

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, December 5, 2024

8 a.m.

Talbot County Free Library

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Dr. Cliff Coppersmith called the meeting to order at 8 a.m.

Members Present: Al Bond, Dr. Cliff Coppersmith, Shannon Potter Dill, John Horner, Reza Jafari, Chris Kleppinger, Ken Kozel, Amy Kreiner, Micah Risher, Rob Straebel, Terenda Thomas, Cassandra Vanhooser, Jackie Wilson

Members Absent: Ted Bautz, Chuck Callahan, Walter Chase, David Montgomery, Clay Stamp, Deborah Walsworth

Guests: Holly DeKarske (via Zoom), Kurt Fuchs, Nancy LaJoice (via Zoom), Merry Mears, Cristy Morrell, Dana Newman, Ryan Snow, Scott Warner

Staff: Kristen Goller

II. Guest Speakers – Dan Gundersen and Lindsay Johnson, Camoin Associates

Dr. Coppersmith, who serves as co-chair of the Strategic Plan Steering Committee, introduced the principals for Talbot County’s strategic planning process—Dan Gundersen and Lindsay Johnson. They represent Camoin Associates, the nation’s only consulting firm that specializes solely in economic development. Mr. Gundersen and Ms. Johnson gave an overview of their philosophy for strategic planning and laid out the plan for Talbot County’s upcoming process.

III. Approval of Agenda and Meeting Minutes

Dr. Coppersmith noted that the minutes were sent prior to the meeting and asked if anyone had comments or corrections. Mr. Jafari made a motion to approve the minutes as written. Mr. Risher seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

IV. County Council Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser reported that both Chuck Callahan and Clay Stamp had a previous meeting and were unable to attend. Both sent their apologies. Assistant County Manager Jessica Morris sent some notes about County business for the meeting. Ms. Vanhooser gave an overview on behalf of the Talbot County Council.

- The **Regional Medical Center** project is underway. Talbot County is exploring applying for an EDA application partnering with the Town of Easton and Easton Utilities for extension of infrastructure to the site.
- The **Public Safety Complex** located on Mary’s Court in Easton is nearing completion. The Sheriff’s Office moved into the building in October 2024. DES is

installing necessary technology to enable their relocation to the building. Phase 2 of the project which includes the construction of a sally port is anticipated to be completed in May 2025.

- An internal working group has been appointed to review the **space needs analysis** for County departments, as well as best and highest use of County-owned properties. We anticipate going out for an RFP in first quarter of 2025.
- The extension of **sewer to Bozman/Neavitt** is underway and will include connecting 610 EDUs.
- **Passage of Ballot Question A on November 2024 ballot.** Grateful to the citizens for passage of Charter amendment to continue support for public safety initiatives to include competitive pay for Sheriff's deputies, EMS providers and paramedics as well as correctional officers. Funds used to support the establishment of a sixth-ambulance crew to support 8-minute response time to northern part of county. Funds also used to help increased support for volunteer fire departments.
- The contract for the **North EMS Station** has been awarded to Industrial Engineering Co., Inc. The County is awaiting building permit.
- **Chapel District Elementary School** project is underway; the contract has been awarded to Whiting Turner.
- Talbot County **Roads Department** has widened of Airport Road and has paved Hailem School Road, Hiners Lane, and Goldsborough Neck Road in preparation for the closing of MD662 for construction of the Regional Medical Center.
- The Finance Office has presented proposed **Reserve Fund Policies** to the County Council for consideration. The FY26 budget process will get underway in the First Quarter 2025
- The Talbot County **Comprehensive Plan** review is underway with the contract awarded to Wallace, Montgomery and Associates. Public meetings and engagement will get underway in First Quarter of 2025 with anticipated adoption by 2026.
- **Hog Neck Golf Course** had a very successful and profitable fall with good weather. Installation of power tees has resulted in a 30% increase in range revenue. Café kitchen renovations and underway.
- Joseph Hughes has been appointed director of Talbot County **Department of Corrections** replacing Terry Kokolis who retired in November 2024.

V. Director's Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser transitioned immediately to her own report after presenting the County Council report. She noted that rather than reporting on the activities of the department she would first look forward to 2025 with a preview of what's to come in the new year.

Strategic Plan: Ms. Vanhooser told the group that she hoped that hearing from Mr. Gundersen and Ms. Johnson had them excited about working on the strategic plan. She noted that the process of selecting the consultants was thorough and intense. She detailed the process of selecting the firm, stating that an RFP was released in August 2024 and that five firms submitted bids on September 10. A three-step review process then took place, consisting of a review of the bid documents and two interviews. A steering committee chaired by Dr. Cliff Coppersmith and Jackie Wilson conducted the final interview and helped select Camoin Associates. This process will take most of the year, and there is ample opportunity for the EDC to be involved in the process.

Talbot Works Business Academy: Ms. Vanhooser reported that the department is currently accepting applications for Cohort #3 for the Talbot Works Business Academy. She asked EDC members to send the name of at least one small business owner they would recommend for the program. She thanked Scott Warner and the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund, who funded Cohort #3 which begins on February 4. The first two cohorts were funded by the Maryland Rural Economic Development Fund. The department has graduated 23 small businesses from the program.

EDA Grant for Water, Sewer, and Utility Infrastructure for Regional Medical Center: Ms. Vanhooser and Mr. Snow will be busy this winter working on an EDA grant for the hospital project. Talbot County is partnering with Easton Utilities and the Town of Easton to apply for multimillion dollar grant. The EDA has a rolling application deadline, and we are fast tracking this process, hoping to get our application submitted early next year for this project.

Business Appreciation Summit: The department is already beginning to plan the annual Business Appreciation Summit for mid-April. Tom Barkin, president and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond Fed, has been invited to be the featured speaker. He is forbidden to speak publicly in the weeks before the Federal Open Market Committee meetings, and the team is awaiting confirmation that he is available. In the meantime, we have begun taking nominations for the annual Community Impact Awards. She asked EDC members to nominate at least one local business, project, or person for a Community Impact Award.

Money Maryland Expo: On September 14, the department hosted what has become an annual Business Resource Fair. In addition to our many partners, we had several businesses enjoy the day-long program offered free of charge by Will Holmes, our consultant for the Talbot Works Business Academy. More than 100 people signed up, but attendance was low as it turned out to be the most beautiful autumn day. Those who attended gave great feedback, and the program featured local and regional experts on our panels that included marketing, securing government contracts, and financing your small business. Lesson learned: fall is not ideal for programming efforts.

Waterfowl Breakfast: The department hosted its annual breakfast in partnership with the Waterfowl Festival and The Arc Central Chesapeake Region. The event was well attended. Carl Anderton, who is now serving as the Director of Rural Economic Strategy for the Maryland Department of Commerce, was the featured speaker. Ms. Vanhooser noted that Nancy LaJoice might want to address the changes at the Maryland Department of Commerce, and that she would leave that topic for her.

IEDC Annual Conference: Ms. Vanhooser and Mr. Snow attended the IEDC Annual Conference in Denver on September 15-19. This was one of the best conferences of any kind that the two have attended in recent years. A couple of interesting notes: Artificial Intelligence continues to be a big topic, and this was especially true at IEDC. There was also a Rural Prosperity track, and IEDC is hosting its first Rural Summit in Great Falls, Montana, this June. Ryan and I set a personal goal to host this conference on the Eastern Shore in the future.

Proposed Accommodations Tax Increase: At the direction of the County Council, we hosted a public meeting on December 3 to discuss the proposed accommodations tax

increase. There were fireworks, and Ms. Vanhooser suggested that EDC members might be able to read about those in the paper. Many of the accommodations tax collectors are not happy with the idea of raising the tax.

The Council will vote on Tuesday, December whether to ask the State Delegation to introduce legislation to increase the tax rate from 4% to 6%. The municipalities in Talbot County have voted to support the increase. That is Easton, Oxford, Queen Anne, St. Michaels, and Trappe. And all have issued letters of support. We will see what the Council does. Even if they vote yes, the fight is just beginning as Talbot County will need to work the legislature to win support for this bill in a year when the budget is such a mess.

Business Inquiries Rise: Ms. Vanhooser reported the number of inquiries from businesses looking to come to Talbot County increased in the fall.

VI. EDC Elections

Dr. Coppersmith noted that December is typically the time when the EDC elects officers. He asked Ms. Vanhooser to present the slate for 2025.

Ms. Vanhooser said that Debbie Walsworth has agreed to serve another year as chairman, and Dr. Coppersmith has agreed to serve another term as vice chairman before stepping up as chairman in 2026.

Dr. Coppersmith opened the floor for nominations. No nominations were offered. Mr. Jafari made a motion to accept the slate as presented; Mr. Horner seconded the motion. The officers for 2025 were elected unanimously.

VII. Town Reports

Town representatives reported on news from their jurisdictions

VIII. Comments from Board Members and Guests

Board members and guests contributed to a robust discussion about events and issues around Talbot County. Notably, Cristy Morrell, executive director of Critchlow Adkins Children's Centers, reported that Comptroller Lierman reported the lack of childcare as a significant problem for the state's economy in her most recent economic report.

IX. Final Remarks and Announcement of Upcoming Meetings

- 2025 EDC Meeting Dates – March 6, June 5, September 4, December 4

X. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at approximately 10:13 a.m.