Sheriff's Office.

The commissioners recessed to provide Budget Officer Kim Reynolds with the time necessary to amend the final FY27 General Fund operating budget based on changes approved by the commissioners earlier in the meeting.

The commissioners resumed their meeting.

Budget Officer Kim Reynold presented the amended FY27 General Fund Operating Budget to the commissioners for adoption. She reviewed the changes made following the morning's budget work session: a decrease of \$419,746 to reserve funds, and a decrease of \$2,798,302 to the Board of Education (BOE). This leaves a surplus of \$2,965,322, which administration recommended be held in reserve for future capital needs. In response to a question from Commissioner Bertino, Ms. Reynolds stated that reserve funds could be allocated toward the upcoming Buckingham Elementary School (BES) replacement project.

The commissioners discussed their individual positions on the adopted FY27 County Operating Budget totaling \$300,172,146. Commissioner Mitrecic said the overall General Fund budget was strong, as it goes a long way toward making the County whole. However, he could not support placing nearly \$3 million in reserve while reducing the BOE's funding request. He argued that the surplus could be used to support teachers, bus drivers, teacher assistants, and other school employees, noting that quality staff are as important as school facilities. He further contended that reserve funds are not guaranteed to be used for the BES replacement project and could instead be diverted to other needs, such as a future emergency.

Commissioner Fiori opposed directing the surplus to reserves rather than education, stating that there is a time to save and a time to invest. He argued that the commissioners had recently invested in County employees and the Sheriff's Office after staffing challenges emerged, and he questioned why similar support was not being extended to the school system. He also expressed concern about how the BOE would meet state mandates and labor obligations, including potential contract negotiations. He concluded that the decision to place \$2.6 million in reserve rather than address current educational needs lacked a cohesive rationale. Superintendent Annette Wallace responded when Commissioner Fiori asked how the BOE would meet its mandates under the revised funding level. She indicated that BOE staff were prepared to provide that information to the commissioners. However, Commissioner Elder stated that the commissioners did not need additional explanation at that time.

Commissioner Purnell said she could not support the budget as amended, arguing that taking \$2.9 million out of the BOE budget and placing it into reserves, while the school system continued to face funding challenges, sent the wrong message. She stated that the County has an obligation to support its children and educational system and questioned the continued practice of reducing the BOE's request. She also maintained that the future BES project should not be used as justification for withholding funding needed by teachers and school staff today.

Commissioner Abbott supported the budget, which includes funding for needed salary increases for teachers, support staff, and bus drivers, and the decision to place the surplus into reserves for the future BES replacement project. She noted that the County was still awaiting the results of a legislative audit of the BOE and said many taxpayers were reluctant to provide additional funding until that information becomes available. In her view, reserving the funds for a major upcoming capital project represented a fair and prudent approach.

Commissioner Elder questioned characterizing the BOE's FY27 funding level as a cut,

because this budget still represents an increase of approximately \$9 million over the prior year. He stated that the funding provided was sufficient to support raises for teachers, support staff, and bus contractors. He argued that claims of cuts were inconsistent with the level of increased funding being provided. He expressed support for the budget, saying it addressed the needs of the BOE and County employees, while also observing that taxpayers were the only group not receiving a direct benefit.

Following much discussion and upon a motion by Commissioner Bertino, 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 adopt Resolution No. 26-16 adopting expense budgets and establishing tax rates for FY27, and designating the surplus of \$2,965,322 in Capital Reserve Funds toward the upcoming BES replacement project.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Abbott, the commissioners unanimously directed staff to determine what it would take to institute a volunteer firefighter property tax credit program in Worcester County, including eligibility requirements, administrative considerations, estimated costs, and how similar programs are structured and administered in other Maryland jurisdictions.

Commissioner Fiori noted that jurisdictions across the country are adopting legislation to address the unique challenges associated with cable landing stations, data centers, and related infrastructure. He stated that Worcester County would be remiss if it did not proactively examine similar issues and develop appropriate local regulations to protect their communities and the environment. He concluded that current code provisions leave significant room for interpretation and that clearer standards are needed to guide future proposals.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Fiori, the commissioners unanimously directed County departments to draft legislation to update the Zoning Code to address cable landing stations, data centers, and related infrastructure for the commissioners to review at an upcoming meeting.

The commissioners answered questions from the press, after which they adjourned to meet again on June 16, 2025.